

Bringing It All Back Home: Tu biShevat in Israel

By Deborah Fineblum/JNS.org

Israelis know that each and every tree is precious. When the pioneers of the Jewish state first cast their eyes on the Promised Land, it was barren. There were no natural forests to be had. And now, just consider: Israel is the only country in the world that ended the 20th century with more trees than it started with. In just six decades, Israelis have literally sunk down roots.

Of course, Israel did not accomplish this alone. Diaspora Jews have grown up dropping coins into little blue-and-white *pushkes* (tin cans), coins earmarked for planting trees in Israel. Many lucky enough to travel to Israel in their youth recall sticking slippery little saplings into the ground, knowing that each one made the fledgling Jewish state that much stronger.

Each sapling and coin has done its part to “green” the Jewish state. Since 1901, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) has planted more than 240 million trees indigenous to the Middle East, such as native oaks, carob, redbud, almond, pear, hawthorn, cypress, and the exotic Atlantic cedar. JNF has also developed more than 250,000 acres of land and 1,000 parks.

Tu biShevat—the Jewish New Year for trees, celebrated January 25 this year—grew out of the tithes (the amount Jewish law requires to be donated) that Jews

take from the produce grown in Israel. The date when new fruits are officially assigned to the New Year is the 15th of the Hebrew calendar month Shevat, hence the holiday’s timing.

Today, Jews around the world mark Tu biShevat by eating fruit, particularly the kinds mentioned in the Torah as Israel’s natural gifts: grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

But in Israel, where trees are nothing less than a relatively recent miracle, Tu biShevat isn’t just a passing nod to our leafy-boughed friends. It’s a real live holiday marked by countless tree-planting ceremonies, ecological consciousness-raising programs in schools and communities, and Seders for young and old alike—minus the matzah. It is in many ways a holiday ahead of its time, says one Israeli rabbi.

“Tu biShevat is really the celebration of spring time, yet it is in the middle of the winter, because it’s really the festival of faith, and particularly faith in the land of Israel,” Rabbi Binny Freedman, Rosh Yeshiva of Orayta Yeshiva in Jerusalem’s Old City, tells JNS.org.

After all, it was in Israel that 17th-century Kabbalistic master Rabbi Yitzchak Luria of Tzfat and his disciples instituted the Tu biShevat Seder, modeled after the Passover Seder. Here, each of the fruits and trees of the Land of Is-

rael were given symbolic meaning, including fruits with hard shells, inedible pits, and those that are completely edible.

In addition, four cups of wine (or grape juice) are drunk in a specific order and in varying shades of red, pink, and white, representing the cycle of life and seasons.

For many years, the Tu biShevat seder was an important event for the children in the elementary school in Kfar Saba, where Israel Lenchner was principal. They were among Israel’s poorest kids, the majority of them from Ethiopian families. “Five hundred years ago, the rabbis of [Safed] would eat 34 fruits and vegetables that night, telling their stories and speaking of their love for Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel),” Lenchner, who is now retired, tells JNS.org. “That’s why, for all the years I was the principal, we always had the Seder of Tu biShevat.”

But Lenchner didn’t do it for the children alone. “As important for them to know the stories, the wisdom and the traditions that have been handed down to us about the land, it’s just as important for us that they know it, that they truly love this land and this people,” he says. “That’s why every year we made sure they heard it, so they could grow up appreciating what they—and we—have been given here.”

The tree planting was an Israeli

tradition even before JNF got in on the act. On Tu biShevat in 1890, Rabbi Ze’ev Yavetz led his students on a first planting outing to Zichron Yaakov. The tradition was embraced in 1903 by the JNF and taken up in 1908 by the Jewish Teachers Union. A few years later, JNF devoted the holiday to planting eucalyptus trees in an effort to drain the swamps and halt the malaria that had attacked the communities in the Hula Valley. In honor of the tradition of this holiday of new beginnings, the laying of the cornerstone at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem took place on Tu biShevat in 1918, as did those of the Technion - Israel Institute of Technology in 1925 and the Knesset in 1949.

These days, more than a million people each year attend JNF’s Tu biShevat planting ceremonies in Israel’s largest forests. But trees have proven not to be immune to violence. In 2006, after the destruction of 10,000 acres of forest by Katyusha rockets, JNF launched Operation Northern Renewal to begin replacing much of the topsoil that had been burned away and replant the forest.

“Through 2,000 years of exile we never stopped believing that one day, we would come home,” says Rabbi Freedman. “Which is why this Jewish festival is being rediscovered in Israel, because anywhere else in the world it is by necessity missing something. A celebration of coming home makes the most sense... when you are home.” ☆



Two-year-old Hagai, and his parents Ofra and Eyal, choose plants in a nursery in Eshtaol, Israel, in celebration of Tu biShevat on Jan. 19, 2011. Credit: Nati Shohat/Flash90.

CJDS Parent Profile



Elissa Levine

Years at CJDS: 7

Husband: Josh

Children: Talia • 6th grade, Providence Day, Sasha, 4th grade

Temple Affiliation: Temple Israel

Why We Chose CJDS

My husband and I first looked at CJDS when our oldest daughter applied to kindergarten. I was familiar with the advantages of a day school education; whereas my husband was more circumspect about how this would benefit our child. What we discovered about CJDS was astounding. There were no leather couches or glossy brochures. Just Mariashi’s unapologetic strength that she will draw forth the best from each child she was entrusted with and bring them to their full potential.

We met the teachers. Without exception, every teacher takes so much joy in teaching. From kindergarten through 5th grade, each teacher was genuinely enthusiastic to come to school every

morning and see ‘their kids.’ CJDS’s core curriculum is second to none, either the same or surpassing other private schools’ curricula.

But without doubt, meeting the 5th grade student ambassadors was the highlight of our introduction to the school. The students were poised and comfortable in their own skin. The fifth graders remarked about how the teachers met each student at their individual level for each subject.

CJDS teachers and administrators are truly invested in the personal and academic growth of each student.

What We Continue to Love About CJDS

What’s not to love? Everything that we liked about the school has been demonstrated in a thousand ways over the years that our children have attended CJDS. The academics continue to be exceptional. The Judaic studies become a moral compass and a code of ethics that our girls internalize and use as a guide in their daily lives. Most of all, the teachers instilled our girls with a love of learning that continues to blossom. Choosing CJDS has been a fabulous decision for our children and our family, and I suspect we have not begun to realize the rewards.

CJDS Charlotte Jewish Day School

For more information about CJDS or to arrange a personal tour, contact: Mariashi Groner, Director • 704-366-4558 • mgroner@cjdschool.org

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