

TU B'SHVAT

THE NEW YEAR FOR THE TREES

This guide was designed to help make the connection between Tu B'Shvat, the World Zionist Organization, and the the World Zionist Congress election which took place in March 2020. The next election will take place in 2025.

The guide includes both an overview of these connections and activities to help students in the 4th through 12th grades think through these issues.

It is our hope that this guide will encourage clergy, educators, students, and life-long learners to reflect on the connection among Tu B'Shvat, trees, land and the government of Israel and how they can make a difference by supporting Masorti Judaism and voting for MERCAZ in World Zionist Congress elections.

The Zionist
Organization of
the Conservative
Movement

 **MERCAZ** USA



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TU B'SHVAT BACKGROUND

The Mishnah teaches:

There are four New Years: The first of Nisan is the new year for kings and for festivals. The first of Elul is the new year for the tithe of beasts. Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say: the first of Tishri is the new year for years, for sabbatical and jubilee years, for planting and for the tithing vegetables. The first of Shevat is the new year of trees, according to the words of Bet Shammai.

In ancient Israel, Tu B'Shvat was the day when farmers offered the first fruits of their trees, after the trees had turned four years old, in the form of a tithe or tax to the Temple. This custom appears in the Torah, which in Leviticus tells us:

When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden for you, not to be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit shall be set aside for jubilation before the Lord; and only in the fifth year may you use its fruit-that its yield to you may be increased: I am the Lord your God (19:23-25).

World Zionist Organization

The custom of planting trees in Israel on Tu B'Shvat harks back to 1890, when Ze'ev Yavetz, an educator in Zichron Ya'akov, took his students to plant trees. According to *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shvat Anthology*, Yavetz told Haaretz in 1891, "For the love of the saplings ... the school must make a festival of the day that was set aside from ancient times in Israel as the New Year of the Trees. To gracefully and beautifully arrange the trees, saplings, lilies and flowers just like they do in Europe on the first of May."¹

For Yavetz, connecting children – the children of the early pioneers – to the land by planting trees was an essential part of a Zionist education. In 1908, the practice was adopted by the teacher's unions and the Keren Kayemet, or Jewish National Fund, an organization founded as part of the Fifth Zionist Congress. On Tu B'Shvat 1949, Israel's legislative body – named the Knesset two days later, on February 16 – met for the first time in Jerusalem, following the January 25 elections. On their way to Jerusalem, most representatives of the new assembly, including David Ben-Gurion, stopped to plant trees.

¹ Ari Alon, Naomi Mara Hyman, and Arthur Waskow, ed. *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shvat Anthology*. New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000, page 304.

THE WORLD ZIONIST CONGRESS AND MERCAZ

Every five years, Jews from around the world participate in the World Zionist Congress. Delegates come from around the world to represent Diaspora Jewry. In the United States, American Jews elected 152 delegates to the 38th World Zionist Congress in the winter of 2020. The next election will take place in 2025.

MERCAZ USA is the United States branch of MERCAZ OLAMI, the Zionist organization of the Masorti (Conservative) Movement. MERCAZ represents Masorti Judaism within the World Zionist Organization and Congress, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the American Zionist Movement, and the Jewish National Fund.

MERCAZ is the force that advocates for funding of pluralistic streams of Judaism in Israel through the World Zionist Congress, which is crucial to our movement's growth in Israel and around the globe.

Our mission is to further the cause for true religious pluralism in Israel and strengthen the connection between, and create engagement opportunities for, the people of Israel and Jews living in the Diaspora.

Sending the strongest possible MERCAZ slate to the World Zionist Congress allows us to fight for the future of Israel as a vibrant and thriving country that fights for religious pluralism and represents all Jews equally.



ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS GRADES 4 THROUGH 6

STORY (20 MINUTES)

Read this story aloud with students. If they have lots of energy, ask them to act it out as you read it aloud.

One day, Honi Hame'agel was walking along the road when he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years? So how do you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: I found a fruitful world because others had planted it. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I, too, am planting for my descendants.

FOLLOW-UP

(Students can discuss the questions in pairs and then share their ideas with the class.)

- **What does this story say about trees?**
- **What does *I'dor v'dor* mean? How does it connect to this story?**
- **Why did the old man plant a carob tree if he would never get to enjoy its fruit?**
- **Whom did the tree help? How?**

WRAP-UP

- When we vote, we're preparing the world for future generations, just as happens in this story. When we vote, how does that shape the future?
- When we vote, we're helping ourselves now, just like trees create oxygen even before they're fully grown. When we vote, we're helping future generations continue to build a strong Israeli society.





SONG ACTIVITY

This Tu B'Shvat song was written in 1910 for the first tree planting ceremony in Tel Aviv – just one year after the city's founding, in 1909 – and sung to the tune of the well-known Yiddish song “Oyfn Pripetshik,” or “On the Hearth.” It tells the story of a rabbi teaching the alef bet to his students and lamenting Jewish life in exile. The song shows how some Zionists equated planting trees to learning Torah.

Tu Bishvat Song

Written by S. Ben-Tzion, 1910

*Open fields and green trees, children
carry spades, there the teacher to the
students teaches alef-bet.*

*This is the Torah, gentle children study,
do not spurn, plant and sow this land,
the spring dove returns*

*This tree – alef, this tree bet – even gimel
– a tree, tree letters in a green book as
far as eye can see!*

*This is the Torah, gentle children
study, do not spurn, plant and sow this
land, the spring dove returns*

*On this land our fathers spilt sweat and
milk and blood – let spring come, let it
blossom, as the nation blooms*

*This is the Torah, gentle children study,
do not spurn, plant and sow this land,
the spring dove returns.*

FOLLOW-UP

(Students can discuss the questions in pairs and then share their ideas with the class.)

- What do you think the author means when he says, “This is the Torah”?
- Why do you think children were the focus of the tree planting on Tu B'Shvat?

WRAP-UP

- Just as the Torah sustains us as a Jewish people, trees also provide sustenance. To make a more sustainable Israel required a big investment in trees and agriculture. To foster a sense of Jewish peoplehood, the World Zionist Congress helps sustain Israel's vibrancy and diversity.

Note: There are many great Tu B'Shvat songs available on YouTube and streaming services.



VENN DIAGRAM ACTIVITY (15 MINUTES)

Ask students to gather in groups of two or three. Ask them to draw a Venn diagram, labeling one circle “Trees and Tu B’Shvat” and the other circle “Government and the Knesset.” The overlapping section in the center should be labeled “Both.”

Give students 7 to 10 minutes to fill in the Venn diagram.

Ask each group to share one item they included in “Trees and Tu B’Shvat,” one in “Government and Israeli Knesset,” and one in “Both.”

The students don’t need to have any background on Tu B’Shvat or the Knesset for this activity. The goal is to be able to draw connections between trees and the government. You can help to draw more specific connections between Tu B’Shvat and the Knesset during your followup and wrap-up.

FOLLOW-UP

Explain to students: On Tu B’Shvat 1949, Israel’s legislative body – named the Knesset two days later, on February 16 – met for the first time in Jerusalem, following the elections on January 25. On their way to Jerusalem, most of the representatives of the new assembly – including David Ben-Gurion – stopped to plant trees.

- **Why do you think Tu B’Shvat was chosen as the day for the first opening of the Knesset?**
- **What are the similarities between the role of the Knesset and trees?**
- **What connections are there between the Land and the Knesset?**

YOGA BREAK (3 TO 5 MINUTES)

If the students need a break, ask them to pose, either individually or in small groups, first as trees and then as “Israel.” They can take this prompt literally or may choose to be more creative, posing as, for example, seedlings or a site in Israel.



ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS GRADES 7 AND ABOVE

Stage a debate between Hillel and Shammai over the correct date for marking the New Year of the Trees. Discuss: Just as there was disagreement between Hillel and Shammai over when to mark the New Year of the Trees, there's often debate within World Jewry over various aspects of Jewish life in Israel and around the world. We can agree that Israel is a Jewish state, but we may disagree about how it should function. By participating in the elections for the World Zionist Congress, we're expressing our opinions about what we'd like to see in the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora, funding, and the status of various Jewish communities in Israel.

Discuss: How does the custom started by Ze'ev Yavetz, of planting trees on Tu B'Shvat, connect us to Israel? What are other ways we can express a connection – even if we're not physically there?

Read this description of 1949 in Jerusalem, by the author Yom Tov Lewinski:

Still in the early hours of the morning, Jerusalem's children were seen passing by in large groups, each by their standard, dressed splendidly in Scout's uniforms, saplings in hand. The kindergarten children, crowned with garlands and holding flowerpots, crossed the streets singing and shouting for joy: 'Tu B'Shevat is here. Hail the trees' New Year.

At nine o'clock, the orderly processions of schoolchildren and youth organizations began – young planters with shovels and hoes in one hand, and saplings in the other. At ten o'clock, the procession of planters from the young generation was received by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. On that day, thousands of trees were planted throughout the country in honor of the Knesset.²

Discuss: Why do you think Tu B'Shvat was chosen as the day when the Knesset opened? What are the similarities between the role of the Knesset and trees? What are the connections between the Land and the Knesset?

² Ari Alon, Naomi Mara Hyman, and Arthur Waskow, ed. *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shvat Anthology*. New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000, page 304.



Read and discuss an excerpt from the poem "With the First Knesset," by Nathan Alterman. What connections, if any, does Alterman make between the historic opening of the Knesset and the trees, nature, and the coming of spring? How is spring a time of change? As with the planting of a tree, we may not see the fruits for some time, so too, the changes or decisions a government makes can have lasting implications.

Research: How is Tu B'Shvat celebrated in Israel today? How does the Knesset mark its anniversary and the connection to Tu B'Shvat?

The *Tu B'Shvat* song below was written in 1910 for the first tree-planting ceremony in Tel Aviv (remember, the city itself was only founded in 1909). The song was sung to the tune of *Oyfn Pripetshik* (Yiddish for "On the Hearth"), a well-known song about a rabbi teaching the Alef-Bet to his students and lamenting over Jewish life in exile. The song shows how some Zionists equated the planting of trees to the learning of Torah.

Tu Bishvat Song

Written by S. Ben-Tzion, 1910

*Open fields and green trees,
children carry spades, there the
teacher to the students teaches
alef-bet.*

*This is the Torah, gentle
children study, do not spurn,
plant and sow this land, the
spring dove returns*

*This tree – alef, this tree bet –
even gimel – a tree, tree letters
in a green book as far as eye
can see!*

*This is the Torah, gentle
children study, do not spurn,
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*On this land our fathers spilt
sweat and milk and blood – let
spring come, let it blossom, as
the nation blooms*

*This is the Torah, gentle
children study, do not spurn,
plant and sow this land,
the spring dove returns.*

Discuss: What do you think the author means when he says "This is the Torah"? Why do you think children were the focus of the tree planting on Tu B'Shvat? Just as the Torah sustains us as a Jewish people, trees also provide sustenance. To make a more sustainable Israel required lots of investment in trees and agriculture. To foster a sense of Jewish peoplehood, the World Zionist Congress helps sustain Israel's vibrancy and diversity.

