

CULTURE & ARTS

TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

Et Tu, B'Shvat?

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

Most American Jews are familiar with the Passover seder. After all, it's been reported that it is the single most observed ritual in the Jewish calendar. But there's another festive and ritually meaningful meal that's coming just around the corner: the Tu B'Shvat seder. Our then-rabbi introduced this twist on the holiday to our congregation about thirty years ago, but it was actually developed by the Kabbalists back in the 16th century as a mystical practice to repair the world. The Tu B'Shvat seder has evolved since then to be both a celebration of the beginning of spring in Israel, and an occasion to reflect on our relationship with God in healing and cultivating the natural world. And of course, because it's a Jewish holiday, there's food, so it's traditional to eat fruits from Israel.

When it comes to ritual meals, we Jews do love the number four. At Passover, we've got the four questions, the four sons, and the four cups of wine, each representing different aspects of our history and traditions. Likewise, the Tu B'Shvat seder typically features four sections, but these represent aspects of the four seasons, both in the natural world and in our own persons.

The first section is called The World of *Asiyah* (Actualization) and features a glass of white wine that, with its lack of color, symbolizes winter and bleakness. The fruits and nuts, with their hard outsides and edible insides (e.g., almonds), also imply winter, in which everything is dormant. They do, however, have the potential to grow into something. Some sages interpret the hard shells to represent our human tendency to judge others by their appearance, while others interpret them as the walls we build around our hearts.



On the Tu B'Shvat seder table

The World of *Yetzirah* (Formation) is the basis of the second section of the seder. This cup of wine has a few drops of red mixed in with the white. The resulting light pink symbolizes the beginning of spring and rebirth. Here in New England, we look forward to the return of color to our lives after a long, gray winter. Another interpretation is that we may embark on a new chapter in our own lives. As for fruits, we eat those with pits at their centers (e.g. apricots). These are said to symbolize both the source of new life and the potential within each of us to grow.

The third section of the seder is called The World of *Beriah* (Creation), and it calls wine that is half red, half white, and fruits that are entirely edible (e.g. carob bean, aka *bokser**). This section reminds us of summer. Although trees come into their full green glory and flowers blossom, vegetable gardens may still be forming their produce. Both the wine and the fruits remind us that we should not waste resources and that we, and all of nature, depend on everything around us and on each other.

Finally, the fourth section of the seder is called The World of *Atzilut* (Presence, Emanation, Birth.) In this section, our wine is almost entirely red, but with a few drops of white added. This reminds us of the first cup and the cyclical nature of the seasons. But instead of eating fruit, we use a different bodily organ to inhale aromas herbs and spices – much like the spices we sniff at Havdalah. These scents can heighten our senses and enrich our spirits. By doing this we celebrate what may be invisible to the eye but still part of the natural world.

We Jews don't just love food. We live for questioning and debating (arguing, maybe?), so the seder will often include discussions, readings, stories, and other activities incorporated into the eating and drinking ritual.



Carob pods – in Yiddish called 'bokser,' derived from the Middle High German bokshornboum "ram's horn tree" (in reference to the shape of the carob).

**Dentists among us may cringe at the thought of their patients chewing on carob beans, but I am told that the fresh pod is easier on the teeth. So, snowbird readers: scope out your neighborhoods in Boca or Scottsdale!*



Under the name Carolinda Goodman, **Carol Goodman Kaufman** has just published her third picture book for young children. *Detective Bears and Friends* introduces readers to the whimsical names that various animal groups are called. In addition to her work for children, Kaufman also writes under her "real" name about food history (including for the *Berkshire Jewish Voice*). Her first novel, *The First Murder*, is set in the Berkshires.

Fudgy Carob Brownies



INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cups sugar
- 1 ¾ cup flour
- ½ cup carob powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 5 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon peppermint extract

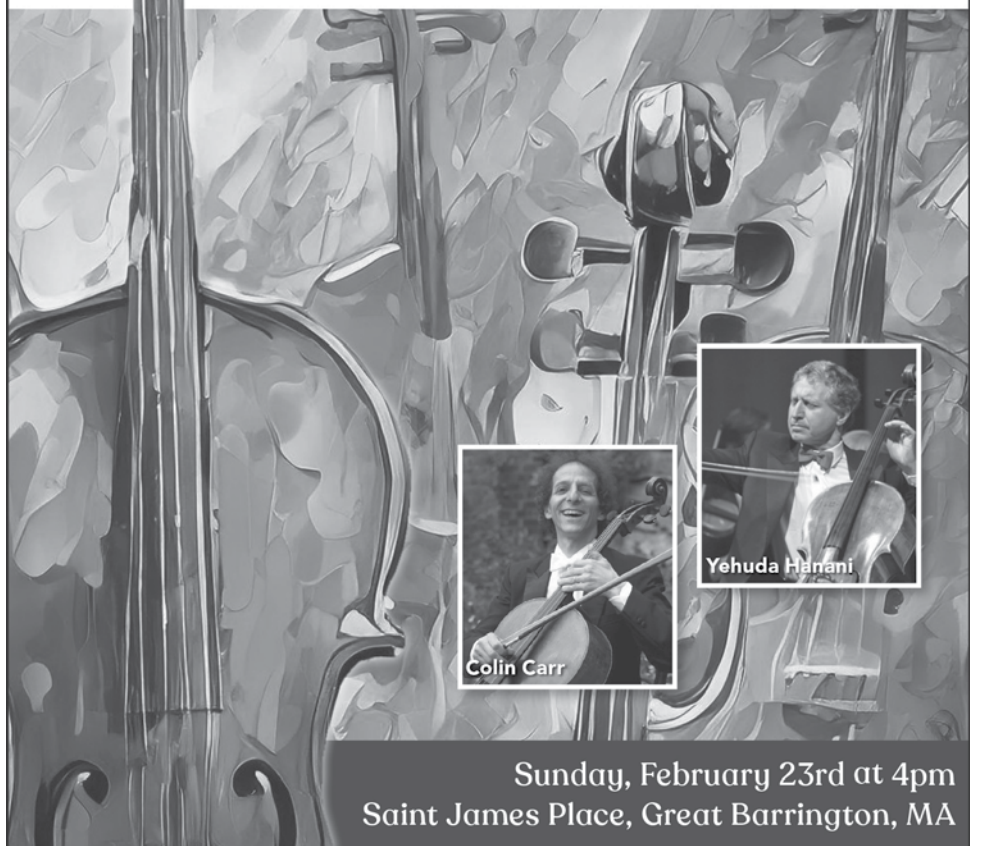
DIRECTIONS:

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
- Grease or spray 9"x13" pan.
- Combine wet ingredients by stirring with a spoon.
- Stir dry ingredients together and add to wet ingredients until well blended.
- Place in pan and bake for 25-30 minutes.
- Cool completely before cutting.

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