



## Tu Bishvat – Abarbanel about the Eshel, the Tamarisk tree

**Abraham**  
**Planted**  
**a tamarisk tree**  
**at Beersheba, and there**  
**he called on the name of**  
**the LORD,**  
**the Everlasting God.**

Genesis, 21, 33



A tamarisk tree is called in Hebrew **Eshel** אשל

אשל = אוכל, שתייה, לינה

It is the abbreviation of: **Food**, **Drink**, **Overnight stay**.

Tu Bishvat, the new year of the tree, is celebrated every year for 2000 years. Normally on this day and in this week in Israel more than 600,000 trees (tree saplings) are planted all over the country. (See the Tu Bishvat chapter in the following pages.) On this day trees will not be planted in Israel if it is the Shemita year (the 7th year). Planting a tree in the Holy Land, Israel, has a very long tradition. 3,800 years ago, Abraham already planted a tree, namely a Tamarisk, near Beersheba. As we read in Genesis chap. 21, verse 33: "Abraham planted a Tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called the name of the LORD, the everlasting God." What was the unique message integrated in this event so that it was important to tell about it in the Bible? Furthermore, having in mind that the text in the Torah is very deliberate, one may ask, why was it necessary to tell the very name of the tree which Abraham planted. This case is a wonderful illustration of how much wisdom is built into the original Hebrew Torah text. The fascinating answer to the above-mentioned question might not be found by reading the text in another language, other than Hebrew. Why is it so? Well, let us see the whole picture. The original Hebrew name of the tree which Abraham planted is called "Eshel" אשל. But telling only this does not provide the beauty of the story. So, let us go step by step: What happened just before Abraham planted the "Eshel" tree? There was a water conflict between Abraham and his people and the Philistines in the northern dry zone of the Negev desert in the south of Canaan (Israel). Abraham's men searched and found water wells in the desert and invested efforts to dig the wells. The Philistines

destroyed their work. Finally, Abimelech the King of the Philistines came with his General Pichol and met with Abraham and negotiated a peace accord. The essence of the agreement was absolutely surprising. It was sensational that even though the Philistines came with an army (the king and the general would not come without soldiers protecting them on the way), and even though Abraham was without an army, the two sides agreed that Abraham could keep all of his seven wells! In spite of the fact that Abraham had no army he got it all. There was not even a compromise achieved by the Philistines. One could expect that if the king and his army chief came to negotiate a water treaty, they would surely have tried to get at least a few of the seven wells in question. But they did not. They left after a peaceful solution was agreed upon. The peace treaty was sealed by Abraham giving King Abimelech a present of seven sheep. What was the first action of Abraham after he succeeded in keeping the water wells? He did not celebrate "his" victory. His first action was to plant an Eshel tree near Beersheba. Only after he had planted the "Eshel" אשל tree (Tamarisk) he expressed loudly his gratitude with a prayer: "and called the name of the LORD, the everlasting God". Now we can answer the two important above-mentioned questions: From the exact sequence of events, we understand first of all that Abraham insisted on keeping the water wells because he wanted to plant a tree, namely an "Eshel" near Beersheba. The Philistines obviously did not need the water. They destroyed the wells only for the purpose of harassment. Secondly, we note that an "Eshel" tree could be

seen from far away in the northern Negev which was a barren landscape. So now we get to the second question of why the very name of the tree planted by Abraham had to be expressly told: the Eshel. The word "Eshel" in Hebrew consists of three letters אשל. The famous Torah commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1509) quotes the Midrash (which is an expansive Jewish Biblical exegesis using a rabbinic mode of interpretation prominent in the Talmud) and explains that the three letters are actually the abbreviation of the three Hebrew words: "Ochel" (food), "Shtiya" (drink), "Linah" / ("Levaya", in old Hebrew) (meaning: overnight stay). (See the illustration above). Now we get to the core of the wonderful interpretation and commentary by the famous Rabbi: People asked why was it so important to Abraham to plant a tree in the desert. By understanding the encoded three words of which the name of the "Eshel" tree consists, the answer to the questions was found. Abraham wanted to publish the fact that God the LORD was the creator. He planted a tree, deliberately an "Eshel" so that people who travelled in the region could see the spot from a distance. In the desert everyone was looking for shade and a place to rest. So, people would be attracted to come to Abraham's place. (And not to go somewhere else, to the "competition"... [👉](#)). We know of Abraham that he was famous for his generous hospitality. When people would get food and water free of charge in the desert they would thank Abraham. Abraham then would tell them to direct their gratitude to

the LORD as the Creator, who had made all food and water available. Since this concept was totally new to the population in the area at that time, a long conversation would follow, until it was already nightfall. Therefore, Abraham would then invite the visitors even to stay the night. The quintessence of the story is: Abraham wanted to make it well known to people and that they should recognize the LORD as the Creator and be grateful to him. In order to get the audience, he planted an "Eshel" tree to make his place known and easily found. By doing so he would draw attention and promote the awareness of the population to the belief in the LORD as the Creator. We have learned from Abraham that planting an "Eshel" tree near Beersheba was the best "PR- measure" for the monotheistic concept. As a matter of fact, we still remember his "PR" initiative even 3,800 years after Abraham did it! P.S. (It is doubtful whether Television advertising campaigns of today will still be remembered 3,000 years from now 😊.) The Hebrew name of the tree (Eshel אשל) contains another hidden significance: In Hebrew Torah learning often famous commentators looked at the Gematria value of a word in order to gain a deeper understanding of the text. (Gematria studies the numerical values attributed to each letter A=1, B=2 etc.) In Gematria Eshel in Hebrew אשל comes to 331. The sum of the numerical value of these three letters is 7! Seven is a holy biblical number since the Creation. For Bible readers this is surely no coincidence.

# Tu Bishvat – the Jewish new year of the trees טו בשבט

in Hebrew: Rosh HaShana Lallanot / Rosh HaShana la Ilan.

**Tu Bishvat** is called in Hebrew also Rosh HaShana la Ilan (plural: la Ilanot). It means the New Year of the tree (trees). The Hebrew words **Tu Bishvat** mean the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Shvat. “Rosh HaShana la Ilan” means the New Year of the Tree.

It says in the Torah book of Leviticus, Chapter 19, verse 23 “And when ye shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food...”(KJV)

The people of Israel have planted in Israel in the last 110 years circa 250 Million trees. In the week of **Tu Bishvat** (the new year of the tree) almost every school kid in Israel plants a tree. Israel is the only state in the world which has more trees today than it had 100 years ago. The tree has a special significance in the Bible and in the state of Israel today. **The parliament of Israel, the Knesset, was founded on the New Year of the Tree, on Tu Bishvat.**



In some countries complete forests were cut off in order to plant tobacco plantations or in order to expand the urbanization. Many roads were built all over the world while reducing the forest and green areas. The protection of the forests as the green lungs of planet earth are of extreme importance for the existence of all living species including us humans. **Therefore, the Jewish New Year of the Tree, Tu Bishvat, is of universal importance.** Many tourists coming to Israel take the opportunity to plant a tree with their own hands in the land of the Bible. So, we have some good reasons to learn more about the special New Year of the Tree, **Tu Bishvat.**



The Jewish calendar contains since biblical times 4 different dates which are called a New Year: Rosh HaShana on the first of the month of Tishrei, **Tu Bishvat** on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Shvat, **the New Year of the Kings** on the 1st of the month of Nissan and **the New Year on the 1st of the month of Elul**. Three of these above-mentioned dates (except for the 1st of Nissan) served also originally to calculate the tithe, as the 10% tax out of the agricultural harvest.

The first and most well-known among the four dates called a New Year is **Rosh**

**HaShana.** It marks the beginning of the calendar year on the first of the month of Tishrei which is in autumn (September / October). In Israel of today Rosh HaShana is an official state holiday when all businesses are closed. According to the Jewish-Biblical tradition this day marks the day on which Adam (the first man) was created by God. It was the sixth day of the creation in Chapter 1 in the book of Genesis. Rosh HaShana served during the biblical era to calculate the tenure of the kings of Israel and Judea.

It further determined the timetable for the pilgrimages to the temple on the three major holidays Sukkot (Tabernacles), Pesach (Passover) and Shavuot (Feast of Weeks). As a result, Rosh HaShana was crucial to determine the seventh year as the Shemita year (Sabbath year, which means "release" year) and therefore also determining the important 50<sup>th</sup> year of Yovel (Jubilee year). Rosh HaShana was the basis for the calendar determination of dates concerning the age of new plantings thereby serving to calculate the harvest of

the field and of vegetables. So, we keep in mind that Rosh HaShana provides the basis for the estimation of the biblical Tithe (one tenth) of the harvest of vegetables of the field, whereas **Tu Bishvat** was used to calculate the Tithe of the fruit of the trees.

The second New Year is **Tu Bishvat, the New Year of the Tree**, which is in winter (end of January / February). **Tu Bishvat** is the deadline to estimate the Tithe of the fruit of the trees as well as to determine the "**Bikurim**" (The First Fruits) of the **Seven Species of the Land of Israel** which had to be brought to the Temple in the period between Shavuot (Feast of Weeks in spring is also called in Hebrew Chag HaBikurim, the Holiday of the First Fruits) and Sukkot (Tabernacles, in autumn, is also called in Hebrew Chag HeAssif, the Holiday of the Harvest). **The Seven Species of the Land of Israel listed in the Torah are: Wheat, Barley, Fig, Pomegranate, Grape, Olive and the Date.** (The date is referred to as honey due tot



he juice dripping from the palm trees. See the chapter about the Seven Species.)

**On the First Day of the month of Nissan** began the calendar year for counting the reign of kings. "1 And the LORD spoke unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, 2 This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you." (KJV.) **On the First of the Month of Elul** (in summer) begins the year relevant for the estimation of the Tithe related to livestock. This date was defined by the Rabbis of the Mishna era.

**Tu Bishvat** served during the Mishna era as the relevant date for calculating the aspects related to the picking of the fruit. Various commandments of the Torah defined the regulations of the Tithe (10% taxation). The Tithe was necessary during the biblical temple era in order to provide for the Kohanim (the Priests), the Levites and the poor people.



The Tithe was a commanded regulation from God. It was required since the priests and the whole tribe of Levi dedicated all their time to the religious rituals mainly related to the tabernacle and later in the

Temple in Jerusalem. They did not get any parcel of land as other tribes did, so they did not have the necessary agricultural resources required to earn their living.

As long as the Children of Israel were in the Sinai Desert God provided them with food such as manna, water and even meat of the quails.

The regulations of the Tithe related to the agricultural earnings of the Israelites in the Land of Israel. The actual implementation started just a number of years after the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, only when the Israelites could count their own harvest and picking in the Promised Land. For example, we learn that the Shemita year was implemented probably only 14 years after the entry into Canaan.

**Because the natural agricultural earnings from harvest of wheat and vegetables or of fruit picking and from livestock could be collected only at different points in time during the year, it became necessary to determine different calendars relevant for the calculation of the Tithe in each category. Therefore, different New Year dates became unavoidable.**



**Tu Bishvat** was defined during the Mishna era by the rabbis as the date relevant for calculating the Tithe from the fruit picking. The decision resulted from heated discussions among the 71 rabbis of the Sanhedrin after the destruction of the

second Temple. Actually, the supporters of the rabbi Shamai school wanted the first of Shvat to be the date. Finally, the followers of the more liberal school of rabbi Hilel decided in favor of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shvat. Therefore, the New Year of the Tree is called **Tu Bishvat**. The preference of the House of Hilel (“Beit Hilel”) is valid until today. In the Babylonian Talmud in the Rosh HaShana treatise/section, chap. 1, verse 1 we read about the famous discussion between the rabbis of the Shamai house (“Beit Shamai”) and the rabbis of the more liberal house Hillel concerning the exact date of the New Year of the Tree. (The word “Tu” is the abbreviation of two Hebrew letters, Tet and Vav, making the date number 9 + 6 = 15.)

The Hillel – School Rabbis argued that concerning the ending of the main rain season as well as relating to the buds of the fruit trees the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shvat should be the decisive date concerning the tithe considerations.



It is important to understand that the biblical rules and their interpretations by the leading Rabbis of the Mishna-era concerning **Tu Bishvat** were of great importance also because the fruits of the trees were not to be eaten in the first four years after the planting of a tree. Why

was the determination of the tree related calendar so important? Answer: In order to calculate the taxation of the tithe it had to be taken into account that counting the ripe fruits in the middle of the fruit picking season should be avoided. Otherwise, the important work would be delayed and disturbed. Also, the farmers had to know since what point of time their fruits were permitted for consumption. Having these practical considerations in mind it was decided to implement the counting at the beginning of the spring by counting the buds early instead of counting the fruits later. (“The tax rate” of 10% already took into consideration that some of the buds would not end up in the fruit finally collected. It was clear to expect some normal rate of loss between buds and ripe fruits.)

With regards to the tithe there are compulsory portions as well as donation options. The 10% tax is called in the Torah “**Maasser Rishon**” (the first tithe). It related to 10% of all fruits, which the owner of the field / plantation brought to the **Levites**. Further the Bible refers to “**Teruma Gedola**” (big donation). The Rabbis of the Mishna era estimated this donation as circa 2% of the agricultural earnings. This donation the owner gave to the **priests**. The further donation aspect of the tithe (not the big donation) which is called “**Maasser Teruma**” related to 1% of all fruit. Practically it was a tenth of the tithe, which the Levites received from the field owners. So 10% of what the Levites got was dedicated to the priests (Cohanim). We remind, that only a small part of the tribe of Levi were active as priests. A Cohen (in plural Cohanim) was in

any case a Levite. But not everyone from the tribe of Levi was a priest.

In addition to the “Maasser Rishon” (the first tithe) there was a second tithe called also “Maasser Ani” (the tithe for the poor people). In some years the owner of the field / plantation was allowed to consume this second tithe himself. In other years the owner donated this second tithe as food for the poor people.

### Customs and traditions of Tu Bishvat

A central custom associated with **Tu Bishvat** in the land of Israel and also in the exile of Jewish communities abroad is since centuries to arrange the **Tu Bishvat** ceremonial meal to include elements of the seven species of the land of Israel.



This custom was modified in the last 500 years to include 15 sorts of fruits in order to remind of the 15<sup>th</sup> day in the month of Shvat which is called **Tu Bishvat**. This tradition is attributed to the famous Kabbalistic Rabbi from the city of Safed in the higher Galilee, the AR”I (Rabbi **Isaac Ben Shlomo Lurie Ashkenazi**, who was called “**Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac**”, and lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.)

In the land of Israel, the custom of planting trees was reinvigorated in 1884 when a

group of Zionist Jews planted more than 1500 fruit trees in **Tu Bishvat** and the days after. This tradition was fostered when more Jews returned to their historic homeland Israel after 1884.



Nowadays, Israeli children plant in the week of **Tu Bishvat** over 600,000 trees all over the country! The three major tree nurseries of the KKL (Israel’s afforestation organization in Gilat near Be’er Sheva (Be’er Sheba), in Eshtaol, in the Jerusalem mountains and at the Golani crossroad in the Galilee produce annually circa 1,800,000 tree saplings. In the year 5775 according to the Jewish calendar (2015), tree saplings were not distributed for planting because it was a Shemita year, the seventh year in which the land of Israel is not agriculturally cultivated as usual. According to the Torah rules the harvest and the food picking in the Shemita year are not permitted for the Israelites in the Land of Israel.

There is a variety of customs and traditions associated with the way.



**Tu Bishvat** was celebrated among the Jewish exile communities. They differed from Morocco to Persia or from Yemen to Germany. In previous times food was available according to the season and to the geographic location. Today the global commercial exchange provides people in many countries with any kind of food from anywhere in the world all the time. So, one should remember that the composition of fruits previously available to a Jewish community depended very much on its location. **In oriental countries people achieved the 15 different kinds of fruits for the Tu Bishvat meal by having various kinds of nuts, almonds and dry fruits. Among them were mainly dry figs, raisins and dry dates.** In northern European countries a higher proportion of fresh fruits was customary. The community ceremonies differed of course also in the melodies of the **Tu Bishvat** songs, even if the texts were identical because they were taken from the same Psalms or the same Torah verses. Today in Israel an interesting and colorful synthesis is crystallizing out of the integration of the many traditions. Among the 7 million Jews already living today in Israel over 2.6 Million are "**Olim**" (immigrants to Israel, who are called "ascenders") who returned to their biblical homeland from over 120 different countries.

**The main characteristics of Tu Bishvat in Israel today are: The planting of trees.**



*Ari Lipinski assisting Dr. Johannes Rau to plant an Olive Tree as a symbol of peace in the Negev desert before Rau became German President.*

As mentioned above, during the week of **Tu Bishvat** Israeli school kids plant over 600,000 saplings all over the country in Kibbutzim and Moshavim and in the cities, in the Galilee mountains, in the Jezreel valley or the Jerusalem mountains, around the Sea of Galilee and even in the Negev desert. The joyful planting ceremonies include a lot of singing and Music. Most ceremonies are organized by the KKL-JNF, school teachers and the municipalities.

But also, many people go privately to plant, or even make a short stop on their way during working hours if they pass by a planting location. The **Tu Bishvat** school day (starting from kindergarten age) is officially devoted to the planting activities which include in most cases a walk or even a trip to a more distant planting location. In many places hundreds and in some places even thousands of people gather at the specially prepared planting areas. Local authorities in close cooperation with the leading afforestation organization KKL-JNF provide the public the enormous quantities of tree saplings on that day free of charge. Just think of the enormous logistical effort involved with the distribution of hundreds of thousands of saplings in a few days to ground allocation required. Thanks to the visionary drive of the founder of the State Israel **David Ben Gurion** (who was PM from 1948 to 1962) hundreds of locations for the **Tu Bishvat** plantings developed into a national, practical and educational vehicle for the modern implementation of the vision of the biblical prophets of the greening of the Land of Israel when the children of Israel will return. From the book of **Isaiah**, **chapter 65**, verse 21: “And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them”. Many people also read the short traditional planting prayer. (You may find the prayer text of the Tree Planting Prayer at the end of this chapter.) The original basis for these planting activities are written in the Bible



book of Leviticus, chap. 19, verse 23 “When you enter the land, and plant various kinds of fruit trees, you are to regard its fruit as forbidden for three years...” (Complete Jewish Bible 1998, David H. Stern)

The characteristic **Tu Bishvat** meal includes a variety of fruits and dry fruits including almond and nuts. As mentioned, the idea is to serve 15 sorts of fruits reminding of the date of **Tu Bishvat**. Many food shops and supermarkets nowadays decorate their facilities offering holiday baskets with a wide variety of fresh and dry fruits. The public kindergartens, schools, the print media and the digital media offer programs concerning the **Tu Bishvat holiday**. Some of them emphasize Bible texts and their commentaries. Others focus on the environmental benefits of **Tu Bishvat**. Most Israelis are happy that the biblical tradition of preserving the creation perfectly suits the most modern approach to the environment. In religious schools, high-schools and in thousands of synagogues (in Israel and worldwide) the teachings focus on Torah texts and rabbinical commentaries about the **Tu Bishvat** holiday.

**Seder Tu Bishvat / Haggadah to Tu Bishvat:** Similar to the traditional Pesach Haggadah booklets which include the guidelines for the festive meal of the first Pesach evening called the Seder evening (Leil HaSeder) special booklets with optional guidelines for the **Tu Bishvat** meal are offered with the heading Seder **Tu Bishvat** or Haggadah

for **Tu Bishvat**. (Haggadah means a story.)

The tree planting prayer: “Our Father in Heaven, Thou who builds Zion and Jerusalem, and establishes the kingdom of Israel, take pleasure in Thy land, and bestow abundance upon it, from the goodness of Thy grace. Give dew for a blessing and cause beneficent rains to fall in their season, to satiate the mountains of Israel and her valleys, and to water thereon every plant and tree. Make deep their roots and wide their crown that they may blossom according to your will among all the trees in Israel for blessing and for splendor. And strengthen the hands of all our brethren who toil in the labor of the holy land and make its desolate areas fruitful. Bless, O Lord, their might and may the work of their hands find favor before thee. Look down from Thy holy habitation from heaven, and bless Your Holy nation, Israel, and the land that You have given us as You promised to our fathers. Amen.”

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***The tree planting prayer:***

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*Amen.”*