

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Tu BiShvat

The New Year of the Trees: a farmers' date from ancient Israel that the mystics of Safed and Sephardic and Mizrahi families turned into a feast of fruit.

WHEN

The 15th of the Hebrew month of Shevat, in January or February, as the first trees begin to blossom in the Land of Israel.

ORIGINS

The Mishnah calls it the new year for trees, the date used to count a tree's age for farming and fruit offerings.

CUSTOMS

Eating many kinds of fruit, especially the seven species of the Land of Israel, and in many homes a Tu BiShvat seder.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews gave the day names, songs, and customs of their own, from "Las Frutas" to tables of 100 fruits.

Tu BiShvat began as a date on a farmer's calendar. In ancient Israel, it marked the point from which the age of fruit trees was counted, which decided when their fruit could be eaten and when a portion was owed as an offering. After the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE, the date lost much of its practical purpose. Centuries later, the Kabbalists of Safed gave it new spiritual meaning, and Sephardic and Mizrahi communities from the Balkans to Baghdad made it one of the most colorful days of the winter: a celebration of trees, fruit, family, and the land.

From farmers' calendar to mystics' seder

- **A new year for trees.** The Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 1:1) lists the 15th of Shevat as the new year for trees. The Bible forbids eating a tree's fruit in its first three years (Leviticus 19:23 to 25), so farmers needed a fixed "birthday" to count from. The date was chosen because trees in the Land of Israel begin to flower after it, once most of the winter rain has fallen.
- **The Kabbalists of Safed.** In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jewish mystics in Safed, a hilltop town in the Galilee, taught that eating fruit with blessings and study could carry deep spiritual meaning.
- **Pri Etz Hadar.** Their ideas grew into a seder modeled on the Passover seder. A booklet called *Pri Etz Hadar*, "Fruit of the Goodly Tree," set out the readings and the order of fruits and wine. It was printed in the 1700s (the Fitzwilliam Museum dates the first printing to Venice, 1728) and spread across the Sephardic world, while remaining largely unknown among Ashkenazi Jews until modern times.
- **Today.** In modern Israel, Tu BiShvat became a day for planting trees. Around the world, many people now see it as a Jewish celebration of ecology and care for the earth.

The seder, step by step

Four cups. Wine or grape juice moves from white to red, cup by cup. Rabbi Marc Angel lists the colors as white, golden, rose, and deep red; the Fitzwilliam Museum links them to the season, from winter snow and almond blossom to red spring flowers.

Three kinds of fruit. Fruits with a hard outer shell, such as pomegranates and nuts; fruits with a pit inside, such as olives and dates; and fruits eaten whole, such as figs and grapes.

Many fruits. Sephardic tables often held at least twelve fruits. Moroccan Jews ate at least fifteen, and Iraqi Jews set out as many as one hundred kinds of fruits, nuts, and vegetables.

Community by community

Ottoman Sephardic (Turkey, Greece, the Balkans)

Ladino speakers called the day *Las Frutas* or *Frutas*, “the fruits,” and the home seder *Frutikas*, “little fruits.” In Salonica, children received embroidered bags of fruit, *frutas bolsas*, and young people performed Ladino plays dressed as trees. In Smyrna (Izmir), each member of the family, down to the babies, had a fruit or food to bless. Tables included *biscochos* and almond *marochinos*.

Sources: Rabbinical Assembly (Marcelo Polakoff); Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood; Museum of Jewish Heritage

Morocco

Moroccan Jews customarily ate at least fifteen kinds of fruit. Wealthy families hosted feasts with as many as one hundred kinds, and children went from relative to relative filling their sacks with fruit. In Judeo Arabic and Haketia, the day was called *Tubisbat*.

Sources: Rabbi Marc Angel; My Jewish Learning; Jewish Language Project

Iraq

Iraqi Jews were known for especially abundant tables, with as many as one hundred kinds of fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Readings from the Bible, the Zohar, and rabbinic writings came first, followed by a festive meal. In Calcutta, a 1951 seder plan written by Lady Rachel Ezra, of an Iraqi Jewish family, assigned each blessing to a family member and listed *kaka* (caraway cookies) and *loozina* (candied fruit).

Sources: Rabbi Marc Angel; Jewish Language Project

Syria (Aleppo)

On the eve of the holiday, the Ten Commandments were read aloud in Arabic in the synagogue. Each commandment was “sold” to a member of the congregation, who read it before going home to the festive dinner.

Source: Rabbinical Assembly (Marcelo Polakoff)

Kurdistan

In Jewish Neo Aramaic, Kurdish Jews called the day *Mzdane 'llane*, “gifts of the trees.” Families placed raisins and other sweet fruits in rings around trees and prayed for a plentiful season. Some women who hoped for children prayed beside the trees.

Sources: Jewish Language Project; My Jewish Learning; Fitzwilliam Museum

Iran

In a playful custom, Persian Jews lowered empty baskets down the chimneys of neighbors' homes from the roof, and the baskets came back up full of fruit. Children wore little bags of fruit around their necks.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Fitzwilliam Museum

Bukhara and Georgia

Jews of Bukhara and Kurdistan called the holiday “the day of eating the seven species,” though they actually ate around thirty kinds of fruit. Georgian Jews named it *Shbidi Pherobá*, “the seven species.”

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Jewish Language Project

India

Indian Jews counted fifty fruits. Bene Israel families hold a *malida* ceremony on Tu BiShvat, and a Bene Israel legend says their ancestors first arrived in India on this day.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Museum of Jewish Heritage

One day, many names

As Jews carried Tu BiShvat across the world, they named it in their own languages. Some names simply echo the Hebrew; others say what the day meant to the people who celebrated it.

LANGUAGE	NAME	MEANING	WHO USED IT
Hebrew	Tu BiShvat; Rosh Hashanah La'ilan	“The 15th of Shevat”; “new year for the tree”	Jewish communities everywhere; the second name comes from the Mishnah.

Ladino (Judeo Spanish)	Las Frutas, or Frutas	"The fruits"	Sephardic Jews of Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans. Some communities said <i>Rosasana des arbores</i> , "new year of the trees."
Ladino	Frutikas	"Little fruits"	The Sephardic home seder, still held in the United States today.
Judeo Arabic and Haketia	Tubisbat	A local form of the Hebrew name	Jews of North Africa, including Morocco.
Jewish Neo Aramaic	Mzdane 'llane	"Gifts of the trees"	Kurdish Jews.
Judeo Georgian	Shbídi Pherobá	"The seven species"	Jews of Georgia, in the Caucasus.

Main sources: Jewish Language Project; Rabbinical Assembly (Marcelo Polakoff); Museum of Jewish Heritage; Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood. In English, Sephardic Jews have also called it the "Feast of Fruit" (Harvard Pluralism Project).

A holiday about the land

Tu BiShvat is closely tied to the climate of the eastern Mediterranean. Winter there is the rainy season, and by the middle of Shevat most of the year's rain has fallen. The almond tree, the first to bloom, is the flower most associated with the day in Israel. The seven species of Deuteronomy 8:8 (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates) are the crops that sustained ancient farmers, and many families still eat them on Tu BiShvat.

That link to the land helps explain why the holiday flourished in the warm, fruit growing lands of the Middle East and North Africa. In modern times, communities have also given it new meanings: celebrating Israeli agriculture, replanting forests, and, for many people today, reflecting on how to care for the natural world.

Why a pomegranate?

Fruits on the seder table carry symbolic meanings. The pomegranate is often said to hold 613 seeds, the traditional number of commandments in the Torah, so it stands for good deeds and abundance. In Smyrna, daughters blessed pomegranates and nuts, while the youngest children blessed dates and apples.

Common misconceptions

- **"Tu BiShvat is a minor day everywhere."** In cold northern Europe, with few fresh fruits in winter, Ashkenazi Jews generally marked it lightly. For many Sephardic and Mizrahi families it was a major celebration.
- **"The Tu BiShvat seder is a modern invention."** Many seders today focus on the environment, but the seder itself goes back to the Kabbalists and the eighteenth century booklet *Pri Etz Hadar*.
- **"Tu BiShvat is the Jewish Arbor Day."** The comparison helps, but the day's roots are in biblical farming law, mystical tradition, and the Land of Israel's seasons.
- **"All Middle Eastern Jews are Sephardic."** Iraqi, Iranian, and Kurdish Jews are usually called Mizrahi, while many Syrian and Moroccan Jews identify as Sephardic, descended from the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

Words to know

Tu BiShvat *Hebrew*

"The 15th of Shevat." The letters *tet* and *vav* stand for 15.

Rosh Hashanah La'ilan *Hebrew*

"New year for the tree," the Mishnah's name for the day.

Seder *Hebrew*

"Order." A ritual meal with readings, blessings, and set foods.

Pri Etz Hadar *Hebrew*

"Fruit of the Goodly Tree," the classic Tu BiShvat seder booklet.

Shiv'at haminim *Hebrew*

The seven species of Deuteronomy 8:8: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

Las Frutas *Ladino*

"The fruits," the Sephardic name for Tu BiShvat.

Frutikas *Ladino*

"Little fruits," the Sephardic Tu BiShvat seder.

Frutas bolsas *Ladino*

Embroidered bags of fruit given to children.

Mzdane 'ilane *Jewish Neo Aramaic*

"Gifts of the trees," the Kurdish Jewish name.

Kabbalah *Hebrew*

"Received tradition," Jewish mystical teaching.

Bringing Tu BiShvat to life

In the public school classroom

- Connect to science: compare when trees bloom in the Land of Israel with your region, and explore how the end of the rainy season shapes farming.
- Study the three fruit categories as botany: shells, pits, and fruits eaten whole. Sort fruits by seed type and structure.
- Map the names for the day across Jewish languages, and discuss what each name emphasizes.
- Plant a tree or start a school garden as an ecology project tied to many cultures' tree traditions.
- Teach about the seder and its blessings; do not have students recite blessings or perform a seder. Follow allergy rules for nuts and sesame.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Hold a Frutikas seder using the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood booklet, with Ladino readings and *biscochos*.
- Challenge classes to gather fifteen, thirty, or even one hundred kinds of fruit, Iraqi style.
- Pour the four cups from white to red and discuss the seasons they represent.
- Fill embroidered *frutas bolsas* for younger children, as in Salonica.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Did our family celebrate Tu BiShvat? What did they call it, and which fruits were on the table?
- Read *Thank You, Trees!* with toddlers, then visit a tree in your neighborhood.
- Try a playful Persian custom: surprise a neighbor with a basket of fruit.
- Record an elder's holiday memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a holiday about trees have mattered more to communities living in warm, fruit growing regions than in cold northern ones?
- Tu BiShvat began as a practical farming date. How did different communities give it new meanings over time?
- What can a celebration of trees and fruit teach us about how people care for the land and for one another?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Tu Bishvat in Jewish languages (Jewish Language Project; names for the day, a Calcutta seder plan, and a Judeo Esfahani dialogue) jewishlanguages.org/tu-bishvat

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA) jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shvat Anthology, edited by Ari Elon, Naomi Mara Hyman, and Arthur Waskow (Jewish Publication Society, 2000). For teachers. jewishbookcouncil.org/book/trees-earth-and-torah-a-tu-bshvat-anthology

The Rhythms of Jewish Living: A Sephardic Exploration of Judaism's Spirituality, by Marc D. Angel (Jewish Lights, 2015; first published 1986). jewishideas.org/rhythms-jewish-living-sephardic-exploration-judaisms-spirituality

Thank You, Trees!, by Gail Langer Karwoski and Marilyn E. Gootman, illustrated by Kristen Balouch (Kar-Ben, 2013). Board book for ages 2 to 4. kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/gail-langer-karwoski/thank-you-trees

Frutikas Tu BiShevat Seder (Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood and the World Zionist Organization). A Ladino and English seder booklet. sephardicbrotherhood.com/_files/ugd/0019a0_7815476f92454b6ba59d17cba725ffa7.pdf

Explore online

Sefardic Customs of Tu Bishvat, by Marcelo Polakoff (Rabbinical Assembly) rabbinicalassembly.org/node/1419

Happy Birthday to Trees (Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge) feast-and-fast.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/discover/happy-birthday-to-trees

Eating Fruit on Tu Bishvat (My Jewish Learning) myjewishlearning.com/article/eating-fruit-on-tu-bishvat

Kabbalistic Tu Bishvat Seder (My Jewish Learning) myjewishlearning.com/article/kabbalistic-tu-bishvat-seder

Thoughts on Tu B'Shvat, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals) jewishideas.org/node/3080

Tu BiShvat: The New Year of Trees (Museum of Jewish Heritage) mjhny.org/blog/tu-bishvat-the-new-year-of-trees

Tu B'Shevat (The Pluralism Project, Harvard University) pluralism.org/tu-b%E2%80%99shevat

Guide to Jewish Practice: Tu B'Shvat (Reconstructing Judaism) reconstructingjudaism.org/article/guide-to-jewish-practice-resource-tu-bshvat

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools) sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history jimena.org/oral-history

Share your family's story jimena.org/share-your-story



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include Reconstructing Judaism (Rabbi David Teutsch); the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge; My Jewish Learning (Lesli Koppelman Ross; Rabbi Miles Krassen); Rabbi Marc D. Angel (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals); Marcelo Polakoff (Rabbinical Assembly); the Jewish Language Project; the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood; the Museum of Jewish Heritage; the Pluralism Project at Harvard University; and Encyclopædia Britannica. Sources differ on when *Pri Etz Hadar* was first printed. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.