

MEMBER SUBMISSION: A NEW YEAR FOR THE TREES

March 11, 2025



Photograph by Christhian Diaz

March 11, 2025

By Sarede Rachel Switzer

The Jewish holiday of Tu B'Shvat, aka the New Year for the Trees, fell on February 12 and 13 this year (in Judaism, the day begins in the evening and ends at nightfall). This relatively minor holiday is actually fairly profound, as I hope to convey in this article.

The main custom of the day is to eat a variety of fruits, especially those for which the Land of Israel is praised, namely: grapes, olives, dates, figs and pomegranates. I am happy that the Coop carries all of these items, which made my observance of this holiday extra convenient and special.

The first mention of Tu B'Shvat is in the Mishnah, the ancient codification of Jewish law. In the times of the Holy Temple, Tu B'Shvat served as an annual demarcation to calculate the agricultural cycle of taking tithes from the produce of trees which were brought as first fruit offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem.

TU B'SHVAT PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO FOCUS ON ENVIRONMENTALISM, AND FEEL A SENSE OF GRATITUDE FOR TREES AND TO CULTIVATE AN AWARENESS OF HOW DEPENDENT WE ARE UPON THEM.

Jewish mystics have historically felt a special affinity towards this holiday, and secular Zionists later adopted it as a way of establishing a connection to the Land of Israel devoid of anything too overtly religious. Jewish Coop members such as myself have fond recollections of participating in campaigns to plant trees for the Land of Israel when we were younger.

The mental, emotional and even spiritual benefits of gardening have been well documented and likely experienced by many within our Coop community. Jewish mystical teachings explain that this is due to gardening's close resemblance to *creation ex nihilo* (the uniquely G-dly ability to create something from nothing).

While our perceived experience is that a tree sprouts naturally and causally from a seed planted in the ground, according to the mystics, this is not so. The Kabbalah teaches that Earth contains a spiritual power of growth, activated not when the seed is planted, but rather when it disintegrates into the ground. So, in actuality, the tree sprouts from "nothingness," via the power of growth within the earth.

Another mystical teaching is that "Man is a Small World": Every person is a micro-cosm of the Earth, possessing elements of the four orders of creation (Inanimate, Vegetative, Animal and Human). Interestingly, it was the vegetative order that Talmudic scholars emphasized, as per the quote from the Jewish bible, the Tanakh: "For man is

a tree in the field” (Deuteronomy 20:19). For, throughout our lives, we also grow—developing and refining our character traits—through ridding ourselves of ego (not unlike the seed disintegrating into the ground).

On a macrocosmic level, Tu B’Shvat provides an opportunity to focus on environmentalism and feel a sense of gratitude for trees and to cultivate an awareness of how dependent we are upon them.

I hope these ideas provide some food for thought (no pun intended!) as you enjoy all of the delicious fruits, vegetables, herbs, teas and spices we are privy to at our Coop.

Happy Tu B’Shvat!