



SHVAT



Herbert Bearman Campus
Jewish Museum
of Maryland
An agency of The Associated

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This is the seventh edition of a monthly zine by the Jewish Museum of Maryland. In each issue, we share content about the holidays, rituals, and ideas related to each month in the Jewish calendar.

This month we're discussing Shvat, the mystical roots of the holiday of Tu B'Shvat, and the white oak, Maryland's state tree.

You can pick up physical copies of the zine in the Lombard and Lloyd Library. Lombard and Lloyd Library is located on the grassy corner of the JMM campus at the intersection of Lombard and Lloyd Streets. We hope to provide space for people at the JMM and beyond to share their thoughts and creations as they relate to where we are in the Hebrew calendar.



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More recent scholarship has challenged the idea that Hemdat Yamim was written by Sabbateans. But for many years, this form of celebrating Tu B'Shvat was seen as heretical by many rabbis, who saw it as a covert way of keeping faith in the Sabbatai Tsevi alive.

Today, Tu B'Shvat is celebrated around the world as both a religious and an ecological holiday honoring trees while reflecting on the role that humans have in both harming and healing the natural world.



Kabbalists developed Tu B'Shvat seders. These were meals where they ate and drank foods and wines symbolizing kabbalistic concepts. The meal was seen as a tikkun, or a ritual of repair, renewal, and healing that helps mend both our personal brokenness and the brokenness of the universe.

The modern concept of tikkun olam, which holds that it is humanity's responsibility to "heal the world," was a 20th-century evolution of this idea.

One of the earliest mentions of a Tu B'Shvat seder in print was in Hemdat Yamim, a kabbalistic anthology about Jewish holidays and customs that was published in Smyrna (now İzmir, Turkey) in the 1730s.

Many people believed at the time and for many years following that the book was written by Sabbateans, followers of the Jewish-turned-Muslim messianic figure Sabbatai Tsevi (1626-1676). Some even believed that Nathan of Gaza (1643-1680), one of the most significant Sabbatean prophets and theologians, was the author.

In the northern hemisphere, Shvat occurs during winter. Trees are bare, leaving behind elegant silhouettes of their impressive trunks.

Mushrooms grow on fallen logs every time it rains. Frost and icicles form in the early mornings. Shvat is a time for resting and introspection.

The full moon on the night of January 24 marks the start of Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of the Trees. Tu B'Shvat is a holiday that encourages us to reflect on our relationship with the natural world and with trees in particular. Trees are a symbol throughout Jewish tradition, in rabbinic text, folklore, healing practices, and liturgy.

GET TO KNOW THE MARYLAND STATE TREE: WHITE OAK (QUERCUS ALBA)



Wye Oak, September 1929

In 1941, Maryland designated the White Oak, *Quercus alba*, as the state tree in honor of a famous White Oak tree, named Wye Oak, which was located in Wye Mills, Maryland.

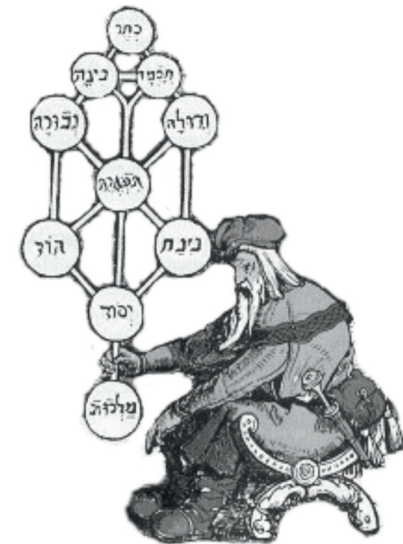
Estimated to be nearly 500 years old, Wye Oak was the largest white oak tree on record in the nation. The tree had a trunk circumference of 32 feet.

Unfortunately, this historic tree was destroyed in a storm in 2002.

Tu B'Shvat was an important holiday for 16th-century kabbalists living in Safed, especially for the students and followers of Rabbi Isaac Luria, also known as the Ari (1534-1572).

They saw divine and mystical secrets in trees and used Tu B'Shvat as a way to deepen their understanding of the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life can simultaneously be understood as a tree in the mythical Garden of Eden, a Kabbalistic concept that visually represents how G-d, humans, and existence function, and the Torah itself.



Wood engraving by Hans Burgkmair of a kabbalist holding a Tree of Life, a visual representation of the Ten Sefirot.

MYSTICAL ROOTS OF TU B'SHVAT

Tu B'Shvat is the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Shvat. It is known as the New Year of Trees, one of four New Year celebrations in the Hebrew calendar.

The holiday has ancient roots. Ancient Israelites were required to tithe part of their trees' produce to support the religious and political functions of the Levites in the Temple. Tu B'Shvat started as a way to track that tithing in time.

Tu B'Shvat later became a religious holiday when the Talmud established it as a way to mark how old trees were in order to fulfill the commandment about not eating the harvest from the first several years of a tree's life.

It may seem like an odd time to celebrate trees since, in the northern hemisphere, we are deep into winter. In Maryland, many of our trees are leafless and covered in snow. But the Talmud explains that, despite the fact that there are still many cold days ahead, the sap of fruit trees is beginning to rise. A new cycle of life and growth begins within trees even when they appear dormant.

One way you can identify white oak trees is by looking at their leaves, which are simple and arranged alternately.

They have 7 to 9 rounded lobes without bristle tips.

The leaves have a dull green color and pale green undersides



White oak trees provide excellent habitats for bats. The bats roost under the flakes of bark on the white oak trunks.

The white oak tree gets its name for its whitish bark and grey twigs.

The bark is known for separating into small scaly plates.



White oak trees produce acorns, and various parts of the tree are eaten by birds, rodents, and deer.

White oak acorns have a narrow oblong shape, and are light brown or dark brown in color, with few to no red tones.

