

Background Materials:

Tu BiSh'vat Stories and Teachings

1. Choni HaM'agel

Once Choni the Circle maker (Choni HaM'agel) was walking on the road and saw a person planting a carob tree.

Choni said, "You know a carob tree takes 70 years to bear fruit; are you sure that you will live 70 years so you can eat from it?"

"I found this world provided with carob trees," came the reply, "and as my forebears planted them for me, so will I plant for my offspring."

-Talmud of Babylonia, Ta'anit 23a

Exploration Ideas:

-Our parents and grandparents plant trees so that we can have fruit—and we plant trees so that our children and grandchildren can have fruit.

-How we treat the environment will impact the Earth for the future

-What we do today affects the world tomorrow and in the future. The things we do and teach are like fruit trees that we plant for the future.

-We learn from our parents and grandparents, and we will teach our children what we have learned.

-We learn about Judaism from the Torah and from past generations of our Jewish family, and we will teach Judaism and Torah to our children.

Questions:

Why does a person plant a carob tree if the fruit will not grow until after the person who plants the tree has died?

Who is the fruit for?

Has that person ever eaten carob? Who planted that tree?

What are things people did a long time ago that still affect our world today?

What do you learn from your parents that you will teach to your children?

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2. The Torah is like Fig Trees

Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba, in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, expounded this verse from the Book of Proverbs:

"One who tends the fig tree will enjoy its fruit."

"How are the words of Torah like a fig tree?"

The figs on such a tree ripen at various times over a long season. Whenever you search a fig tree, you can find fruit ready to eat.

So also with words of Torah – whenever you are engaged in studying them, you will find morsels of wisdom.

-Talmud of Babylonia, Eruvin 54 a,b

Exploration Ideas:

-A fig tree always has ripe figs on it somewhere, even if some of the figs on the tree are not ripe. The Torah is full of lessons and stories that teach us and help us—and if you look, you will find some ready for you to learn and enjoy.

-The Torah has something to teach about every time and part of life.

-Even if sometimes you don't understand part of the Torah, you may learn from a different part.

Question:

What is something that you have learned from the Torah?

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3. Israel is Like a Date-Palm: Each Part is Useful

“As the psalm says: “The righteous flourish like date-palms”

No part of the palm tree is wasted:

we eat the dates,
we use the branches for making a sukkah,
we use the fibers for ropes,
we use the leaves for sieves*,
And the trunk for ceiling boards –

So there is no-one worthless in Israel.

Some of us are good at rules and regulations;
Some of us are good at telling sacred stories.
Some of us excel in making fine distinctions;
And others in connecting together what seems distinct.

-Midrash Genesis Rabbah 41.1 (adapted)

* a sieve is a sifter made of woven palm fronds

Exploration Ideas:

-The Jewish People is like a date-palm tree. Each person may have a different strength, which brings value to the whole community.

Questions:

- What is special about the date-palm according to this text?
- How is the date-palm compared to the Jewish People?
- Do you think the Jewish People are like a tree? How?

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4. The Mitzvah of Planting Trees in Israel

“And when you come into the land you shall plant all manner of trees.” –Leviticus 19,23

Questions:

- Why do you think God instructs us to plant trees in the Land of Israel?
- Why does it matter to plant all different kinds of trees?

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Long ago in the Land of Israel the Jews celebrated the birth of children by planting trees. When a girl was born a cypress tree was planted for her. When a boy was born a cedar tree was planted. The trees grew with the children and when the children married, branches of their trees were used to make the Chuppah, the marriage canopy.

Exploration Ideas:

- Why do you think Jews in the Land of Israel celebrated their children’s birth by planting trees?
- What do you think of this ritual?
- Have you ever seen a chuppah? What was it made of? Was it decorated?