

Tu B'Shevat – a Celebration of Sustainability

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

February 11, 2007

Tu is Hebrew for 15 and Shevat is the month on the Jewish calendar that we are now in. Therefore this holiday always occurs on the 15th of the month of Shevat, which means it moves around relative to the solar calendar that we are used to, as do all the Jewish holidays. This year Tu B'Shevat began on the evening of February 2, last Friday, the night of the full moon, and lasted through Saturday, Feb. 3rd. Every 15th of every Jewish month is a full moon. It all begins to make sense, eventually.

One of my very favorite things about the Jewish tradition is that it is not afraid of change. Or even having multiple meanings at the same time. We Unitarian Universalists do not have a monopoly on living with uncertainty. What you heard me tell the children earlier was just the tip of the iceberg of possible meanings and symbolism for this holiday. Listen to this history of Tu B'Shevat, which to tell the truth isn't even the same from source to source.

The Biblical Tu B'Shevat.

The earliest incarnation of Tu B'Shevat was during the time just proceeding the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible, from about 900-600 B.C. E. This was the time of the commandment about the harvest of fruit trees that I read to you earlier from Leviticus. In order to fulfill this commandment you needed to have a common measure by which to measure the age of your trees. At this time in history the "donation" of the entire fourth year's harvest and subsequent yearly donations went for what was called the greater good of the society, which meant the upkeep of the priests and the local sacred sites. By the time of the Biblical prophets, as the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, there arose such a wave of social and spiritual protest at the unjust nature of who was benefiting from these tithes of harvest that a change was brought to the structure and purpose of tithing. Now it would stay in the local community and be used to protect the poor, the foreigner, the widow and the orphan. Judaism has always been an evolving religious movement.

Tu B'Shevat is not mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible. The first recorded message of Tu B'Shevat is found in the post-biblical writings of the Talmud. By the time of the Second Temple in the year 515 B. C. E., this New Year of the Trees was being set aside as a time to bring your harvest tithe to the Temple to celebrate growth and recycle such growth by leaving portions of one's harvest for the poor.

The Rabbinic Tu B'Shvat

After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 C. E., Jews were a people in exile without a deep connection to any land. Tu B'Shevat was barely observed for well over a millennium, surviving instead as a relic of tradition. It was recorded in the Talmud, but as the Jewish people lost their connection with the land of Israel, so too they lost connection with the direct observance of the new year for trees.

During this period, however, Jewish rabbinic tradition began to enrich the symbolic meaning of trees, the Tree of Life as it represented the Torah, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. These became powerful symbols in Jewish spirituality.

It was also during this period that the commandment not to destroy the fruit trees of your enemies during war time was expanded. "If even the trees of our enemies must be preserved, the Rabbis taught, all the more the earth and air and water when there is no war!" (Trees, Earth, and Torah, p. 11)

The Kabbalistic Tu B'Shevat

At the end of the 15th century Jewish mystics adopted the holiday as a portal into the mystical, establishing a specific Seder as a meditation upon the world we live in and the other worlds of creation that we strive for, where's God's spirit is far more visible and recognizable. Today's Tu B'Shevat Seders trace back to seeds that were planted at this time.

Part of the Kabbalistic tradition put a great deal of emphasis in the belief of four worlds. When God created the world as a whole, God's divinity was veiled in four stages, or worlds within worlds, each division more ethereal than the next. Humanity dwells in the world of action and physicality. In our reality it is easy to feel as if God's energy is non-existent or distant. [remember the fruits with the hard outer shells?] There are three other worlds, each ascending in spirituality until the world of emanation, where the concepts of physicality and boundaries cease to exist.

"Thus a day of tithing trees for the sake of the earthly poor became a day for renewing the heavenly abundance of the One Great Tree. This is the great act of transformation that the kabbalists worked upon the older forms of Tu B'Shevat.

The Zionist Tu B'Shvat

At the end of the nineteenth century, as Zionist pioneers began to work the land of Israel, Tu B'Shevat became the day to celebrate their return to the motherland, and a day for diaspora Jews to help by, for instance, giving money to plant trees in Israel. From a Zionist perspective Tu B'Shevat became a day to bring Jews closer

to the land of Israel, both in thought and in action. Some people make a connection between Tu B'Shevat and our Arbor Day, when we also plant trees.

The Eco-Jewish Tu B'Shevat

The first Earth Day took place in 1970. In its aftermath, the first generation of Jewish environmentalists asked the question, "when's our Earth Day?" – and answered, Tu B'Shevat. From an eco-Jewish perspective the celebration of Tu B'Shevat is a catalyst for encouraging Tikkun Olam (healing of the world), as well as a day to dwell on the current state of the global environment and to examine how our own actions affect the physical world. The mystical has been joined with the ecological, affirming that they are after all the same perspective: that "it" is all one thing – the interdependent web of all existence.

The Vegetarian Tu B'Shevat

I'd like to point out that vegetarians delight in this festival because the Tu B'Shevat meal is eaten without killing any creature. In fact, the meal is totally vegan. Everybody loves this holiday.

Along the way, in this history, several other things were added. For example, because we appreciate our food more when we stop to really taste it, we are instructed to chew each bite 32 times, 32 for both the number of teeth in our mouths, and the number of times the name of God is mentioned in the story of Creation.

Blessings are very important in the Jewish tradition and in the Tu B'Shevat celebration the blessings help us articulate our hopes for sustainable living on earth. "One who enjoys the delights of this world without reciting a blessing is called a thief," it is written, "for only by means of the blessing is the sustaining flow maintained, and the power of the guardian spirit of that fruit is renewed; so the fruit is nourished by this flow, and its power to grow renewed." (Trees, Earth, and Torah, p. 399)

There is no one way to celebrate Tu B'Shevat! "More than any other Jewish festival, Tu B'Shevat is the celebration of Becoming. There is no legal structure to define it. It springs wholly from the spiritual depth and growth of the Jewish people in relation with the One Who always beckons us to grow and in relation with the earth where all things grow." (Trees, Earth, and Torah, p. xv)

No matter what the tradition, there is a purpose behind the creation of holidays and festivals and rituals and special dinners and songs. I have brought you this insight into one Jewish festival because it, without a doubt, has relevance for us as Unitarian Universalist and as people of the earth. An earth that is suffering. There is not much time left for arguing about it; something must be done, and soon.

I believe anything that calls our attention to the need, and to our responsibility to heal the earth is good – and especially when it is addressed in a spiritual way that brings the

religiousness right down to earth. A leap of faith, down from the clouds of the abstract, to our real lives on earth. This was my Earth Day sermon last year. If environmental work is not connected to our religious conviction, I sometimes think it will never happen. It is our spiritual core that shapes our motivation and our will.

A. D. Gordon is highlighted in the book *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shevat Anthology*. He was one of the guiding lights and heroes of the land-oriented energy of the Zionist movement. His work helped infuse more traditional Jewish theology with an earth based spirituality. The tree-planting movement and the Zionist revival of Tu B'Shevat and reforestation were part of the legacy of his time. Here is a beautiful piece that he wrote:

And it shall come to pass, O child of Adam, when you return to Nature, on that day you shall open your eyes, and you shall peer directly into Nature's eyes and there you shall see your own image. You shall know that you have returned to yourself, for in hiding from Nature, you hid from yourself. And furthermore, you shall see, that from upon you, from upon your hands and feet, from upon your body and soul, fragments are peeling and falling, crumbling and falling. Heavy fragments, hard, oppressive; you straighten yourself, you stand up tall, you grow. And you will know that these are the shards of your shell, in which you had constricted yourself in your bewilderment, and out of which you have finally grown. And you will recognize on that day" nothing had been according to your measure, you must renew everything; your food and your drink, your dress and your home, the character of your work and the way that you learn – everything.....

And on that day, child of Adam, you will know how to live with Nature, for it will be your will to know....

Blessed Be.