

A Tu B'Shvat Grows in Brooklyn

כי האדם
עץ השדה

An eleven-year-old girl sitting on this fire escape could imagine that she was living in a tree.

How strong,
vital, enduring!
how dumbly
eloquent!

באחד בשבט,
ראש השנה לאילן,
כדברי בית שמאי;
בית הלל אומרין,
בחמישה עשר בו.

עץ-חיים היא, למחזיקים בה; ותמכיה מאשר

Tu B'Shvat has been celebrated many different ways through history, changing to meet the needs of each generation: from pagan roots, to a tax deadline, a kabbalist mystical observance, and Jewish Arbor Day.

Tu B'Shvat means the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shvat, with Tu representing the Hebrew letters *tet* and *vav*, which also represent the numbers 9 plus 6.

As with other holidays, Tu B'Shvat probably has pagan origins, dating back to worship of Asherah, the goddess of fertility, whose spirit resided in trees. There was a special festival in honor of Asherah halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

In Temple days over 2,000 years ago, Tu B'Shvat was literally the birthday of the trees for accounting purposes, determining which year the tree's fruit could be harvested and which fruit would be tithed as a Temple offering.

The idea of a Tu B'Shvat seder was developed by 16th-century kabbalists in Palestine. They recognized the many and varied dimensions of God's creation and used the fruits of Israel to symbolize their existence. Moreover, the kabbalists of Safed developed the model of tikkun olam that we embrace today — healing the world by gathering the scattered holy sparks. To encourage the Divine flow — shefa — and to effect tikkun olam, they created a Tu B'Shvat seder loosely modeled after the Passover seder.

In this seder, we will read from both Jewish text and the inspired work of Brooklyn's own prophets and poets to celebrate the beauty and majesty of trees, their fruit and their significance as a metaphor for life and its seasons. In keeping with the seder's kabbalistic origins, the supporting Biblical text has been drawn from Song of Songs, whose themes of love and nature made it another central text to Jewish mystics. Meanwhile, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and the poetry of Walt Whitman provide local roots and inspiration.

The kabbalists drank four cups of wine and ate different foods to represent four levels or worlds of existence. The first world is *Asiyah*, or Action, the physical world around us. The second is *Yetsirah*, or Formation, the world of feelings and emotions. The third is *Beriyah*, or Creation, the world of intellect and the mind. The fourth is *Atsilut*, or Emanation, the world of divine essence.

We will begin our seder by saying a Shehecheyanu, a blessing of thanks that is typically recited at the beginning of holidays and to celebrate special occasions.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעֵנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, she-hecheyanu, ve-kiyemanu ve-higiyanu la-zeman ha-zeh.

Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has caused us to live, and has sustained us, and has enabled us to come to this time.

This Haggadah includes text developed for the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life; the Boston Workmen's Circle; and Rachel Barenblat of Velveten Rabbi.



עולם העשייה

Asiyah is the physical world, creation at its most basic. This is the world of objects: flesh, stone, wood. Here the spark of the Divine is hidden by the shell of appearance. This is the world of earth and the season of Winter.

First Cup of Wine

The divine tree roots itself in the world of Asiyah — the physical world of existence. The world of Asiyah appears hard and impenetrable, but, like winter’s frozen ground, it is a shell that contains the life of the spirit below. The white wine or juice we drink symbolizes winter’s pale light and white snow.

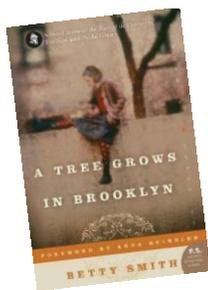
We lift a glass of white wine and recite together:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

Who wants to die? Everything struggles to live. Look at that tree growing up there out of that grating. It gets no sun, and water only when it rains. It’s growing out of sour earth. And it’s strong because its hard struggle to live is making it strong. My children will be strong that way.”



“Aw, somebody ought to cut that tree down, the homely thing.”

“If there were only one tree like that in the world, you would think it was beautiful,” said Katie. “But because there are so many, you just can’t see how beautiful it really is. Look at those children.”

First Fruit

The fruit we eat for the world of Asiyah also symbolizes the winter season, with its protected outside and soft interior.



Removing the hard shells of pomegranates, walnuts, almonds, coconuts, or pecans exposes a vulnerable inside.

We recite together the blessing for the fruits:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי העץ

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-eitz.
Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree.

שיר השירים Chapter 6

יא אל-גנת אגוז ירדתי, לראות בְּאֵבֵי הַנָּחַל; לראות הִפְרֹתָהּ הַגִּפְנֹן, הַנִּצּוֹר הַרְמָנִים.

11 I went down into the garden of nuts, to look at the green plants of the valley, to see whether the vine budded, and the pomegranates were in flower.

יב לא ידעתי-- נפשי שְׂמַתָּנִי, מִרְכָּבוֹת עַמֵּי נָדִיב.

12 Before I was aware, my soul set me upon the chariots of my princely people.

עולם היצירה

Yetsirah is the world of formation. Here materials are transformed and we acknowledge creative power, ours and God's. This is the world of emotions and water, Spring and thaw.

Second Cup of Wine

We are moving up the trunk of the divine tree. In the world of Yetsirah, we drink white wine or juice with a dash of red. This gradual deepening of color parallels the reawakening of colors in nature as the sun brings the earth back to life. In spring the sun's rays begin to thaw the frozen earth and the first flowers appear on the hillsides. As we drink the second cup of wine, may we, like the flowers, blossom into our full potential.

We add a bit of red wine or juice to the white and recite together:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melek ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn



She was made up of all of these good and these bad things.

She was made up of more too. She was the books she read in the library. She was the flower in the brown bowl. Part of her life was made from the tree growing rankly in the yard...

She was all of these things and of something more that did not come from the Rommelys nor the Nolans, the reading, the observing, the living from day to day. It was something that had been born into her and her only — the something different from anyone else in the two families. It was what God or whatever is His equivalent puts into each soul that is given life — the one different thing such as that which makes no two fingerprints on the face of the earth alike.

Second Fruit

To represent Yetsirah we eat fruits without protective shells — olives, dates, apricots, peaches and plums — symbolizing how, in spring, we will forget our protective attire and expose our soft bodies to the sun. Still, these fruits contain pits, reminding us that we may still have hardness around our hearts. Each of us is still tied to the hard stone of ego and feels the need to protect what makes us vulnerable. As we eat these fruits of may our hearts be open to the feelings and needs of ourselves and others, allowing the warmth of our care through the world.



We recite together the blessing for the fruits:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי העץ

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melek ha-olam, borei peri ha-aitz.
Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree.

שיר השירים Chapter 7

12 Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages.
יב לכה דודי נצא השדה, גלינה בכפרים.

13 Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine hath budded, whether the vine-blossom be opened, and the pomegranates be in flower; there will I give thee my love.
יג נשכימה, לכרמים--נראה אם-פרחה הגפן פתח הסמדר, הנצו הרמונים; שם אתן את-דדי, לך.

14 The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and at our doors are all manner of precious fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.
יד הדודאים נתנו-ריח, ועל-פתחיהו כל-מגדים--חודשים, גם-ישנים; דודי, צפנתי לך.

עולם הבריאה

Briyah, the third world, is the world of Creation. It is the world of thoughts represented by air and the season of summer. We recall the words of Genesis: “Adonai formed a human from the dust of the Earth, and blew into its nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being...placed in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and protect it.” One name for God is “The Breath of Life.” We breathe out what the trees breathe in; God breathes in us and through us. Briyah is the world of air, the holy breath of creation.

Third Cup of Wine

In the world of Briyah, we drink red wine or juice with a dash of white, reminding us that as the land becomes warmer and the colors of the fruits deepen as they ripen, we too become warmer and more open.

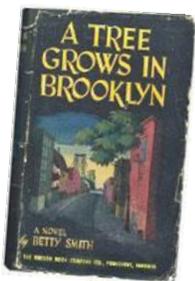
We add a bit of white wine or juice to the red and recite together:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.
Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

The one tree in Francie’s yard was neither a pine nor a hemlock. It had pointed leaves which grew along green switches which radiated from the bough and made a tree which looked like a lot of opened green umbrellas. Some people called it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky. It grew in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement.



That was the kind of tree in Francie’s yard. Its umbrellas umbrellas curled over, around and under her third-floor fire escape. An eleven-year-old girl sitting on this fire escape could imagine that she was living in a tree. That’s what Francie imagined every Saturday afternoon in summer.

Third Fruit

Briyah is represented by fruits with no shells or pits — fig, blackberry, carob, kiwi, kumquat, strawberry — reminding ourselves to relinquish both our shells and the stones we carry inside us. In our deepest relationships we are like the fruit of Briyah, with no inner shell and no outer façade.



We recite together the blessing for the fruits:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, borei peri ha-eitz.
Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree.

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים Chapter 2

יא כִּי-הִנֵּה הַסֶּתֶו, עָבַר; הַגֶּשֶׁם, הַחֹלֵף הַלֵּף לָךְ.
11 For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;

יב הַנִּצְּנִים נִרְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ, עֵת הַזְּמִיר הַגִּיעַ; וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר, נִשְׁמַע בְּאֶרְצֵנוּ.
12 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

יג הַתְּאֵנָה תִּנְטֵה פְּגִיהָ, וְהַגִּפְנִים סְמָדֵר נִתְּנוּ רִיחַ; קוּמִי לְכִי (לָךְ) רַעֲיָתִי יָפְתִי, וְלִכִּי-לָךְ. {ס}
13 The fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines in blossom give forth their fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

עולם האצילות

Atsilut is the world of essence, divine emanation. This is the world of spirit and fire and Autumn. This is the top, where the divine tree dissolves into the unknowable.

Fourth Cup of Wine

The pure deep red wine represents the full bloom of nature before the cold winter. As nature expends its last bit of energy in an explosion of color, a full cycle is completed. As we drink the fourth cup of wine, may we become strong, like healthy trees, with solid roots in the ground and with our arms open to the love that is all around us.

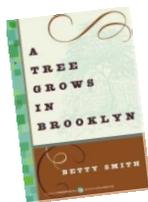
We take up a cup of red wine and recite together:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melek ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen.

Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn



She looked down into the yard. The tree whose leaf umbrellas had curled around, under and over her fire escape had been cut down because the housewives complained that wash on the lines got entangled in its branches. The landlord had sent two men and they had chopped it down.

But the tree hadn't died... it hadn't died. A new tree had grown from the stump and its trunk had grown along the ground until it reached a place where there were no wash lines above it. Then it had started to grow towards the sky again.

Annie, the fir tree, that the Nolans had cherished with watering and manurings, had long since sickened and died. But this tree in the yard — this tree that men chopped down... this tree that they built a bonfire around, trying to burn up its stump — this tree had lived! It lived! And nothing could destroy it.

Once more she looked at Florry Wendy reading on the fire escape. “Good-bye, Francie,” she whispered. She closed the window.

No Fruit

In the world of Atsilut we eat no fruit, for this world cannot be represented by any fruit. In this spiritual world, we become aware of God's love, mercy, and wisdom perceived with our hearts, not our senses. Our hearts are full and we praise the Source that renews all creation.

As we have passed through each world, we have changed with each season. We began by protecting our soft inner self and slowly peeled our hard outer layer.

Within the next layer another hardness was found, protected by the softness which surrounded it. Then we came to a place where there was no distinction between the protected and the protective. Let us rejoice in where we are!

שיר השירים Chapter 8

ו שימני כחותם על-לבך,
כחותם על-זרועך--כי-ענה
כמנת אהבה, קשה כשאול
קנאה: רשפיה--רשפי, אש
שלהבתיה.
6 Set me as a seal upon thy
heart, as a seal upon thine
arm; for love is strong as
death, jealousy is cruel as the
grave; the flashes thereof are
flashes of fire, a very flame of
the LORD.

The Lesson of a Tree from Specimen Days
by Walt Whitman

Sept. 1.—I SHOULD not take either the biggest or the most picturesque tree to illustrate it. Here is one of my favorites now before me, a fine yellow poplar, quite straight, perhaps 90 feet high, and four thick at the butt. How strong, vital, enduring! how dumbly eloquent! What suggestions of imperturbability and *being*, as against the human trait of mere *seeming*. Then the qualities, almost emotional, palpably artistic, heroic, of a tree; so innocent and harmless, yet so savage. It *is*, yet says nothing. How it rebukes by its tough and equable serenity all weathers, this gusty-temper'd little whiffet, man, that runs indoors at a mite of rain or snow. Science (or rather half-way science) scoffs at reminiscence of dryad and hamadryad, and of trees speaking. But, if they don't, they do as well as most speaking, writing, poetry, sermons—or rather they do a great deal better. I should say indeed that those old dryad-reminiscences are quite as true as any, and profounder than most reminiscences we get. (“Cut this out,” as the quack mediciners say, and keep by you.) Go and sit in a grove or woods, with one or more of those voiceless companions, and read the foregoing, and think.

One lesson from affiliating a tree—perhaps the greatest moral lesson anyhow from earth, rocks, animals, is that same lesson of inherency, of *what is*, without the least regard to what the looker on (the critic) supposes or says, or whether he likes or dislikes. What worse—what more general malady pervades each and all of us, our literature, education, attitude toward each other, (even toward ourselves,) than a morbid trouble about *seems*, (generally temporarily seems too,) and no trouble at all, or hardly any, about the sane, slow-growing, perennial, real parts of character, books, friendship, marriage—humanity's invisible foundations and hold-together? (As the all-basis, the nerve, the great-sympathetic, the plenum within humanity, giving stamp to everything, is necessarily invisible.)

Aug. 4, 6 P. M.—Lights and shades and rare effects on tree-foliage and grass—transparent greens, grays, &c., all in sunset pomp and dazzle. The clear beams are now thrown in many new places, on the quilted, seam'd, bronze-drab, lower tree-trunks, shadow'd except at this hour—now flooding their young and old columnar ruggedness with strong light, unfolding to my sense new amazing features of silent, shaggy charm, the solid bark, the expression of harmless impassiveness, with many a bulge and gnarl unreck'd before. In the revealings of such light, such exceptional hour, such mood, one does not wonder at the old story fables, (indeed, why fables?) of people falling into love-sickness with trees, seiz'd extatic with the mystic realism of the resistless silent strength in them—*strength*, which after all is perhaps the last, completest, highest beauty.



Master of the Universe, grant me the ability
to be alone; May it be my custom to go
outdoors each day Among the trees and
grass--among all growing things And there
may I be alone and enter into prayer To talk
with the One to whom I belong. May I
express there everything in my heart.



Tree Table 2009
Gitlin Blackstone home

And may all the foliage of the field, all
grasses trees and plants awake at my coming,
to send the powers of their life into the words
of my prayer. So that my prayer and speech are made whole
Through the life and spirit of all growing things,
Which are made as one by their transcendent Source.
May I then pour out the words of my heart
Before your Presence like water, O God,
And lift up my hands to You in worship, on my behalf, and
that of my children! - Rabbi Nachman of Breslov



Tree Table 2019, Kane Street Synagogue

