



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Suite 203
Washington, D.C. 20002

TU BISH'VAT: JEWISH EARTH DAY

Jewish communities across North America are embracing Tu Bish'vat as a Jewish Earth Day, linking traditional Jewish understandings of our relationship to and responsibility for all Creation with profound concern about the global ecological crisis.

What for centuries was a relatively unimportant Jewish observance is now increasingly imbued with rich meaning celebrated with a variety of observances. The late 20th-century embrace of Tu Bish'vat by Diaspora Jews represents an important turning point in the history of Jewish relations to the land.

The traditional post-exile practices of Tu Bish'vat were developed primarily in the Middle Ages by Jews searching for an opportunity to connect with the Land of Israel. For most of the last hundred years, Tu Bish'vat has been widely observed as an opportunity to support the building of the Jewish state. Most recently, Diaspora observances of Tu Bish'vat indicate the desire of Diaspora Jews to build caring relationships with the land on why they live.

Many contemporary Diaspora Jews are no longer satisfied by an abstract relationship to the rhythms of nature through the celebration of festivals linked to the seasons of the Land of Israel.

They are increasingly taking time to learn about, to protect and to preserve the ecosystems and creatures with which they live. Tu Bish'vat is now celebrated by learning about the places in which Diaspora Jews live, studying Jewish environmental ethics and engaging in acts of ecological "tikkun," or repair. This Tu Bish'vat marks a significant step in the growth of the Jewish environmental movement. Jewish environmentalists find in Judaism a profound response to the environmental crisis we face as a society, and find in ecological thought and action insights and practices that have the power to renew Judaism.

For the growing number of young Jews with deep commitments to environmental activism, Jewish environmentalism offers them a way to meaningfully maintain their involvement in the Jewish community. While Jewish communities have been cultivating a response to the ecological crisis, corporate interests - such as the mining, timber and petrochemical industries - have been building a movement to dismantle the environmental protections that we have come to take for granted in the United States.

The 104th Congress has given corporate interests unprecedented access and attention; some of its leaders have worked closely with industry to draft legislation that would reverse two decades of bipartisan environmental accomplishments. Fortunately, many people of conscience across the country are speaking out about our obligation to protect Creation for its own sake and for the sake of human health and well-being now and in the future.

However, the outcry is not yet sufficient to turn the tide. More people must understand what is at stake - for ourselves, our children, all people and all creation - and take action.

As we mark the approach of spring this Tu Bish'vat, we cannot afford to be silent about the fateful decisions our nation is making. What can we do to cultivate an authentically Jewish response to the environmental crisis that will contribute to healing our relationship with the Earth as well as to the renewal of Jewish life?

- Revive the mitzvot and “minhagim,” or customs, that celebrate the wonder of life and that involve us in a caring relationship with Creation. Tu Bish’vat, Shabbat and many other holidays have ecological significance, as do a wide range of other Jewish observances. Both Judaism and ecological consciousness beckon us to acknowledge and act upon the recognition that there is something much larger than us at work in the universe.
- Learn about the places in which we live by becoming familiar with the creatures, plants, hydrology and geology of our bioregions. Our synagogues, day and religious schools, and community centers can sponsor educational programs, organize visits to nature centers, stock libraries with appropriate books and magazines, and work with local conservation organizations and other civic groups with common goals.
- Act to effect ecological tikkun personally, institutionally and politically through reforestation and other restoration efforts, political advocacy and responsible management of our own homes. This Tu Bish’vat, all Jewish individuals and institutions should make a commitment to reduce the use of paper products, to establish recycling programs for paper waste and to buy recycled paper products.

As Jews have courageously taken on the challenges of ages past, so we must muster our spiritual, intellectual, political and financial resources to overcome the conditions that threaten the future of humanity. This Tu Bish’vat, let us embrace the challenge of forging an ecologically sustainable future, raise our voices as Jewish individuals and institutions in favor of protecting all of Creation, and make a commitment to embody personally and communally the millennia-old Jewish mandate to protect the Earth on which we live.

Source: Mark X. Jacobs