

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman



The Celebration of Eretz Yisrael

Tu BiShvat marks the cutoff for many *mitzvot* connected to fruit and the *mitzvot hat'luhot ba'Aretz* (the agricultural *mitzvot* particular to *Eretz Yisrael*). The source of the Tu BiShvat *Seder* comes from Tzfat, during the time of the Kabbalists. The first mention we have of this is in the book *Birkat Eliyahu*, in 1728, in which the author tells of Rabbi Moshe Chagiz, who encouraged Jews to eat 15 different types of fruit and to learn 15 chapters of Mishna, and who claims that the Arizal also did this. Over time, the Tu BiShvat *Seder* was formed by the sages of Tzfat and included eating fruits of Israel, drinking four cups of wine, and reciting verses expressing the connection between *Am Yisrael's* return to its Land and the nature and flora of Israel. This was an attempt to highlight the centrality and importance of *Eretz Yisrael* and instill a love of the Land. This beautiful and meaningful *minhag* spread throughout Jewish communities all over the world.

Tu BiShvat is also a good time to nurture Diaspora Jewry's connection – especially the youth – to Israel. The Prophets of Israel saw the Jewish nation returning to its birthplace from the four corners of the earth, but the reality, 72 years after the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael*, is rather different (although that process has indeed begun of course).

There are many reasons for this. Demographic, social and religious changes have brought about the materialization of outlooks – ideological, cultural and religious – in Israel and the Diaspora. Centuries-old Jewish communities have disappeared or been diminished. On the other hand, new ones have been established and existing ones expanded, and there has been a positive change in the social, economic and political status of Jews in many countries.

Despite aliyah being an option from anywhere in the world, and at any time, half of the Jewish nation still lives outside of Israel, with the vast majority of course in North America. These Jews – at least the affiliated ones – have established flourishing communities, synagogues and schools, and social and communal services. So much so that many Jews do not see themselves as living in exile. They live where they choose and do not feel discriminated against or inferior. Moreover, they can proudly wear their Jewish identity and live a fully Jewish lifestyle.

Perhaps the problem is that they believe Israel is purely the spiritual center of the Jewish people and not a place in which one actually has to live.

In this reality, we must proudly declare: טוֹבָה הָאֶרֶץ מֵאֵד מְאֹד, “The Land is very good!” Our responsibility is to reinforce the centrality of Israel in the lives of world Jewry and to cultivate the

relationship with *Medinat Yisrael* in three areas:

The first is the emotional-experiential, encouraging identification with Israel through experiential events and activities. The second is the cognitive – deepening knowledge about Israel through multiple perspectives: history, geography, civics, security, economy, etc.

And the third area, the most important in my opinion, is that of values. Educating and raising awareness to the meaning of the Jewish national homeland, the role of the State of Israel, and the fact that Israel is the eternally beating heart of the Jewish people, a Land over which G-d Himself watches, and the place where the destiny of *Am Yisrael* will be fulfilled.

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman is Head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora in the World Zionist Organization and one of World Mizrahi's representatives in the National Institutions.

The World Zionist Organization's Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora is in constant contact with hundreds of rabbis and community leaders and conducts extensive activities to strengthen Jewish identity and cultivate a connection to Israel. Among other things, we produce a range of educational kits and study aids. Ahead of Tu BiShvat, we produced an illustrated *Seder Tu BiShvat* in 10 different languages. Materials for your school or community can be found at wzo.org.il.

