

# Tales about Trees That are Timely for This Holiday Celebrating Nature

By Michael Brown

KENDALL PARK (JTA) — Tu B'Shevat gives parents the opportunity to share with their children the importance of trees in everyday life.

Jewish tradition is full of parables using trees to convey messages. This tale happens to specify a carob tree, but it could just as well have been an olive, fig or even mulberry tree. The message remains the same.

### "Honi and the Carob Tree"

One day when Honi, the righteous man, was out walking, he came upon a man planting a carob tree.

"How long will it be before this tree bears fruit?" Honi asked.

"Seventy years," the man replied.

"How do you know you'll be alive in 70 years?"

"Just as I found carob trees when I came into the world," answered the man, "so I am now planting carob trees for my grandchildren to enjoy."

Honi then sat down to have a meal and fell asleep.

When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, "Are you the man who planted this tree?" The man replied: "I am his grand-

son."

Honi therefore realized that he had slept for 70 years.

(Babylonian Talmud Taanit 23a)

Some folk tales help explain particular characteristics of trees.

The first is about the olive tree. Olive trees tend to become hollow as they get older. This is possible because the tree gets its nourishment from the thin layer of inner bark just underneath the outer bark.

The second story concerns the Oriental strawberry tree. This particularly striking tree can be found growing in the Galilee, Carmel and Judean mountains. It's most noteworthy characteristic is its red bark, which has been associated throughout the ages with bloodshed.

### "The Grieving Olive Tree"

After the second temple was destroyed, there was widespread grief and mourning throughout the country. To demonstrate their extreme grief, all the trees of the country shed their leaves. After the trees were

bare, they noticed that the olive tree — which is by nature an evergreen — still retained its leaves.

Representatives of the trees approached the olive tree and asked "Why don't you shed your leaves in grief over the destruction of the Temple?" The olive tree responded: "You, my brothers, show your grief on the outside for

Sacred trees and groves are scattered throughout Israel. Many of these trees are quite old, and many folk tales have arisen concerning their origins as well as their special powers.

The first story concerns a sacred grove in the Galilee village of Peki'in. On the outskirts of the village is a cave and ancient carob tree that is connected to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son. According to legend, the two were nourished by the fruit of the tree and a magical spring of water while they hid from the Romans. Christian residents of the area also associate the grove with the sons of Jacob, and therefore refer to it as the carob trees of Bnei Ya'acov.

The second story takes place on Mt. Carmel. On this mountain there is an ancient grove of oak trees sacred to the Druse.

According to tradition, there was an assembly here of 40 prophets. The following story takes place during World War I, when Turkish authorities were cutting down large numbers of trees throughout the country as fuel for their steam engines.

### "The Carob Trees of Bnei Ya'acov"

It is told that the men of Ras-Abad collected a head tax from the residents of Peki'in, and every year they would come and take away for themselves one of the young girls of the village.

One year it was the turn of one particular girl, and the tax collectors arrived at the door of her

home, which was next to the grove of carobs. The young girl hesitated and then she fled through the window and hid among the dense growth of trees. When the tax collectors noticed that she fled, they chased after her.

When the young girl saw her pursuers approaching near, she raised up her voice in prayer to God that she would be saved from these strangers and she asked that the carob trees protect her.

Her prayer was answered: The branches of the carobs suddenly sprouted flames that burned anyone that tried to get near the girl. The flames also pursued the rest of the tax collectors and burned their clothing and their bodies. They fled far away from the village.

From then on, thanks to the carobs of the sons of Jacob, this tax was canceled.

### "Grove of the 40"

One day the Turkish overseer cast his eyes on the Grove of the 40. He yelled to his Druse workers to cut down the trees, but they refused. Angriily he summoned the Turkish soldiers and ordered them to cut down the trees, but they also refused.

Dismissing the fears of the workers and soldiers, the overseer decided to demonstrate his courage in this regard. He grabbed an ax and approached one of the trees. Raising the mighty ax he took aim at the tree. However, as the ax neared the tree his arm withered and became useless. Thus the grove was spared. ☆

Michael Brown, a school librarian in Marlboro, NJ, is the author of the "Jewish Gardening Cookbook."



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all to see. My grief will be carried within for all times." And so it is, that each year the olive tree eats away at itself in grief and sorrow until it is nothing more than a hollow strip of bark.

### "How the Katlav Tree Came to Be"

One day a young shepherd became embroiled in an argument with his father over the affections of a young woman. Words were said on both sides as tempers flared. Suddenly, in anger the shepherd raised the staff in his hand and struck his father, killing him. In shock, the son threw the blood stained staff to the ground, where it sprouted.

## The Trees are Having a Birthday



A Jewish environmental festival called Tu B'Shevat falls on January 28.

Literally the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Shevat, Tu B'Shevat is often called the Jewish Arbor Day or the new year for the trees.

### Background

Once a nature festival of Jewish peasants, this holiday draws our attention to two commandments related to the land: one requiring farmers to give away a tithe (one tenth) of all crops grown during a given year, the other prohibiting people from eating the fruit of a tree until the fourth year after planting.

Both mark time for nature and for trees, and the day evolved into a religious birthday celebration and a harbinger of spring. It remains one of the minor Jewish holidays.

### Celebrating Tu B'Shevat Today

The focus is on the environment both locally and in Israel. Planting trees in Israel is a popular custom especially for children.

We eat foods and fruits grown in Israel, especially carob, nuts, raisins, figs and almonds. Kabbalistic tradition assigns a variety of meanings to the different fruits we eat, from levels of creation to categories of interpersonal relations.

The Tu B'Shevat seder, originated in the sixteenth century by a group of Jewish mystics in Safed has gained in popularity recently. It involves eating fruits, drinking four cups of wine and reciting certain biblical verses. ☆

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