

מקור חיים

Mekor Chaim

Source of Life



UJC Rabbinic Cabinet Chair: Rabbi Bennett F. Miller, D.Min. Vice Chair: Rabbi Ronald Schwarzberg

President: Rabbi Harold J. Berman Director: Rabbi Eric M. Landa, D.Min.

Mekor Chaim Editor: Lisa Kleinman Coordinator: Rafi Cohen

A series of inspirational messages
on the weekly Torah portion by
members of the UJC Rabbinic Cabinet

Tu B'shvat By Rabbi Harry Rosenfeld

Growing up in the Cleveland snow belt, I never understood why, in the dead of winter, we Jews were so focused on trees. Every year at Tu B'shvat I would dutifully bring my pushke back to religious school and buy a tree or two, but reclaiming the land was something my suburban mind couldn't grasp.

Later, during visits to Israel, I planted seedlings in straight lines in the growing JNF forests, and I began to connect to Tu B'shvat. But it all came together in Israel just a few years ago. In 1998, our tour guide took us to a commercial greenhouse where we purchased full-size fruit trees and then planted them on his army base. This act gave me a more complete understanding of Tu B'shvat.

The Kabbalistic custom of a Tu B'shvat Seder is ripe with the symbolism. Trees in this world are a physical manifestation of the heavenly Tree of Life, represented by the *sefirot*. By properly eating and appreciating the fruit of each kind of tree we bring a *tikkun*, a positive impact, to the *sefirot*, which in turn brings *tikkun* to our world. Planting trees is also part of our *teshuvah*, our repentance, for the sins we have committed against the world God created. Each of these acts brings us closer to a world of *sheleimut*--wholeness and peace.

While we were planting fruit trees in 1998, these images and a Biblical verse kept running through my head, Deuteronomy 20:19: "When you shall besiege a city a long time...you shall not destroy its trees by forcing an ax against them; for you may eat of them...For is the tree of the field a man that it should be besieged by you?"

We planted trees that we are forbidden to harm during war on an army base. This simple act of planting a fruit tree was a physical manifestation of the Kabbalistic understanding of the Tikkun of Tu B'shvat. With the soil of our land under our nails, we literally established roots that could bring healing and peace to our world.

This message is a universal one. The Kenyan environmentalist Wanagri Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize this year for her reforestation efforts in Africa. In her acceptance speech she said:

Tree planting became a natural choice to address some of the initial basic needs identified by women.... Together, we have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income to support their children's education and household needs. The activity also creates employment and improves soils and watersheds. Through their involvement, women gain some degree of power over their lives....In the process, the participants...realize their hidden potential and are empowered to overcome inertia and take action.

The simple act of planting a tree embodies our power to change our world for the better. That is our task assigned to us by God. May we each do our part to bring our world closer to *sheleimut*.

Rabbi Harry Rosenfeld is Membership Chair of the UJC Rabbinic Cabinet and is the spiritual leader of Temple Beth Zion in Amherst, NY.

United Jewish Communities (UJC) represents 155 Jewish Federations and 400 independent communities across North America. Through the UJA Federation Campaign, UJC provides life-saving and life-enhancing humanitarian assistance to those in need, and translates Jewish values into social action on behalf of millions of Jews in hundreds of communities in North America, in towns and villages throughout Israel, in the former Soviet Union, and 70 countries around the world.