

## Tu B'Shevat and Judaism's agrarian roots

BY DAVID RECKESS

Each year in the Hebrew day school I attended in upstate New York, as the presidents' week vacation approached, we sang a song for the upcoming holiday of Tu B'Shevat. "*Ha'shkediah porachat, v'shemesh paz zorachat...*" I dutifully sang along, "*Tu B'Shevat higyah, chag la'ilanot!*" My teachers explained the meaning of the song: "The almond tree is blooming; the brilliant sun is shining... Tu B'Shevat is here, a holiday for the trees!" We ate figs and dates, and drew pictures of trees with beautiful flowers. Then we pulled on our snowsuits, donned hats and gloves, and went outside for recess to build snow forts and throw snowballs.

Even as a young boy, I remember thinking that this holiday made no sense whatsoever. A holiday for trees in February? Brilliant sunshine and blossoming flowers in the dead of winter? Hasn't anybody looked outside?

When I was 19, I visited Israel in the middle of January. Driving through the countryside and into the Negev desert, I was astounded at the beauty of the blooming flora. I asked my mother about the trees with the bright pink-and-white flowers that seemed to line every street. When she said they were almond trees, I instinctively started singing the song from my childhood. "You mean the almond trees actually *do* bloom in time for Tu B'Shevat?" I asked, incredulous. "I thought that was just a song from the olden days!"

The Jewish calendar is filled with holidays that, in some way, are tied to the seasons. Passover welcomes in spring with an egg and fresh greens on the seder plate. On Sukkot, we hang the signs of autumn from the roof of our sukkah. The candles in the *chanukiyah* help bring light to the darkest days of the year. And we all enjoy fresh apples on Rosh Hashanah. Yet the occurrence of Tu B'Shevat in the middle of the cold Central New York winters presents possibly the biggest seasonal challenge for us as Jews. How can we adhere to our religious tradition that tells us to celebrate trees and the re-emergence of life when, as I sit to write this *d'var* Torah, the expected high temperature for tomorrow is a mere seven degrees?

After my trip to Israel, I might have said that Tu B'Shevat, as with many Jewish traditions, simply invites us to turn our minds and hearts toward Israel, where, in fact, the almond trees do bloom in January. But Judaism is about more than just yearning for Israel. Jewish laws, customs and holidays are meant to guide us in our daily lives, to help us live in the here-and-now. How, then, can Tu B'Shevat lend meaning to our lives in Central New York?

My answer came to me not in the depths of snowy winter, but on a chilly October morning while picking rainbow chard at a local organic farm. For the past two years, my wife and I have been shareholders of Community Supported Agriculture of Central New York (CSA-CNY). As with most CSAs, we pay a lump sum at the beginning of the growing season, providing a local organic farm with the necessary capital to help cover the costs of farming. In return, we receive weekly shares in the farm's bounty – fresh, local, organic produce – throughout the summer and fall. Through our involvement with CSA-CNY, we have begun to appreciate the rhythms and flavors of the Central New York region. On a volunteer work day at the farm in the middle of Sukkot this year, I started to make the connection between the food we get from the CSA and the Jewish lives we lead.

I arrived at the farm at 8 am, just as the sun began to burn away the light frost from the ground. The farmer and his lone employee greeted me with happy faces and rosy cheeks. They had been in the fields since 6 that morning, picking the last of the chard and sorrel leaves before the heavy frost forecast for that night. Working alongside them under the warming sun, filling baskets of hand-picked leaves that would grace my fellow CSA shareholders' tables that evening, I thought of the Sukkot celebration I had attended a few days earlier. Suddenly the urgency of Sukkot made sense to me: the need for Jewish farmers in biblical times to build a temporary structure, out in the fields, in order to complete the harvest before winter set in. It also occurred to me that my first CSA share of the season had arrived almost exactly on Shavuot, the holiday commemorating the year's first fruits. Reflecting on the historical and agricultural significance of these Jewish holidays while working in the farm fields, I came to understand Judaism's agrarian roots in a way I never had before.

Judaism teaches us in many ways that our relationship to food is sacred. The laws of *kashrut* dictate which foods we can or cannot eat. We say a blessing before and after each meal. We give thanks for the food we have, and perform the mitzvah of providing food to those in need. But these laws are not just about eating; they are about the land the food comes from, the people who grow the food and the way we treat others in our society. Judaism teaches us to respect the bounty of the earth and the value of all human beings. Though the biblical holidays are firmly rooted in the land and seasons of ancient Israel, their lessons instruct us to honor the very land on which we live, the land which gives us life. Holidays such as Sukkot, Shavuot and Passover turn our attention to the rhythms of the seasons, the needs of our local community and our neighbors.

And so, as I picked chard on that October morning, I thought about the seemingly incongruous occurrence of Tu B'Shevat in the middle of our winter. Sure, Tu B'Shevat invites us to think of Israel, with its almond trees blooming and brilliant sun shining; but even more, Tu B'Shevat is an invitation to engage in the natural cycle of our local environment, to give thanks for the bounty that our particular region provides, to look for the blessings in our snow-covered trees and to find ways to respect and revere our local community.

This year for Tu B'Shevat, do something to celebrate your local ecosystem. Visit a maple sugar shack, go outside and build a snowman, or buy yourself or your neighbor the gift of a CSA membership ([www.csacny.com](http://www.csacny.com) or [contact@csacny.com](mailto:contact@csacny.com)). Let this be a year committed to recognizing the sacred in your own backyard. Let this be a year filled with the bounty of our Central New York region. Let this be a year of Jewish study and growth, honor and love, soaked in the ancient traditions that nourish us and engage us in the natural world that sustains us. Tu B'Shevat is here, a holiday for the trees.

*David Reckess is completing his master's degree in elementary education at SUNY Cortland. A member of Congregation Beth Shalom-Chevra Shas, he teaches Sundays at the CBS-CS Religious School.*