

## Of Trees and People

These months always feel like a fallow time, not only in terms of the solar cycle, but also the Jewish year cycle. The lights of Hanukkah are behind us and the excitement of Purim and Pesach as yet on the horizon of far off spring. The one holiday that we do have in this season, Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of the Trees, always feels slightly out of place: with no signs even of buds yet, much less leaves or luscious fruits, there doesn't seem to be much to celebrate in early February, when it falls this year.

Historically, the fact that the trees themselves are fallow at this time is probably the reason this *became* their new year. The ancient Jewish new years all had a practical, even fiscal element—they designated items for tax purposes, just like today the Gregorian new year has fiscal implications for income earned before or after. Masechet Rosh Hashanah 14a teaches that Tu B'Shvat was the new year of trees exactly because “most of the rains have fallen, but much of winter still remains.” In other words, nothing was remotely near harvestable around then, so it would be very clear which tax year any tree fruit would be assigned.

Even now, across the world from the land of Israel, and 2000 years from the ancient system of tithes, there is still wisdom in celebrating the new year of the trees in a time when the trees appear most inactive: it reminds us that life flows beneath the surface, that the potential for bud, leaf, flower and fruit exist even now. There is holiness in the winter work of tending and pruning. Trees are easy to celebrate when we are picking fruit in an orchard or luxuriating in the shade on a bright summer day. This is the time of year when, most poised to hunker down, we need to remind ourselves of the glory of life most actively.

As a mystical take on Deuteronomy 20:19 teaches, “A human is a tree of the field” – and just as trees need this time to gather inner resources, I hope that all of you are taking care of yourselves in the cold, and nurturing within yourself the spark that will burst forth when it is ready.