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Ya know how sometimes weird things happen that you just chalk up to pure coincidence? Well in my life it happens all too often, sometimes to the point of being creepy while at the same time reinforcing my belief in God or some other mysterious force that makes these things happen.

For example -- in the 6th grade, I entered a school-wide contest for National Arbor Day. I had to write an essay on "*What Trees Mean to Me and My Community*". Well, as you might guess, I won the contest and had to read the essay in front of the entire school. So, here I am today, a mere 40 years later, working for Jewish National Fund and delivering a speech on Tu B'Shevat, also known as the **Jewish** Arbor Day and the New Year for Trees! Fate? Coincidence? God working in mysterious ways? Don't know, but whatever brought me to this day, I'm very happy and I thank you!

Tu B'Shevat, translates as the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat. So, why celebrate a New Year for Trees? Tu B'Shevat did not begin as a holiday at all, but rather the date used by farmers to calculate the year's crop yield and determine the tithe (or tax) that the Bible requires. As the rabbi's explained it, "If the fruit of a tree blossoms before the 15 Shvat it is tithed for the outgoing year; if after 15 Shvat, it is tithed for the incoming year. The day of Tu B'Shevat was fixed as the administrative holiday which marked the end of one tax year and the start of a new one, hence the New Year for Trees.

But clearly, there has to be more meaning for us today. So, there are several customs or observances that have evolved over time which help make this holiday more relevant to modern Jews.

One custom is to eat a new fruit on this day, or to eat from the Seven Species (shivat haminin) described in the Bible as being abundant in the land of Israel.

Another custom, started by 16th century kabbalists, was a seder ritual similar in concept to the Pesach seder, drinking 4 cups of wine, blessings with the addition of discussions on the spiritual significance of fruits and the Seven Species. This custom spread primarily in Sephardic communities, and is now more popular among Ashkenazim as well.

And, the most popular custom, tree planting, had no part at all in this holiday until many years later. On Tu B'Shevat in 1890, Rabbi Zeev Yavetz, one of the founders of the Mizrachi (Religious Zionists) movement, took his students to plant trees in the agricultural colony of Zichron Yaakov, which **JUST HAPPENS TO HAVE BEEN** Beth El's sister Masorti synagogue about 7 years ago!. This custom was adopted in 1908 by the Jewish Teachers Union and later by Jewish National Fund, established in 1901 to oversee land reclamation and afforestation of the Land of Israel.

To date, JNF has planted 240 million trees in Israel thanks to our donors. In a letter this past week from Effie Stenzler, the World Chairman of KKL (Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael, JNF's partner in Israel), Stenzler stated that at the forthcoming Tu B'Shevat events throughout the land, approximately 800,000 trees will be planted. The Zionist revolution added new meaning to this ancient day by helping Diaspora Jews connect and strengthen the roots of the people to the land.– literally.

So why plant trees? As trees grow, they help stop global warming by removing carbon dioxide from the air, storing carbon in the trees and soil, and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere.

While fighting global warming, trees provide many benefits to all of us, every day. We know that they provide shade, block cold winter winds, attract birds and wildlife, purify our air, prevent soil erosion, clean our water, and green the landscape.

One of the upcoming projects I've heard (through the grapevine) that JNF may take on is afforestation in Haiti. JNF frequently shares its expertise and knowledge with other countries including many in the Middle East. Haiti is 97 percent deforested, according to a New York Times video shot before the recent earthquake hit. In fact, Haiti is one of the most deforested countries in the world. After several hurricanes, deforestation accelerated in Haiti. Logging increased as a response to the capitol's "intensified demand for charcoal." A recent National Geographic article on Haiti highlighted the problem of **landslides** that could arise for the hillside region around Port-au-Prince because there are no trees.

Trees also provide safety. If you saw the movie Defiance or heard the many stories, as I have from Holocaust survivors, the forest was frequently used as a safe haven when escaping from the Nazis.

Trees also play a symbolic and important role in our tradition. The protection of trees even during warfare is mentioned in the Torah. In Deuteronomy (20:19-20), concerning laying siege to a city, we are told "you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down"... Rabbinic law understood this commandment in a general way and taught that we are forbidden to randomly destroy anything that is good and useful, not only during a siege, but any time.

This idea of not destroying is the basis of Judaism's attitude toward nature and the world. Like Adam & Eve, we are to till and tend the earth that has been given into our charge.

Trees are often the symbol of a good person – "The righteous shall flourish as the palm tree, they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon" (Psalm 92:14-15). The tree was chosen as this symbol because, unlike grass or even plants, it has permanence, is well-rooted and productive for many years.

Similarly, the tree is also the symbol of wisdom – "It is a tree of life to those who grasp it and whoever holds onto it is happy" (Proverbs 3:18) As we know, the sages identified

wisdom with Torah and ordained that this verse be recited when the Torah is returned to the ark after being read as we did this morning.

In a recent Jerusalem Post article, Rabbi Reuven Hammer sums it up beautifully – this “holiday for trees is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the wonder of nature, our responsibility to preserve the earth and all that grows from it, as well as to prize those things that the tree symbolizes, goodness and righteousness and the worth life that comes from devoting oneself to the Torah and its ways of peace.”

As we celebrate Tu B'Shevat today, join me in ensuring that future generations will also experience that same wonder of nature -- here, in Haiti and in Eretz Yisrael! Please join our Tu B'Shevat seder after Kiddush today and don't forget to plant a tree in Israel!

Shabbat Shalom & Chag Sameach!