

There are four new years in the Jewish calendar, according to the Talmud in Masechet Rosh Hashanah. Most of us are familiar with Rosh Hashanah, the New Year that falls on the first of the month of Tishrei. That's when the year changes, as it did this year from 5775 to 5776. The other new years are on the 15th of Shvat, also known as Tu B'Shvat; the first of Nisan and the first of Elul.

Since various kinds of produce and livestock were taxed in ancient times, each New Year was originally a fiscal year for something different – the first of Elul for cattle, Rosh Hashanah for monetary debts, the first of Nisan for vows, and Tu B'Shvat for tree fruit. It's kind of amazing that a religious ritual has its origins in such a quotidian practice.

That spunky little holiday has evolved with the sentiments of the time almost more than any of our other practices. Tu B'Shvat will fall this year on January 24th and 25th, and we will celebrate it with a contemplative service and family-friendly potluck dinner and seder. The meditative seder was an innovation of the 16th century Kabbalists, mystics living in the city of Safed in northern Israel, who used most Jewish teachings and practices as prompts for internal spiritual work.

The practice of planting a tree on Tu B'Shvat, which you might think went back centuries, actually came into vogue with the modern Zionist movement. It accomplished two goals. One was affirm a reconnection to the land for Jews who had been a diaspora people for so long. Of course, it was also part of the effort to "make the desert bloom".

Finally, since the first secular "Earth Day" in 1970, Tu B'Shvat has morphed into a Jewish Earth Day, a time to focus on the environment.

Fiscal, spiritual, physical or environmental – you might ask, "Which is the 'real' Tu B'Shvat?" But of course, the right answer is "all of them." We do spiritual work, plant trees and celebrate the environment because each generation has added its own layer of meaning onto this day, and we get to inherit all of it, and make it our own. I hope you will join us this year, and see what new practices and meanings we can create together.