

YLJC Judaism 101

**TU BISHVAT
AND JEWISH
ENVIRONMENT-
ALISM**

Study pack

GW 02.02.17



TU BISHVAT

Part 1: who said calendars were simple?

There are four new years: on the 1st of Nisan is the new year for kings. On the 1st of Elul is the new year for the tithe of cattle [...] The 1st of Tishri is the new year for years, for shmita and yovel years [...] and for the tithe of vegetables. The 1st of Shevat is the new year for trees.

Talmud: Rosh Hashanah 2a

Notes:

...*Nisan*... – the first month of the year

...*the new year for kings*... – ie. for calculating when a king's Golden Jubilee, Diamond Jubilee etc. occurs

...*the new year for the tithe of cattle*... – basically the start of the financial/ tax year: Israelites had to pay a tax of x% on every cow born to them each year, so there had to be a cut-off for calculating which cows were born in which year

...*1st of Tishri*... – Rosh Hashanah, and the point at which the number of the year changes (eg. we are now in 5777), actually falls at the start of the seventh month of the year

...*shmita*... – every seventh year is a fallow year with special rules on agriculture, servants, debts and more: the last shmita year was 5775 (2014-15)

...*yovel*... – every 50th year, ie. every seventh shmita year, is extra-special with all sorts of additional rules: this Hebrew word is the root of the English word 'jubilee'

Part 2: the lesser-known seder

	Wine	Fruit
I	White. Symbolising winter.	Hard on the outside and soft on the inside, eg. a coconut. Symbolising the protection the earth gives us.
II	Mostly white but with a little red mixed in. Symbolising the transition of the seasons.	Soft on the outside and hard on the inside, eg. an olive. Symbolising the life-sustaining power that emanates from the earth.
III	Mostly red but with a little white mixed in. Symbolising the further passing of the seasons.	Soft throughout and completely edible, eg. a grape. Symbolising God's omnipresence.
IV	(You guessed it...) Red. Symbolising fire and the Divine spark that all living beings harbour.	A tough skin on the outside and soft on the inside, eg. a satsuma. Symbolising mystery: we seek to uncover the secrets of the earth.

JEWISH ENVIRONMENTALISM

Part 3: whose planet is it anyway

Part of the philosophy behind Judaism's environmental regulations is the view that the world does not belong to humanity but is the creation of God entrusted to humanity's stewardship. Despoiling the world is not only against our own self-interest but a denial of God. Protecting it is one way of acknowledging God's creative power.

[...] Another aspect of Jewish philosophy is that we deal in the long-term, not just in the present moment. There is a responsibility to the future and to the next generation. It is typified by Honi the Circle-maker, first century BCE, who was planting a sapling in his old age and was asked why he bothered doing so as he would never live long enough to enjoy its fruit. His reply serves as a message for our time too: "When I came into the world, I found it well stocked by those who had preceded me. I now plant for those who will come after me" (Ta'anit 23a).

Rabbi Jonathan Romain: Faith and Practice: a Guide to Reform Judaism Today, 1991, pp 230-32

Part 4: planning permission

A variety of biblical and Talmudic laws indicate that whilst the land was to be used for the benefit of humanity, it had to be treated responsibly. Thus the Torah prohibits an army besieging a city from destroying fruit-bearing trees (Deuteronomy 20:19). From this, the Talmud derived the principle that all other instances of wasting resources were forbidden, including food (Shabbat 140b), water (Yevamot 11b) and all things that might be of use to others (Bava Kama 82b).

Safety standards were also enjoined. They ranged from disposal of domestic rubbish, for instance broken glass which should be buried in one's own land rather than scattered in the public domain (Bava Kama 30a), to the effects of 'industrial' activity, for instance a threshing floor was prohibited within 50 cubits of the city lest the chaff was carried by the wind and affected the health of city dwellers (Bava Batra 24b), while no furnaces were allowed in Jerusalem because of the fumes (Bava Kama 82b).

Rabbi Jonathan Romain: Faith and Practice: a Guide to Reform Judaism Today, 1991, pp 230-32

This 47th annual conference, recognising the rabbinic principle of bal tashchit ('do not destroy'), calls upon all synagogues and their members to consider the principles of ecologically sound living and their application to our daily lives: a reverence for the Earth and all its creatures; recognition of the interdependence of all life; protection of the environment as a precondition of a healthy, prosperous society; and recognition of the finite nature of the Earth's resources and our responsibility towards future generations.

Resolution of the 1988 annual conference of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain (now the Movement for Reform Judaism)

Part 5: burying our problems

We recognise recycling as one of the most effective measures we can take to protect and replenish the natural world. We ought to make every possible effort to institute programs of recycling in our homes and institutions. This is certainly the case with the large quantities of paper that our synagogues and schools consume. To recycle this paper is both an act of environmental responsibility and a means by which those institutions can practice the Judaic values that they preach.

We are presented, however, with a conflict between the mitzvah of environmental stewardship and another important Jewish value: the care we take in the treatment and disposal of our sacred texts. Jewish tradition prohibits us from destroying written texts containing any of the names of God. The recycling of old prayer books, which are replete with these names, would seem to transgress this prohibition. Our task, therefore, is to resolve this conflict of Jewish principles, each one making its powerful and legitimate claim upon our attention.

Thanks to new technologies, we produce a tremendous quantity of texts for study and worship. As did our ancestors, we regard our new technologies as a blessing, because they do much to help us fulfil the mitzvot of study and prayer. Yet like the Jews of those days, we find that limitations on space make it virtually impossible for us to store away or to bury all of these papers once they have served their purpose. And we worry, as did they, over what will happen to these texts if we do not find some acceptable alternative means of disposing of them.

The very holiness of our texts demands that we treat them with respect when we use them and in the means we choose to dispose of them when the time comes; we do not wish to toss them into the trash heap or dump them out with the garbage. We could address the disposal problem, of course, by abandoning these new technologies so as to produce less material. But given their very real usefulness to us in our study and our worship, we are as reluctant to do that as our ancestors were reluctant to turn their backs on the printing press.

Therefore, just as leading authorities could countenance the destruction of printed sacred texts in order to save them from disgraceful treatment, we can do the same with the texts that we produce by photocopying and electronic publishing. And if it is permitted to destroy these texts as a means of preserving their honour, we think that it is even more proper to recycle them, since in doing so we act to fulfil the mitzvah of environmental responsibility.

Central Conference of American Rabbis, Reform Responsa for the Twenty-First Century, 2010, vol 2 pp 71-76

Part 6: all the world's a very broken vessel

Tikkun atzmi	Repairing oneself
Tikkun kehila	Repairing our community
Tikkun medinat	Repairing our country
Tikkun am	Repairing our people
Tikkun olam	Repairing the world

At the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe. Then God decided to bring this world into being. To make room for creation, God first drew in breath, contracting. From that contraction a dark mass was produced. And when God said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), the light that came into being entered the dark mass, and ten vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But somehow the frail vessels broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered, like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere.

That is why we were created, to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. Some even say that God created the world so that Israel could raise up the holy sparks.

And that is why there have been so many exiles: to release the holy sparks from the servitude of captivity. For in this way the people of Israel will sift all the holy sparks from the four corners of the earth. And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the vessels will be restored, and the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally take place.

Professor Howard Schwartz, Tree of Souls: the Mythology of Judaism, 2007, p 122, retelling an ancient tale attributed to the Kabbalist Isaac Luria (16th century)