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January 12, 2014/11 Shevat 5774

University Public Worship
Stanford University

"From New Year's to New Year's in Two Easy Weeks"
(Genesis 2:1-9; Deuteronomy 20:19-20; Jonah 4:5-11)

When I began rabbinic school in Jerusalem, I shared an apartment with a Stanford graduate. We took the same small classes and had many of the same friends. Since her name is Patrice and mine is Patricia, we also shared the nickname, "Patty". We experienced some amusing mix-ups, like the time she arranged a dinner date with my relatives, visiting from the States. After a few such encounters, we decided that to reduce confusion, we should use our Hebrew names while in Israel. There was a small problem, though. Neither of us had been given Hebrew names, so off we went to choose the name we wished our parents gave us. Later in the day, we excitedly shared our new names. And wouldn't you know it? We both selected the same Hebrew name—Ilana, meaning "tree".

I tell you this so that you will know that I have a particular affection for the holiday that will occur on the Jewish calendar on Wednesday night, when the moon is full—the holiday of Tu B'shevat, the New Year for Trees. Yes, oddly, this year, we go from New Year's to New Year's in two easy weeks. There are actually four new years in the Jewish calendar—although, to be honest, Jan. 1 is one of them. Rosh Hashanah—the first of the month of Tishrei, in the autumn, is the new year marking the birthday of creation; The fifteenth of the month of Shvat, usually in late winter, is the new year for trees, the first of the month of Nisan, in spring is the new year for kings and finally, the first of the month of Elul in the summer is the new year for tithing cattle. Lest this seem overwhelming or arbitrary, consider our own red-letter dates—in the university, we start the calendar year, the fiscal year, the academic year, and the benefits year, all at different times.

The New Year for Trees provided a marker for a tree's age—it was forbidden to eat the fruit of a tree in its first three years—so it was necessary to identify when it was time to eat or tithe or tax its fruit. In ancient Israel, the full moon in the month of Shevat was a kind of fiscal year for trees. The date was selected because most years, the fifteenth of Shevat fell after the winter rains had come and gone, the sap had begun to rise and the fruit had started to ripen.

But, unlike the new year for kings or for cattle, the new year for trees became a minor festival. The Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics of the town of Sefat created

a special ritual meal in the 16th century, associating it not only with wood and fruit trees, but also with the transcendent Divine Tree of Life. That meal was patterned after the Passover Seder and is called a Tu b'Shevat Seder. In the 20th century, early Zionists revived the physical component of the holiday, by planting trees throughout the Land of Israel. In our day, as the fragility of the earth has penetrated our awareness, Tu B'shevat has come to be a rededication of our responsibility to protect the natural world, a kind of longstanding Jewish Earth Day.

I first set foot on California soil in 1974 to attend Johnston College in Redlands, nestled among orange groves at the foot of the San Bernardino Mountains. When my cousin from Los Angeles drove me to school in late summer, he regaled me with stories about those mountains. I was convinced he was mistaking the road we were on for another one—because there were no mountains. Then November came and the smog lifted, and I realized that the pictures in the college view book actually had not been photo-shopped. There were the mountains—strong and beautiful and enduring.

Around the same time, a fifteen-year old kid who attended summer camp in those same heights learned that trees were dying in the mountain forests from the smog creeping in from Los Angeles. He and two-dozen friends transformed a parking lot at the summer camp, planting a meadow of smog tolerant trees. Two years later, this same teenager, Andy Lipkis, organized a campaign to plant 20,000 smog resistant sugar pine seedlings at summer camps in the area. When he learned of a law prohibiting the forestry department from giving away the trees, he raised funds both from corporations and from smog-ridden inner city LA kids who donated 50 cents or a dollar to plant the trees. Andy Lipkis had discovered his purpose in life, and he founded The Tree People.

In 1981 the Air Quality Management District estimated that it would take 20 years to plant a million trees at the cost of \$200 million. Convinced he could accomplish this in a shorter time and in a fraction of the cost, Andy Lipkis led the Tree People in launching the city's first "Los Angeles Million Tree Campaign." Their goal—to plant one million trees before Los Angeles hosted the 1984 Summer Olympics three years later. The millionth tree—an apricot—was planted in the San Fernando Valley four days before the Olympic torch was lit. If there had been a gold medal for protecting trees, Andy Lipkis and the Tree People would have been standing on the podium.

There is a Jewish tradition that when a son is born a cedar is planted and when a daughter is born a Cyprus tree is planted, and when they marry, boughs of those trees serve as the chuppah, their wedding canopy.

Just before the 1984 Olympics, I got married in a summer camp in the Santa Monica Mountains. The centerpieces on our table were milk cartons containing 12-inch high seedlings, courtesy of the Tree People. We asked our guests to take them home and plant their trees. We still hear stories of the trees that took root thirty years ago in the yards of those we love.

Andy Lipkis named his non-profit well. There is a long tradition intertwining trees and people. In Genesis, people and trees are created in the same day, in close proximity—“the Eternal God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being. The Eternal God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom God had formed. And from the ground, the Eternal God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.” (Genesis 2: 7-9)

And in Deuteronomy, the closeness between human beings and trees is made explicit. There, we find the curious phrase, *ki haadam etz hasadeh*, literally, “for man is the tree of the field.” But when we look at the whole context of the verse, the phrase becomes not remarkable, but reciprocal, reflecting the interdependence of trees and people. “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the axe against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down, *ki haadam etz hasadeh*, for man is the tree of the field.”

The simple meaning is clear—even if you are at war, you still have to protect the trees. At some point, the siege will end and those protected trees will bear fruit for the people who survive. While you are fighting, you are permitted to receive sustenance those trees, but in return, you must protect them for the future. Even as the trees nourish you, you must insure that those who are now your enemies will in time be able to be nourished by them as well.

But biblical commentators find more than a simple meaning of this verse. Rashi, a learned 11th century commentator notes that the phrase, *ki haadam etz hasadeh*, for man is the tree of the field, begins with a small word, *ki*, which can mean, “perhaps.” In his interpretation, the verse reads, “Is the tree of the field perhaps a man that it should be included in the besieged town because of you,

to suffer the tribulations of hunger and thirst like the people of the city? Why should you destroy it?” What Rashi suggests is that the trees are like bystanders or non-combatants—they should not be caught up in the fray. Instead, they remain like sentinels, symbolizing a time of peace, when they give forth fruit to those who are hungry, stand tall to provide shade, and cleanse the air we breathe.

Indeed, one of the ways the Bible describes human happiness and blessing is through the metaphor of a bountiful and flourishing tree, as we read in Psalms, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm, stand tall like the cedars of Lebanon, rooted in the house of God.” (Ps. 92:12) or, “He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces, thrives.” (Ps. 1:3)

Imagining that well-watered, richly foliated, green and fruitful tree can return us to what is essential in human flourishing. It can renew our sense of wonder, our capacity for vitality, as we drink in nature and its bounty. Two weeks ago, I had the great pleasure of hiking among the Giant Sequoias of Mariposa Grove in Yosemite. Some trees reached so high into the sky, they truly seemed like ladders to heaven. Others were so wide that tunnels for coaches had been cut through them. Still others had been burnt by fire, but grew around the blackened areas to remain green and growing, a testament to vitality and eternity. Like me, every person who came upon those majestic, ancient redwoods had on their faces the same expression of awe and appreciation. Those trees are indeed, wonders of nature.

It is no surprise that Rabbi Nachman’s much-appreciated prayer of nature begins,

“Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone.

May it be my custom to go outdoors each day,
among the trees and grasses, among all growing things,

and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer
to talk with the One to whom I belong.

May I express there everything in my heart,
And may all the foliage of the field,
(all grasses, trees and plants),
may they all awake at my coming,

to send the powers of their life
into the words of my prayer
so that my prayer and my speech are made whole

through the life and spirit of all growing things,
which are made as one by their transcendent Source.

Trees and the natural world return us to awe, and they can also teach us generosity and kindness. Jonah was filled with resentment when God forgave the sinners of Nineveh. The way that God tried to introduce him to generosity and compassion was by growing a fruit bearing plant to provide shade from the noonday sun. The plant gave Jonah happiness, so he is unhappy when God caused it to wither. The lesson God has in store for Jonah is incremental. If you have the capacity to care about nature, then you have the capacity to care about human beings. If you can appreciate trees, you can appreciate man. God said, “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?” (Jonah 4:5-11)

Whether Jonah learns this lesson is left unresolved. But we must. Man is the tree of the field. Our fate is inextricably intertwined. How we treat the trees reciprocates how we treat our fellow human beings. Let us remember what trees do for human beings.

- Trees contribute to our health and well being by providing oxygen for photosynthesis. An average size tree gives off enough oxygen to keep a family of four breathing for one day
- Trees help reduce air pollution that can cause health problems in humans. In one year, an acre of trees absorbs the amount of carbon dioxide you produce when you drive your car 26,000 miles
- Trees convert fog to water. In one night, an 100 foot redwood tree can turn fog into the equivalent of four inches of rain, passing it on to plants, animals and nearby creeks.
- The roots from trees help prevent erosion and landslides, and prevent the property loss and damage that can be caused by floodwaters.

Yet, today, trees are under assault, even more than who were in besieged cities in the ancient world.

- Only about half the world's forests that existed a thousand years ago remain today.
- The World Bank estimates that tropical forests, the primary source of livelihood for about 140 million people, are being lost at a rate of approximately 1% or 17-20 million hectares annually.
- With the trees, go a myriad of species that are reliant on the forest ecosystems.

Many of us made resolutions on January 1, 2014. As we approach the new year for trees, let us resolve to protect the trees to which we human beings are so closely linked. Here are some easy to institute suggestions from kids concerned about the planet they are inheriting.

- Purchase sustainably harvested woods
- Purchase recycled paper products
- Receive only the mail you want and need. Cancel (much of) the junk mail you receive by registering with donotmail.org
- View your bills online. That includes phone, bank, electricity, cell phone, water, and other bills. Have each of these institutions send you only an e-bill.
- Read news and magazines online and cancel the daily newspaper and monthly magazine subscription
- Borrow books from friends or from libraries instead of buying them.
- Bring your own bags for groceries
- Buy products in bulk. Doing so requires less packaging, much of which is paper.
- If you use firewood, cut down a tree or branch on your own property.
- And if you can, plant and tend your own fruit trees.

As we make our own resolutions to protect nature in this new year, as we honor the relationship between trees and people, as we appreciate the activism of groups like the Tree People, let us heed the words of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who reminded us of the importance of planting for the future. “If you are holding a sapling in your hand and someone announces that the Messiah has come, finish planting the tree, and then go greet the Messiah.” (Avot d’rabbi Natan 31b)

May your future and the future of the trees flourish. Happy New Year!

Helpful Sources:

<http://www.treepeople.org/history>

http://cn.jvillagenetwork.com/uploadedFiles/site/Holidays/Tu_bShevat/25943treessh.pdf

http://www.canfeinesharim.org/uploadedFiles/site/Holidays/Tu_bShevat/23286Treessh.pdf

http://www.canfeinesharim.org/uploadedFiles/site/Holidays/Tu_bShevat/25948Trees-Lesson-Plan.pdf

Thanks to Stanford graduate, Rabbi Jonathan Neril for his work with Canfei Nesharim.