HAPPY NEW YEAR . . . AGAIN?

OUR JEWISH YEAR SESSION 2: TU B’SHVAT

BIG QUESTIONS FOR THIS SESSION:

How do we mark times of renewal throughout the year? How does Tu B’Shvat connect us to nature and/or to ourselves?

BEFORE THE SESSION:

Read Abby Pogrebin’s reflections on Tu B’Shvat in My Jewish Year, pp. 143-155.

MATERIALS:

Nametags or table-top name cards

Markers or pens

Raisins or dried cranberries or blueberries

WHEN YOU ARRIVE (5:00)

For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else’s name.

REFLECTING ON YOUR PRACTICE (10:00)

Discuss as a group:

1. How did Hanukkah go?
2. Did our conversation change how you experienced the holiday?
3. Did our conversation change how you observed the holiday?
TU B’SHVAT (ט"ו בשבט): DIVING INTO OUR TRADITION (25:00)

This opening text study and discussion introduces the four different Jewish new years.

Please ask one participant to read aloud:

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1

אַרְבָּעָּה רָאָשֵׁי שָנִים هֵם. בֶּאֶחָּד בְּנִיסָּן רֹאֵשׁ הַשָּנָּה לַמְלָּכִים וְלָּרְגָּלִים. בֶּאֶחָּד בֶּאֱלוּל רֹאֵשׁ הַשָּנָּה לַמַּעְשָׁר בְּהֵׁמָּה. רבִּי אֶלְעָזָר וְרַבִּי שִמְעוֹן אוֹמְרִים, בֶּאֶחָּד בְּתִשְׁרֵׁׁי. בֶּאֶחָּד בִּשְׁבָּט רֹאֵשׁ הַשָּנָּה לָּאִילָּן, כְּדִבְּרֵי בֵׁית שַמָּאי. בֵׁית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים, בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָּשָּׁר בּוֹ: (ט"ו/Tu)

The four new years are: On the first of Nisan, the new year for the kings and for the festivals; on the first of Elul, the new year for the tithing of animals (Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say, on the first of Tishrei). On the first of Tishrei, the new year for years, for the Sabbatical years and for the Jubilee years, and for planting, and for vegetables. On the first of Shevat, the new year for the trees according to the words of the House of Shammai (the House of Hillel says, on the fifteenth (ט"ו/Tu) of that month).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the four new years described in this passage?
2. Which activities and people are associated with each new year?
3. What corollaries do you see between the Jewish new years and our different new years today (e.g., school year, fiscal year, etc.)?

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1 The Mishnah was compiled by Rabbi Yehuda ha Nasi around the year 200 CE. It is a stand-alone text, but also provides the basis for the Talmud (compiled around the year 500 CE).
How do you think about the different new years in your life? Take a few minutes to fill out this chart individually:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>What are the rituals or activities you associate with this new year?</th>
<th>How do the rituals / activities help you mark that time as meaningful and new?</th>
<th>What resolution(s) do you bring to this new year?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Years (Dec 31 – Jan 1)</td>
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<td>School year</td>
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<td>Fiscal year</td>
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<td>Rosh Hashanah</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you notice any overlap between the rituals / activities members participate in for the different new years? Do any of these points of connection surprise you?
2. Where do you find meaning in celebrating different new years? Which ones feel like a new start?

INTRODUCING TU B’SHVAT (5:00)

What does Tu B’Shvat mean? Why do we celebrate it? Today, we associate the holiday with trees and tree-planting. Please invite one member to read aloud Abby Pogrebin’s explanation of the holiday (My Jewish Year, pp. 145-146):

“Tu B’Shvat was dubbed by the Talmud rabbis as a Rosh Hashanah (a new year) for the trees, because it began the tithing cycle, in which a farmer had to tithe his crops either to the poor or to Jerusalem, depending on the year. It was reimagined by the medieval Kabbalists as a celebration of creation and the bounty of the earth, with a ‘seder’ consisting of nuts and fruit eaten in a certain order.

“...This holiday, I’ve now learned, was the ancient precursor to Earth Day. It should make us alert to the preciousness of air, water, animals, and foliage, as well as all that we’re doing to destroy them.”

Why do we celebrate the renewal of the earth in the depths of winter? Attending Romemu’s Tu B’Shvat seder, Abby Pogrebin writes:

“Yitzhak Buxbaum, [a teacher and storyteller]... reminds us that ‘sap is starting to move in the trees,’ despite the fact that we’re in extreme winter. ‘At least it is in Israel,’ he says, winking. In the depths of winter, it is reassuring to be reminded that spring has started somewhere.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does it feel relevant, as a New Yorker, to celebrate the beginning of Spring in Israel?
2. What does it mean to celebrate the “bounty of the earth” when nothing is growing?
TU B’SHVAT GUIDED MEDITATION (5:00)

The following is a lightly edited version of the guided meditation Abby Pogrebin participated in at the Romemu Tu B’Shvat seder (My Jewish Year, pp. 153-154). If done slowly and intentionally, the experience of eating a single raisin/dried cranberry/blueberry can take up to five minutes. The reader will want to pause between each instruction, so group members can take in and mindfully complete each step.

- Take a single piece of fruit.
- Look at your piece of fruit and think about where it came from, what it required to get here: sun and soil and planting and pruning and picking and packing and driving and unloading and packaging. There were also farmers and pickers and drivers and grocers….
- Roll it around in your fingers. Notice the different colors. Smell it.
- Put the fruit in your mouth without biting or chewing it. The temptation to bite into it is strong, but resist it. You may find this part difficult.
- Now bite into the fruit. Just one bite. Hold the pieces in your mouth.
- Take another bite.
- Now you can chew the fruit to completion.
  Notice how you swallow it. We feel gratitude. For the sensations. For the ability to taste. For being together.

Choose 1 of the following 2 sections (or do both if you have time).

OPTION 1: CRACKING TU B’SHVAT OPEN (20:00)

A ritual of mindful eating is one way to mark Tu B’Shvat. Most people have not eaten in this way before. It may have felt uncomfortable, or it may have been pleasant.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was that experience like for you? What was difficult? What was pleasurable?
2. What insight did you gain?

A Tu B’Shvat seder is a more traditional ritual that has been used to celebrate this holiday over the past four hundred years, giving us a way to connect to the earth and the foods that grow out of it. Traditionally, there are four kinds of foods eaten at the seder, none of which “require the death of any animal whatsoever” (My Jewish Year, p. 147).

- Hard outside, soft inside (walnut, almond)
- Soft outside, hard inside (olive, apricot, plum)
- Completely edible (raisin, grape, blueberry)
- Peel protecting edible interior (banana, mango, orange)
These four fruits can be understood as metaphors for people and our traits. In chevruta (pairs), discuss:

1. When are you hard outside but soft inside? When do you need to be this way? In what interactions is this the most comfortable way for you to be?
2. When are you soft outside but hard inside? When do you need to be this way? In what interactions is this the most comfortable way for you to be?
3. When are you soft through and through? When do you need to be this way? In what interactions is this the most comfortable way for you to be?

OPTION 2: DIVING INTO OUR TRADITION (15:00)

The Kabbalists of 17th-century Tsfat understood the universe to comprise four worlds, or levels of creation. Invite one member to read aloud each of the four worlds, as described by Abby Pogrebin (My Jewish Year, p. 148):

**The world of emanation, reinterpreted as the spirit (Atzilut).** The spirit--like the spiritual--has always been a mushy area for me. But when I do feel transcendence, it’s admittedly often in nature. The poetry and power of a glassy lake or a snowy mountaintop is hackneyed for a reason: so many of us have felt the same enchantment when we look at those vistas. I can easily name the moments when I’ve felt God, and they often involve streams, peaks, deserts, glaciers, forests, oceans, or cliffs. It’s harder to list the steps I’ve taken to safe-guard those scenes. The Atzilut hasn’t yet been translated to Assiyah.

**The world of creation, reinterpreted as intellect (Beriyah).** I respect intellectual mastery and covet it, too. I’m grateful to the people who spend most of their time thinking about the planet we’re going to leave to our children and grandchildren; they’re doing the heavy lifting for the rest of us. While I’m anxious about the environment, I’m not radicalized. Which makes me more anxious, which makes me think my Yetzirah is at least functioning.

**The world of formation, reinterpreted as emotion (Yetzirah).** Okay, I can get emotional. But I’m also impatient with those who exhibit too much emotion. At the same time, I’m wary of people who seem detached. Who gets worked up about the danger to nature these days? And when people are vociferous about the ecological emergency, do we write them off as grating or overzealous? If we were forced to grasp the severity of the threat, maybe we’d all be more outraged. Maybe, on some subjects, we’ve muffled our Yetzirah.
The world of action (Assiyah). This makes me think about what I actually do, or don’t do--for my family, community, and strangers--and for the future. When do I act, when am I inert? I realize few of my friends devote any time to rescuing the environment, but nor are they indifferent to the importance of clean air and oceans. So what rouses our Assiyah?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Spirit: When have you felt transcendence (been taken out of yourself) by an experience in nature? Do the group members’ experiences of transcendence have anything in common?
2. Intellect & Emotion: What makes you anxious about the environment? How do you balance knowing and feeling when it comes to your concerns?
3. Action: Genesis chapter 1 describes humanity as the master of the natural world. This can mean that people have complete dominion over nature, or it can mean that people are required to take care of nature. When do you feel like you dominate nature, and when do you feel like you take care of the earth? In what ways do you feel an obligation to care for the natural world? How do you steward the earth?
4. Which “world” comes most naturally to you? Which do you struggle with?

TURNING SPIRIT INTO ACTION (10:00)

Discuss as a group:

1. How can we mindfully create experiences like this for our families, friends, and/or the next generation? How can Tu B’Shvat and its themes/lessons live out in our lives?
   - Mindful eating
   - Meatless Mondays (“the eating of fruits and nuts does not require the death of any animal whatsoever”)
   - Tu B’Shvat seder
   - Visit a city park or National Park
   - Donations to National Parks
   - Plant a tree
   - Donate to plant a tree
   - Other options?

Next session will begin with an update on each participant’s experience of celebrating Tu B’Shvat. There’s no pressure to change the way anyone celebrates, this will simply be an opportunity to reflect back on how these discussions impacted how participants think about the holiday.

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