



MACCABI WORLD UNION

Department of Education

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י"ב שבט תשע"ח

ט"ו בשבט

Tu¹ Bishvat – *Ecology, Nature and National Life*

Dear friends,

T"U BiShvat is not mentioned in the Torah. We learn about the Festivity that links the Jewish People to our ancestral Land in the first Mishnah of Masechet Rosh Hashanah: "1st of Shvat is the New Year of the trees, according to the Rabbinical School of Shamai; the Rabbinic School of Hillel says: it is on the 15th of Shvat."² Engaged 2000 years ago in agriculture and raising livestock our People after the loss of national sovereignty needed to express their love for our Land of Israel by celebrating the passing of its seasons and the renewal of the annual natural cycle at the end of winter.

Paradoxically, it was the loss of daily contact with our Land by the great bulk of our People (after mass expulsions following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE and the end of the Bar-Kochvah Rebellion in 135CE) that spread consciousness and celebration of T"U BiShvat, the 15th, so widely, precisely because it expressed our desire to return to the Ancestral Land of the Children of Israel. T"U BiShvat became the most explicit manifestation of Jewish nostalgia and longing for the Land of Israel, its landscapes, fruits and trees, and the hope of Return and recovery of Jewish National life.

In that parenthesis of time when Jews were allowed to return to our Land before the State of Israel came into being nearly 70 years ago, T"U BiShvat emulated the most important traditions in the Jewish calendar which sustained and transmitted Jewish Peoplehood so successfully through two millennia of Exile and Dispersion. The Kabbalists from Spain and Portugal who came to Israel in the 16th century were guided by the Ar"i³ to renew the T"U BiShvat celebration and establishing it as a "Day to eat the fruits of Israel" – a "Seder T"U BiShvat" with white and red wine, fruits and blessings analogous to the Passover Seder each year when Jewish families unite and reunite. No less than 15 fruits were, and are part of this new Seder, all of them celebrating nature in Israel and our ancestral production of olives, dates, grapes, citrus fruits, figs, apples, bananas, nuts, pears and so on. T"U BiShvat simultaneously gave joy to an oppressed people in our Diasporas, and simultaneously expressed deep melancholy at the loss of our national life. It was in the hope of recovering our full National life that the People of Israel regained our independent State, today

¹ The name Tu BiShvat is a Hebrew Date: the 15th Day of the month of Shvat. In Hebrew alphabet numerology, the letter Yud stands for 10, so for example 11 is Yud-Aleph; 15, however, is not Yud-Heh because that would form one of the names of HaShem. Thus 15 is formed from Tet (9) & Vav (6).

² Mishnah, Rosh Hashana, 1: 1.

³ Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi, inhabitant of Tzfat in the Israeli Galil.



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celebrating T"U BiShvat as "Chag HaNetiot ", the Festivity of Tree Planting, thus fulfilling the precept of greening the Land of Israel, "When you come to the Land, you will plant all kinds of trees."⁴

The tree that marks the beginning of this celebration is the Almond, which blossoms in white, then pink and finally fuchsia flowers, starting exactly in T"U BiShvat. It is as if this tree indicates to us, with no need of calendars, that the passage of winter to spring is beginning. I allow myself a personal reference here: we live with our family in the Judean Hills. Every day, when I drive down to our Maccabi World headquarters at Kfar Maccabiah, I see the transformation of almond trees along my route from the heights to the plains of Israel. When T"U BiShvat arrives, I actually *see* T"U BiShvat: I see the white almond flowers from one day to the next, embellishing defoliated branches of those wonderful trees which decorate the green foliage and rocks of our stony hills. It evokes and symbolizes the reborn life of this country, of our commitment to plant and replant Israel that has transformed the Land of Israel into the most reforested country on the planet. It is also an example of how the messages of our traditions and celebrations are renewed in accordance with feelings and needs of each new generation – today, T"U BiShvat is the national holiday of ecology in modern Israel.

So Come, Come to Israel, See our reborn Land, with its almond trees in bloom today, and tomorrow with the fields of grain ripen, and later, when the glorious fruits of summer appear, reborn as we are in our reborn life as a Nation in our reborn Land.

This T"U BiShvat, may we plant in our souls renewed commitment to the Land of Israel and the State it supports, to create in our generation a flowering bounty of rich fruits to challenge and inspire the future of all our People.

**T"U BiShvat Sameach!
Chazak ve'ematz!**

**RABBI CARLOS TAPIERO
Deputy Director-General & Director of Education
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⁴ Leviticus (Vayikrah) XIX, 23.