

THE TREE THAT SUSTAINS ALL LIFE

By Everett Gendler*

We prepare the soil, plant the seeds, tend the garden—then leave it. Each evening we leave—and it grows quite on its own. Each Shabbat we leave it—and it grows on its own. We take the children to camp—and it grows on its own. We go camping in Vermont—and it grows on its own. We visit the Nearings in Maine—and it grows on its own.

With each leaving I experience a momentary pang, a start of anxiety, the agricultural analogue of "Who's minding the shop?" "Oy, who will tend the garden? Who will help it grow?"

Who indeed? For while it grows on its own, "its own" includes an incalculable number of helpers: Microorganisms and earthworms among those inhabitants of the soil, numerous beyond all counting, who "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night," tend the plants and help them grow. Any adequate notion of earth-covering herbage and seed-yielding fruit trees must include this immense assemblage of living stuff, the true intermediary of "The One Who brings forth sustenance from the soil." To recognize this reality is to begin to comprehend what food is and whence it comes.



Tu B'Shvat

Within Judaism there is a day devoted by the mystics to such a comprehension. Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of The Tree, timed for the Full Moon of late Winter when, in the Mediterranean basin, the sap in the trees begins to rise. Celebrative rather than cognitive in mode, its central ceremony is a Seder with an ordered eating of a variety of fruits.

The ceremony derives its impetus from two propositions:

- (1) Said Rabbi Iben: A person is destined to give account for innocent delights which his/her eye saw but his/her mouth did not taste.
- (2) One who enjoys the delights of this world without reciting a blessing is called a thief, for by means of the blessing the sustaining heavenly flow is maintained, and the power of the guardian spirit of that fruit is renewed ... By reciting a blessing with kavanah (directed awareness), one avoids becoming a destructive agent who hoards and keeps to him/herself the sparks of vitality which were in the fruit. But by the blessing and the mastication with the 32 teeth, which correspond to the 32 uses of Elohim (God) in the Creation story, one both purifies and returns the sparks to the life-sustaining flow of Holiness.

However one may assess this Kabbalistic sense of guardian spirits of the various trees and their fruits, even the most naturalist-humanist construction of reality can, I think, identify with the importance of *being appreciative* of

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Haverim, Haverot—

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that which we eat and being aware of those forces which replenish it.

Their Practice

How did the Kabbalists practice their Tu B'Shvat Seder? Recognizing that edible fruits may be divided into three categories—those with protective shells outside but edible inside, those edible inside but with an inedible pit, and those entirely edible—they sought ten examples of each category: grapes, figs, apples, etc. for the last; dates, olives, peaches, etc. for the second; nuts, coconuts, pomegranates, etc. for the first. Then, reading various passages from Bible, Talmud, and Zohar relating to fruits and trees (and grains also), they would eat examples of the various categories. (For a brief summary of the mystical significance of some of this, cf. *The Jewish Catalog I*, pp. 134-135.)

Also figuring in the ceremony were four cups of wine, the first white, the second white with some red added, the third roughly half and half, and the fourth mostly red with just a bit of white. (Red and white Concord wine or grape juice work well for this, as do other compatible red and white wines.)

Our Practice

How might we put this into practice? Set a festive table with candles, plates of fruit, nuts, wine of two colors, and selections of songs and readings. A striking photo or drawing of a tree would also be appropriate, for according to Kabbalistic thinking this is the Festival of *The Tree*, i.e., the Cosmic Tree that sustains all life.

Begin by lighting the candles, sing a song or two for Tu B'Shvat, then the b'racha over the first cup of wine. One could then read Biblical selections dealing with vine and wine, sing another appropriate song, then prepare to eat from the first category of fruit. Start either with the "higher," that entirely edible, and "descend," or begin with

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FOR There is hope of a tree
If it be cut down, that it will sprout again,
And that the tender branch thereof will not cease:
Though the root thereof wax old in the earth,
And the stock thereof die in the ground,
Yet through the scent of water it will bud,
And put forth boughs like a plant.
Job 19



the "lower," that inedible on the outside, and "ascend." Before eating the first category, read Biblical and other passages pertaining to that fruit or nut. Also, talk about how these characteristics of the various fruits may suggest analogies to us as persons, our behavior in situations which are threatening, our defenses, etc. After the b'racha "bore p'ri ha-etz" (Creator of the fruit of trees), eat examples of that category.

Some more singing, then on to the second cup of wine, mostly white with a touch of red, preceded by the b'racha. (A rather nice introduction to each cup of wine is the song "V'hitifu," derived from Amos 9:13, which can serve to link musically the four cups of wine.) With each cup think about the parallels between the deepening redness of the wine and the colors of nature as fructification proceeds.

More singing, some further readings (see below), then on to the middle category of fruit. Again, discussion, reflection, associations, etc. Next the third cup of wine, this time half red and half white, then on to the last category of fruit and the final cup of wine. This last cup is almost all red but with some white to remind us of the essential imperfection and incompleteness of all that we know on this earth.

Resources

What about readings? Besides Biblical sources which can be found with the help of a concordance and Talmudic passages which one can find with the help of M. D. Gross' *Otzar Ha-agadah* (check ilanot, trees, and perot, fruits, for a start), some possible passages from Zohar are these: I 33a; II 58b-59a; III 16a, 58a, 74a, 86a, 127a, 189b. All are in the Soncino English translation.

For other sources, Wendell Berry's *Farming: A Handbook* has some wonderful poetry. Tschernichowsky is another likely source (cf. the translation of one of his poems in *The New Jews*, p. 243). Modern Yiddish and Hebrew poetry are good bets also, as is the poetry of D. H. Lawrence and R. M. Rilke.

For suggestive readings about soil, the following may be rewarding:

Helen and Scott Nearing: *Living the Good Life* (esp. p. 88, Schocken edition)

Charles Darwin: *On Humus and the Earthworm*

Sir Albert Howard: *An Agricultural Testament*

Edward Hyams: *Soil and Civilization*