

## **“Remaking Rituals (Tu BiSh’vat)”**

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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Jacob is hanging out at his friend Rachel’s house. It’s getting pretty late. “What time is it?” asks Jacob. “I have to go to work tomorrow. I can’t stay out too late.” “I don’t know,” says Rachel, “I don’t have a clock.” “You don’t have a clock?!” “Why should I?” says Rachel, “I have a shofar.” “You can’t tell time with a shofar,” retorts Jacob. “Watch me,” says Rachel. She opens up the window, sticks out her head, and blows a long blast of the shofar. Her neighbor yells, “What are you, crazy? It’s one o’clock in the morning. Quiet down!” “See,” says Rachel. “That is how you tell time with a shofar.” The message? Be creative!

You might have thought a shofar was just something to be sounded on Rosh Hashanah, but it can be so much more! As we begin the year 5780, we are invited to repurpose and rework what we have and use it in new and unexpected ways.

This year, it goes without saying, newness is all around us. We are sitting in a new space that we repurposed and rearranged to fit our needs. Some of the ritual objects are familiar, some are new. It may feel a little bit unsettling to you. It does to me. As if that was not enough, I am also going to do something different in my sermons this year. I will be focusing on different holidays, not Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Why? Well, we all put a lot of time and energy into the High Holidays, but we have many other Jewish holidays that occur throughout the year, each of which is important to our Jewish lives. We often do not have the time to delve into them as deeply as we do on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There is no Passover sermon; we don’t spend all day at the temple on Chanukkah; and I surely do not see so many of you on Shavuot as I do tonight! Moreover, these holidays have strong, if unintended, connections to the themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Tonight, as we begin a new year, we take a moment to look at another new year, the new year for the trees that Jewish tradition celebrates on Tu BiSh’vat.

Some of you may have never heard of this holiday before. You would not be alone. It is a minor holiday, mentioned only in passing the Talmud. The first mishna of tractate Rosh Hashanah mentions the four new years--Nissan (the month of Passover), Rosh Hashanah, the new year for trees, and the new year for animals. Tu BiSh’vat marks the day when every tree is ‘born’ so to speak. The mishna says on this day, all trees turn another year older. Why do we care about how old the trees are? Well, it turns out that we can not eat fruit from a tree until it is four years old. Since it was confusing to have to remember the date when each individual tree was planted, the sages picked one day for all of them. The day occurs in the winter, the one season when trees were not planted, in order to prevent confusion about their ages.

At this point some of you are thinking, wow, I never imagined I was going to synagogue to hear random and meaningless trivia about trees. And on Rosh Hashanah, for crying out loud! Well, you have good company. That is pretty much how the sages of the Talmud felt. Tu BiSh’vat was right up there with the new year for animals--ignored and unremembered for hundreds of years. But then, in the 1500s, a group of mystics living in the city of Tzfat (a city that still exists in modern-day Israel) rediscovered this unappreciated and frankly rather meaningless holiday and reshaped into something entirely new. It is this reinvention of Tu BiSh’vat that I want to focus on as we explore how our tradition holds within it the possibility of reenvisioning or reworking rituals and celebrations to make them meaningful.

The theme of reinvention is especially pertinent to us during this season, which is full of rituals that are designed to be meaningful, but which might need a little reimagining. The rabbis created the High Holiday liturgy we experience to lead us on a journey of inward discovery. To inspire personal change, they compiled and wrote awe inspiring prayers that our recent ancestors supplemented with dramatic music like Avinu Malkeinu and Kol Nidre. The prayers portray God as sitting on a throne in judgement as we pass like sheep under His, yes His, staff. We beg for mercy from Our Father and Our King. We imagine our fate in the year to come, recounting the possibilities--tranquil or tormented, poor or rich, in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer written during the time of the Crusades.

For some of us, this imagery of grandeur works. Some of us need to be scared into doing the right thing, just like those videos we watched in drivers education. For some, this vision of a powerful and awe inspiring God enthroned in the heavens works magnificently.

But others of us don't connect with this type of God. We might want to view God as a partner who helps us along. We see God as loving rather than judgemental. We might feel that God had left us mostly to our own devices and that reward and punishment do not really exist. For those of us who have a different conception of God, these services can be difficult. (After all, even if you love an awe-inspiring God, three hours is a lot of time to be in services.) If you feel disconnected from the traditional prayers, I invite you to take a lesson from the ancient kabbalists and remake the rituals in a way that helps you to become a better person, a better friend, a better citizen, a better Jew.

If you aren't feeling immediately creative, there is good news; we have several already scheduled opportunities that offer a different experience. Tashlich is a chance to be outdoors, to sing, and to reflect. Join us for that tomorrow. If you don't love praying, but want to be in community, we are always looking for people to help with our children's programming. Let me know if you are interested in exploring the holidays with our youngest community members. Yom Kippur study allows for time in community and to discuss ideas with others. This year our afternoon Yom Kippur study will feature texts about tears. We'll look at what happens when God cries--a very different view of God than that our liturgy provides. Our Yom Kippur chanting and meditative service provides a chance to recenter yourself. I invite you to explore these alternative models of connecting to God, yourself, and community.

And for those of you feeling a little more daring, Tu BiSh'vat teaches us that we don't have to do any traditional rituals; we can create our own. The mystics were intrigued by the idea of a holiday about trees and nature in the winter. They saw potential in this little event, so little that we might not even call it a holiday. Hey, they thought, we can make this ancient ritual meaningful today. And so they did.

The central ritual they created is a Tu BiSh'vat seder, modeled on the Passover seder, with a theme for each of four cups of wine. Note that the traditional texts never mention a seder in connection to Tu BiSh'vat. The mystics took the Passover ritual and completely repurposed it in order to encourage people to improve their spiritual selves, just as we do on Rosh Hashanah. And it took hold. Within a hundred years, Tu BiSh'vat was included in a holiday compendium, and it is recognized as a holiday today. Yet it retains its spirit of reinvention. There is no set liturgy; there are no legal requirements. We are invited to make this ritual fit what we need, in our own time and place. As Jews moved back to Palestine in the early 20th century, they remade the holiday into was remade the holiday to become a day of planting trees and connecting to the land of Israel. In the 1970's Abraham Joshua Heschel created a Tu BiSh'vat ritual around reforestation in Vietnam and planted symbolic trees of peace. In the 1980's Ellen

Bernstein founded the first national Jewish environmental organization, Shomrei Adamah, which grew out of a Tu BiSh'vat seder she led. Today, groups such as Hazon and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life are creating seders to tie into modern day environmental concerns. Here at Temple Beth El we sing, dance, read stories and create a mad libs, all of which help us reflect on our own relationships with creation.

Tu BiSh'vat's history of rediscovery and reinvention can inspire us as we approach this New Year. It invites us to think anew about our new year's rituals, encouraging us to reflect on the last year in our own way and decide what it looks like to forgive ourselves and others. We could have a festive meal with some new foods. We might go for a walk in the woods and create a ritual for letting go of the mistakes of the past year. We might focus on tzedakah, and spend the next ten days giving in a variety of ways--through actions, through money, to those we know, to those we don't know. We might bake challah with intention this Shabbat, marking the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in a special way. Our tradition gives us permission to create or expand on our own holiday rituals.

The remaking of rituals for Tu BiSh'vat also offers us a new lens through which to do the soul searching that is a hallmark of this season. Tu BiSh'vat gently guides us through the work of repentance with the Tu BiSh'vat seder, the ritual of eating fruits and nuts in a certain order. With the first cup of wine, we eat peanuts, pecans, bananas and other foods with a hard outer shell, symbolizing our outer defenses. When we first examine our misdeeds, we often make excuses. "I'm not really that way." "I do not do that very often." "Other people are overreacting." We must first get through our outer layer of armor to do the work of *teshuvah*.

With the second cup of wine, we eat peaches, dates, and other foods with a pit. Once we 'soften up,' we begin to look at our actions and examine them. However, there remains an inner barrier, perhaps only visible to ourselves. At this step, we have seen where we have gone wrong, but have not yet completed the important task of asking forgiveness from those whom we have harmed.

For our third cup of wine, our foods are those that are totally edible, such as grapes or figs. Once we reach this stage, we have looked inside ourselves to see how our habits or mindset might keep us from changing. We have asked for forgiveness and committed ourselves to not repeating the same mistakes again. This represents the best of *teshuvah*. We have completed the process.

But in the seder there is still one more cup, because in Judaism we like having sets of four. This cup is about the unity of ourselves with the divine. Did I mention that mystics created this seder? At our synagogue seder, we ended up choosing bread as the food for this cup. Why? Because we must partner with God to in order to make bread. There are no bread trees where loaves grow. God provides the raw materials--the wheat, the eggs, the water -- but we ourselves have to do the work. We need to harvest the wheat and process it into flour and take care of the chickens and collect the eggs. Of course, today, thanks to grocery stores, our personal job is much easier, but the fact remains that neither we nor God can create bread alone. Tu BiSh'vat reminds us we need to find partners.

In Avot D'Rabbi Natan, an 8th or 9th century Rabbinic commentary, we read a discussion about friendship. The commentary suggests that we should have a friend "with whom to eat and drink, read and study, sleep and share secrets of Torah and personal secrets (Avot D'Rabbi Natan 1:8)." What a friend! Someone with whom you share meals and discuss good books. To whom you open your home and with whom you share secrets--the secrets of your learning and the secrets of yourself. That sounds like a true partner in creation. We might not

always be able to be full partners with God, but we can find people with whom we can partner as we do the work of *teshuvah*, of repentance.

Tu BiSh'vat, the holiday mentioned in passing in the mishna, has come to hold real meaning in our own time. During our new year, it can teach us a great deal. It gives us permission to remake the rituals of this season so that they are meaningful for us. It gives us a new way to think about changing ourselves and reminds us to do the work of *teshuvah* in partnership. Each year will bring unexpected surprises. As we enter this sanctuary we are thrown off balance by a new place, and some new tunes and new faces. It wasn't what we expected. We could let discomfort overwhelm us or we could embrace that uncertainty as an opportunity for new possibilities.

This year may we find meaning in rituals--old and new. May we work to change ourselves and the world around us. May we be open to possibilities in unexpected places. And may we always journey with a friend or two by our side.