

Kol THE VOICE OF Barrack

Sh'vat 5781

Each year, as the new month of Sh'vat begins in late January or early February, we know that Tu B'Sh'vat - the 15th day of Sh'vat and the Jewish New Year for Trees will arrive with the full moon, midway through the lunar month. This year, Tu B'Sh'vat falls on Thursday, January 28th. While spring is coming to Israel with almond blossoms and the first flowers that bring color to the desert and craggy hillsides, we know it's still a long way off here in the Tri-State region. It's not even Groundhog Day yet!

While we may be planning to enjoy some ice skating and perhaps even a snow day or two in the weeks ahead here, the ancient holiday of Tu B'Sh'vat celebrates the arrival of spring in Israel and Israelis enjoy it as a field day for outings, planting trees and for eating Israeli foods, especially from among the seven species mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and honey.

Tu B'Sh'vat can be about more than the weather and the special foods. Israelis have helped us to think about Tu B'Sh'vat as an opportunity to clean up parks and to learn about how we can protect the environment. Here in our school, we will celebrate Tu B'Sh'vat with middle and upper school assemblies on January 27th, led by the Environmental Action Club and the JLI/Jewish Leadership Initiative when we will celebrate ways to enjoy the environment while also speaking about the costs of development that have led to deforestation, rising sea levels and bleached coral reefs. Scientific evidence of our warming planet has inspired action in Israel and around the world through one of Israel's best known organizations, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel ([SPNI](#)) and through a new New York-based nonpartisan Jewish organization called [Dayenu](#) ("It's enough for us"). Dayenu draws its name from the song we sing at Passover, expressing gratitude for the ample and sufficient beauty around us and for good feelings of satiety when we realize we have more than enough.

In a rich piece of Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 13:2) dating to approximately 400 CE, the ancient rabbis look to Genesis 2:5 as a prompt to consider the important relationship between human beings and our trees. The verse begins, "When no shrub of the field was yet on earth" and goes on to describe the primordial world on the verge of creation of that time. The Hebrew word for "shrub" is "שִׁיחַ" (siah), also translated as "tree", references "a conversation" (שיחה - siha). The rabbis play imaginatively with how we live our lives in conversation with our trees:

All trees converse with one another;

All trees converse with humanity and the creatures of the world;

All trees were created to give pleasure to humanity and the creatures of the world.

Kol Barrack (The Voice of Barrack) is a periodic publication that recognizes the new month in the Jewish calendar. In this edition, Rabbi Judd Kruger Levingston, Director of Jewish Studies, shares his thoughts with our school community.



Rabbi Judd Kruger Levingston
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כָּל הָאֵילָנוֹת כָּאֵלוּ מְשִׁיחִין אֱלוּ עִם אֱלוּ
כָּל הָאֵילָנוֹת כָּאֵלוּ מְשִׁיחִין עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת
כָּל הָאֵילָנוֹת לַהֲנָאֲתָן שֶׁל בְּרִיּוֹת נִבְרָאוּ

Thus, trees aren’t an abstraction just to beautify the scenery. As many of us have discovered over the course of the pandemic, trees and time in the environment is a necessity, not a luxury. It is not surprising that we are turning to our parks more than before. Quite remarkably, during the most intense lockdown periods of the current pandemic, both light pollution and emissions levels dropped. This year, on Tu B’Sh'vat, when the isolation we have been feeling through the pandemic is leaving us more eager for companionship than ever, let’s note that over 1500 years ago, our tradition recognized the importance of trees to our well-being and let’s see them as our companions and as places to come together for companionship both now and in a post-pandemic world.

Hodesh Tov! Have a wonderful start to the new month of Sh'vat and enjoy a very happy New Year for Trees, “חג האילנות” (hag ha-ilanot).

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