



Towards a 21st Century *Tikkun Olam:* Of *Tu B'Shevat*, *Purim* and Feeding the Needy in our Community

As we begin a new secular year and the second decade of the 21st century, having said our last good-byes to the "00s", we find we are still dealing with a world filled with hungry people. Given the billions available in our society to bail out the bad boy banks or as our President has called them, 'the fat cats', it's hard to believe that people both here in America and around the globe are still starving. Most of us equate hunger with a child in subcontinent Africa, belly distended, wide-eyed and suffering, but right in our own backyards, right here in America, the land of plenty, there are millions who are classified as 'food insecure', the current buzzword for what we formerly used to call 'hungry'.

According to the Princeton-based social research think tank, Mathematica Policy Research, more than over seven million people use emergency food assistance every week. A recent Mathematica report stated, "This paradox of hunger amid plenty is a threat to our nation's prosperity and our collective well-being." Surely, as Jews, we own a responsibility to being our 'brother's (and sister's) keeper' and doing what each of us can to improve the lot of those less fortunate than ourselves. The months of *Shevat* and *Adar* include both *Tu B'Shevat* and *Purim* and offer us specific holiday opportunities to engage in aspects of *Tikkun Olam* that focus on the hungry.

During *Tu B'Shevat* we celebrate the first fruits in Israel and traditionally participate in a *Tu B'Shevat Seder*. This year our Seder will be on January 23rd during Kiddish directly following Sabbath services. This celebration of the splendid, abundant gifts of the natural world which give our senses delight and our bodies life marks the beginning of spring in Israel. Sustaining rains are at their peak and the earth responds, brimming with buds of fragrant life. To mark this moment, school children plant trees. Often these trees have been provided by the contributions of Jews in the diaspora through the good offices of the Jewish National Fund. For we Jews living outside of Israel, *Tu B'Shevat* is a celebration of the renewal of vision and awareness, a celebration of connections and connectedness--to our own inner-selves, to the social world of human beings, and to the natural world and its Source.

Given that basis for the *Chag*, *Tu B'Shevat* is not only a good time to be mindful of Israel, to donate to JNF, and to observe the *Chag* through a ritual seder as we do as a community every year with fruits and nuts and other tasty foods. It is an especially good time to reach out to those right in our midst who are less fortunate than we are. This year, I am encouraging everyone to bring canned food to the synagogue between now and *Tu B'Shevat* so that we may make a food donation as a congregation to one of our local Jersey City food banks. Especially during the cold winter months, it is an important mitzvah to give food to those in need, so look in your pantries and bring those cans you haven't used to the synagogue so we can donate them to those in need in our Jersey City community. You'll find a receptacle right in our lobby.

And at the end of February on February 27th, *Motz'ei Shabbat*, we shall celebrate *Chag Purim*. While we enjoy the celebration of our liberation in Persia so many centuries ago, reminding ourselves through the reading of *Megillat Esther* how we were persecuted and then we triumphed in another part of the world with heroes like Mordechai and Esther defeating enemies like Haman, there are other important aspects to *Purim*. One of the most important of these is the tradition of *Shaloch Manos* (Yiddish) or *Shaloch Manot* (Hebrew). *Mishloach Manot*, literally, the sending of gifts, is traditional on *Purim* and the law is actually described in the Book of Esther (9:22) as part of the proper celebration of *Purim*. There is a rabbinic teaching that we should give gifts (usually food items of fruits, candies and snacks) not only to our friends and families, but also to those who are needy and to those whose spirits would be raised by knowing that someone cares. So in the month of February, we have a second opportunity to prepare a food donation to those less fortunate in our community. To this end, the food drive will continue during February so that by *Purim*, Congregation B'nai Jacob will be ready to provide another 'delivery' of foodstuffs, now in the spirit of *Shaloch Manos* to our neighbors in need.

As we broaden our giving horizons and reach out to our wider community and those in need during January and February, it is timely that our next speaker for our Friday Night *Kabbalat Shabbat* Speaker Series will be a representative of the many Food Bank and Pantry initiatives in Jersey City. Our guest speaker will be at our services on Friday evening, February 5th, and following a Friday Night Live! musical service, will share with us the current challenges and opportunities facing the multiculturally-diverse needy of Jersey City. A festive *Oneg Shabbat* will follow Steve's talk. I look forward to seeing all of you at the *Tu B'Shevat seder* (1/23), the special Speaker Series event (2/5), our *Purim* festivities (2/27) and the *Shabbatot* inbetween. May you and your loved ones have a happy and healthy 2010!

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