

TU BISHVAT - HISTORY

The new year for trees in Israel's 70th year



Children get close to the land on Tu Bishvat, 2005. (Photos: Joe Malcolm)

• By DAVID GEFFEN

Tu Bishvat has a beauty of its own – a time when we continue to ensure that our land will grow and develop through afforestation. What most people are unaware of is that the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund uses the money collected to purchase land and develop the land for settlement. Where the JNF goes, the Jewish people follows.

When Theodor Herzl made his first and only visit to the homeland of his

people in November 1898, planting a cypress tree in Motza just outside Jerusalem was a dramatic highlight that captured his imagination. He described it in his diary.

Herzl had come to Eretz Yisrael hoping to meet German Kaiser Wilhelm, who was also in the Holy Land. Visiting various parts of the country, Herzl traveled from the coastal settlements of Mikve Israel and Rishon Lezion toward Jerusalem. His entourage stopped at a small community named Motza. He and those traveling with him entered the village to

a warm welcome and reception. When the sun started to set, Herzl looked out at the land of Judea and saw “a variety of lights of brilliant colors reflected upon its hills.” He knew that he had to plant a tree here so he climbed the hill and placed a young cypress tree in the earth.

That tree grew quite quickly, according to author Larry Domnitch. “Six years later, it stood tall and statuesque signifying to the settlers the Jewish people’s return to Zion.”

Some 11 years after Herzl’s trip, Henrietta Szold and her mother visited Eretz Yisrael. Pragmatist that she was, Szold immediately began to see the possibilities of our homeland reborn. In her comprehensive article on the four-month trip published in the American Jewish Yearbook, she described the Tu Bishvat celebration that she witnessed.

“There was the future in the processions of school children, on whose breath the world stands, as they wend their way singing to Motza, on *Hamisha Asar be-Shevat* [Tu Bishvat], the Palestinian children’s Arbor Day.” She captured their joy “as they placed the tiny seedlings into the soil, watering them carefully and hopeful that they would grow into tall trees pushing their way against the sky.”

Interestingly, even though she had never visited the American West, she compared the Jewish homeland to a fast-developing American state. “Palestine has the conditions and the opportunities of California. The soils in various parts of our homeland are adaptable for all sorts of growth.” She stressed that the “success of the reforestation work already underway may well offset the dearth of wood in the country.”

Almost 10 years later, in 1928, an artistic depiction of children planting on Tu Bishvat in the vicinity of Jerusalem underscored the meaning of the holiday. Zeev Raban, a leading member of the faculty of the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem, drew a series of pictures capturing the celebration of all the Jewish festivals in Eretz Yisrael itself. They appeared in *Hageinu* (Our Festivals), published in New York under the sponsorship of the well-known Jewish educator Zvi Scharfstein.

In the series of books commissioned and issued by Scharfstein, he called upon a group of artists, Raban being one of them, to provide illustrations of the modern Jew of the 1920s. His goal, which



Zeev Raban, a leading faculty member of the Bezalel School of Art, drew a series of pictures depicting the celebration of Jewish festivals in Eretz Yisrael itself (with the Tu Bishvat depiction here). (Avie Geffen)

was fulfilled well, was to show the world the “Jewish home” in Palestine.

Illustrated by Raban, the book depicted the celebration of the Jewish holidays and Shabbat in various locales in the Jewish homeland. Yom Kippur, for example, was being observed in the Istanbul synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem. On Shavuot, there is a procession of children from all the various groups – Yemenite to Ashkenazim – carrying the bouquets of flowers. The Lag Ba’omer observance was depicted on the shores of the Kinneret. Shabbat can be experienced as the mother lights the candles as her children encircle her.

Trained in Europe, Raban joined the Bezalel faculty in 1912 at the invitation of the director, Boris Schatz. In that pre-World War I period, he experienced the spirit of growth of the land as a result of the initial waves of aliya. Even though the draconian rule of the Ottoman Turks was restrictive, the Jews in Palestine at that time laid the foundation of the cultural renaissance that flourished in the Mandate period.

Once the British took over, with Sir Herbert Samuel as the first High Commissioner, the 1920s became a time of growth in the Jewish homeland. Dr. Batsheva Goldman-Ida, curator of the exhibition of Raban’s works, describes what the artist was doing.

“The body of his work took form parallel to the historic events [leading to the establishment of the state]. His is not the work of a hermit or a recluse; on the contrary, Raban was a propagandist... actively involved in creating the ethos of the emerging country. His artistic motifs were to become those of a majority Jewish culture.”

Through the colorful Raban drawing of children planting with the Tower of David in the background, we observe the delight of the 1920s on this soil. The boys are wearing their pith helmets to protect them from the sun. Their spiffy

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ties create a most fashionable outfit. Their dress is similar to that of the first Jewish Palestine Guides, those important pioneering figures. In Raban's noted tourism poster of the 1920s, the guide is also dressed in his helmet, his white suit and tie.

The poem in Hebrew facing the illustration has a rhythm appropriate to Tu Bishvat, the New Year of the Trees, 90 years ago.

To the field! To the field! In pairs we go out together!

Each of us with tool in hand, A miniature gardener.

Let us go out - let us go out Into the field, let us move!

This year, as we watch young and old marching out to plant and to make the soil blossom and bloom, we can again be inspired by our own Tu Bishvat, a date on which we plant for the future as others have done before us. No matter how difficult it may be, *hazorim bedim'a berina yiktzoru*: "we will reap in joy."

As Tu Bishvat approached in January 1948, a countdown had started when the State of the Jewish People would be declared as defined by the UN Partition Plan passed on November 29, 1947. A Pittsburgh rabbi, Avraham Silverstone, in an article for the local Anglo-Jewish paper, chose to capture the fervor of those heady days through the spirit of Tu Bishvat - the "old-new holiday" as he labeled it.

"Where there is life, there is hope for new strength," he began. "The festival that has survived the hostile interference of men and nature, just like Am Yisrael's steadfastness through the centuries, has been revived and brings us renewal once again."

In his article, Silverstone shared with his readers the description of a Tu Bishvat observed in Yesud Hama'ala in 1884. Located in the Hula Valley, the settlement was founded by 12 families from Poland.

A diary entry quoted by Silverstone, captured the essence of the celebration.

"Last week, we planted a grove of 1,500 trees." Then a specific count was listed. "There were 708 etrogs, 100 pomegranates, 400 figs and mulberries. And we shall plant with God's will other types of trees. For aside from large profits from the fruits, with which God's help we will be successful, we shall also need good health, for humans are one with the trees of the fields and without them, we do not have a good life."

Nearly 135 years later, Israel has a multitude of forests to ensure that the country is and will always be green. Rabbi Hyman Friedman, associate rabbi and principal of the Hebrew school of Shearith Israel synagogue in Atlanta, was my rabbi when I returned to that city following the five years I had lived in army bases in World War II.

He taught us the song "Atzei zeitim omdim" ("Olive Trees Are Standing"). Even though we would not be here to plant, we were reminded how the fruit of Eretz Yisrael would taste - even though the carob seed pods they gave us had were fairly difficult to chew.

"Boys and girls, the Jewish people has been dreaming for 2,000 years to return to Eretz Yisrael. The countries of the world feel guilty about what they did to us. Maybe those countries all over the world will give us a chance. Then together we sang with great enthusiasm, "Am Yisrael Hai."



'The festival that has survived the hostile interference of men and nature, just like Am Yisrael's steadfastness through the centuries, has been revived and brings us renewal once again.'