# Advice and a shoppping list for your Tu Bishvat seder:

Tu Bishvat--the New Year of the Trees--is a time when Kabbalists pray and meditate to bring blessings to all the fruit trees, and to repair the Tree of Life itself, which is the system of the Sefirot, the ten qualities through which God created or emanated the world and which continue to animate the world. They recited prayers and passages over fruit--as many as thirty different kinds or more--in what we call a Tu Bish'vat seder.

The seder itself travels through the four worlds of Cordoveran Kabbalah, from the most material to the most spiritual, in this order: Asiyah (doing, making), Yetsirah (creativity), Briyah (divine creation), Atsilut (divine emanation).

Each level or world has a color of wine and a kind of fruit associated with it. The order is: fruit with a hard shell and white wine, fruit with an unswallowable pit or pits and white wine with a drop of red, fruit with seeds that can be swallowed and skin that can be eaten and wine that is half red and half white, and for the fourth level of Atsilut, fragrant plants to smell and red wine with a drop of white.

The Tree of Life for us means something new as well: the evolutionary tree that represents our relationship to every other living creature on the planet. Acknowledging these relationships is more important now than ever, when humanity is "pruning" the Tree of Life, extinguishing species, and unraveling the weave of Life that sustains planet Earth. We truly need to pray and act for the repairing the Tree of Life--not just for next year's fruit crop, or for mystical blessings, but also for all living species.

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## Interpreting the levels:

Often Kabbalah sees the world as divided between klipot, shards or shells, and n'tsotsot, sparks. Sometimes the klipot are thought of as protecting the sparks, and sometimes they are seen as threatening the sparks. The shells and pits of the fruit represent the klipot, since they cannot be eaten. That's the basic reaons for the levels of fruit in the Tu Bishvat seder.

There are many interpretation of the levels that are not specifically Kabbalistic, however. The common interpretation of the first three levels I've heard is that they represent psychological types: the person who is well-defended on the outside and may have trouble being vulnerable, the person who seems emotionally open but has a core that is invulnerable and unshared, the person who is open on a social level and also on a deeper level. The fourth type would I suppose be someone who is truly enlightened.

Another interpretaion is that the four levels represent the four seasons. This can work -- but the actual intention of the original Tu Bishvat seder is to move from winter to spring, with the final cup of wine, the cup that is all red, being drunk at the Passover seder when spring has arrived.

But the simple and actual scientific meaning of the levels of fruit is that each level represents a level of symbiosis with us. As we move through the four worlds, from one kind of fruit to the next, we reach greater and greater symbiosis with what we are eating. At the first level, when we eat nuts with a shell, the nut is the seed itself, and when we to feed ourselves we destroy the seed. At the second level, fruit with a pit, the pit is something we can't eat but also don't destroy. We can enjoy the fruit and still plant the seed. The tree, you could say, wants us to eat the fruit. At the third level, the fruit that is wholly edible is the one where we can swallow the seeds and they can pass through us and afterwards germinate in the ground. We can nurture the seed even as we eat it.

In actuality, humans have the potential to have the kind of relationship with every other species where we nurture each other, and also the potential to have the kind of relationship where we destroy a species by using it, as we have done too many times.

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# What to include at a seder -- shopping lists and ideas:

Below are instructions and shopping lists for a seder that celebrates the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, and additional instructions for a seder that celebrates both Trees of Life together.  
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## Here are some things people can be asked or invited to bring if you want contributions:

\* a fruit you haven't tasted since the fall.  
\* an object you found in Nature that was not shaped by human hands.

as we move through the four worlds, from one kind of "fruit" to the next, we reach greater and greater symbiosis. At the first level, when we eat nuts with a shell, we are destroying the seed that needs to be planted in order to feed ourselves. At the second level, fruit with a pit, we are eating the fruit and discarding the seed, so we cannot pass the seed through our bodies. At the third level, wholly edible fruit, meaning fruit with seeds small enough to swallow, we are in complete symbiosis, and we can pass the seed through our digestive tract to fertilize and nourish it.\* a story about an environmental project or place in the natural world that you care about, or about the local ecosystem where the seder is taking place.

\* information about actions, activism, local or global, related to protecting the Earth, lessening climate disruption, and living rightly upon the land.

\* a poem, song or story about trees.

\* any Torah teaching about trees and Nature-related subjects

If people are bringing Torah, songs, stories and actions, I like to explain the three levels of the seder and invite people to decide where their contribution fits into the seder. Then as we go through the seder I invite people at each level to share their contribution.

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Here's an annotated shopping list for Tu Bishvat. Fruits that are especially important (e.g. because they are mentioned in the Bible) are starred. It may be hard to find real carob, but you can use carob energy squares. I sometimes leave out particular nuts (e.g. walnuts) or even all tree nuts if anyone is allergic.   
  
Try to find about 5 of each category of fruit corresponding to the three levels. The kabbalists in Eretz Yisrael used ten kinds of fruit to represent the sefirot at each of the first three levels, for a total of 30 fruits. I also like to get one of everything I can find. I have also done super-abbreviated seders (for example in the hospital) with just pistachios, apricots and raisins, that is, one fruit for each level. You can sometimes find everything you need in one packet of trail mix.

It works to have extra fruit of a few kinds for people to munch on, like apples, oranges, grapes, olives, dried apricots, and cashews. The rest of the fruit can be just enough for everyone to taste. That means a large enough box of blueberries, a pomelo divided up in quarter segments, and such. It helps to have most of the fruit cut up into bites and on platters, with the fruits for each world on their own platter -- that might mean six platters. If possible (i.e., if there's enough room on the platter and enough fruit to go around) have a whole version of the fruit on the platter too, or perhaps a separate plate with one whole piece of each fruit. This would include a few nuts in the shell.

It is also good to have any kind of new fruit, whether it's just something that has not been tasted yet this season by one person at the seder (so we can say shehechiyanu) or whether it's completely new and exotic, so a little bit of anything weird (i.e. ugli, star), is good. (If that fruit is a star fruit -- remember that they need to look pretty beat up and completely yellow with some brown before they taste good). When I lead a seder, I invite the people for whom that fruit is new to lead the blessing for fruit and say shehechiyanu.  
  
Here are the three levels of fruit plus a fourth level for sweet smells that we use at a Tu Bishvat seder. (Note: I put citrus in the third level, since the peel is definitely edible and not meant to keep creatures from eating the fruit inside.)

Level 1) Fruit with tough outer shells: Pomegranates\*, almonds\*, coconuts, walnuts\*, pecans, pistachios and other nuts, cashews, lychee, etc. Most of these may be pre-shelled, but have at least one variety in the shell (pistachios might be a good choice since they don't need a nutcracker). Often it's enough for the different kinds of nuts to get two or three packages of mixed nuts. If you can, prepare a coconut (and save the coconut water to drink with this level or at the end with the fourth cup of the seder). These represent the first world of Asiyah, making or doing.

Level 2) Fruit with inedible pits: Olives\*, dates\*, plums, apricots, peaches, avocado, cherries etc. These represent the second world of Yetsirah, creating on the artistic/human level.  
  
Level 3) Fruit without shells, or with edible skins and seeds that can be swallowed, so the entire fruit can be eaten: Figs\*, grapes\* (and raisins), carob\*, pears, apples\*, kumquats, oranges, grapefruit, kiwi, blueberries, cashews, etrog (perhaps etrog jelly), Meyer lemons, etc. They represent the third world of Briyah, creating on the divine level.

Level 4) For the fourth level, use things with good smells like the following: rosemary, cedar, eucalyptus, bay leaves, sage, preferably on their branches. Cinammon, cloves, etc. might be readily available in the kitchen. These represent the fourth world of Atsilut, emanation - pure being in direct connection with the divine.

It's also good to have some crackers and/or cookies for people to nosh, and to have some at the end for everyone. Having one challah to share around might be enough. There is a custom in some seders to eat these kinds of things at the end, representing entering the land.  
  
For drinks, you need white and purple/red grape juice and white and red wine. Because the first three levels use more white grape juice or wine, it's good to have about 2/3 or 3/4 of what you buy be white. The wine need not be the main thing we use for the four cups -- it's enough to have one bottle. But if you can have more than one, make sure that includes one white and one red.

It's also nice to have something that is better quality than Manischevitz to move up to between the second and the third cup or the third and the fourth cup (that would often mean a nicer red wine), so that you can say the special blessing for changing from one drink to a nicer drink. There is a fancy grape juice made by Glendale Farm which can fit this bill.

The highest level in this category of nicer drinks might be a single-malt scotch, the flavor of which can be described as "essence of oak tree", to drink after the fourth cup. Maple syrup, truly essence of tree, also fits into this role in the Seder. I sometimes like to have it as an option for the fourth cup along with scotch or as something to drink for a fifth cup. (I use very small cups for both.)

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## Here are some ideas for an evolutionary tree of life seder:

In addition to these standard items for a seder, you can include some items that specifically relate to the other kingdoms of life: real pickles (two jars of a brand like Real Pickles or Batampte should be enough -- you can tell they're real by checking the ingredients -- real pickles don't have added vinegar), representing bacteria. Also raw cider vinegar. Anything that is produced using fermentation can be used to represent the invisible kingdoms of life -- for example, olives, chocolate or coffee.

Wine and bread can represent fungi (yeast), along with a variety of mushrooms -- some of the rarer mushrooms make beautiful displays. Peanuts are not tree fruit of course, or fruit at all. However, they can represent mycorrhizal symbionts.

One possibility for representing protists is seaweed, and a few packages of seaweed should be enough for everyone to have a bite. The snacking kind would work fine, and having extra for people to munch on is great.

For animal, any dairy works -- cheese might be a good choice. If you get cheese, try including one variety that is goat or sheep. I would say one soft cheese and one hard/sharp cheese -- maybe chevre, brie and cheddar. But serving it is easier if it's all hard cheese. Another possibility is sweet yogurt for dipping fruit into, and that would also be work for representing bacteria.

Also if you want a fifth cup to represent the five kingdoms (bacteria/archaea, protists, plants, fungi, animals), you might use water, so there could be pitchers of water as well as the grape juice and the wine.

Lastly, if you want to represent the medieval kingdoms of mineral, vegetable and animal, you can use a good salt (i.e. some kind of sea salt or red/pink unrefined salt in crystals) which you can grind up at the Seder, to represent the mineral kingdom.