

Traveling with Jewish Taste[®]

Tu B'Shevat, One of Four "New Years"

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



The almond tree is blooming
And the golden sun is shining
Birds atop each roof
Bless the arrival of the festival.
Tu B'Shevat has arrived
The festival of trees
Tu B'Shevat has arrived

Well before anybody had ever heard of National Arbor Day, we Jews had Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for Trees. This holiday is but one of four new years commemorated in the Jewish calendar.

We also have the first of Nisan, used for counting the years of the reigns of kings in ancient Israel; Rosh Hashanah, on the first of Tishrei, traditionally believed to be the date on which the world was created; and the first of Elul, similar to our tax day on April 15, used to determine the start date for the animal tithing to the priestly class.

Unlike the other three new years, though, Tu B'Shevat is the only one that is celebrated in the middle of the month. Since the letters of the Hebrew alphabet also serve as numbers, the word "Tu" is actually an acronym made of the letters "tet" and "vav," or nine and six, which equal fifteen.

Hence, Tu B'Shevat falls on the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, when the moon is full.

Tu B'Shevat was originally designated for the purpose of calculating the age of trees both for harvesting and tithing purposes. The Torah prohibits fruit from being eaten during the first three years of a tree's growth, but on Tu B'Shevat we eat the first fruits of the fourth year, as well as samples of the seven species mentioned in the Torah (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates).

One of the most potent memories I have of Hebrew School (other than the time I got into trouble for setting the clock ahead) was our celebration of Tu B'Shevat. I loved feasting on the dried fruits that, we were told, came from the Land of Israel itself.

Even if the fruits hadn't been delicious, the notion of their having traveled over the ocean (and to the port on camels?) to our little school was exotic to my child's mind.

And, although we never saw it in Hebrew School, my mother spoke fondly of

something called "bokser," which I later learned was the carob bean pod ("haruv" in Hebrew), repository of faux chocolate. Readily available in Israel by picking from a nearby tree, these hard-as-leather pods she remembered were a treat for kids – and, I imagine, a boon for dentists.

It is tradition in Israel to plant new trees on the holiday, but the children of the Pittsfield Community Hebrew School did not plant. No, in the frigid February of Berkshire County, we made do with purchasing trees for the good folks at the Jewish National Fund to place into the holy ground. I loved bringing my dimes to school and sticking the leaf-shaped JNF stamps onto the "tree" pinned to the bulletin board in the back of our classroom. (How many of us thought that we would see the actual trees we had planted once we got to the real JNF forest?)

In later years, I learned about the Tu B'Shevat Seder, based on a ritual developed by the kabbalists of the sixteenth century in Tsfat, in the north of Israel. Like the Passover Seder, this holiday ritual involves four cups of wine, but there the similarity ends.

Rather than focusing on physical exodus, this Seder contemplates the spiritual

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'Bokser,' the carob bean pod, a repository of faux chocolate



Tu B'Shevat's four glasses of wine represent winter, the coming of spring, the warmth of spring, and the full heat of summer



Trees planted in holy ground



A Tu B'Shevat Seder table

A Tu B'Shevat Sandwich: Date, Banana, Raisins, and Peanut Butter on Pita

This recipe is perfect for a Tu B'Shevat picnic (or lunch at your desk) as it uses all four of the food types, and is delicious to boot. Enjoy!



Ingredients:

2 whole-wheat pita breads	1/4 cup raisins
1/2 cup peanut butter	2 bananas, peeled and sliced
8 Medjool dates, pitted and chopped	

Directions:

- Cut each pita bread in half and open carefully.
- Spread two tablespoons of peanut butter on each half.
- Divide dates, raisins, and bananas evenly among the four halves.
- Heat on both sides in a skillet coated with vegetable spray, or on a Panini grill, until browned.

Serves 4

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Barbra Streisand's Erasmus Hall High School yearbook photo

ally considered to be as "important" a musical.

In "Fiddler on the Roof," the Jewish audience easily embraced a tuneful presentation of shtetl life, with the specter of expulsion and pogrom looming over

everything, while also depicting the struggle between tradition and modernity.

New political and cultural ideas like Marxism and intermarriage challenge longstanding belief, with Tevye, as the embodiment of this antagonism between past and present, seeking to preserve his relationships with his wife, Golde, and daughters as the shtetl disintegrates around him.

At "Fiddler's" conclusion, Tevye and wife depart for America, and from that end "Funny Girl" – and Brice as well as Streisand, professionally and in real life – should be clearly seen as a continuation of the narrative; the next phase of identity; the beginning of the Jewish American story.

Moving forward during two non-world-war-periods, the life of Brice – and indeed that of Streisand (though she was raised in the Williamsburg and Flatbush sections of Brooklyn) – are ones in which the kooky and ostensibly unglamorous young 'Funny Girls' girls from the Lower East Side ascend to become two of the most famous people in the United States by virtue of their talent, perseverance – and, importantly, the bursting of the bonds of the stereotypical "blue-eyed-blondie" American beauty, as Jewish beauty blends seamlessly with on stage/screen ability.

Thus, in "Funny Girl," the desire to leave the shtetl behind had been replaced by Brooklyn neighborhoods, Manhattan's Henry Street, and the desire for Broadway fame.

Yet the clash between the past and future is seen again in the challenge to the family's structure.

In "Funny Girl" it is the mother who expresses fear, through: "Now she belongs to the ages, my work is done" – "I lost a daughter but I gained a star." But even if the celebrity aspect gives "Funny Girl" some distance from most everyday lives, to see Streisand and Brice, their triumphs and their tribulations, is to see the twentieth-century American Jewish experience.



Though, in 1924, Nicky Arnstein would be convicted in a Wall Street bond theft scheme, convinced of his innocence the strong-willed Brice 'stood by her man' and went to great expense to fund the legal costs of her second husband

Indeed, it must be argued that Brice, Streisand, and "Funny Girl" are more significant in the context of the American



Fanny Brice, in 1915, brought showgirl glamour to the stage as a proud Jewish woman

Jewish musical and Jewish American culture than Tevye and Golde, Tzeitel, Hodel, and Chava, whose characters are fully rooted in the Old World.

These actors and characters are integral to shows which are about different kinds of Jewish struggle: "Fiddler" is about the preservation of Judaism against new ideas and hostile forces; "Funny Girl" is about ascension, integration, and the desire to become both Jewish and American: as reflected in the show; the full career courses of Brice and Streisand; and the "real life" of each actress.

"Funny Girl" the musical, the entertainment business paths of both actresses, and the personal story of each are as essential as "Fiddler" to understanding the Jewish experience.

Moreover, if "Fiddler" presented the audience with a representation of a sympathetic yet patriarchal and traditional Old World Jewish male, the importance of "Funny Girl" is that it gave us an enduring picture of the modern American Jewish woman.

Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice



In the '30s and 40s, Brice's most noted comedic role was as radio's bratty toddler 'Baby Snooks,' which she often played in costume for the benefit of the audience in the studio



Fanny Brice was a Ziegfeld Follies girl in the 1920s

(and as herself) was/is strong and assertive, funny, clever, sharp, talented, and independent-minded. External beauty

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aspects of ourselves as reflected in nature. The first glass of Tu B'Shevat wine is pure white and symbolizes the cold barrenness of winter. This is followed by a white, tinted with a bit of red, symbolizing the coming of spring. Next is a glass of red wine with a little white mixed in, signifying the warmth of spring. The fourth and final cup is a deep red wine and represents the full heat and bounty of the summer.

The Seder also includes four different types of foods and asks participants to consider their metaphorical relationship to their spiritual selves, starting with the most outward appearance – our hard outer shell – to our most inner spirituality.

While interpretations vary as to the details, I list them here the way I learned them:

- A food with an outer shell or peel that cannot be eaten, such as a nut or orange.
- A food that has pits or seeds inside, such as a date or plum.
- A food that is completely edible, such as a fig or raisin.

- A food made primarily of wheat, the sustenance of life. This category can include bread or cookies.

Tu B'Shevat in recent decades has also developed into an environmental education holiday that teaches us of our connection to the earth and of our role as "shomrei adamah," caretakers of the earth. In fact, several Jewish environmental learning centers have sprung up around the country, specifically to teach young and old alike – year 'round – of our connection and responsibility to the earth.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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