Living Religion

Scattering seed for a ‘mystical seder’

By Jim Remsen

The man rose at his window seat in the banquet room and began his speech, as if he had been reading. It was from the Talmud:

“A day when rain comes is as great as the day heaven and earth were created.”

Inches away, a steady rain was falling. Though this was midwinter Manhattan, not the arid Middle East, the convergence of word and weather would have delighted the biblical prophet himself.

Those mystics’ deep visions were the main course of this unusual meal. Ellen Bernstein, a Philadelphia-based environmental scholar, had updated their centuries-old “mystical seder” and gathered 80 Jewish professionals and communal leaders to field test it.

Bernstein’s work in progress is an 8-page booklet designed for use during the brief winter holiday of Tu B’Shevat. Her sponsor, the tree-planting Jewish National Fund, had her compile it in hopes of broadening observance of the annual holiday known as Jewish Arbor Day, or the New Year of the Trees.

JNF officials were watching Monday’s focus group keenly, poised with mass-marketing plans. Tu B’Shevat is JNF’s main holiday — yet it passes unnoticed by most American Jews. The dumpsters during this holiday, which arrives tonight, tend to be devoid of food and in need of tree-planting ceremonies by children and families, said Bernstein. JNF, which has planted forests and groves in Israel for decades.

Scattered concerts, too, have put on Tu B’Shevat mystical seders in recent years, but there is no codified liturgy, and written materials are limited. JNF leaders saw a need for a widely available, model text — and an opportunity to promote their environmental work.

Tu B’Shevat, as visualized by the 16th-century Kabbalists, has a deep environmental spirituality. The mystics created their seder, based loosely on the Passover seder, as a way to help spiritually repair the world. The ritual meal involved eating many symbolic foods and showering blessings on them. The mystics visualized this as a way to expiate sin, improve one’s inner self, pour blessings into the world, and promote creation itself.

The seder was structured on the Kabbalistic understanding of the “four worlds” — and, as Bernstein notes, “their counterparts within us.” Her booklet retains the richness of that order and adds foursomes of their own.

The project was a natural for Bernstein, 45, of West Mount Airy, a national expert on conservation at the University of California (Berkeley). He founded Sheer Hai Adam (Guardians of the Earth) in 1991 to develop environmental liturgy, and is now working on her third “soo-ology” book.

She also is director of the Jewish Continuity Initiative for the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia. In that capacity, she leads invigorating worship services with the “Friday Night Alive” format that periodically makes the rounds of local synagogues.

To prepare her “An American Tu B’Shevat” seder, Bernstein said, she commissioned a Kabbalistic scholar for a pure translation of the original text. Though she found much of it incomprehensible as the clouds of Neptunus, she tried to capture the central language and themes. A profound theme that she hopes comes through is the power of human Noshigut.

As her text constructs, the Kabbalists believed that Adam’s rebirth “shattered the soul of the world” but that his progeny, humanity, can repair the break through sincere blessings. Indeed, they taught, the blessings effect a kind of spiritual oxygen exchange with the plant world.

“According to the Kabbalists,” she writes, “the simple act of eating a fruit depletes the plant of the fruit’s divine energy. We can restore the energy (and complete the cycle) by offering a blessing. The plant’s guardian angel channels the blessing back to the specific plant and the plant will bear again. Without our blessings, the angel cannot replenish the energy and the plant cannot produce a second generation of fruit. When we neglect the blessings, we fail to recover our God-given obligation as guardians of Creation. We are like robbers, stealing the divine energy from the plant.”

So for a rainy hour Monday, the 80 people gathered in a dining room in the United Nations complex pastored by the ritual master. They worked their way, sequentially, through platters of fruits and nuts, blessing them in profusion, and rose to recite dozens of passages. The readings were a mix of old and new, secular and religious, poetic and polemical.

Based on the positive initial response, JNF leaders will proceed with plans to distribute the booklet nationally by next year and promote Tu B’Shevat as a major, meaningful national holiday. The test might be posted on the Internet, with invitations to add or subtract elements, Bernstein said.

The booklet might even be available at your local vegetable stand, free for the taking through the underwriting of a kosher wine company. Pioneers have been put out to bring that about, said JNF executive vice president Russell Robinson.

This, Robinson said, would get it into the hands not only of congregations, schools and Jewish groups, but also of the multitudes of unschooled Jews, who might be intimidated and repelled by a communal service but could try the seder on their own.

Whatever happens, Bernstein hopes the message of environmental spirituality hits home. The Kabbalists’ seder, in essence, is crystallizing the idea that, as she writes, “God is the source, the One behind the extraordinary diversity of nature; that we are part of, not apart from, nature, and that is incumbent upon us to care for Creation.”

By Michael S. Wirtz / Inquirer Staff Photographer

ASSIYAH

“In the Kabbalists’ scheme, the outermost world, the one in which we live and act, is called Assiyah, literally ‘Ding’ or ‘Making.’ Assiyah is the world of nature, on concrete reality, of the body. To experience this world, see (like the Kabbalists) eat fruits and nuts like carobs, walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, pomegranates, coconuts, pineapples, bananas and almonds — fruits with a tough outer shell and a soft inner. The hard outer covering represents the protection we need to survive in the world. . . . The pulp inside symbolizes the sweet interior that marks our true essence.”

YETZIRAH

“Just above or behind Assiyah is Yetzirah, literally ‘Formation.’ It is the world of the energy that moves us, of emotion. For this world, we eat fruits with soft outer husks and hard interiors — olives, dates, peaches, apricots, plums, prunes. . . . The pit symbolizes a heart that is well fortified. The soft edible fruit symbolizes a relaxed and receptive attitude.”

BRIYAH

“The next world up is Briyah, literally ‘Creation.’ This is the world of mind, of pattern, of intention. For Briyah we eat fruits that are soft throughout like figs, grapes and blueberries. In this world, which approaches pure spirit, we can let go of our defenses; we can soften our hard hearts, and we can relax into joy. The closer we come to relying on God, on our inner truths, the less dependent we are on our protective mechanisms.”

“An American Tu B’Shevat Seder” is a new liturgy developed by Ellen Bernstein for the Jewish holiday of Tu B’Shevat, the New Year of the Trees, which arrives tonight. While the seder contains modern readings and environmental prayers, it draws most heavily on teachings of the mystical Kabbalah. A central concept is the ‘four worlds’ of nature — and human nature. Symbolic fruits are eaten for the first three worlds, as described below, but not for the fourth, Briyah, which is considered infinite and ineffable. People also drink four cups of wine, starting with white (representing dormancy) and mixing more and more red (for fruitfulness and vitality).

Bernstein’s seder, as excerpted in the captions below, describes the Kabbalistic Taxonomy.”
Scattering seed for a ‘mystical seder’

By Jim Bresnen
LIVING BIBLELAND

The man rose to his window seat in the balcony room and recited his assigned reading. It was from the Talmud:

“A day when rain comes is as great as the day when earth and heaven were created.”

Inches away, a steady rain was falling. Though this was midtown Manhattan, not the arid Middle East, the convergence of word and weather would have delighted the Kabbalists’ spirituality.

Those mystical deep visions were the main course of this unusual meal Monday. Ellen Bernstein, a Philadelphia-based environmental scholar, had updated their centuries-old “mystical seder” and gathered 80 Jewish professionals and communal leaders to behold it.

Bernstein’s work in progress was an 88-page booklet designed for use during the brief winter holiday of Tu B’Shvat. Her sponsor, the tree-planting Jewish National Fund, had her compile it in hopes of broadening observance of the annual holiday known as the New Year of the Trees.

JNF officials were watching Monday’s focus group keenly, pleased with the marketing plans.

Tu B’Shvat is JNF’s main holiday — yet it passes unnoticed by most American Jews. The daylong holiday, which arrives tonight, is usually observed with tree-planting ceremonies by children and fund-raising for the JNF, which has planted millions of trees and groves in Israel for decades.

Scattered congregations have put on Tu B’Shvat seders in recent years, but there is no codified liturgy, and written materials are limited. JNF leaders see a need for a widely accessible model text — and an opportunity to promote their environmental work.

Tu B’Shvat, as visualized by the 16th-century Kabbalists, has a deep connection to the mystical creation of the seder, based loosely on the Passover seder, as a way to help spiritually connect with the world. The ritual meal involved eating many symbolic foods and showering blessings on them. They visualized this as a way to expel sin, improve one’s inner self, pour blessings into the world, and promote creation itself.

The seder was structured on the Kabbalistic concept of the “four worlds” — earth, air, water, fire; their counterparts within us.

Their booklet retained the richness of that order and added flourishes of her own.

The project was a natural for Bernstein, 43, of West Mount Airy, a natural-resource conservation graduate of the University of California. She founded Shomrei Adamah (Guardians of the Earth) in 1991 to develop environmental liturgies, and is now working on her third “eco-theology” book.

She also is director of the Jewish Continuity Initiative for the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia. In that capacity, she has helped coordinate worship services with the “Friday Night Alive” format that periodically makes the rounds of local synagogues.

To prepare her “An American Tu B’Shvat” seder, Bernstein said, she commissioned a Kabbalistic scholar for a pure translation of the original text. Though she found much of it as unapproachable as the clouds of Neptune, she tried to capture the central language and themes. A profound theme she hopes that comes through is the power of human blessings.

At her text consists, the Kabbalists believed that Adam’s rebellion “shattered the soul of the world.” But that his progeny, humanity, can repair the breach through sincere blessings. Indeed, they taught, the blessings effect a kind of spiritual oxygen exchange with the plant world.

“According to the Kabbalists,” she writes, “the simple act of eating a fruit depletes the plant of the fruits’ divine energy. We can restore the energy (and complete the circle) by offering a blessing. The plant’s guardian angel channel the blessing back to the specific plant and the plant will bear again. Without our blessings, the angel cannot replenish the energy and the plant cannot produce a second generation of fruit. When we neglect the blessings, we fail to recognize our God-given obligation as guardians of Creation. We are like robbers, stealing the divine energy from the plant.”

So for a rainy hour Monday, the 80 people gathered in a dining room in the United Nations complex partook of the ritual meal. They worked their way, sequentially, through platters of fruits and nuts, blessing in profusion, and rose to recite doves of passages. The readings were a mix of old and new, secular and religious, poetic and polemical.

Based on the positive initial response, JNF leaders will proceed with plans to distribute the booklet nationally by next year and promote Tu B’Shvat as a major, meaningful nature holiday. The text might be posted on the Internet, with invitations to add or subtract elements, Bernstein said.

The booklet might even be available at your local vegetable stand, free for the taking through the unceremonious wrapping of a kohlrabi. Patrons have been put out to bring that about, said JNF executive vice president Russell Robinson.

This Robinson said, would get into the hands not only of congregations, schools and Jewish groups but also of the multitudes of unaffiliated Jews who might be interested, or commanded by a communal service but could try the seder on their own.

Whatever happens, Bernstein hopes the message of environmental spirituality hits home. The Kabbalists’ seder, in essence, was cry-