



# A SPIRITUAL CHECK-UP

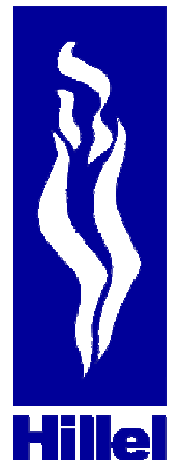
## A “SEDER” FOR TU B’SHVAT (THE NEW YEAR OF THE TREES)

### ∞ *Facilitators’ Guide* ∞

By Aryeh Ben David  
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Sponsored by:

The Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning  
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**Illustrations by Maria Radacsi**

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## WELCOME

Welcome to the “spiritual check-ups” designed and written for Hillel’s Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning by Rabbi Aryeh Ben David, Director of Spiritual Education at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem.

In the same way that we all look after our *bodies* by having physical check-ups, these “spiritual check-ups” are designed to help students take care of their *souls*, and think about the things that give meaning to their lives.

These workshops are ready-made activities for use on campuses of all kinds. We hope that they will spark conversations, enrich the students with some experience of studying Jewish thought and help them feel connected to their Jewish identities.

This workshop is the latest in a series which includes the following:

- The Inner Voice
- Body and Soul
- Radical Amazement
- Preparing for Passover

Please check them out at [www.hillel.org](http://www.hillel.org)

This workshop is especially designed to help you celebrate Tu B'Shvat, the 15<sup>th</sup> of the Hebrew month of Shvat, in which Jews traditionally celebrate “the New Year for the Trees”. The workshop takes the form of a “seder”, which includes some readings, eating fruits, and having some meaningful and stimulating conversations.

For the sake of clarity and convenience, each Spiritual Check-Up includes the **Facilitator’s Guide**, **Student Guide** and **Experiential Exercise**. The Facilitator’s Guide is the same for each Check-Up. Background on the **history and philosophy** of these guides may be found at the end of the Inner Voice packet.

## BEFORE THE SESSION

### *1. Marketing and Targeting the Tu B'Shvat Seder*

- a. Which students would you like to participate in this session? Do you want your student board and other empowered students to have the opportunity to think deeply? Or are you going to try to attract students who don’t usually come to Jewish events? Have you thought about partnering with organizations on campus who are interested in ecology or environmentalism?
- b. As with all Hillel events, students will be much more likely to come to this event if they have had personal contact with someone involved. Think about sending personalized invitations in advance, or calling people personally. This is the kind of event that requires

the personal touch. You could also advertise that there will be food served, which makes it into a whole evening program.

## 2. *Selecting a Location*

Who are the students you are targeting? Where are they? Which location would be the best for them? Sometimes hosting events at Hillel will deter unaffiliated students from coming. Think about the best place to host the event, remembering that it should be comfortable and relaxed, quiet atmosphere.

## 3. *Preparing the Room*

- a. **Most importantly – make sure that it doesn't resemble a classroom.** Is the setting friendly? Are the chairs in a circle? Can you pull a couch into the circle? Are there pillows on the floor to sit on? Students walk into a classroom and automatically go into an academic mode of detachment. We want a warm, inviting atmosphere to help them unwind, and maybe even open up their hearts.
- b. How is the lighting? Don't try to make it too moodful or dark. They'll just fall asleep.
- c. Is the room clean? Are there any newspapers, magazines, or flyers lying around? Coffee cups or candy wrappers? Get rid of them. We don't want any distractions.
- d. Do you have name tags? This is very important. Hopefully there will be some new faces and they won't know each other. It eliminates the feeling that there are "insiders" and "outsiders."
- e. Do you have the student booklets copied and ready? If you don't have enough, are there enough to share?
- f. Food? Make sure you have the right fruit ready and arranged nicely on a "seder plate" that everyone can see.

### Things you will need for this seder:

Some fruit for everyone to taste, of each of the following types:

	<b>Peel/Shell</b>	<b>Pit/Seed</b>	<b>Examples:</b>
1.	cannot eat	cannot eat	avocado, orange, watermelon
2.	can eat	cannot eat	grape, date, olive
3.	cannot eat	can eat	kiwi, pomegranate, pistachio
4.	can eat	can eat	fig, strawberry

Cake  
Pens

## ☞ DURING THE TU B'SHVAT SEDER

### *1. Preparing to be the Facilitator*

Nervous? Relax. Remember - it's not about you.

- ☞ You don't have to dazzle them with your erudition or charisma.
- ☞ You don't have to be funny.
- ☞ You don't have to know everything.
- ☞ You don't have to have an answer for every question. Remember that at the Pesach Seder we start off by asking four questions. Then we read the *Haggadah*. We only answer three of the questions, one of the questions we never answer.

You just have to be personal and sincere. Your job is to:

- ☞ Guide them through the booklet and facilitate the activities in the student booklet.
- ☞ Make sure that the evening keeps moving. Don't let it get bogged down. Don't let anyone monopolize the evening.
- ☞ Try to bring in people who appear to be on the outside, without drawing attention to the fact that they are an outsider, or that it is their first time.
- ☞ Encourage people to ask questions, and help to make them inclusive so that everyone understands and can participate.

You can do it. So relax and enjoy it. If you are transformed by the workshop, then for sure it will work for everyone else.

### *2. The Welcome*

Are the students seated comfortably? Can you make eye contact with everyone?

- ☞ Find the people who chose to sit on the outside. They're nervous. They're not sure if they really want to be here. They're checking things out. They're not just sitting on the outside; they're emotionally on the outside. They're the most likely to leave.
- ☞ Give them a big smile and bring them into the circle. Start a conversation with them.

Everyone seated? Let's get them talking. Ask someone: "Why did you come here tonight?"

Just point and shoot. Ask someone else. Try to bring in the people who are looking distant. It will help warm them up. It should give you a feel of the crowd.

The students are coming from all different places – classes, sleeping in their rooms, exercise, coffee shop, etc. Your job now is to bring them together and to help them focus on the program. For this program to work, everyone will need to concentrate. Look serious. Even better, be serious.

### 3. *Get Personal*

**You, the facilitator, now have to set the tone by saying something personal about yourself.** If you don't lead the way, then they will not fully engage.

1. Talk about why this is an important subject for **you**. Try to be as specific as possible. Offer a moment – positive or challenging – that has affected your spiritual life. It's a great opportunity to deepen the bond you have with the students, and to show new students that you can create an engaging and welcoming space for them to discuss meaningful issues. Most of their professors do not share their personal side.
2. You're giving them permission to bring their hearts and souls (not just their minds) to the activity.
3. Don't (!) talk too long. Three minutes is plenty. Remember, it's not about you. It's about them. You're just the catalyst.

### 4. *Timing and the Components of the Session*

The program is designed to last around an hour and a half, although it could go longer if you extend the conversation. The program consists of the readings, some eating, some one-on-one conversations (“chevruta”) and a small creative writing piece. All of the elements could be extended if you wish.

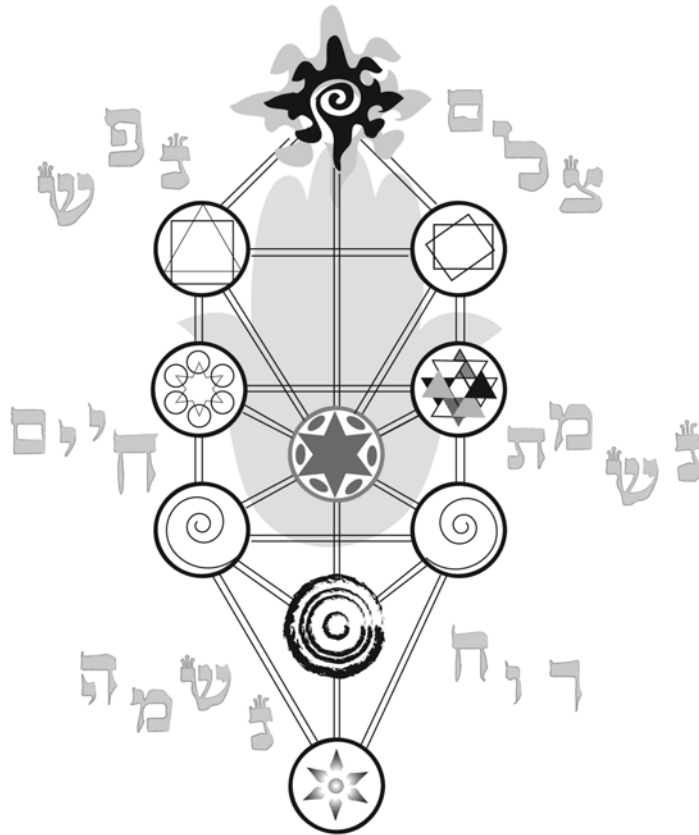
### After the Session

One of the most important parts of these workshops is what you do *afterwards*. How are you going to capitalize on the success of the workshops? How can you involve these students in future activities? How can you build on their interest and energy? Even before the session starts, invest some time in thinking about what will happen afterwards. Here are some ideas of how to continue the connection with the students who participate.

### *Ideas for Follow-Up*

- a. Invite all those who participate to have coffee with a Hillel staff member in the week following the workshop. Call them up and make a date to talk about their interests and how this workshop affected them.
- b. Encourage the students to come to another, similar workshop that is run with the same format.
- c. Invite other religious leaders in the campus community to join you for similar activities in the future. They make good partners for future events.
- d. Think about planning a retreat based on similar activities, later in the year.

- e. Encourage the students who participated this time to bring a friend to the next workshop, and to help organize and publicize.
- f. Involve your Jewish student board, and lay board, in activities of this type. Brainstorm ways to integrate pieces of these spiritual check-ups into regular Hillel events (personal *chevruta* at a Friday night dinner or other events, etc.)





# A SPIRITUAL CHECK-UP

## A "SEDER" FOR TU B'SHVAT ∞ STUDENTS' GUIDE ∞

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☞ *First Reader:*

☞ **Someone please volunteer to be our *First Reader*, thanks.**

## ☞ **GUIDELINES FOR THE READING OF THE BOOKLET**

We're having a "seder" tonight, for Tu B'Shvat, the Jewish New Year for the Trees. It's modeled on the *Haggadah* of the Passover Seder; the book that we use to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

Just like the *Haggadah*, this text will be read by the participants of the evening.

Guidelines for Readers:

1. Some people get nervous when they read aloud and end up reading very quickly. Try to read loudly and slowly.
2. Try to add a bit of life to what you're reading. Relax. Have some fun.
3. Please don't read ahead. The *Haggadah* works better when we're all on the same page.
4. Occasionally there will be "Instructions to the Reader" directions, don't be alarmed, enjoy it.

At the ☞ *Next Reader* sign, pick the next reader of your choice.

☞ *Next Reader*

## ☞ **GETTING STARTED**

*[Instructions to reader: raise the Seder plate with the fruits and recite:]*

Over 400 years ago, our forefathers in Tzfat (the Kabbalists), began celebrating Tu B'Shvat by eating of the fruits of the land. Various customs arose. Some groups ate from the 7 species of fruit and grain that are mentioned in the Torah (olives, grapes, wheat, barely, figs, dates, and pomegranates). Some ate 18 different types of fruit, symbolizing life (18 is the numerical value of the Hebrew word "*chai*", meaning "life"), some groups ate 30 different types of fruit, and some up to 100 different varieties.

*[Reader: Put down Seder plate]*

The goal of the Kabbalists was not simply to eat fruit. Rather, fruits of the land were the stimulus to get in touch with nature and learn about ourselves from the natural world. Tonight, we're going to going to take advantage of this holiday and its focus on fruits in order to reflect on ourselves.

☞ *Next Reader*

## FOCUS: OUR ROOTS

A tree grows in two directions at once: its trunk, branches and fruit are fully visible, striving upward. The roots are hidden from our eyes. But the health and beauty of tree that we see is really only possible because of what is concealed from our sight, what is underground. The health of the roots will determine the health of the whole tree.

We are also like trees, with our own roots, branches and fruit. Our branches, leaves and fruit are the achievements we have made, the way we reach upwards and outwards to the world. Our visible accomplishments.

Our roots are what tie us to our history, our family and our sense of who we are. Our roots nourish us and enable us to live and grow, though nobody may see them and at times, we too, may be unaware of them.

When we meet new people, they see our external selves, only who we are and what we do. According to the Kabbalah, to truly understand a person you have to meet their parents and their grandparents. Only when we see their roots, their past, do we begin to understand and appreciate who they are today.

*Instructions to Reader: ask everyone to draw on this page their own personal tree. What are your roots? What enabled you to become who you are? What people, ideas, or experiences that may be hidden from a person who met you today continue to nourish you and produce your fruits?*

*After 10 minutes ask a few people to share something that they have drawn.*

☞ *Next Reader*

**FOCUS: OUR NEW FRUITS**

Tonight, we celebrate the New Year of Trees.

We don't celebrate a New Year for vegetables. We don't celebrate a New Year for flowers or bushes. We don't even celebrate a new year for animals.

Why is this night different? What is so special about trees?

It is not just a night to eat fruit. Mystically, it is considered an opportune time to heal the whole world. It is a time to reflect on one of the basic failures of human relationships, and hopefully to fix it.

The original sin of the Garden of Eden happened through a tree. It is considered to be the paradigm of all human failure, the primal character flaw.

*[Instructions to Reader: ask participants what they think is the primary human character flaw, the "seed" of all other human failings.]*

Tonight, we will again interact with trees, hopefully learning from the mistake of Adam and Eve and learning a different approach to trees, nature, and our whole physical being.

What was their original sin? It wasn't simply eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil that God prohibited them to eat from. According to the Kabbalah, the eating was just the outcome of an earlier mistake.

According to our tradition, a tragic drama took place in the Garden of Eden. Adam & Eve were created on the sixth day of creation, on Friday, the eve of Shabbat. Together with the rest of creation, they were supposed to wait and look forward to the holiness of Shabbat. Especially regarding sexual relations, it is a special mitzvah to wait and have sexual relations on Friday night. Then our physical unity has an additional spiritual element to it. The holiness and unity of Shabbat enhances physical unity.

Adam and Eve were supposed to refrain from engaging in sexual relations until that Friday night. It was, after all, only a few hours.

The Torah doesn't explicitly relate what they did, but the Talmud fills in a few glaring absences in the story to give us a whole new understanding of what is the primary failure of human beings.

☞ *Next Reader*

Why did the snake all of a sudden begin talking to Eve? Why was the snake, in a sense, flirting with Eve? Where was Adam during this conversation?

States the Talmud:

“What inclination seized the snake? Because he saw Adam & Eve busily engaging in sexual relations, the snake began to desire her. And where was Adam during this conversation between Eve and the snake? Since they had engaged in “the way of the world,” he had become tired and fell asleep!”

We are familiar with the rest of the story. The snake persuades Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, she then convinces Adam to do likewise, and God punishes them by banishing them from the Garden of Eden. Paradise lost.

What is the message of this interpretation of the story? What, according to the Kabbalah, is the archetypal sin of human nature, which did and continually does cause human beings to lose their paradise? The behavior that potentially in every person brings a breakdown in human relationships?

The sin: impatience. Especially physical, sexual impatience.

### ☞ *Next Reader*

Adam & Eve couldn't wait for Shabbat. They couldn't control their sexual desires, and just hang on until Shabbat. And so everything broke down. This, according to our mystical tradition, is the root of all breakdowns. We're not supposed to repress our physical needs, but we need to control them. Impatience reflects that instead of us controlling our physical desires, they are controlling us.

And so what are we celebrating tonight? What can we learn from our relationship with fruit that may help us rectify this primal flaw?

The Torah states:

19:23 And when ye shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then ye shall count the fruit thereof as forbidden; three years shall it be as forbidden unto you; it shall not be eaten.

19:24 And in the fourth year all the fruit thereof shall be holy, for giving praise unto the Lord.

19:25 But in the fifth year may ye eat of the fruit thereof, that it may yield unto you more richly the increase thereof: I am the Lord your God.

According to Jewish tradition, we cannot simply pick a piece of fruit off a tree and wolf it down. First, we have to wait. It could be the most beautiful piece of fruit in the world – nevertheless, we just have to wait. And this waiting for the tree to mature, this controlling of our desires to simply pluck a piece of fruit off and eat it, reflects our control over our physical desires. It is understood to be a “*tikun*,” a fixing, of the original impatience of the Garden of Eden. It's a moment of patience. It's a moment of regaining paradise.

*Instructions to Reader: ask everyone to write a few sentences in response to the following questions:*

1. In general, notwithstanding very annoying situations, how would my life be different if I had more patience?
  
2. One thing that I could do to help me become more patient is:

*Instructions to Reader: ask a few people to share what they wrote.*

☞ *Next Reader*

**FOCUS: OUR FRUITS**

Fruits can teach us about ourselves.

When we enter the world of fruits, we quickly notice that not all fruits are created equal, or at least, equally. Some grow on the ground, we look downward to pick them; some grow high up on trees, sending our eyes and arms reaching toward the heavens. Some are tiny, needing a bunch of them to satisfy a person; some are large enough to satisfy a whole crowd at once. Some grow in clusters, little fruit communities; others are loners.

In this Tu B'Shvat seder, we will think about, and eat, four primary categories of fruit – each according to its degree of edibility. For some, I am able to eat every bit of the whole fruit. Some, I eat the fruit but discard the peel or shell. Some, I discard the pit or seed. And there are some that I cannot eat either the peel or the seed.

*Reader: please pick up an example of each fruit and demonstrate the four different kinds of fruit:*

	<b>Peel/Shell</b>	<b>Pit/Seed</b>	<b>Examples:</b>
1.	cannot eat	cannot eat	avocado, orange, watermelon
2.	can eat	cannot eat	grape, date, olive
3.	cannot eat	can eat	kiwi, pomegranate, pistachio
4.	can eat	can eat	fig, strawberry

These four levels of fruit serve as metaphors for four types of personalities.

The peel or shell is a metaphor for the walls that people may create to distance themselves from each other. A fruit with an inedible peel or shell represents an impenetrable personality, a person who has erected a formidable exterior that prevents others from really getting to know him or

her. An edible peel or shell reflects a personality who will permit others to approach the hidden chambers of his or her life.

The pit or seed is a metaphor for one's heart. A fruit with an inedible pit or shell represents a person with a "cold heart." This person may not have exterior walls (an inedible peel) and consequently may allow you to enter into his or her life, but will not reciprocate and try to enter yours.

A pit or seed which may be eaten reflects a warm or soft-hearted person, caring and interested in the lives of others. [Everybody sigh gently.]

### ☞ *Next Reader*

Thus, there are some people who neither allow others to get to know them, nor express concern or try to know others. According to our chart, this would be an "avocado-ish" kind of person. Others may want you to listen to them but do not reciprocate and express a similar concern for you ("grape-ish"). Some people listen to others and will always be there in times of need, but it is still very difficult to get to know them well ("ki-wish").

#### *Eating of the fruit*

*Start with an olive or a date.*

*Everyone should take an olive or date and recite: "Baruch Attah Adonai Elohenu Melech Ha'Olam Borei Pri Ha'Etz", "Blessed are You, Lord, Ruler of the Universe, who created the fruit of the tree". This blessing covers all the fruit you will eat next. Pass around the plate with the fruits so that everyone can try some.*

### ☞ *Next Reader:*

The fig represents the ideal fruit. Nothing discarded, nothing withheld. This too would be the ideal level of inter-personal relations. Someone who both talks and listens, capable of both giving and receiving. In short - "fig-ish."

*Instructions to Reader: ask everyone to turn to the person next to them and discuss the 4 questions for the next 15 minutes. These are the rules:*

- 1. no cynicism,*
- 2. sincere listening,*
- 3. no giving advice,*
- 4. confidentiality between the partners.*

### **4 Questions**

1. With which of these 4 categories of fruit do you identify? [Everyone should eat a fruit that typifies their category.]
2. How would you ideally like to be (regarding walls and pits)? What is holding you back from being like that?
3. Have you ever been in a group/community/society etc. that particularly enabled people to "lower their walls" and have "warm-hearts"?
4. How did they achieve this?

☞ *Next Reader*

## ☞ *Afikomen*

In Jewish practice, a New Year is a time for reflection. On Rosh HaShanah we examine our lives. Tu B'Shvat is a time to reconsider our relationship with nature, what our relationship is with nature, how we can learn and grow, both with others and spiritually, from the world around us.

*Instructions to Reader: Ask if anyone has any reflections on the evening.*

May we go forth from this Tu B'Shvat seder renewed, with new eyes and a new heart, to see the wonders of nature, with its trees of all kinds and shapes, and its fruit of all kinds, shapes and colors.

May we appreciate and deepen our roots, let down our walls and open our hearts, and with great patience relate to the people and world around us.

## Appendix

The importance of the date of Tu B'Shvat (the 15<sup>th</sup> day in the month of Shvat), is first mentioned in Jewish sources over 1,800 years ago.

This date marks a turning-point in the year. It is the date by which, in the Land of Israel, most of the rains have already fallen. The gentleness of spring is beginning to emerge from the harshness of winter. The cold frost of winter is fading, the natural world is reawakening and its first signs of life are appearing. The trees are beginning to blossom.

According to the laws of *tzedakah* (Jewish laws of charity), Jews only truly assume ownership of their possessions after they give away 10% to the needy. The same applies to the fruit too. Before a farmer can begin to enjoy the harvest, a portion of all the produce must be donated to those who do not possess land. The amount of this "fruit *tzedakah*" is known as the 'tithe' (10%). Tu B'Shvat marks the date according to which year all fruit grown in the land of Israel would be "tithed." Any fruit which began to ripen before Tu B'Shvat is considered to belong to the previous year, any fruit which will ripen henceforth is regarded as part of the upcoming year. Ever since then, Tu B'Shvat has been known as the New Year of Trees.