

Community News

A Tu biShevat Confession

By Lisa Garfinkle

Let me share a guilty secret. Despite my commitment to environmentalism and my position as Shalom Green project manager, I have always found it difficult to muster enthusiasm for Tu biShevat, the “New Year for the Trees,” which falls this year on January 25. As a Southern girl with a deep aversion to cold, the thought of celebrating trees and nature at a time of year when days are short and typically freezing, and, let’s face it, nature is not at its most beautiful, has never been incredibly appealing. The timing of the holiday seems better suited for warmer climates, say, that of Israel, while the secular Earth Day, which falls on April 22 is more suited to my internal thermostat and seasonal preference.

However, my experience over the past year working on Shalom Green has led to an attitude adjustment. The knowledge I’ve gained about Judaism’s profound connection to the natural world, combined with a renewed appreciation for the dedication of those who make Jewish environmentalism a priority in their lives, and a humbling awareness of just how little I know about natural cycles and the effect of our human activities on them has convinced me that every day should be a day for celebrating nature. Thus, any holiday dedicated to such a celebration is worthwhile.

Our Jewish ancestors were way ahead of me on this, perhaps because in their time, living in harmony with nature was a more immediate matter of life or death than it is today. Knowing when to

plant, what to plant, when to harvest, and how to keep the land fertile meant the difference between eating and starving. And from the beginning, Judaism has appreciated trees as important symbols of the essential role of nature in sustaining life. In Deuteronomy, for instance, the Torah forbids us from cutting down fruit trees, even during wartime. According to the Midrash, the Jewish people’s first act upon entering the Holy Land was to plant trees. And the Torah, itself, is known as “the tree of life.”

In modern times, our connection to the earth is more remote. The results of actions that impact the environment may take years or even decades to become evident. However, Jews in Israel continue to plant trees on Tu biShevat, and throughout the year, supported by donations from Jews across the world, in an effort to renew the land. As a result, Israel was one of the only countries in the world to enter the 21st century with a net gain in the number of trees. This continued dedication to preserving the earth is critical, because while the effects of living out of harmony with nature — cancer, lung disease, contaminated water, soil and air — may become evident more slowly today than they did in ancient times, they are no less devastating.

Over the past year, Shalom Green has worked to make the environment and sustainable living a priority for the Shalom Park Community. We have obtained energy audits on all Shalom Park buildings and put in motion plans for reducing our community’s car-



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bon footprint. We built and planted the Shalom Park Community Garden, which will serve as an environmental learning hub for all ages, allowing community members to experience directly planting, nurturing and harvesting crops. The Shalom Green Challenge has enrolled more than sixty families in an effort to promote sustainable living at home, and Shalom Green continues to work to raise awareness about environmental issues across Shalom Park.

As we enter our second year, Shalom Green needs your help to continue and expand these efforts. So on this Tu biShevat, plant a tree in Israel or at home, host or attend a Tu biShevat Seder, eat the fruits mentioned in the Torah - pomegranates, figs, grapes, olives, and dates, start seeds for your spring garden, but most importantly, join Shalom Green and commit to caring about the earth every day - not just on environmentally themed holidays. Here are ways for you to get involved:

- * Volunteer to help in the Shalom Park Community Garden or join the Garden Committee
- * Join the Shalom Green Steering Committee to help move the Environmental Initiative forward in year two.
- * Get involved in efforts to re-

duce the carbon footprint of your Shalom Park agency or institution.
* Help plan environmental forums and educational activities for the Shalom Park Community.

* Participate in the Shalom Green Challenge and work to live more sustainably at home.
For information, email environmental@shalomcharlotte.org. ✪



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