

Tu B'Shevat

Prior to this course, I had never heard of the Jewish holiday, Tu B'Shevat. However, after some research, I've come to understand that it's a holiday based on scripture that can be found in Leviticus 19:23-25, which states: *"When you come to the land and you plant any tree, you shall treat its fruit as forbidden; for three years it will be forbidden and not eaten. In the fourth year, all of its fruit shall be sanctified to praise the L-RD. In the fifth year, you may eat its fruit."*

The Jewish people take this piece of scripture literally, and the holiday marks another year in the life cycle of the trees, essentially, "New Year's for the trees."

This year, the holiday will begin at sunset on February the seventh and end at nightfall on February the eighth.

There are several customs that are practiced on this holiday, such as the planting of a new tree or trying a new fruit. Other people choose to eat from the shivat haminim, or Seven Species, which are "wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates."

It is also a common practice for Jewish children to go around and collect funds to plant trees in Israel.

To me, this was a very interesting concept and a holiday that I had never heard of. I truly appreciate the connection between spirituality and religion, so this idea sounded like fun to me. As far as the actual celebration portion of the holiday goes, I probably wasn't up to Jewish standards. I live in an apartment, so I can't exactly go plant a tree in my own yard, nor did I want to plant one on someone else's property if they didn't want it there. So I had to be a little creative. I feel like the purpose of the holiday is not only to mark another year and the life cycle of the trees for practical purposes, but also to appreciate the gift of the trees that God has given us. Even if the trees don't bear fruit, they serve other purposes such as providing shelter or food for animals and recycling our carbon dioxide into oxygen. So I figured going to the park and spending time around the trees, appreciating their presence and specifically recognizing them, would be an acceptable trade-off. I did, however, participate in the eating of one of the Seven Species—grapes! They weren't kosher because I already had them in my refrigerator and didn't want to be wasteful, but I think they probably still count.

I'm genuinely surprised at how much I learned from this experience. Not only did I learn a little bit more about Judaism and Jewish holidays, Tu B'Shevat in particular, I also learned how seriously the Jewish people take their religion and spirituality. To them, the scriptures are literal and need to be treated as such. So they have holidays such as Tu B'Shevat that help them live out the literal meanings of scripture. This has shown me that I should be a little more proactive about my religion and not take every passage with a grain of salt. Even if I don't interpret something as a literal command to me personally, sometimes it's good to obey it just as the characters in the scriptures did because it shows God gratitude and respect. For example, at first the New Year for the trees felt kind of silly because it seemed as though there was very little spiritual significance to it. But once I stopped trying to figure it out, and I just let go, that's when it really made sense. This holiday is practical, so the Jewish people know which stage their trees are in. But it's also about being grateful for the simplest things in life that we're given every day and never take the time to appreciate - like trees and the fruit they bear.

I think the most important thing that I learned from this isn't directly linked to the holiday itself, but I discovered it during my research of the holiday. While clicking through the pages of a website that was very helpful during this project, I noticed that over and over the website would say "L-RD" or "G-D," with the vowels removed. At first, I just thought it was kind of strange, but then when I clicked on a page that had a list of prayers, there was a notice at the top that said, "Please note that all of these prayers contain the name of G-d. If you print them out, please treat them with appropriate respect." After reading that, I completely understood. They are removing letters from God's name out of respect, because they view His name as too holy to speak or be written out fully. I was floored by this. I was always taught from a young age that it's disrespectful to set my Bible on the ground, and, of course, you should never say the Lord's name in vain. But I never even thought about needing to treat a paper that has God's name on it with respect. That was a huge wake-up call. I often stack my Bible with the rest of my textbooks. I talk about God casually in conversations. I've thrown church handouts with God's name on them in the trash. It never occurred to me that these acts could be seen as disrespectful because it's so easy to feel like God is far away and not here with me every single day. If He's far away then there's sort of a wall between us, so I'm sure He wouldn't mind if I just toss out the church bulletin with His name on it. And that's the glaring message that the website sent me; it's *not* okay to do all of those things. Everything about God is holy—His name, His word, *everything*. If I were standing right in front of God, would I just stack my Bible with the rest of my textbooks? Definitely not. So I need to behave as though He's right in front of me at all times...because He is.

There are so many things to be learned from other religions, but what I learned from Judaism is truly an invaluable lesson to my faith. I've learned to step outside my comfort zone and worship in more creative ways. I also learned God deserves my utmost respect in all areas of life. Celebrating Tu B'Shevat was a fun way to open my eyes to Jewish beliefs and culture, but it isn't about being Jewish or any other religion. It's about loving and appreciating what you have. With that being said, I think I might even celebrate on the actual holiday, too!