

Trees

A Gift of God



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I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED TREES. Israelis also love trees, and they plant them for all sorts of occasions. In fact, Israel is one of the only countries in the world that entered the 21st century with more trees than 100 years before. Let's take a brief look at the relationship between Israel and trees.

Tu BiShvat—the New Year of Trees



Tu BiShvat, also known as the New Year for Trees, is a post-biblical Jewish holiday which celebrates trees. The name means the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Shvat*, which falls in January or February, at the time of year when the trees in Israel are just beginning to bud and the almond trees begin to put forth their delicate pink and white blooms.

Israel celebrates *Tu BiShvat* by planting trees, eating the fruit of trees and reading Scriptures about trees. Some communities have a *Tu BiShvat* seder, a service and meal combined to focus on trees and their biblical significance. Attention is also brought to the biblical injunctions on when to eat the fruit of a tree after it is planted. Leviticus 19:23–25 prohibits eating the yield during the first three years. In the fourth year, the harvest belongs to God. Only from the fifth year is the fruit for the enjoyment of the people. On *Tu BiShvat*, each tree is considered to have a birthday and thus to have aged one year in order to keep track of the number of years since it was planted.

Tu BiShvat is all about thanking God for the gift of trees. Some celebrate by incorporating 15 different fruits and nuts in their meals on this day, thanking God for each one. Jewish people in the Diaspora (Jewish population outside Israel), will have some fruits from Israel on their menu for the day.

In a very real sense, it is not only a day about the trees themselves, but about the rebirth of the nation of Israel. The prophet Ezekiel spoke about the time when God would bring the Jewish people back from



the nations to their homeland in Israel—and trees formed part of the prophecy! *“But you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel, for they are about to come”* (Ezek. 36:8).

Trees in the Bible



Genesis 1 offers the first description of trees in the Bible as a *“...fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself...”* (v. 11b). A few verses later, after humans were created, we read, *“And God said, ‘See I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food’”* (v. 29).

Genesis 2:8–9 summarizes: *“The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”*

In these few verses we learn that God planned for trees to be a blessing, provide food and offer pleasant shelter. Some of them also had specific purposes.



The Significance of Trees



God created this earth to be self-sustaining, and trees were a key element. Trees provide food, absorb carbon monoxide and other pollutants from the atmosphere, and in turn, give oxygen. In fact, trees and plants produce about 50% of the oxygen we need to live. If trees were to disappear, life would become very difficult on this planet. Air quality would be greatly affected, rain

levels would decrease and soil erosion would make growing crops difficult. God created trees for a great life-giving purpose.

We have a historical example of what happens to a land that loses its trees. During the Ottoman Empire, many taxes were levied. One of the things taxed was trees. Over the 400 years the Turks reigned over the Holy Land, those who couldn't afford the taxes cut down the trees. Many travelers testified that there were less



than one thousand trees remaining in the Land. The Jewish people who returned in the late 1800s and early 1900s came to a virtually empty, neglected and nearly treeless Land. It suffered from soil erosion, with deserts in the south and malaria-filled swamps in the north. The Land was not pleasant, nor could it sustain a large population without significant improvement.

God told Adam and Eve to take care of the garden, “to tend and to keep it” (Gen. 2:15b). God created a wonderful self-sustaining world, but He expected mankind to care for it in partnership with Him.

God's plan had been ignored for 400 years. Then, His people began returning to the Promised Land and immediately began to plant trees, drain swamps and tend or husband the Land. Today, Israel has over 200 million trees. They grow abundant fruit for their population and export many varieties worldwide. Israelis developed water saving technology that makes the best use of limited rainfall and built desalination plants to ensure there will be

adequate water for people, trees and agriculture for the foreseeable future.

The Tree of Life



The Tree of Life has been a subject of great interest to both Christians and Jews. Many artists have attempted to portray this tree. God said it was a tree that would provide eternal life. Wouldn't we all love to eat of its fruit? The Tree of Life is first mentioned in Genesis 2. Of great interest to Christians is that it is also referenced in Revelation 22, the last chapter of the Bible. The Tree of Life is also found in the book of Proverbs, with another probable reference in Ezekiel 47, which features a strikingly similar portrayal to the Revelation passage.

The Revelation and Ezekiel passages describe the tree as growing along a river and bearing fruit that brings healing to the nations (or peoples). According to biblical scholar and rabbi Emil G. Hirsh, there are also descriptions in apocryphal books. "The Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* (xxiv. 4) describes the tree of life as having 'a fragrance beyond all fragrance; its leaves and bloom and wood wither not forever; its fruit is beautiful and resembles the dates of a palm.' The Slavonic *Book of Enoch* (viii. 3) says, 'In the midst there is the tree of life...and this tree can not



be described for its excellence and sweet odor.’ IV Esd. viii. 52, in describing the future, says, ‘Unto you is paradise opened, the tree of life is planted...’”

It is important for us to remember that in the Genesis account, Adam and Eve are not forbidden to eat of the Tree of Life. However, after they eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God banished them from the Garden so they would not be able to eat of the Tree of Life. Many theologians have asked why they hadn’t already eaten from it. Perhaps they had no need to. The *ArtScroll* commentary on Genesis explains: “At first there was no need to guard the tree because Adam had no need for it for the tree of life would have had no effect before the sin because man was immortal regardless and it is like giving medicine to a healthy person (Hadar Zekeinim).”

The *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* adds, “After the judgement of Adam and Eve for their sin, the record notes that this tree was identified with everlasting life, and that man in sin must not have access to the tree and henceforth would be subject to entropy.”

In other words, death and sin had entered the world. Eternal life, God’s perfect plan for mankind, was on hold.





In Jewish thought, the Tree of Life is related to the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.). Proverbs 3:1, 18 stands as proof. “My son, do not forget my law [Torah], but let your heart keep my commands... She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her.”

Jewish liturgy teaches that “the Torah is a Tree of Life (Etz Chayim) to all who hold fast to it

and that it represents eternal life planted in our midst.” Editor and author Ellen Frankel explains that the symbology is richly seen in the *Torah* scrolls. “The wooden rods around which the Torah parchment is rolled are called Etzei Hayyim (trees of life) which are topped with pomegranates. The image of the tree of life, both as a symbol of Torah as of immortality in the World to Come has long been a favorite decorative motif in synagogues.”

Even though we don’t have access to the Garden of Eden, the Scripture teaches that how we live our life brings life. “*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise*” (Prov. 11:30). The Jewish sage Metzudos explained, “The deeds of the righteous are like a tree that brings life to the world.”

The book of Revelation gives us future hope of healing and eternal life as the righteous once again have access to the Tree of Life. “*And he showed me a pure river of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each fruit yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations... And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city*” (22:1–2, 12–14).

Trees—God's Blessing



Space doesn't allow me to talk about all the individual tree species God created, their special properties, fruits and medicinal benefits. The Scripture is full of references to them. They do have one thing in common: God designed them to be pleasant, bring healing and provide food. The message of God's love and goodness can be seen throughout Creation. The next time you enjoy a piece of fruit or a handful of nuts, don't forget to give Him praise for He is good and His love endures forever.

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TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT)—*Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Nevi'im* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- *Torah* (Gen.—Deut.)

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