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TU B'SHVAT

Sometimes You Feel Like a Nut

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Mike Wallace, the legendary *60 Minutes* correspondent, kept to a Tu B'Shvat diet.

When I was one of his broadcast producers years ago, Wallace prided himself on his intake of nuts and raisins, insisting they were the secret to his longevity and jet-black hair.

Mike, rest his soul, would never have called his regimen the Tu B'Shvat Diet, because he couldn't have told you what Tu B'Shvat was (he was a proud Jew without ritual), but it occurs to me that he was on to something. Because he lived to ninety-three and never went gray.

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.

These days, we're supposed to plant trees on Tu B'Shvat. Or plant plants. Or give money to enable others to plant plants.

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.

I dial up Rabbi Michael Cohen of Israel's Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. "We are partners with God," he says. "We've been given this earth on loan, and we need to take better care of it."

It's a very Jewish idea: we've been given life that can't be taken for granted. It's why observant Jews thank God every morning—simply for another morning. Life isn't a given. Neither is land, water, sun, or trees.

The Arava Institute educates students from Israel and abroad to be environmental leaders, while also conducting research on projects such as solar power fields and sustainable water management. Cohen says Tu B'Shvat has become an important conservationist holiday in the last three decades, thanks to an increasing Jewish awareness of natural resources in peril. "The overwhelming scientific world says, 'The crisis is here, it's now and it's happening,'" Cohen says. "The religious response to that reality is that we need to do something about it."

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, founder of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, who, at eighty-one years old, fits the part of the quintessential bearded sage rabbi, says: "Tu B'Shvat should affirm the importance of physical creation and healing the physical damage." He calls out those people who say either, "It doesn't apply to me," or "I'm too overwhelmed to act." I fall in the latter camp. Waskow says I should feel galvanized, not helpless. "The same scientists reporting the danger are saying we do have a window of time when we can make a difference," he says. "If we don't do anything, it's unimaginable."

He says our gluttony today echoes the gluttony of Adam and Eve. The Tu B'Shvat seder was created to repair original sin. "The big mistake of the Garden of Eden," he explains, "is that God said, 'There's incredible abundance here. Eat from it, enjoy. Just exercise a little self-restraint. You see this particular tree here? Don't eat from it. Reserve it. Show some self-restraint in the way that you deal with the abundance of the earth.'"

We all know how Adam and Eve responded. Waskow says we've repeated their mistake. "If you gobble up everything, you produce disaster and abundance stops."

Waskow suggests I take a small first step by planting parsley to use in my Passover seder—which is two months away. Not only does spring feel distant, but it's odd to learn that there's a seder before the seder, just as there was a fast before The Fast back in the fall. As I'm discovering again and again, Jews repeat tropes. Or have multiple iterations of the same ritual. But he's right: the parsley could be a nice link between both seders. I can get in touch with the earth for one supper by planting herbs for the next.

I buy a packet of seeds, a flowerpot, and some soil. I spread newspaper on my kitchen table, cut open the peat, and scoop the earth into the clay pot with a soup ladle. Then I embed the seeds in the soil, according to the packet instructions. Inconsequential as this project is, I'm enjoying the warmth of the loamy dirt and the idea that these kernels could actually morph into edible herbs. When I pour a little water on my planting, it feels holy.

Setting aside whether I'll be able to till parsley successfully (not a safe assumption), I return to the nuts. I need to understand the nuts because they are prescribed at any Tu B'Shvat seder, along with the seven species associated, in the book of Deuteronomy, with the land of Israel: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

"The Tu B'Shvat seder is extraordinary because the eating of fruits and nuts does not require the death of any animal whatsoever," Waskow says. "It's the most deliciously life-filled meal because it doesn't require any death." I'd never thought of that: how many species died for my meal.

Tomorrow night, I'll attend my first Tu B'Shvat seder, a ceremony invented by seventeenth-century Kabbalists in the Israeli village of Safed, to honor nature, the Tree of Life, and the four worlds—or four levels of creation, as the Kabbalists defined them.

I had no idea there were four worlds, but they tug at my environmental consciousness and make this holiday more complex. As I read about each one, I try to personalize it. That's the only way I can connect to this mystical stuff at all.

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"?

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 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 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 safeguard those scenes. The *Atzilut* hasn't yet been translated to *Assiyah*.

It's challenging to memorize the four worlds (I've already forgotten them), and their accompanying four fruit-types (which I'm about to

share), but the metaphors are provocative and also kind of childlike in their literalism:

For the world of action, the mystics tell us to eat fruits with hard shells and soft insides, such as walnuts and coconuts.

For the world of emotion, we eat fruits with soft shells and hard insides, such as dates and plums.

For the world of intellect, we eat fruits that are wholly edible such as grapes or blueberries.

The world of the spirit is not represented by any fruit.

Is it too much of a stretch to liken ourselves to seder produce?

"It's not going too far at all," Waskow replies. "The fruits and the nuts of the Tu B'Shvat seder clearly represent different kinds of human beings. Human beings with tough outsides, but soft insides; those who are open, soft, you might say, to each other with *chesed*—loving-kindness—outside and inside. So when we go through the Tu B'Shvat seder, we should be asking ourselves: 'When do I need a tough outside? When do I want to make sure my outside is soft and my inside is clearly strong? And when do I want to be open—outside and in?' They're all legitimate parts of us. The question is how to judge which part of us is the *life-giving* one for the moment that we're living in."

I'll be asking myself that at my first Tu B'Shvat seder tomorrow.

And in the meantime, I'll remember to water my parsley plant. Because I've failed at every vegetable I've ever tried to grow before, but this time I'm on a mission to produce greens for the seder plate, a small stab at ecology.

My Tu B'Shvat baptism happens at Romemu, a spiritual community that I choose for its amalgam of orthodoxy and mysticism. It strikes me as exactly the right place to experience this environmentally responsible holiday.

Romemu was founded in 2006 by Rabbi David Ingber, who is considered one of the leading lights of reinvigorated worship. In 2011,

when I complimented him at a Jewish learning-binge conference called Limmud NY, he informed me—with a smile—that my brother accidentally broke his nose years ago when they were playing ice hockey together in a pickup game.

Since Rabbi Ingber is away in Israel on the night of the Tu B'Shvat seder, we are guided instead by his frequent partner in prayer, Romemu's sprite-like music director, Basya Schechter, who fronts a musical group, Pharaoh's Daughter.

There are no assigned seats in the church basement on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 105th Street. Volunteers have decorated the plain hall with strings of orange lights and a few small potted trees.

Thirteen tables of ten are set with yellow paper tablecloths (crayons scattered, if we're inclined to draw), and a platter is piled high with the prescribed fruits and nuts: figs, walnuts, pomegranates, clementines, blueberries, and almonds.

I never thought I'd pine for Manischewitz. But the odd wine fusions prescribed by the Tu B'Shvat seder will make me yearn for the sugary Passover wine.

The Kabbalists who created the Tu B'Shvat seder in the Middle Ages chose to include four cups to mirror Passover. But at some point, their wine directives took an odd turn.

The first cup we drink is just red wine. (Other Tu B'Shvat seders start with just white; the choice is optional.)

The second cup is red wine *with white wine added* (I'll be honest: can't recommend it).

The third cup is white wine *with red wine added* (even stranger). Other seders suggest a *full mixture* of half-red, half-white. Either way, it suddenly feels like I'm a kid in chemistry class.

The fourth cup is just white, where apparently other Tu B'Shvat seders do just red for the last cup. It feels backwards to go from red to white, but I roll with it.

Some add a fifth cup. For Romemu, it's vodka. No objections there.

Each cup represents one of the worlds, which were linked to one of the fruits; talk about symbolism-saturation.

Sitting next to me is a twenty-nine-year-old woman who says she majored in biological anthropology and has bought a one-way ticket to Israel to work on organic farms, leaving tomorrow. She admits that her parents wish she would stay home and find a husband, but she's disregarding their advice. She seems to unwittingly affirm the invitation printed in Romemu's Haggadah, "to set a kavanah/intention for your own personal unfolding."

I'm pretty folded-up myself, at least at this seder so far, especially when we're directed by another leader—"spiritual storyteller" Carole Foreman—to get up and circle our tables while singing "*Zeh ha-schulchan asher lifnei Adonai*," "This is the table that is before God." Maybe if vodka had been the first cup instead of the last, I'd be more game for circling.

But Basya's beautiful singing does make me exhale a bit, and sets the tone for openness and a lack of inhibition. She is casually dressed in a skirt, tights, and a floppy winter hat, and her huge smile is infectious as she introduces the first world, *Assiya*, which their Haggadah defines as "Actualization = the physical world, earth winter."

"Find a fruit on your table that is hard outside and edible inside," Basya instructs. "What are the challenges we have in our lives that are almost impenetrable?"

My tablemates pass the platter of banana halves, clementines, and walnuts.

"Some things are difficult at the start," Basya continues; "but once we go further, they soften."

Fruit therapy, I think to myself.

Basya's questions bounce in my head and I try to answer them inwardly, honestly. When did I meet a barrier that then softened? My Hebrew skill. A chilly friend. The Jewish holidays.

Yitzhak Buxbaum takes the microphone. A self-described "teacher and storyteller" with a gray ponytail, who has written ten books on Jewish spirituality and Hasidism—and happens to be married to Romemu's storyteller, Carole Buxbaum—he reminds us that the "sap is starting to move in the trees," despite the fact that we're in extreme

winter. "At least it is in Israel," he clarifies, winking. In the depths of winter, it is reassuring to be reminded that spring has started somewhere.

He continues: "The Tu B'Shvat seder is a *tikkun*—a mystical repair of the sin of Adam and Eve. . . . The sin is that we ate wrongly. So we repair the sin by eating in a holy way." Eating in a holy way on Tu B'Shvat seems the antithesis of Passover's excess. Tu B'Shvat's nuts and oranges are the antidote to Pesach's gefilte fish and brisket. A cleaner meal. (I may need pizza later.)

Basya says we've now come to the second world, *Yetzirah*; "Formation = growth, creativity, water, emotions, spring."

"Find a fruit on your table with a pit inside and an edible outside," she directs us.

My tablemates take dates, which turn out to be faulty because someone brought pitted ones in error. We're missing the rigid centers, which means we're missing the metaphor.

"These fruits are representative of all the things that we start that seem easy at first, and then get hard: our spiritual practices, our exercise regimens, our relationships," Basya says. She adds a personal insight—"I'm good at many things really quickly and then I hit a wall"—and encourages us to think about the times we've hit walls and broken through them.

My walls come easily to mind:

1. Slowing my thoughts.
2. Slowing my coffees with friends.
3. Slowing my device-dependence.
4. Slowing. Period.
5. Golf.

This holiday trek is another personal example of wall-defiance. In the past, I hit barrier after barrier whenever I tried to gain more grounding in Jewish tradition. I kept being reminded of how much I didn't know, how unyielding prayers can be. This project has been an attempt to push through.

Basya recounts out loud a conversation she had that morning with Larry Schwartz, who teaches meditation at Romemu and is in attendance at this seder. "This is one of four Jewish new years," he told her, "Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Tu B'Shvat, and Passover. Look at how many chances we have to start again."

So many chances to start again.

I can't think of one person in my life who hasn't wished they could start over in some area of their lives. I love that teaching. Judaism gives us another go. Four times.

The third world is "Briah," "Creation," which the Haggadah says equals "thought, air, summer season." We now eat fruits that are wholly edible, through and through: blueberries, strawberries, grapes.

For this category, Basya quotes an eighteenth-century Hasidic sage, Rabbi Nachman of Bretslov: "There is no such thing as obstacles." Would that this were true. But maybe it is. Maybe the obstacles we perceive are largely self-constructed and not impassable. Maybe we see hard pits when the fruit is permeable.

Larry Schwartz takes the microphone to guide us through a meditative eating practice:

"Look at your piece of fruit and think about where it came from, what it required to get here: sun, soil, planting, pruning, picking, packing, driving, unloading, packaging. . . . Farmers, pickers, drivers, grocers. . . ."

I pick up a strawberry slice and a snapshot flashes: my teenage daughter picking fruit last summer with two friends, running from bush to bush, clearly excited at the surfeit and the sweetness. Strawberries in February seem defiantly optimistic.

"Roll it around in your fingers," Schwartz says. "Notice the different colors. Smell it."

He instructs us to put it in our mouths without biting or chewing it. "The temptation to bite is strong, but resist it. This is really difficult."

I'll say. Delayed gratification is ungratifying. I lack the discipline of delay. I've seen glimpses of suspension or deferral in several holi-

days so far—the Days of Awe (we await forgiveness), the three fasts (we delay food), Sukkot (we suspend routine), Shemini Atzeret (we stay back with God), Shabbat (we suspend work)—forced intervals that require waiting, postponing, patience. Taste the strawberry without chewing it.

Finally we're permitted to bite it. One bite only. Then a second. At last we can masticate to completion.

"Notice how you swallow it. We feel gratitude. For the sensations. For our ability to taste. And for being together."

I've lately been keenly aware—as I watch people like Milton age or decline—of what a loss it is to no longer be able to taste or swallow. The thought spurs panic. How often I gloss over the microscopic joys of a good meal. I won't take them for granted again. Tu B'Shvat brings home not just the riches of the earth but the laziness of our pleasure in it.

The seder breaks for the buffet dinner, and we fill our paper plates with chickpea patties, rice, a fattoush-like salad, and lentils.

After eating and talking, it's time for the fourth cup, for the spirit—*Atzilut*. The Haggadah describes this world as "Emanation—World of the Aleph, world without words. . . ." Indeed, I have no words for this world because I don't understand it. I also lack the fruit for *Atzilut* because none is assigned to this world. The Romemu Haggadah says, "We are beyond eating, beyond speech. . . ." (I'm never beyond either, though I could certainly do with less of both.)

The vodka marks the fifth and last cup—a Romemu invention, with a world described as *Yechidah*—literally "single one," which tonight's Haggadah describes as, "Outside of time, presence = the highest of the highest are humor and music. . . ." I'm not sure I'd say "the highest" world is humor, but I'm game for the next seder stop: comedy. A Romemu congregant does some standup, and a few volunteers play "Name that Fruit" with Yitzhak Buxbaum. I'm the only one at my table who finishes my vodka.

Basya sings a final song, and as she does, I take my pen and underline one part of a verse they've included in their Haggadah. It's by Reb Nachman: "*Do you know that every blade / of grass has its own poem?*"

As I bid good-bye to my tablemates and return to the snow detritus outside, my answer is yes. Every blade of grass has its own poem, indeed. I will taste things a little differently now. I will do more to guard the earth. I will aim to repair (or at least not repeat) the original sin of excess. I will think about the worlds of action, emotion, intellect, and spirit, and the fruits that correspond—where I'm hardened or porous, when I've given up or pushed through. "*Every blade / of grass has its own poem*." Every Tu B'Shvat is a second chance.

Rabbi Micah Greenstein

ON TU B'SHVAT

Tu B'Shvat is a holiday for skeptics and mystics alike. You don't have to be a mystic to be enthralled with trees. Just ask a New Englander in October, or a visitor to Northern California's Muir Woods any time of year. In the presence of nature's greatest wonders, even a skeptic would concur that behind all the brokenness we witness in the world and in our lives, there is an awesome beauty and unity.

As a giant metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things—people, nature, and time itself—Tu B'Shvat speaks to the world. And for the wondering Jew, the message is even more direct. However one chooses to plant this precious seed of Judaism—with love and care—will reap a lifetime of meaning and blessing, beyond one's lifetime, too. "Because my parents planted trees for me," the Talmud teaches (Ta'anit 28a), "likewise I am planting trees for them." For the sake of our children and our world, keep planting.