

# Kol THE VOICE OF Barrack

## Shevat 5782: Happy New Year to Us...and Happy New Year to the Trees!

### The New Year for Trees or Tu B'Shevat?

It's Rosh Hodesh Shevat today, the beginning of the Hebrew month that marks the onset of spring in Israel, and if the great sage Shammai (c. 30 BCE) had had his way, we would be marking *Rosh HaShana L'Ilanot*, the *New Year for Trees* today. If we were in Israel, we would be enjoying some special fruits and boarding buses to plant trees throughout the land. Although we marked the winter equinox less than two weeks ago on December 21st, Shammai's version of the Jewish calendar doesn't waste time in pointing us towards the springtime and the promise of renewal.

To explain Shammai's reasoning, he wasn't so naive as to think that we should be celebrating the arrival of spring already; for him, this day is a first glimpse of spring. His followers teach that most of the rains will have fallen by now in the Land of Israel, so the ground is ready for a new year of crops. For Shammai, the New Year for Trees marks the start of a new agricultural season.

We don't follow Shammai, though. Instead, In the Talmud and in our practice today, we follow the teaching of his rabbinic rival, the great sage Hillel from the same era. According to Hillel, we should observe *Rosh HaShana L'Ilanot*, the New Year for Trees, two weeks later on the 15th of Shevat, or, as we know it, "Tu B'Shvat," falling this year on Monday, January 17th.

Even though I mark *Rosh HaShana L'Ilanot* as *Tu B'Shvat*, Shammai's reasoning and his dialogue with Hillel appeals to me in my role as the advisor to our school's Environmental Action Club (EAC). At our annual *Tu B'Shvat* assembly coming up on January 12th, students will be addressing the combined impact of the pandemic and climate change. What we learn from them may make us less dismissive of Shammai's proposal for an earlier observance of *Rosh HaShanah L'Ilanot*.

### The Pandemic and the Environment

During the early stages of the pandemic, when much of the world was shut down, air pollution dropped significantly due to reduced automobile and air travel and a reduced need for industrial emissions from coal-burning plants and other sources. Air quality improved in some parts of the world, allowing for significant reductions in the smog that usually clouds Beijing and the haze that often dims the views of the Himalayan Mountains from northern India. Reduced noise pollution improved the quality of life for birds, hibernating animals, migrating animals, and other species that began to venture out during the day with less fear. Water quality improved measurably from California to Venice, Italy. I must confess that I wasn't the only one who was disappointed to learn that the fun stories about dolphins [swimming in the canals of Venice turned out to be false](#).

Despite what appears to be this good news about how quickly it is possible to dial back some of the impact of industrialization and to restore some aspects of our climate, we can't help but note that the rapid spread of the pandemic itself was made possible by many of the same forces that fueled climate change in recent decades.

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, Ph.D., shares his thoughts about the month of Shevat and adds his perspective on the New Year for Trees.



Rabbi Judd Kruger Levingston  
DIRECTOR OF JEWISH STUDIES

Judd currently leads and teaches in the Jewish studies department and serves as the advisor to the Derech Eretz Council and to the Environmental Action Club. He is the proud parent of **Ivan '12**, **Miranda**, and **Serena '20**. He is the author of *Sowing the Seeds of Character: The Moral Education of Adolescents in Public and Private Schools* (Praeger, 2009) and of a forthcoming second book entitled *The Moral Case for Play: Advancing Moral Ecologies of Play in K-12 Schools* (Rowman & Littlefield/Lexington Books), 2022 or 2023. He was recognized as the 2020 [Clean Air Council Philadelphia Clean Air Commuter](#) of the Year.

[jlevingston@jbha.org](mailto:jlevingston@jbha.org)

A report from the National Institutes of Health National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) points out that increases in urban living, intensive farming, population growth, deforestation, and changing animal habitats make it easy for viruses and diseases to spread. The combination of higher population density, greater congestion, and [higher chemical exposure levels facilitate the transmission of air pollution and viruses](#). With inadequate access to cleaner water and air, with inadequate health care, and with global trade in animals, too many vulnerable people have become victims of Covid-19 and its variants, and another pandemic could ravage the world again. It is frightening to think that this might not be an isolated once-in-a-century epidemic. As my fellow EAC advisor, science teacher and alumna Dr. Arlene Spevak '79 points out, while evidence points in this direction, research is needed to establish this link and we will look to the next generation of students to conduct groundbreaking research.

This may sound like grim news. The connection between climate change and the pandemic can teach us how to celebrate the New Year for Trees in the most meaningful way possible and our EAC club members and their advisors Dr. Spevak and I remain optimistic that we can learn from our societal mistakes and make a difference. As Rabbi Tarfon teaches in Pirkei Avot 2:16, "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it."

### **Making Change for the Future**

At the January 12th assembly, our EAC student speakers will point out that more air pollution is generated by methane from domestic cattle around the world than from automobile emissions. Niva Cohen '23, the EAC President, shared research with me indicating that while it takes 660 gallons of water to produce a quarter-pound hamburger patty and 2500 gallons for a pound of beef, it only takes one-third of that amount of water for a plant-based diet. Over the holiday season, five billion pounds of returned items end up in landfills and it's fair to say that Americans return goods worth \$380 billion, only some of which gets resold while much of it ends up also in the [trash](#). Landfills also are filled with clothing.

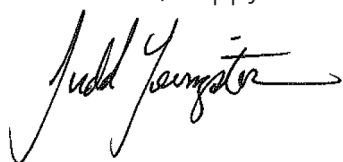
Some families are aware of our idling ban in the parking lot as well, but my colleagues in Operations and I would like everyone to remember to shut off their engines while waiting in our parking lots to make it easier for everyone to breathe clean air as they leave our buildings to go home. The [United States Department of Energy](#) reports that 250 million pounds of carbon dioxide go into the atmosphere unnecessarily due to engine idling.

As recent statistics show, even though we want to see our plastic bottles get recycled, only about 10% of them actually do get recycled. As a result, here at Barrack, every student does their part to uphold a single-use plastic water bottle ban that has been in place for nearly two years now. Our students stay hydrated with reusable water bottles that they refill at our user-friendly water fountains, and they can take justifiable pride in saving hundreds of pounds of plastic from going into landfills every year.

Armed with these statistics, our EAC leaders will ask, in the spirit of Shammai and Hillel, would you consider reducing your waste stream with biking to school or to work, driving an electric vehicle if you don't already, reducing noise pollution, reducing meat consumption (observe Meatless Mondays!), choosing foods that involve less water use, patronizing restaurants that use compostable containers, and giving up the temptation to purchase "fast fashion" that will go out of style and be treated as unwearable long before the clothing actually wears out? Can we take a moment to ask our government to promote renewable energy, public transportation, and safer wastewater treatment while promoting waste water recycling and clean gas lines that can reduce spills?

As much as the pandemic has shown us that we can live with less of some things, including processed foods, it also has shown us with [alarming statistics](#) how much medical waste and non-recyclable materials are generated by paper masks, Personal Protective Equipment, take-out food containers and packaging for one-time deliveries. While we can't avoid some of this extra waste, we can be sure to dispose of it properly and not leave it around as trash. As we mark Rosh Hodesh Shevat today, coinciding with the tradition some of us have to make New Year's resolutions, we, our Barrack kehillah, can resolve to learn from the pandemic not only how much we love being in school and in community, but also how much we love this earth and how essential it is that we provide responsible stewardship.

Hodesh Tov, Happy New Year, *Shana Tova L'Ilanot!*



Rabbi Judd Kruger Levingston, Ph.D., P '12, '20  
Director of Jewish Studies