



### "BUT ONLY GOD CAN MAKE A TREE"

Joyce Kilmer wrote these words,

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.  
Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.

Kilmer's love for, and appreciation of, trees is closely matched by the attitude of many Jewish people, particularly with reference to trees in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) and the planting and preservation of the same. There is, in fact, a minor holiday on the Jewish calendar (minor when compared to Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur) which draws attention to the trees.

The holiday is Tu B'Shevat (pronounced *too bih shih va'ht*; the Hebrew writing of the name is under the graphic of the tree on the reverse side) which is celebrated in 1999 on February 1.

**Literally**, the name means "fifteenth of Shevat" (the eleventh month of the religious calendar), the day on which it is observed each year.

**Technically**, it was originated as a cutoff point for the payment of tithes on the produce of fruit trees in the Promised Land, as commanded in Leviticus 27:30:

*And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's: it is holy unto the Lord.*

Trees which had begun to bear fruit by this date, Shevat 15, were included in the previous year's payment of tithes (much like our tax year ending on December 31) and the rest were included in the following year's obligation. Because of this, the holiday has sometimes been nicknamed, "New Year for the Trees."

**Historically**, it became a time for Jews in other parts of the world (the Diaspora) to pause and to think of the budding of the trees in their Ancient Homeland, so far away from the frozen winterscapes of Russia, Poland, and equally frigid locales to which the exile had driven them. Ozzie Nogg, in a column in the *Jewish Exponent* (January 13, 1995), puts it this way:

The shtetl [term referring to any Jewish village, particularly in Russia or Eastern Europe, ed.]

Jews could feel the spring sun on their backs. Winter was gone and for a day, at least, the villagers were in Eretz Yisrael—awash in milk and honey and fragrant citron. They ate precious bits of date and almond and fig brought straight from the Holy Land. They thanked God for the fruit of the trees and prayed to some day stand inside the gates of Jerusalem and behold with their own eyes the Cedars of Lebanon.

**Traditionally**, Tu B'Shevat is a time of rejoicing and celebration among Jews worldwide. Fasting and the reciting of prayers of repentance are prohibited as contrary to the spirit of the day. A favorite practice is the eating of various fruits, especially those grown in Israel, with preference given to carob products, since the carob tree was extremely common in ancient Israel, and almonds, the first tree to blossom in the spring.

**Presently**, the day is observed in Israel with planting of hundreds of thousands of saplings by schoolchildren and so has earned another nickname, "Jewish Arbor Day." Reforestation is something of a national passion to Israeli Jews since the land has been denuded of its precious trees through two millennia of warfare's "scorched earth policies."

**Biblically**, Tu B'Shevat reminds us of the description of the righteous man in the Book of Psalms.

*And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth*

*its fruit in its season; its leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."*

*(Psalm 1:3)*

## NOTABLE QUOTES

"Men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all the other alternatives."

Abba Eban, Israeli statesman and ambassador

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Anne Frank in her diary written in hiding two years from the Nazis, followed by her arrest and death in the concentration camp



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Hebrew Christian Fellowship  
P.O. Box 177  
Dresher, PA 19025-0177  
Phone: (215) 887-3447  
e-mail: hcf1033@aol.com  
web page: WWW.HCFellowship.org  
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