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## Rabbi's Message

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### A Question of Stewardship

Tu Bish'vat falls on February 8 this year. Originally designated as the beginning of the fiscal year for collecting tax on the produce of trees, that role for the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Sh'vat ceased with the fall of the Second Commonwealth to the Romans in 70 CE.

Over the past few centuries, Tu Bish'vat has taken on other meanings. In the late middle ages it was observed with a meal structured like a Pesach seder to thank God for the many varieties of fruit, a practice that has been revived in recent years. When I was a child, it was a kind of Jewish Arbor Day, dedicated to the planting and care of trees. The Jewish National Fund was particularly active at this season, with campaigns to purchase trees to be planted in Israel.

Today it has evolved into a Jewish ecology day. On Tu Bish'vat we raise the themes of ecosystems, biological diversity and the intricacies of humans living within nature. Because nature is, of course, everywhere and humanity can be so thoughtless and destructive, working out our proper relationship with the natural world is a constant and ongoing endeavor. Like all of our holy days, Tu Bish'vat only emphasizes a theme which is actually a matter of constant concern throughout the year.

Here in western Pennsylvania, the primary ecological issue is drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale. There are implications for public health, infrastructure, biodiversity, land use, government services and more. If some of these issues seem not to be part of the natural world, consider that virtually everything we humans do has impact on ecological systems.

The interconnected problems arising from exploiting the Marcellus Shale mostly come down to a single issue: how can we use this resource while protecting the environment? It is a question of stewardship.

There are two primary definitions of stewardship. One is the responsible oversight and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving. In the context of the Marcellus Shale, it is human health, the environment and the economy that require stewardship.

The other definition of stewardship is acting as the surrogate of another, especially by managing property. In this sense, to be an ecological steward means acting as a surrogate for God. This involves caring both for the created world and for human needs.

It's a tough balancing act. There are myriad smart people on every side of every issue raised by mining the Marcellus Shale. Tu Bish'vat comes to teach us that being smart is useful, but what really matters is being wise.

Rabbi Paul Tuchman