

# 9. Miscellaneous Holy Days and Observances

## ***Tu B'Shevat - (Shevat 15)***

The new year for trees. It is customary to partake of a new fruit (one which has not been consumed in the previous year and traditionally, one of the fruits for which the Holy Land is noted, e.g., dates, figs, pomegranates, grapes, or carobs) and to recite the “*Shehecheyanu*” blessing (“Blessed are you, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion.”). C.J.L. ch. 59 §14.

## ***The Spiritual Significance of Tu B'Shevat***

There are many important and relevant lessons that the Jewish tradition learns from the tree. The Torah states: “For man is as the tree of the field” (Deuteronomy 20:19).



Among the various commentaries on this verse, there are those that interpret these words to mean that there are direct parallels to be made between the nature of man and that of the tree:

1) The (concealed) roots, whose function is to support the tree and enable it to resist all kinds of inclement weather. The roots act as the foundation without which the tree would collapse. They also provide the tree with its main source of nourishment from the elements of the soil.

2) The (revealed) body of the tree, which encompasses the trunk, branches and leaves — the major bulk of the tree. When the word “tree” is mentioned, the trunk comes to mind. It is where growth takes place and where age is discerned through the number of rings, and so forth.

3) The fruits are the products of the tree, and its ultimate purpose. It is for them that one initially plants a (fruit) tree. Within the fruit, moreover, the seed for reproduction is found.

Each of these components possesses certain qualities that the other does not. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that each one is needed to complete the tree.

These components are also found in the “tree” that is Mankind:

1) The root: The spiritual root of the Jew is the intrinsic connection that penetrates to his very essence.



To such a degree that it is likened to the connection binding a child and parent: "Children are you to Hashem, your G-d" (Deuteronomy 14:01). This connection transcends reason and therefore finds expression through "emunah" (faith), which transcends logic and reason.

This essential connection and attachment provides the soul with spiritual nourishment, constituting the essence of one's spiritual structure. Without a foundation to hold it up, the edifice, no matter how strong, stands the chance of collapsing under pressure. Much as the tree's roots are hidden deep in the earth, this deep attachment and faith are sometimes concealed deep within the recesses of one's heart. Appearances can be deceiving: a tree weak in appearance can, in fact, rest on wholesome deep roots, while a solid-looking tree may rest on very weak roots and be in danger of collapsing.

2) The body: The aspect of a person's life that corresponds to the body of the tree (trunk, branches, and leaves) is the revealed and complex structure of daily Torah and Mitzvot observance. This activity constitutes the bulk of a person's efforts at self development and self growth. And just as the tree's rings reveal its age, so do people's development in the area of Torah and Mitzvot reflect the extent to which they have grown from year to year, from month to month, and even from day to day. It is this gradual spiritual development that defines the true age of a person. As the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi



Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, once said, "One's age is not determined by the date of birth written on one's passport."

In addition to the various details of the tree, including its numerous leaves (which correspond to the many details of Torah and Mitzvot observance), there is also the tree's overall element of beauty, which is conveyed by the sum total of all its parts. Similarly, the Jew who strives and labors in Torah and Mitzvot not only accumulates "ring upon ring" of individual spiritual achievement, but also develops an overall elevation, and an encompassing spiritual beauty.

3) Fruits: The "fruits" of man are the results of the beneficial influence he exerts on his environment, wherewith he also illuminates the path of others, showing them their true calling and mission in life. This activates a chain reaction whereby those he influences will, in turn, influence others, thus creating "fruits of fruits." It is, furthermore, in the fruit that the seed for the next generation is located.

When can one generation of trees expect to reproduce a next generation that is as solid and staunch as the preceding one? How can continuity and perpetuity be assured? Only when the preceding generation is not only concerned about its own development and its own beauty, but also has "fruits." Only an attitude oriented to the "fruits" of the future holds within itself the seed of future salvation.



## ***Sefirat Ha'Omer*** ***(The Counting*** ***of the Omer)***

Also known simply as The “Omer”, this 49-day period between Passover and Shavuot is defined by the Torah as the period to bring special offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem, to make physical the spiritual connection between Passover and Shavuot. *See generally* Leviticus 23:15. Passover marks the Jews’ liberation as they left Egypt, and Shavuot marks the receiving of the Torah. The counting begins the second night of Passover. *See generally* C.J.L. ch. 120.

The Sefirah is a time of sadness. Because approximately 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva died in a plague during thirty-three of these days, Jews traditionally observe certain rites of mourning during this period, music is not played or listen to, no marriages are permitted and no shaves or haircuts are taken. C.J.L. ch. 120 §6.

There is a divergence of customs as to which period of mourning is observed. Some communities observe the first 33 days of the Omer. Others observe the period from the first day of the month of Iyar. Those who observe the latter period of mourning nevertheless take haircuts on the day before the holiday so as not to usher in the festival in an untidy appearance. *See* C.J.L. ch. 103 §2; 120 §7.



Some traditions observe both periods, thus fulfilling the requirements of both.

### ***“Lag Ba’Omer”***

Under either custom, the thirty-third day of the Omer is observed as a special holiday (work is permitted) celebrating the end of the plague and commemorating the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar, the central text of the Kabbalah. Haircutting is permitted that day and festivities such as weddings may be celebrated.



## ***The “Three Weeks”***

Because the catastrophe of the destruction of the Temple began on the seventeenth of Tammuz, it is customary to observe some rules of mourning from that day until the ninth of Av (a period of three weeks). C.J.L. ch. 122 §1.

Shaving, taking haircuts and listening to music are prohibited during the entire three-week period. C.J.L. ch. 122 §§1-8.

During the last nine days of this period (between the 1st and 9th of Av), observant Jews do not drink wine or eat meat at all (except on the Sabbath or certain special occasions, *e.g.*, feasts celebrating circumcision or the completion of study of a Talmudic tractate). *Id.* §8. For those who request it, reasonable accommodation may be made by making tuna fish or other non-meat products available during that nine-day period.

During that same nine-day period, observant Jews do not launder their old clothes, not even a garment that one does not intend to wear until after the fast day of the Ninth of Av. C.J.L. ch. 122 §9.



## ***The Weekly Reading of “Ethics of Our Fathers”***

One of the six chapters of the “Pirke Avot” (commonly translated as “Ethics of Our Fathers”) traditionally is studied on each of the six Sabbaths between Passover and Shavuot. This rich collection of aphorisms from the Mishna focuses on ethical conduct, and may be found in any Jewish prayer book after the Sabbath afternoon service. In many communities, this weekly cycle of readings is repeated every Sabbath throughout the summer until Rosh Hashanah.





# 10. Life Cycle Events

Jewish law contains a host of religious laws governing major life cycle events such as births and deaths. For example, fathers have a host of religiously-mandated obligations to perform certain rituals upon the birth of a son.

Upon the death of certain relatives, Jews are obligated to follow certain religiously-mandated practices with respect to mourning.

In every case, institutional staff would be well advised to communicate with a qualified Rabbi to discuss issues surrounding life-cycle observances.



## ***Religious Rituals Surrounding Birth***

Fathers, in particular, have a host of religiously-mandated obligations with respect to certain rituals to be performed upon the birth of a son.

### ***If the newborn is a boy***

If a newborn child is a boy, the child's father has certain obligations mandated by Jewish law.

### ***“Brit Milah”: The “Covenant of Circumcision”***

A Jewish baby boy is circumcised when he is eight days old (health permitting).

With the exception of the surgical procedure itself, the father of the child conducts most of the ceremony, with a Rabbi and family members in attendance.

By tradition, the father formally “names” the child at the circumcision, and a celebratory meal is consumed afterward.



## ***“Pidyon Ha-ben”: The “Redemption of the Son”***

If the baby boy is a firstborn to the mother and the father is not a Kohein or a Levite, nor is the mother the daughter of a Kohein or Levite, the father must participate in a ceremony in which he “redeems” his son. The father plays a critical role, reciting different blessings and essentially conducting the entire ceremony.

### ***If the newborn is a girl***

#### ***Naming the Daughter***

If a newborn child is a girl, the father formally “names” the child and recites certain blessings (“*Mi Shebayrach...*”) during the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, followed by a celebratory meal with the family in attendance.



## ***Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah***

When a Jewish boy reaches the age of thirteen (“Bar Mitzvah”) and a Jewish girl reaches the age of twelve (“Bat Mitzvah”), they are considered to be “adults” for purposes of Jewish law and are obligated to follow all precepts. Boys are called “Bar Mitzvah” (“son of the commandment”), and girls are called “Bat Mitzvah” (“daughter of the commandment”).

The father of the child recites a special blessing (“*Boruch She-pitranee...*”) at the reading of the Torah scroll in the synagogue, the youth traditionally makes a speech discussing the Torah or points of Jewish law, and a celebratory meal is consumed with friends and family present.



## ***Religious Rituals***

### ***Surrounding Weddings***

Weddings are possibly the most tradition-rich events in Jewish life.

Jewish parents traditionally bless the bride and groom on the day of their weddings, and many other customs are performed by parents and extended families.



## ***Religious Rituals Surrounding Divorces***

Under Jewish law, a married woman remains “married” until she has obtained a formally-drafted decree of divorce (a “Get”) from her husband.

A Get is a complicated document that should be drafted and reviewed by competent Rabbinic authorities.

Moreover, the technical religious requirements involved in properly delivering a Get to a to-be-divorced woman requires the assistance of a learned Rabbi.



## ***Religious Rituals Surrounding Deaths***

### ***Religious Laws Governing the Deceased***

Jewish law is particularly complex with respect to the proper care and burial of the deceased. There are three primary components: the “watching over” the body until burial (the “Sh’mira”); the spiritual cleansing and thorough immersion in a mikvah, or water flow, of the body (the “Tahara”); and the burial itself (the “K’vurah”).

A qualified Rabbi should immediately be contacted upon the death of a Jew. That Rabbi will typically contact a qualified Jewish burial society (commonly known as the “Chevra Kaddisha” (“the society of the holy”) to handle all of the intricate details.

Until qualified personnel can respond, institutional staff must be aware of the following:

Under Jewish law, the deceased may not be embalmed or cremated.

Post-mortem examinations (autopsies) are forbidden, except where a reasonable likelihood exists that such an examination will contribute to



saving the life of another patient at hand, or where an autopsy is required by civil law (e.g., where death resulted from foul play). Competent Rabbinic authorities should *always* be consulted in the case of a “required” autopsy.

Burial should take place as soon as possible after death.

## ***Religious Laws Governing the Mourners***

There are seven next-of-kin upon who's death one must observe the period of mourning: father, mother, son, daughter, brother and sister (whether from father's side or mother's side), wife and husband. C.J.L. ch. 203 §1.

A rent in one's garments must be made for the loss of a relative for whom one is required to observe a period of mourning. C.J.L. ch. 195 §1.

Any person who lost a relative for whom he is bound to observe the mourning period is called an “Onen” between the time of death until after the interment. An Onen must avoid all kinds of levity. C.J.L. ch. 196 §1.

It is the custom to observe a partial period of mourning even for other relatives during the first week





until the Sabbath. This period includes refraining from bathing in warm water. C.J.L. ch. 203 §2.

The period of mourning begins as soon as the decedent is buried and the grave filled with earth. The mourner removes his shoes at the cemetery. C.J.L. ch. 204 §1.

On the first day of mourning, mourners are forbidden to eat self-prepared food at the first meal. It is, therefore, the duty of neighbors to send food for that first meal, which is known as the “meal of condolence.” That meal traditionally should begin with eggs or lentils and a bagel, which are round and have no mouth (dent), just as the mourner presumably has no mouth (i.e., the grief is so great that one cannot yet vocalize the loss). C.J.L. ch. 205 §1.

During the first seven days of mourning (the “Shiva”), a mourner is forbidden to perform any work, bathe, wear shoes, have sexual intercourse, study the Torah (except laws of mourning and sad Torah subjects), offer greetings, wear freshly washed garments, cut hair, or be present at any festivity. C.J.L. ch. 208 §1. Mourners are obligated to recite a special prayer for the dead — the “Kaddish” — three times daily. Such recitals must take place in the presence of a prayer quorum of ten adult Jewish males (a “*minyan*”).

During those seven days of mourning, a mourner is forbidden to sit on a regular chair or bench. C.J.L. ch. 211 §1.



Mourners are not permitted to cut their hair during the next thirty days of mourning (the “*Shloshim*”), whether the hair of the head, the beard, or any part of the body. A mourner for a father or mother waits 3-4 months before cutting any hair. C.J.L. ch. 211 §12.

The Kaddish is recited by the mourners three times daily for a period of eleven months in the first year after the decedent’s death.

If a person learns of the death of a relative, he begins to count the period of mourning from the day he becomes aware of the death. C.J.L. ch. 204 §5.

If one heard of the death of a relative for whom he is required to observe the rites of mourning within thirty days of the death, even on the thirtieth day, the tidings are “timely” and the mourner must rend garments and observe the seven days of mourning (counting them from the day the news is received). Such mourners must also observe the thirty days of mourning, counting them from that same day. The day when the news reaches him is governed by the same rules as apply on the day of burial. C.J.L. ch. 206 §1.

If a potential mourner hears of the death more than thirty days after the death, it is considered “delayed news” and the mourner need not observe the seven-day “*Shiva*” mourning for more than one hour. C.J.L. ch. 206 §2.

