

Tu Bishvat, Festival of Trees by Hannah Neshet www.voiceforisrael.net

Today, Israel and the entire Jewish world celebrates **Tu Bishvat**, the Festival of Trees. At this time of year, the first of the flowering trees such as this beautiful almond (shkeidiyah) - begin to blossom. Spring is in the air here in the Land, and it reminds us that a beautiful sunny spring always follows the cold winter; and so it is in our lives also. There is always hope of new life.

The name of Tu Bishvat is derived from the date of the holiday, which occurs on the fifteenth (15th) day of the Hebrew month of 'Shvat'. "Tu" comes from the Hebrew letters tet ט and vav ו which correspond to the numbers 9 and 6, adding up to 15.



Almond (shkeidiyah) trees blossoming in Israel

Tu Bishvat is considered a 'New Year for trees'; but why do we need a special new years day for trees? It is because in the Torah, there are certain things that must be performed (or are forbidden) depending on the age of the tree. For example, the fruit of a new tree is not to be eaten for three years. Before this time, the premature fruit is called **orlah**, a word related to the male foreskin which literally means 'uncircumcised fruit'. It is to be removed and not used. In the fourth year the fruit is to be given as first fruits in the Temple. Only in the fifth year may the fruit from the trees be eaten.

"When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden.[a] For three years you are to consider it forbidden [b]; it must not be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. But in the fifth year you may eat its fruit. In this way your harvest will be increased. I am the LORD your God."
(Leviticus 19:23-25)

Therefore, one day was chosen as the day in which to calculate the age of all trees planted that year. Not only are we reminded on this special day to be thankful of the many benefits we receive from trees, such as their beauty, food, shade, shelter, homes for birds and animals, and prevention of soil erosion (as well as many other benefits); but we are also reminded of the miracle that God has performed, along with the hard work and incredible sacrifices of Israeli pioneers to bring an amazing restoration to this Land.

What was once barren and devoid of life (because of the sins of Israel) is now (because of God's mercy) fertile, fruitful, and glorious in beauty.

Tu Bishvat is more of a national Israeli chag (festival) than a Biblical one – in fact the Torah contains no command to celebrate it, nor is it even mentioned. It does, however, contain significance for us as Bible believers, especially those who are interested in prophecy.

Most are aware of the fact that for approximately two thousand years, this land lay desolate, a wilderness, practically uninhabitable, void of vegetation. God warned His people over and over again, but they would not listen to the warnings of His prophets, and so He had no choice but to carry out all the curses of the Mosaic Covenant into which the nation of Israel willingly entered at Mt. Sinai, as is written in Deuteronomy 28).



The desolation of the land and exile of the people would stand as stark evidence of God's wrath to all the surrounding Gentile nations.

"The whole land is brimstone, salt, and burning; it is not sown, nor does it bear, nor does any grass grow there, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and His wrath.'

All nations would say, 'Why has the Lord done so to this land? What does the heat of this great anger mean?'

"Then people would say; "Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt... Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against this land, to bring on it every curse that is written in this book. And the Lord uprooted them from their land in anger, in wrath; and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day." (Deuteronomy 29:23-28)

In 1867, Mark Twain, in his book, *The Innocents Abroad*, described this desolation of the Land: *"[Israel is a] desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds... a silent mournful expanse.... a desolation.... we never saw a human being on the whole route.... hardly a tree or shrub anywhere. Even the olive tree and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country."*

The prophet Jeremiah gave a similar explanation as to why God so devastated the physical land of Israel: **“Why does the land perish and burn up like a wilderness, so that no one can pass through?”** And the Lord said,

“Because they have forsaken My Torah which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice, nor walked according to it, but they have walked according to the dictates of their own hearts and after the Baals, which their fathers taught them.” (Jeremiah 9:12-14)

The good news is that our God is merciful and He promised a future time of restoration, when an ecological miracle would take place. The desert would blossom like a rose, the wilderness would be transformed into a Garden of Eden; trees would once again produce fruit; the land would be re-inhabited, the cities re-built.

“For the Lord will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord.” (Isaiah 51:3)

“The wilderness and the dry land will be glad; the desert will rejoice and blossom like a rose.” (Isa 35:1) *Photo: A Beautiful rose from our garden in Israel*



This time is now! It is God’s appointed time to end the punishment and return his favor unto Zion, to choose Jerusalem and Israel once again. **“You will arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time to favor her, Yes, the set time, has come.”** (Psalm 102:13)

It is beautiful to witness the almond trees (called sh’keidim in Hebrew) blossoming, as the first tentative sign of spring. It was at a Tu Bishvat assembly at my children’s Jewish day school that I began to wonder, *“What am I doing here in this freezing cold winter in Canada when the trees are already blooming in the Land of Israel?”*

We decided then and there to go home.



Beautiful trees in full blossom at Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem, Israel, on Tu Bishvat

So it is a joy and a wonder to be back in the Land and to see the beauty of the trees and flowers; especially since it was here that for so many years the Land was totally barren because of the sins of Israel and their subsequent exile. God cried out in grief over the land through the Prophet Jeremiah: **“Desolate, it mourns to Me, The whole land is made desolate, because no one takes it to heart.”** (Jeremiah 12:11)

But God promised that one day He would bring back the exiles of Israel and restore the fertility of the land.

“Then it shall be, after I have plucked them out, that I will return and have compassion on them and bring them back, everyone to his heritage and everyone to his land.” (Jeremiah 12:15)

God promised through the Hebrew prophet, Ezekiel, that the trees in this land would once again shoot forth their branches and produce fruit in preparation for His people Israel who were about to come home.

“But you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel, for they are about to come.” (Ezekiel 36:8)

Now the exiles of Israel are returning, and the land is once again fertile, fulfilling these words of the ancient Hebrew prophets.



A palm tree in our front yard in Israel

Tu Bishvat Customs

A popular custom in Israel (as well as in Jewish communities outside the Land) on Tu Bishvat, is to partake of dried fruits and nuts from the trees such as figs, dates, and almonds. Many people create special plates filled with fruits and nuts of all kinds especially those mentioned in the Torah as being evidence of the bountiful blessings of this land: grapes, figs, olives, pomegranates, and dates. A special blessing is recited: *“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.”*



Jewish school children in the Diaspora may receive dried carob pods to sample, sent from the trees of Israel. I still remember as a little girl in Hebrew school in Canada, receiving dried up carob pods from Israel once a year on Tu Bishvat. They smelled bad and tasted worse, but we treasured them because they were from the 'Promised Land.' Now, I see these carob pods fallen in abundance all over the walkways and roads from the carob trees in our moshav (village). :)



The prophet Isaiah knew by divine inspiration that one day Jacob would take root again in the land and then **“Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit.”**

(Isaiah 27:6) Israel, a land once barren and lifeless, now exports its fruits and flowers to the world. What a miracle!

God wants to do the same kind of miracle in our own lives today. God has chosen each one of us, and appointed us to bring forth much good fruit for our Father's glory. (John 15:16)

There may be areas of our lives which have become barren, dull, and lifeless, perhaps even because of our own sin; but let us allow hope to be renewed in our hearts this Tu Bishvat, that with God all things are possible.



A Fruit Stand at Jaffa Gate, Old City, Jerusalem

He can bring forth new life even out of the stoniest ground.



An Almond Blossom Photo by Liat Nesher

Laying the Cornerstone

Because Tu Bishvat represents revival and restoration in nature, many of Israel's major institutions have chosen to be inaugurated on this day, including: the cornerstone-laying ceremony of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on Tu Bishvat 1918, Haifa's Technion University of Technology, on Tu Bishvat 1925; and The Knesset (Israeli Parliament), on Tu Bishvat 1949

Planting Trees in the Land

“And when you arrive in the land, plant all manner of fruit trees.” (Leviticus 19:23)

Another Jewish custom practiced on Tu Bishvat is to plant a tree in the Land. This custom originated in 1890, when on Tu Bishvat, Rabbi Zeev Yavetz, one of the founders of the Mizrachi movement took his students to the agricultural colony of Zichron Yaakov to plant trees.

In 1908, the Jewish Teachers Union adopted this custom and later, in 1901, by the Jewish National Fund (Keren HaKayemet L'Israel), which was established to oversee land reclamation and reforestation of the Land of Israel.

The Jewish National Fund effectively stopped a plague of malaria in the Hula Valley in the early 20th century, by planting eucalyptus trees.

Hulda Forest



Today, this tradition carried on, as the JNF schedules major tree-planting events in large forests every Tu Bishvat in Israel, where over a million Israelis take part each year. The JNF also reaches outside of Israel to the nations to promote the reforestation of Israel with an annual worldwide campaign on Tu Bishvat.

For \$18 anyone from anywhere in the world can have a tree planted in Israel. Why \$18? When we add up the numerical value of the Hebrew word, Chai **חַי** (meaning life) it comes to a total of 18 (10+8).

Therefore according to Jewish custom, gifts and donations are often given in multiples of 18, to symbolize the desire that the gift will bring forth life. Often, these trees are planted in honor of a special occasion or a memorial of a loved one and the donor receives a certificate to that effect.¹



American tourists plant trees on Tu Bishvat with Israeli soldiers

¹ To buy a tree go to <http://www.jnf.org/>

On our family's first Tu Bishvat in the Land of Israel, we rode the buses, searching for a place to plant our sapling. We carefully chose our plant, dug and tenderly laid our little tree in the hole we had dug in the hard dirt with our hands, as we had no tools. I wept as we realized our tiny contribution to the awesome fulfillment of prophecy for this land. God commands us, when we arrive in the land, to plant trees.

Life is appreciated everyday in Jewish culture and all of life is respected, whether it is for a human, an animal or even plant. God so values trees, that the Torah actually forbids people from destroying the trees during times of war.

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees.”
(Deuteronomy 20:19)



Israeli children planting trees on Tu Bishvat

The enemies of Israel, however, pay no heed to this and often the forests of Israel suffer terrible devastation from missile attacks and bombings. We don't often think of trees as casualties of war, but when forests are destroyed by missile attacks, it is a great tragedy for the nation of Israel. The IDF and the Jewish National Fund are now joining forces to plant trees around Israeli towns to disrupt terrorists' ability to target homes.

The desolation of the Land was a sign of God's curse over the Land and people of Israel; therefore its reforestation represents healing and restoration, not only of the Land, but also of the people - *the Land and the People of Israel are forever linked in an inseparable covenant.*

Israel apparently is the only country in the world that is actually adding to their population of trees rather than reducing their numbers. We are reminded by this custom of planting trees that the restoration of the land of Israel is a miracle of God, but it also has come about through partnership with man – through hard work and sacrifice, as well as irrigation.

The spiritual restoration of Israel, promised in the very next chapter of Ezekiel (37) will happen in the same way. It will be a mighty move of God - the pouring out of the water of the Holy Spirit upon the land - but it will also be accomplished through hard labor and sacrificial efforts: like the first pioneers who left home, country, and family for His name's sake.

In the future, in the New Jerusalem, fruit-bearing trees whose leaves will bring healing will line the sides of the river which flows from the sanctuary of God.

“Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all kinds of trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine.” (Ezekiel 47:12) (Rev. 22:2b-3)

Will you stand with Israel and partner with God to see spiritual as well as physical restoration come to this Land?



We are so thankful for your kindness and faithfulness in standing together with us in the Land of Israel through your fervent prayers and generous support.

SHALOM & HAPPY TU-BISHVAT

Love Hannah & family

Photo: *Hannah with her two youngest children, Liat & Avi-ad and one of her grandchildren, Aden, planting trees on Tu Bishvat*

