



Brit Tzedek v'Shalom

JEWISH ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE & PEACE



By [Rabbi John Friedman](#), Rabbinic Cabinet Chair

Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for Trees, is upon us, and while it is an undeniably lovely holiday, marked by respect for nature and big bowls of fruit, it can feel a bit odd to celebrate trees from the depths of an American winter.

Of course, the date corresponds to Israel's growing season, the point in the natural cycle when the earliest blooming trees begin to emerge from their annual dormancy. The tithes once required of fruit growers were reckoned according to the age of each tree, as measured on *Tu B'Shevat*. Our celebration of the day in the Diaspora is a quiet reminder of the Jewish people's tie to the land, regardless of their distance from it.

As they so often do, though, our sages also relate *Tu B'Shevat* to the realities of human relationships, recalling that "Man is a tree of the field" (Deuteronomy 20:19). One of the interpretations given to this simple verse is that, like the branches and leaves of a tree, no one person stands alone.

Manifestly linked with all who have gone before and all who will come after, joined to those who may seem remote indeed, humanity itself branches and spreads, never losing the essential rootedness that connects us all.

Trees themselves serve as a wonderful symbol of this human connection. The seed planted today bears fruit not for me, perhaps, but for my children, and theirs. And, as Sandy Tolan's book [The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East](#) makes beautifully clear, the tree that "belongs" to me may well "belong" to someone else, as well.

Having survived the Holocaust after losing everything and almost their lives, the Eshkenazi family immigrated to Israel from post-war Bulgaria. They were settled with other refugees in a lovely home

in the town of Ramle (al-Ramla in Arabic). The Eshkenazi family ultimately bought the home from the state of Israel and tended carefully a lemon tree they discovered in its garden.

Then one day in July 1967, just a month after Israel's resolute defense of the national dream in the Six Day War, Dalia Eshkenazi opened her door to find Bashir Khariri -- come to see the home in which he'd been born, and from which he and his family had been forcibly removed by the Israeli army in 1948. The lemon tree Dalia so loved had been planted by Bashir's family.

In 1991, after Dalia inherited the home from her parents, she —with the participation of Bashir's family (now living in the West Bank)--turned the house into a community center where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim children and families from Ramle meet. Open House was founded to create community among Palestinian and Jewish Israelis in this mixed city of 65,000 residents. On one *Tu B'Shevat* the Open House community planted an olive tree in the same garden.

Ultimately, Dalia and Bashir forged a relationship of respect that is never easy. Indeed, discovering our ties to the people around us, coexistence with those we once held as enemies, sharing what we love body and soul, never is.

But as Dalia and Bashir prove, the effort can and must be made. It is only by facing our difficulties that we find a way beyond them, only by respecting all peoples that we will learn to stop killing each other.

A clear majority of Israelis and Palestinians alike have come to understand that the only way out of endless war is to share the land to which each people is bound. Inexorably tied to each other -- whether easily or not -- the two nations must find a way to truly honor the fact that they, like all of humanity, are "a tree of the field."

In Brit Tzedek, we are all working to achieve this end. Each of us has a role to play in forging the path to real peace, planting seeds from which our children will be nourished for generations to come.

Suggestions for Tu B'Shevat:

1. Support Open House, founded in 1991 to further peace and coexistence among Israeli Arabs and Jews in Ramle, in the home Dalia and Bashir grew up in. Donations can be made through [Friends of Open House](#).
2. Review the [Tu B'Shevat study materials](#) developed by Rabbis for Human Rights.
3. Support [Rabbis for Human Rights](#) as they plant trees in the Galilee in areas that were burned this summer in the Naftali Hills during the Lebanon War.
4. If children will be attending your *Tu B'Shevat* celebration, create a Jewish values "tree," asking them to describe what behaviors stem naturally from values such as respect for fellow humans or caring for the earth, and discussing how actions such as sharing and protecting our



resources play a role in achieving peace.

5. Read and discuss [The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East](#) by Sandy Tolan.

If you would like to add to these ideas, please contact Rabbi John Friedman, chair of Brit Tzedek's Rabbinic Cabinet at rabbfriedman@btvshalom.org.

Rabbi John Friedman serves as national chair of Brit Tzedek's Rabbinic Cabinet. He was also the founding chair of the Durham/Chapel Hill chapter of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom and serves on its national board.

Friedman has been rabbi of Judea Reform Congregation in Durham, North Carolina for twenty-six years. He was ordained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1976.

Rabbi Friedman attended rabbinical school at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem and has visited Israel frequently since. In 1997, he was part of a delegation of rabbis that met with Palestinian Authority leadership in Ramalah.

Rabbi Friedman attended the University of Kansas, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Harvard University where he was a Charles Merrill Fellow in 1994. He received a doctorate from the Hebrew Union College. His articles on Bible, Jewish literature, Jewish education, and Black-Jewish relations have been published in a variety of journals. Rabbi Friedman is also a trained mediator.

John is married to Dr. Nancy Eisenberg Friedman. Nan is a pediatrician on the faculty of Duke University Medical Center in the Division of Pediatric Endocrinology. John and Nan are the parents of Abigail and Joshua.

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