Origins of Tu BiShvat

During Biblical times, Tu BiShvat was a day of importance largely because of its halachic ramifications on an agriculturally — and Beit HaMikdash — oriented society.

Tu BiShvat marked the cut-off date for determining which year fruits belonged to.

Fruits that ripened before Tu BiShvat belonged to the previous year in the Shemitah cycle, and fruits that ripened afterward would be considered part of the current year.

Fruit that ripened before Tu BiShvat on a three-year-old tree would be considered prohibited neta revai, while fruit that ripened afterward would be permissible.

Tu BiShvat is first mentioned in the Mishna (written in the 1st–2nd century):

“There are four New Years: On the first of Nissan is the New Year for Kings and Festivals; on the first of Elul is the New Year for the tithe of animals – Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon say; on the first of Tishrei is the New Year for the years, for Sabbatical years, for Jubilee years, for planting and for vegetables; and on the first of Shevat is the New Year for Trees, according to the view of the school of Shammai, but the school of Hillel says on the fifteenth [of Shevat]” (Rosh Hashanah 2b).

Afterward, Tu BiShvat is mentioned in halacha as a quasi-holiday on which it is forbidden to fast or eulogize, and on which the prayer of tachanun is not said.

In Israel and Today

On Tu BiShvat in 1892, Ze’ev Yavetz, one of the founders of the Mizrachi Movement, took his students to plant trees in Zichron Ya’akov. This custom was adopted and institutionalized in 1908 by Israel’s Teacher’s Union and then by the Jewish National Fund. In the early 20th century, the JNF devoted the day to help dry the malaria-infested swamps of the Hula Valley by planting eucalyptus trees there.

The inauguration of the Knesset in Yerushalayim took place on Tu BiShvat in 1949.

Today, over a million children and adults take part in tree-planting throughout Israel on Tu BiShvat. In modern times, Tu BiShvat has taken on an ecological significance as well. Many individuals and organizations see this day as an opportunity to raise communal awareness of the importance of preserving and protecting our planet.
The Middle Ages

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the 15th century, many Jews immigrated to Tzfat. Among them were prominent rabbis such as Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the Arizal), Rabbi Yosef Karo (author of the Shulchan Aruch), Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, and Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz. Tzfat soon became the center of Torah study, and the 16th century was known as Tzfat’s “golden era.”

It was during this period that many of the Tu BiShvat customs we have today were formed. The Arizal and his students understood that Tu BiShvat had hidden spiritual significance and instituted the Tu BiShvat Seder – prayer and Torah learning centered around a meal with four cups of wine, similar to a Pesach Seder. They established the custom of eating various fruits on Tu BiShvat, especially the Shivat HaMinim of Eretz Yisrael, and wrote the first published version of the Tu BiShvat Seder, called “Pri Eitz Hadar.”

Rabbi Chaim Vital, a student of the Arizal, recorded 30 different fruits to eat on Tu BiShvat – 10 from which to throw away the external peel and eat the internal fruit, 10 from which you eat the external fruit and discard the peel, and 10 of which are eaten whole, internal and external. According to Rabbi Chaim Vital, these three types of fruit correspond to three spiritual worlds (briyah, yetzira, and asiya), which also correspond to different parts of the tree. By eating these fruits on Tu BiShvat, the kabbalists believed they could rectify these worlds and the sin of Adam and Eve.

Inspired by these kabbalists, Jews around the world began to take on these customs. Today, there are various customs regarding the Tu BiShvat Seder. Some Jews like to have 15 different types of fruit, for the 15th day of Shevat. Many Chassidim have the minhag to eat jellied etrog from Sukkot on Tu BiShvat and pray for a beautiful etrog for the coming Sukkot.