

Shabbat Parashat Bo
The New Year of the Trees Needs Our Commitment and Action!

This week's *parasha* contains the first official commandment given to the Israelite people in the Torah: to observe the first day of the "spring month" as the first of all months (i.e. a New Year). The children of Israel were freed from slavery, achieving their first taste of freedom in four hundred years. This new independence was accompanied by the responsibility of self governance. One aspect of this new independence was the creation of an official calendar, which was set to begin with this spring month, known to us now as "Nisan," during which we celebrate the festival of *Pesah*.

The Mishna, the first official Jewish law code edited by Rabbi Judah the Prince in approximately 220 CE, teaches that there are actually four official new year celebrations in one twelve month cycle: the first of Nisan, the first of the twelfth month, Elul, the first of Tishrei, on which we celebrate our Rosh Hashana to this very day, and the New Year which falls in the month of Sh'vat, over which there was a debate about whether it should fall on the first or fifteenth day of the month. Eventually, Hillel's opinion won out and the New Year of the Trees, named for its date on the Hebrew calendar – Tu Bish'vat – was established on the fifteenth of the month of Sh'vat ("Tu" stands for the letters *tet* and *vav* adding up to 15 when converted to numerical form based on their places in the Alef-Bet: 9 + 6).

Last Shabbat, we celebrated Rosh *Hodesh* Sh'vat, the beginning of our current Hebrew month. Tu Bish'vat is a very meaningful festival on a variety of levels, particularly for those who take an environmental interest in the world. However, it is in the Land of Israel that Tu Bish'vat takes on the most power. While we in Vancouver continue to live through our winter season, Tu Bish'vat in Israel marks the time when the first tree blossoms begin magically to appear on the *Sh'keidiyot*, the almond trees. Each year, school children participate in tree planting field trips in order to continue to beautify the land with more trees or to convert more areas of Israeli desert into green tree groves. It is indeed a modern miracle to see how Israel has turned barren lands into beautiful fertile forests, and the project continues in the Negev desert each and every day.

This year, tree planting in Israel takes on an even deeper meaning. Casualties of wars and rocket attacks in Israel are not limited to the tragic loss of human life. Earlier this year, as Israel was forced once again to defend its innocent citizens for bombardments of missiles and rockets being fired from Gaza, the Kissufim Forest, which sits on Gaza's eastern border, suffered heavy losses of trees. VTT has been asked to lend its support to the rehabilitation of this forest (a project being undertaken by the JNF) for Tu Bish'vat this year. As announced last week, our PPP has made a lead gift of one tree per VTT class to launch our support of this project and I enjoin every VTT family to follow their example and commit the \$18 it takes to plant a single tree. It will take many years to re-grow the trees that were lost, but the sooner that reforestation begins, the sooner the lost trees will be replaced. JNF Tu Bish'vat packets went home last week and tree purchase envelopes should be returned to your child's homeroom before January 25th, 2013. It is a very special *mitzvah* to plant a tree and support tree growth in Israel, one that takes on even more meaning this year! May we all celebrate the New Year of the Trees, which this year falls next Shabbat, by doing our part to green the Land of Israel.

Tu BiSh'vat Hi'gi'ah...Hag La'llanot Samei'ah! (Tu BiSh'vat has arrived...Happy festival of the trees!)
Shabbat Shalom!