A Tu b’Shevat Seder
by Rabbi Dennis & Julia Beck-Berman

Introduction

Reader 1: According to the Mishnah, Tu b’Shevat is known as Rosh HaShanah la’ilan — “the New Year for the tree” (Rosh HaShanah 1.1). It falls on the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat. Any fruit that ripened before Tu b’Shevat would be considered part of the previous year for tithing purposes. At this time in Israel the winter rains are ending. The sap starts to rise in the trees and the first buds emerge. A spring-like awakening permeates the land. Rosh HaShanah la’ilan really does feel like a new year.

Reader 2: The Tu b’Shevat seder originated among the 16th-century Kabbalists in Safed, who breathed new life into a somewhat neglected holiday. The seder became a popular Sefardic custom. “The tree” in the Mishnah becomes the Tree — the Cosmic Tree of Life — which symbolizes the divine flow emanating down to the lowest level of the material world, becoming diversified and entering into and vitalizing all creation.

Reader 3: The Jewish mystics gathered in the evening around elegantly decorated tables full of sweet smelling flowers, fruits, wine and candles. They sang, danced, ate and studied late into the night. Today, we assemble as our ancestors did in a celebration of the awesome miracles of nature. The themes of the meal include appreciating the beauty of the world, the cycle of the seasons and our special love for the land. We are also cognizant of the environmental challenges that we face in the 20th century.

Reader 4: Underlying the kabbalistic seder is a statement in the Palestinian Talmud (end Qiddushin):

R. Hezekiah and R. Kohen said in the name of Rav: “A person is destined to give strict account [in the next world] for every [good] thing that they saw but did not partake.” R. Elazar heeded that teaching, and would save up small coins and with them [purchase and] partake of every [good] thing once a year.

Reader 5: What an amazing idea! On Judgment Day, God will take strict account of us for all of life’s legitimate pleasures that we neglected to enjoy. For it is by experiencing and appreciating these delights that we remember the God who created them.

The Four Cups

Reader 6: No seder is complete without four cups of wine (a fruit derivative), one of the greatest worldly delights. We begin with white wine and gradually add more red wine to the mixture. The increasing redness symbolizes the change in the colors of nature as spring arrives and trees produce their fruits.
Similarly, people ripen and mature as they go through life’s experiences and pleasures. And just as a little drop of white wine remains in the fourth cup, so we never attain total perfection in this world.

**Assiyah — The World of Earth/Action**

**The First Cup of Wine**

**Reader 7:** This cup of white wine or grape juice symbolizes winter and the mystical dimension of atzilut, or emanation, at which God’s energy infused the creation process with initial life. In winter, when nature is asleep, the earth is barren, sometimes covered with snow.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

**Reader 8:** Look at the work of God! For who can repair what he has ruined? (Ecclesiastes 7:13) When God created Adam He took him around to all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Look how lovely and praiseworthy are My works! Yet everything I created, I created for you. Be careful that you do not ruin and destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there is no one after you who can repair it. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

**The First Fruit**

**Reader 9:** For Assiyah, the world of Earth, we eat nuts and fruits with a tough skin (such as walnuts, almonds, pistachios, oranges, and bananas) to remind us of the protection the earth gives. Through this act, we acknowledge that we need protection in life, both physical and emotional. We bless our defense systems. They are holdovers from an earlier time when they helped us to survive.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-etz. Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the tree.

(for bananas: Barukh ... borei peri ha-adamah. Praised ... Creator of the fruit of the land.)

**Reader 10:** But many do not remember God’s fine work nor heed the divine command. So there arose plagues of humanity’s own creation — the Ten Plagues of our world.

(Spill a drop of wine for each one.)

Yetzirah — The World of Water/Feeling

Reader 11: Yetzirah, the World of Water, is the world of formation and birth. Water, the fluid element, gives shape to all matter. From water, the heart, pours forth blessing and emotion. Draw water in joy from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12:3). As we celebrate, we are aware of the valuable resources both in Israel and in the United States.

Reader 12: Think of the delicate ecological balance of our world. We know that without water, a tree’s roots cannot grasp the soil, its trunk and limbs cannot grow strong, its leaves cannot shine with rich, vibrant colors. We are aware of the need to preserve our natural resources and insure adequate water supplies for ourselves as well as the world community. We can each do our part in our own community. We can advocate to protect and to preserve our life-giving natural resources for ourselves and for future generations.

The Second Cup of Wine

Reader 13: As spring approaches, the sun’s rays begin to thaw the frozen earth. Gradually the land changes its colors from white to red, as the first flowers appear on the hillsides. So, our second cup will be a bit darker. We pour a little red wine into the white.

Reader 14: This cup of wine or grape juice is mostly white, with a little red mixed in, to symbolize the passing of the seasons and the mystical concept of formation and birth, often associated with water.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

The Second Fruit

Reader 15: For Yetzirah, we eat fruits with a hard inner pit and a soft outer layer (such as olives, dates, cherries, apricots, plums). Through this act we acknowledge the need to fortify our hearts. With a strong heart and a pure vision we can remove our protective outer shell. We can then grow richer and deeper as we become available to the miracles of nature which surround us.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-etz.
Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the tree.

Reader 16: R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, after the terrible destruction in the war with Rome, advised: If you have a sapling in your hand and are told, “Look, the messiah is here!” you should first plant the sapling and then go out to welcome the messiah. (Avot d’Rabbi Natan, Version B, ch. 31).

Tu b’Shevat
Sh. Shalom
On the fifteenth of Shevat With the coming of spring, An angel with ledger in hand comes down, Each bud, each tree, each twig writes down, And all of our garden’s planting.
From town to town and place to place The swift-winged one does soar, Searching the vale, inspecting the hill, But crossing the desert hastily idle, He returns to Heaven once more.
And when with tree, bush and bud The ledger is filled up; When the desert forms fields from sand And a lush garden fills our entire land, The Messiah will show up.
(Translated by Rabbi Dennis Beck-Berman)
Beriyah — The World of Air/Mind

Reader 17: Briyah, the world of the air. Air is the stuff hopes and dreams are made of. Air is the Word manifesting as the World. Close your eyes and take a breath. As you inhale, know you are being breathed by the earth. Let the breath out and visualize your next step to beautify the Garden.

Reader 18: “The breath of life” — of course that is its name! We breathe and the trees breathe. We breathe in what the trees breathe out. So we breathe each other into existence: we, and the galaxies, and the arrays of science and the codes of law and the plays of music, we are breathing each other into existence. And the breath, of course, goes in a cycle.

The Third Cup of Wine

Reader 19: This cup of wine is half red and half white and symbolizes once again the change of seasons and the mystical concept of Beriah. In summer, when vegetables are abundant, we are reminded of the richness of life.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

Reader 20: It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city .... It may be cut down, however, if it causes damage to other trees or to a field belonging to another person or if its value for other purposes is greater. The Torah forbids only wanton destruction... Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command You must not destroy. (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8,10)

The Third Fruit

Reader 21: For Briyah we taste fruits that are completely edible (such as apples, pears, grapes, raisins, figs, and strawberries). In this world, where God’s protection is close at hand, we can let go of all barriers and try on freedom. We are co-creators with God and each of our thoughts becomes action.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-etz.
Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the tree.
(for strawberries: Barukh ... borei peri ha-adamah. Praised ... Creator of the fruit of the land.)

Reader 22: When Rabbi Nachman was about to take leave of Rabbi Isaac, he said, “Please, master, bless me.” R. Isaac replied, “Let me tell you a parable by which I would respond to your request: A parable of a man who was journeying in the desert. He was hungry, weary, and thirsty, and he lighted upon a tree whose fruits were delicious and its shade pleasant, and a stream of water was flowing beneath it. He ate of its fruits, drank water from the stream, and rested under the tree’s shade.
Reader 23: When he was about to continue his journey, he said: “Tree, O tree, what blessing shall I bestow upon you? If I say to you, ‘May your fruits be delicious,’ behold, they are delicious. If I say, ‘May your shade be pleasant,’ behold, it is pleasant. If I say, ‘May a stream of water flow beneath you,’ behold, a stream of water does flow beneath you. Therefore I say, ‘May it be God’s will that all the seedlings taken from you be like you.’”

Reader 24: “You, too, dear Nachman. What blessing shall I bestow upon you? Knowledge of Torah? Behold, you already possess such knowledge. Eminence? You are already eminent. Honor? You are already honored. Riches? You are already rich. Children? You already have children. Hence I say, ‘May it be [God’s] will that your offspring be like you.’” (Ta’anit 5b-6a)

Atzilut — The World of Fire/Spirit

Reader 25: Atzilut, the World of Fire: By Your light do we see light (Psalm 36:10). As summer turns to fall, plants are preparing seed for the next cycle of nature. We too must nourish the world for the coming generation.

Reader 26: Just as the natural world goes through changes to achieve its full potential, we also need to change. We need to get rid of anger, envy and greed so that we can be free to grow. When we do this, we will become like strong, healthy trees, with solid roots in the ground and our arms open to the love that is all around us.

The Fourth Cup of Wine

Reader 27: This cup is red with a dash of white, symbolizing the mystical concept of fire and the idea that within all living things dwells a spark of God.

All: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Praised are You, Lord, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

Reader 28: For is the tree of the field a person? (Deut. 20:20) Translate: For is the tree of the field (not necessary for) a person?” This teaches that there can be no human life without the tree. (Sifre Deuteronomy §203) Indeed, fruits and nuts are essential to our health, and trees are an integral part of our ecological system.

Reader 29: There is an ancient custom of planting a cedar sapling upon a boy’s birth and a cypress sapling upon a girl’s birth and later using branches from both trees to suspend the wedding canopy (Gittin 57a). In Israel trees are

Master of the Universe: Grant me the ability to be alone. May it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass, among all growing things, and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer to talk with the one to Whom I belong.
Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav

Once when Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, was walking in the fields, lost deep in thought, the young student with him inadvertently plucked a leaf off a branch. Rav Kook was visibly shaken by this act, and turning to his companion he said gently, “Believe me when I tell you I never simply pluck a leaf or a blade of grass or any living thing, unless I have to.” He explained further, “Every part of the vegetable world is singing a song and breathing forth a secret of the divine mystery of the Creation.” For the first time the young student understood what it means to show compassion to all creatures.”
A. Unterman, Wisdom of the Jewish Mystics, 80 f.
planted on Tu b’Shevat. This custom goes back to the early pioneers and gained popularity largely under the influence of the American Arbor Day.

The Fourth Fruit

Reader 30: There is no totally edible fruit, but there are fruits of the earth whose aroma we can partake (such as cinnamon, cloves) or which can be made into wholly edible foods (such as chocolate candy). These symbolizes the mystery of the world and our study of Torah. We are constantly seeking to uncover her secrets, and are continually nourished by her fruits.

All: Barukh ato Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, borei minei vesamim. Praised are You, Lord, Creator of many spices.
(for candy: Barukh ... shehakol niyeh bidvaro. Praised ... by whose Word all things exist.)

Conclusion

Reader 31: We praise You, Adonai our God, sovereign of the universe, for nourishment and sustenance, for the fruits of the vine and tree. We thank You for the wonderful land You gave our ancestors, for the covenant and the Torah, for life and health. As the Torah says: You shall eat and be satisfied, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. Praised are You, Adonai, for all the earth’s bounty by which we live.

Reader 32: In the coming weeks, when you see a tree’s buds beginning to blossom, remember to say the blessing: Praised are You, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who left nothing lacking in the world and created in it beautiful creatures and beautiful trees to give people pleasure.

SOURCES


Celebrating Tu B’Shevat with Hadassah (New York, 2001)


Arthur Waskow, et al., editors, Trees, Earth and Torah (Phildelphia, 1999)

A special blessing can be made when we move from one kind of wine to a higher quality wine or liquor:

who is good and does good
hamei v’hamotei

8. Level beyond physical fruit
enjoy sweet smells like
cinnamon, bay leaf, or special
tastes like scotch

7. red with a drop of white

6. Fruit completely edible
No Shells
Open on all levels
eat apples, pears, oranges, grapes

5. half red half white

4. Fruit with a pit:
Shell on the inside
Inner Defenses
eat olives, date, avocado, cherry

3. white with a drop of red

2. Fruit with hard outside shell
Outer Defenses
eat walnuts, almonds, coconuts,
pomegranates

1. all white
make the blessing here
for all 4 cups

Sweetest All-Purpose Blessing After Eating:

Blessed be you YHVH our God Ruler of the World, who created many souls and what they lack, for everything you created, to give life through them to the soul/being of all life. Blessed be the Life of the Worlds.

Briyah
World of Creation
Creating Something from Nothing
Air, Binah

Yetirah
World of Formation
Crafting One Thing From Another Thing
Water, Tiferet

Asiyah
World of Doing and Making
Earth, Malkhut, Shekhinah

About the four elements:
The order here reflects standard medieval science. However, in Kabbalah, the usual order is: water-Chokhmah, fire-Gevurah, air-Tiferet, earth-Malkhut.

Some people being or end the seder with grains that grow in Israel: barley, crackers from wheat, etc.

Blessings for smelling:
fruit: borei re’ach tov ha’pe’erot
trees: borei utsay b’samim
plants: borei ishay b’samim
prepared spices: borei miney b’samim

Blessings for eating:
wine: borei p’ri ha’agafon
drinks: shehechol nihyeh bid’havro
tree fruit: borei p’ri ha’ets
grains: borei miney m’zonot
vegetables and fruit of perennials: borei p’ri ba’adamah

Remez
Moral, Ethical
Parable, Allegory

D’rash
Mythic
Midrashic
Poetry, Anagogy

p’shat
Simple
Literal

Some people start the seder with washing and hamotzi – the blessing over bread, and end with birchat hamazon. If you do this then there will be 15 steps, including teaching at each level, corresponding to נ”א=Tu