

[Tu B'Shvat: An Ancient Jewish Holy Day for Modern Environmentalists](#)

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Tu B'Shvat, long ago the annual date set aside in ancient Israel for determining the age of trees, essentially as a tax matter, today marks what has come to be known as the "Jewish New Year for Trees." In that fact, it is not unique -- it is one of four "new years" events within the Hebrew calendar, pointing to a complexity of cyclical understanding and thought that, as moderns, we have to some degree lost.

In recent years, however, this somewhat obscure holiday has been reclaimed by an emerging Jewish environmental movement that sees the holiday as an indicator of their ancestors' concern for the health of the natural world. As a sort of Jewish Earth Day, this moment in mid-winter when the tree sap begins to rise has become a rallying point for an environmental movement with far-reaching ideas about integrating faith and the natural environment, responding to global climate change and reimagining what it means to be Jewish.

"Tu B'Shvat has become important because it's become known as the Jewish environmental holiday," says Leora Mallach, director of the ADVA Network, an alumni association for two prominent Jewish programs, the [ADAMAH](#) Jewish Environmental Fellowship and the Teva Learning Center, known for their penchant for incubating Jewish environmental leaders. "That provides a real opportunity for education and awareness within the Jewish community."

The points of connection between trees, the larger environment and Jewish tradition are rich and many: In prophecies surrounding the coming of the Messiah, it is noted that one day the trees will sing and clap their hands; in the Kabbalistic tradition, the 10 *Sefirot*, or "qualities" of being, are arrayed in *Etz Chaim*, the Tree of Life -- also a name for the Torah; Eve and then Adam eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; and in a famous, mystical story from the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva and three others ascend into the mysterious realm of "pardes," the orchard.

Nigel Savage, director of the Jewish environmental organization Hazon, has seen the trend develop over the years. Having attended his first Tu B'Shvat seder in 1986, Savage has seen more and more focus around the holiday in every year since then, in no small part thanks to Hazon's own work, providing education and resources to Jewish communities around the country. This year alone, Savage anticipates Tu B'Shvat seders being carried out with Hazon materials in over 100 communities and households around the country.

As Savage notes, "Any Jewish holiday is just a reminder of something we should be thinking about the other 364 days of the year." In that, Hazon has become a leader in substantively connecting ancient traditions to contemporary challenges. Now entering its 11th year, Hazon organizes bike rides on both coasts and in Israel

to raise money for environmental organizations and causes, complete with full religious services, local, organic food, and a day off for the Sabbath. Hazon also organizes food conferences, tackling agricultural and food issues in the U.S., fiscally sponsors numerous Jewish environmental start-ups and spearheads the largest faith-based coalition of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the country.

"Tu B'Shvat comes to remind us that our lives depend on the physical world that sustains us," Savage says, "Tu B'Shvat is a day to think about how we power our homes, and how we travel, and the changes we might make in the coming year. Tu B'Shvat is a time to notice that there's going to be a Farm Bill in this country in 2012. The next time the Farm Bill comes through, we should be thinking about equity and food systems."

"You can't find the phrase 'urban food desert' in the Talmud," admits Adam Berman, Executive Director of Urban Adamah, a new program in Berkeley, Calif., based loosely on the aforementioned Adamah that seeks to synthesize organic, local food production, social justice, and Jewish values. But, he says, the values espoused in ancient Jewish thought clearly indicate an imperative to substantive engagement on environmental challenges of our time. "The core Jewish values of ahava, tzedek and chesed speak directly to the issues we are talking about here around social and environmental justice," he says.

In that opinion, Berman is not alone. Progressive Jewish environmental organizations are springing up with surprising speed: From [Urban Adamah](#) to another Berkeley-based organization, [Wilderness Torah](#), to the [Kayam Farm](#) at the Pearlstone Center in Baltimore, Md., the [Kavanah Garden](#) in Toronto, [Eden Village](#) summer camp in Dennytown, N.Y., and the [Jewish Farm School](#), leading alternative spring break trips around the country. "There's so many things happening in so many different places around this country," says Mallach, of the ADVA network.

With a rising concern for the environment in the face of global climate change, and in particular an interest in agricultural sources and practices, brought on by the work of writers like Michael Pollen and films like Food, Inc., the Jewish concern for environmental equity and healthy food is far from unique. What is unique about organizations like Hazon, Wilderness Torah, and Adamah is that they are taking on these issues through a religious lens.

In doing so, they are bending what have become standard cultural norms in the way of religion and progressive values. For Zelig Golden, director of Wilderness Torah, engaging in what are traditionally understood as liberal causes is not contradictory to a religious life; in fact, it is what defines it.

"There's a teaching that when you build a city you have to create green belts around the city," he says, "This is Torah. This is ancient scripture. Talking about building greenbelts."

Savage seconds Golden's feeling. "This is one of the places where Jewish tradition has wisdom," he says, "The question is how do we start to evolve a contemporary environmental halacha," or code of law.

"Fundamentally, we're in the business of shifting what it means to be Jewish. That's what we're trying to do."

In not shying away from modalities that are often perceived as conflicting, the emerging movement is not alone in a shifting American cultural landscape. Mourning those lost in the now-iconic shooting in Arizona, President Obama's adherence to and grounding in a religious faith (as deeply questioned as it may be by his critics) highlighted his ability to appeal to constituencies that lie outside the institutionalized ideas of what is right and left in this country. At a recent talk on environmental action, First Lady Michelle Obama lauded the work of Hazon, among other organizations.

Golden, whose organization seeks to reconnect Jews to the environment through the celebration of the traditional Jewish pilgrimage festivals, sees this synthesis as just one part of a growing paradigm shift. "I don't see Wilderness Torah as an environmental organization," he says, "I see it as a Jewish cultural organization, looking to reawaken the most ancient parts of our culture, to bring us back into relationship with ourselves personally, community, the Earth and ultimately our relationship to God. It actually transcends environmentalism. Wilderness Torah today has just been building 'programs,' Ultimately, these should become embedded cultural experiences that are actually lived out, not just provided by a non-profit organization."

Tali Weinberg's story in many ways encapsulates the journey of many Jews of her generation. A daughter of a kibbutznik father and a second generation holocaust surviving mother, Weinberg went to a Jewish day school growing up and participated in a culturally Jewish, largely secular home. At university she became involved as a political and environmental activist, and explored other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, meditation, and indigenous First Nation ceremonies in Manitoba.

"I felt like I couldn't really find those streams and important issues within the Jewish community," she says, "I spent eight years really having little involvement with my Jewish identity."

In her mid- to late-20s, she had what she describes as a "reawakening," exploring indigenous, land-based roots in her own religion and culture. She attended Elat Chayim, a Jewish spirituality organization then based in Accord, N.Y., and became involved in the ADAMAH community, serving two seasons as the farm's field manager.

"While I was farming and in the field, I started to integrate some of these ideas," she relates, "It became an embodied experience as opposed to a predominantly intellectual experience. The text was the land itself."

After two years studying permaculture outside of the Jewish context, Weinberg is returning to become the farm manager for Urban Adamah, where she hopes to integrate the design system pioneered by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren with her Jewish background. Whereas permaculture is a recently popularized design strategy that seeks to employ sustainable land use practices by mimicking those systems found in nature, Weinberg sees ancient traditions the world over -- Judaism included -- as speaking to the same idea.

"If you look at some of the permaculture principles and ethics, they're basically a universal articulation of what exists in every part of the globe, in every tradition," Weinberg says. "These are all things that are both in permaculture and in Judaism. Our teachers, our ancestors, really understood how to engage in the land in a sustainable way."

Golden, for one, agrees: "Jewish environmental thought is not new," he says. "It is as ancient as the Jewish tradition. Jewish traditions are connected to the cyclical calendar, which tracks the seasons, tracks the moon cycle, tracks these rhythms."

"You can go right into Genesis, into the stories of Avraham, the stories of Isaac and Jacob ... all these stories take place in an earth-centric environment. Avraham is told to go out from his home into the wilderness. Isaac encounters his beloved while meditating in the field. Jacob has his vision of the ladder and God right here on earth while on what very much seemed like a vision quest, surrounded by stones."

"The next Sabbatical year begins in December 2014," says Savage referring to the biblical practice of letting agricultural fields lie fallow once every seven years. "We want to put *shmita* on the agenda for Jewish

community. By December 2014, we want it to be the case that in every synagogue, every classroom, every JCC -- we want there to be a conversation happening."

Maybe he will get his wish. What's happening now, Golden says, is "still very nascent. It's still pre-emergent. We haven't actually hit the big time yet. In a generation, there's going to be a blossoming, as what's now called the Jewish environmental movement will become a mainstream Jewish experience."

"I think it's inevitable that the Jewish community, as all communities of faith in this country, will embrace the values that we are espousing," argues Berman, the Urban Adamah director. "All religions will cease to be compelling if they aren't speaking to these issues, as they become more prevalent, as more and more people realize that engaging with these issues is essential to meaning, joy, happiness, connection and life."

If so, larger things may be looming on the horizon. What was once an accounting of tree inventory in ancient Israel may be emerging as the accounting of a movement. "What we're seeing in the community," Golden says, "Is just the sap beginning to run."