

Rabbi Jonathan A. Schnitzer  
B'nai Israel Congregation  
Rockville, Maryland

Tu B'Shevat

4 February 2012

A famous French general who had worked very hard all his life finally reached the age of retirement. Now – at long last – he would have the time to do some of the things which were especially important to him.

It was the first day of this new era in his life – and the general was in the courtyard behind his house getting ready to plant a tree. He was just about to lift his shovel, when the doorbell rang and his secretary came to him to tell him that Madame Fontaine had arrived to have tea with him.

“Who invited her?” asked the general. He was plainly annoyed.

“I once told her,” said the secretary “that she could drop in, if she were ever in the neighborhood, and here she is in the parlor waiting to have tea with you.”

“Well, tell her that she will have to come back tomorrow,” barked the general. “I have been waiting for years to plant this tree, and I am not going to wait any longer.”

“But, general,” the secretary retorted, “she is a very famous person and you should see her. Even if you planted that particular tree now, it would take fifty years before it bore fruit. Why not just wait one more day?”

**“That settles it,” said the general, “if it will take fifty years before this tree will bear fruit, then indeed I must plant it right this very minute. I will not see anyone, until I have planted this tree. I haven’t got a minute to lose.” (from a story told by Rabbi Leonard Winograd in Speak to the Children of Israel).**

**A philosopher once said that the secret to life lies in learning to plant a tree, whose fruit we will never eat, and whose shade we will never see. When we learn to plant what we ourselves may never use, we will better understand how the world works.**

**Whatever we want done – we ourselves must do. But our focus cannot always be on immediate results. Sometimes, the greatest magic takes centuries to develop. The trees which Jews plant on Tu B’Shevat have that kind of mystique.**

**This coming Wednesday, February 8, is the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Shevat, known popularly as Tu B’Shevat, the New Year of the Trees. It is a wondrous holiday – our opportunity to link ourselves with Nature and with Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.**

**Our ancestors were sensitive to the rhythms of the year. Tu B’Shevat marked a time, when they were deeply aware of those processes. Winter passes, spring emerges, the seasons flow in a regular pattern – and trees, trees are a highly visible aspect of those miracles.**

**Even in those centuries when most Jews did not actually reside in the land of Israel, Tu B’Shevat was not abandoned. Rather, it became part of a visceral**

attachment to Eretz Yisrael – with considerable effort often expended to obtain various fruits grown in Israel.

The Kabbalists who ventured to Eretz Yisrael and settled in Safed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century developed a new practice: a Seder for Tu B'Shevat. Modeled on the Passover Seder, this Tu B'Shevat ritual followed a prescribed order of eating and the drinking of four cups of wine.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the return of large numbers of Jews to Eretz Yisrael, Tu B'Shevat assumed a new dimension yet again. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) arranged for massive tree plantings on Tu B'Shevat – with barren wastelands eventually becoming lush forests. Jews in the Diaspora – outside of the land of Israel – were encouraged to provide for the purchase of such trees. Today, the Jewish National Fund has dramatically expanded its horizons – incorporating many water and environmental projects. Through our ongoing support of JNF, we express our love for the land of Israel and our concern for its beauty, vitality and its future.

Tu B'Shevat is also our Jewish Earth Day. In an era of serious environmental hazards – the greenhouse effect (with summer in February), the solid-waste crisis, oil slicks and the pollution of water and foods through pesticides, Tu B'Shevat reminds us how fragile, how delicate, how complex our eco-system really is. Protecting the natural world becomes a moral mandate, a consummate Mitzvah, for each of us.

The Midrash calls God a Tzayar, an artist. Our universe is the result of God's artistry.

**The poet, David Wagoner, puts it well, in saying: “If what a tree or bush does is lost on you, You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you.”**

**Tu B’Shevat becomes our antidote to environmental indifference.**

**As we celebrate Tu B’Shevat this week, let’s remember the story of the general and how determined he was to plant a tree. Yes, Tu B’Shevat is coming – and for all the reasons that should be obvious to us, we don’t have even a moment to lose.**