

## Tu BiShevat

Tu BiShvat appears in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 2a) as one of the four “new years” in the Jewish calendar, “*Bet Hillel says that the new year for the trees is the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shevat.*” Today, people celebrate by eating a variety of fruit. Kabbalists have established a Tu BiShevat seder, and customs abound. One group from Hungary eats 15 unique types of fruit and say a chapter of “Shir HaMaalot” from Psalms before each fruit.

### Connection to the Bene Israel

For the Bene Israel in India, Tu BiShevat has a special significance. For them it is the day of ascension of Elijah the Prophet to heaven and is called the *Malida*.

Discussing the Bene Israel connection to the Tu BiShvat can be incorporated in teachings on Jewish holidays, Tanakh discussions on Elijah the Prophet, and even philosophy and *hashkafa* lessons!

### Background

The Bene Israelis are mainly concentrated in Mumbai. Tradition tells us that their ancestors escaped King Antiochus’ reign of the Land of Israel by sea in 175 BCE. They were shipwrecked and their survivors were washed ashore the Konkan Coast, south of Mumbai. They lived there quite detached from the rest of the Jewish people and only became aware of the Talmud in later years. It was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Cochin’s Jews (in south India) taught the Bene Israel Jewish liturgy and forms of worship.

The Bene Israel spoke (those who were born in Mumbai still do speak) Marathi as their mother tongue, one of the main dialects in Western India. They built a flourishing Judaism in Mumbai, building ornate synagogues, publishing informative periodicals on Jewish custom and law, and they translated core books from the Jewish canon into Marathi. Like the Beta Israel in Ethiopia, Mumbai’s Bene Israel were subject to British missionaries, who taught many Bene Israelis Hebrew, and then employed them to teach in their schools. Very few actually ended up converting to Christianity, since it was very clear, despite all the benefits to this relationship, the missionaries’ messianic message to accept Jesus was against their beliefs.

Tu BiShevat occupies a special place in Bene Israeli tradition. It is on Tu BiShevat, or the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, that they date the shipwreck of seven Jewish men and seven Jewish women off the Indian coast. Those shipwrecked are said to have prayed to Eliyahu HaNavi to save their lives and tradition implies that he answered their prayers.

Based on the story from Kings II 2:11 of Eliyahu ascending in his chariot to heaven, the Bene Israel hold that Elijah ascended to heaven from Khandalla in the Konkan region of India. It may indeed be tied to Elijah’s connection to those original Jews who were shipwrecked there in 175 BCE. In that spot there is a site in which it appears there are hoofprints and a chariot’s wheel indented into the hard earth. This became a pilgrimage site for Hindus and Indian Muslims, as well as Jews.

The Bene Israel continue to express their gratitude through a special ceremony on Tu BiShvat called *malida*, which in Persian means “confection,” and it includes a series of prayers to Eliyahu HaNabbi and other ancestors. Eliyahu is seen as a communal protector who guards over every *simcha*, warding off bad fate or the evil eye, much as other communities have a tradition of Eliyahu visiting at different times, at the Passover seder, or even “spotted” in miraculous settings.

The ceremony is rich with references of the prophet. A notable male at the *malida* ceremony leads chants and those present repeat the *Shema* and the words “Eliyahu Hannabi” close to a dozen times. The leader then makes the blessing over a cup of wine and either he or other participants pick up pieces of fruit and make a blessing on them out loud. The ceremony continues with the *malida* spread presented on a round plate. The dish contains pressed rice and sugar with grated coconut (some hold that it is shaped like Mt. Sinai) and adorned with five types of fruit.

Today, Beer Sheba has the largest population of Bene Israel Jews in Israel, seconded by Ramla, and the *malida* ceremonies are still performed. In 2020, Indian-Israeli activists - the new generation, children and grandchildren of immigrants who are fighting for more formal recognition of their unique ancestral history - were able to bring an explanation about the *malida* ceremony into the Israeli school curriculum. They also rallied Jews around the world to participate in the *malida* ceremony on February 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, calling upon all the celebrators to upload videos and photos on Facebook under #Malida2020.

#### Additional Resources

Explore the liturgy and traditions of the Spanish- Portuguese community for Tu BiShevat: <https://youtu.be/GdTp4lekBwQ?si=bbfA8wgsEghOoyND>

An educational video fitting for classroom use: [https://youtu.be/W39Fbe2-1Kk?si=uy\\_jSaOP-Daxnhpf](https://youtu.be/W39Fbe2-1Kk?si=uy_jSaOP-Daxnhpf)



