

I like to go outside, and sit on my deck and listen to the trees. I don't always hear them, but I always feel good afterwards and I feel a connection that helps me to feel at one with the universe. Richard Powers in his moving book, *The Overstory*, writes, "Out in the yard, all around the house, the things they've planted in years gone by are making significance, making meaning, as easily as they make sugar and wood from nothing, from air, and sun, and rain. But the humans hear nothing."

I want to hear something. So I'll keep listening. This made me wonder what are the trees that fill our Jewish teachings and culture saying to us? I want to listen to our trees.

### **The tree planted in honor of your birth.**

Do you have one of those? Or know someone that does? I have a maple and my sister has a forsythia tree in Baltimore, where we grew up. My kids have trees planted in St. Louis in my in-laws back yard. We planted the traditional trees mentioned in the Talmud (BT Gittin 27a) for this occasion a Cedar for a boy and cypress for a girl.

If tradition holds we will use a branch from their tree to build their chuppah. (I guess that will depend on if their grandparents are able or willing to bring it with them to the wedding.) Don't worry. You didn't miss any big announcement from my kids- the branches are for future use.

What does the tree planted in honor of your birth say? It says, "your parents' hope that you will grow, blossom, and strike roots, and demonstrate sensitivity to the wonders of nature." It says, "we will give you roots so your branches can stretch to the heavens." It says, "Think Beyond Today."

### **Do you have a tree planted in Israel? What does it say?**

God teaches the importance of planting trees in the land, in Israel, through example. The first thing God did when creating the world was establish a garden, and as soon as there was dry land God began planting trees (Genesis 2:9). To emulate this act of creation, the Bible gives us the commandment to plant trees when we enter the Land of Israel (Leviticus 19:23).

I recently received a letter from JNF- the Jewish National Fund, the biggest planter of trees in Israel. I think it speaks for the tree who could very well say:

“The best way to connect to the land of Israel is to put your hands in deep rich soil. Perhaps the reason is. that once the earth leaves its trace on your fingers the spirit of all those who came before you - who walked on the land, planted and toiled over the several millennia of history, and sacrificed their lives to return to Israel - is forever imprinted on you, and you have placed your imprint on the land of Israel.” (Sept 2018)

The tree you have planted in Israel says: “You belong here. Have hope, be visionary. Think Beyond Today.”

### **What would the Carob tree tell us?**

Remember this story. One day Choni the circle-maker was walking down the road and he sees a man planting a carob tree.

He asks him “How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?”

The man replies, “Seventy years.”

Choni then asks him, “What makes you think you will live another seventy years?”

“I won’t”

“So why are you bothering to plant it?”

The man replies, “I found grown carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted these for me, so I too plant these for my children.”

The carob tree says, “You are blessed to have a world of trees and fruits and food. You live in abundance. But don’t forget, what you do today affects what the world will be like tomorrow. It says, “Each generation is linked to the next by its actions. We depend on those who came before us. So you need to plant, and conserve and make choices today that will make tomorrow better. (Larry Kushner, The book of Miracles. P. 17)

It says, “Think Beyond Today. ”

### **What would the fruit tree that was not chopped down by the warriors who destroyed the town say to us?**

In Deuteronomy we learn- When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. (Deut. 20:19-20)

This tree, the one that was spared, tells us, “Do not to be wasteful. From me you learn the mitzvah of Ba’al Taschit - do not waste. And as

Maimonides has taught us this law goes beyond just trees that give fruit (like me) to include the the smashing of household goods, demolishing buildings, stopping up springs, destroying food, or the wasteful consumption of anything.” (Maimonides MT 6:8-10)

This tree quotes Ecclesiastes Rabba (it is a very learned tree) “When God made the first human, God showed him all of creation and said: ‘See all my works, how beautiful they are. All I have made, I have made for you. Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend what you have destroyed.’” (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

So the tree that was spared, tells us “Reduce, reuse and recycle. Recycling isn’t just a good, trendy thing to do; it is a profoundly Jewish thing to do.”

When I listen to the tree that was spared I hear: “Don’t buy things you don’t need”. In my case it is make-up, shoes and black pants. And I know I’m not the only one. If you are having trouble coming up with what you don’t need to buy, I’m sure your family members would gladly tell you.

The tree that was spared continues: “Don’t be lazy!”

Why don’t I recycle everything that I can? Well it is a pain. It is a pain to wash out the container from my salad, or to clean out the mess in the bottom of peanut butter jar. It is easier to just throw them away. It is easier to use a paper towel and to throw it out then I dish towel that needs to be washed.

So one of my commitments this year is to listen to the tree that says “don’t be lazy”. To take the extra step to recycle everything and to use reusable items. I bought those reusable beeswax sheets that you can use to wrap a sandwich instead of using a plastic baggie or tin foil. They work well. I am a big fan of reusable cups and straws and water bottles. I have Duke cups, Northwestern cups, Michigan Cups and the stainless steel ones with inspirational sayings. I love my Tervis tumblers and they help me to listen to the trees. (Although, I’m thinking maybe I should stop buying them, in light of this sermon!)

The tree that was spared screams, “Get moving! There is work to be done to save our planet for future generations and you’d better start right away - Think Beyond Today.”

**The tree in Borei p’ree haeitz.**

Borei P'ree Ha'eitz is the ending of the blessing we say over apples and other tree fruits. Blessed are you, Ruler of the Universe who creates the Fruit of the tree. The tree of borei p'ree haeitz. What does it say?

“Appreciate the food with which you have been blessed. It nourishes your body.” It says, “Eat healthy! Just 100 years ago everything you ate was organic. Fresh from the tree. Farm to table wasn't a trend, it just was. Water came from a well or a tap. Food was slow cooked. Ingredients could be pronounced. Think about what you eat everyday.”

Have you ever wondered why are chicken and brisket Shabbat and holiday meals? There is nothing in the Torah that says this is what we should eat. It's probable that people could not afford to eat meat more than once a week, so they saved up to have something special for Shabbat. Something out of the ordinary. Not something they ate three meals a day.

I didn't serve brisket for Rosh HaShana (which then and Passover are the only times I make it and I make a mean brisket) because I'm trying to eat less meat. I didn't have a completely meat free meal either, but it was plant strong.

My goal is to actually be vegan. I tried it in the spring - truly believing that it is better for the planet and the environment, better for my health, better for solving world hunger, better spiritually in the sense that it allows me to feel more connected to the universe and better for the animals! Isaac Bashevis Singer said, “I did not become vegetarian for my health, I did it for the health of the chickens.” He makes a good point.

It turns out being vegan isn't that hard. I was able to be about 95% vegan for 6 weeks.. I wasn't hungry and I felt good. Over the summer I did add animal products back into my diet, but there were lingering positive effects from my foray into veganism. I'm eating more fruits and vegetables. I go whole days without eating anything with a mother or a face. Which is my favorite definition of veganism - not eating anything with a mother or a face. Or just one meal a day will have an animal protein as opposed to all three.

I thought about going strictly vegan again so I could stand up here show you what a shining example I am. That didn't happen. There are many people in this congregation who are my role models and are shining examples. But I decided that standing up here and telling you that it is hard

to not eat animal products in the world we live in, would actually be more realistic. I am a work in progress but I'm following my Jewish values and my drive to do Tikkun 'Olam- repair the world and I'm working on eating in a way that will sustain the world for the future. These High Holidays urge us to grow and improve. So our challenge is to be better this year than we were last year. Ask yourself, "what can I do to be better this year?"

When I go to vegan friendly restaurants it is easy because there are vegan choices. At TBT we have joined Vegan Options Always - we are one of the first congregations in the New York Area and the first on Long Island to take this pledge. This means we will provide a equally nutritious vegan option at all Temple events. We've been moving in this direction for a while, but this will encourage us to "take it up a notch."

So the tree of borei p'ree ha'eitz says, "When making food choices- Think Beyond Today."

### **What about the Tree you are planting when the Messiah comes. What does it say?**

"Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai used to say, 'If while holding a sapling in your hand you are told that the Messiah is about to arrive, first plant the sapling and then go out to receive the Messiah'." (Chapter 31)

The tree you are planting when the Messiah comes says, "There is no quick fix. Do the work that needs to be done. Do it now, before it is too late. Even when Messiah might come, you will still be in charge of the earth. We will still need to plant trees. -Think Beyond Today."

**All these trees, The tree planted at your birth, the tree planted in Israel, the carob tree, the tree that was spared, the borei p'ree ha'eitz tree and the tree you are planting when the Messiah comes are telling us -"You have work to do-As individuals and collectively."**

So what can we do? We can trace the consequences of our behaviors, and figure out which ones we can change this year, this High Holidays, in order to feel like we are part of the solution. Maybe you will Shop at more farmer's markets; Or grow your own vegetables; Bring reusable bags to the store; Stop using single use plastic straws. Any one of us doing these things makes a little tiny dent, but if everyone here did them, we make a much, much bigger dent.

“An example: Americans use an average of 156 plastic bottles a year, per person. That’s 50 billion plastic bottles in total. Used for 20 minutes, if that, and then taking centuries to decompose. ...

If 2500 people are hearing this sermon..and your consumption is just average, and we all decided this year to cut our use of disposable plastic bottles by 90% (ie once in a blue moon, rather than regularly), then we would save more than 300,000 plastic bottles a year. Imagine the sight of 300,000 plastic bottles. They would fill your backyard swimming pool. Imagine your own part in it. (<https://www.earthday.org/2018/03/29/fact-sheet-single-use-plastics/>

And Nigel Savage- <https://hazon.org/five-ways-to-prepare-for-rosh-hashanah/> )

Along these lines, at Temple Beth Torah, we are installing a refillable water station donated by the Adult B’nai Mitzvah class. Everyone can bring a water bottle to Temple, to Religious school, Nursery School. Instead of buying stainless steel water bottles for each child in our school, because that might have just gone into the cabinet with all the other unused water bottles and we would just be creating more junk, we are asking each student to bring in refillable water bottle and we will give them a sticker on it that says, can you guess? -Think Beyond Today.

This is what we are calling our Eco-Friendly/Greening Campaign at TBT - Think Beyond Today. TBT (Similar to Touched by Torah 613)

### **And we are doing so much more. As a congregation**

We are partnering with the United Nations through Mr. Regini at West Hollow Middle School to reduce our carbon footprint. This is done by calculating our carbon emissions, then pledging to reduce them and by making a donation to offset our usage. The donation will go toward a sustainability project in the developing world - such as clean drinking water or building with recycled plastics.

West Hollow is the first school in the country to be part of the United Nations Climate Neutral Now (CNN) we will be the first synagogue. Besides all the good this will do for the environment and the world, I love how it sends a message to our Middle Schoolers that Judaism and “real” school are intertwined.

We have several other initiatives. The Confirmation Class donated ceramic plates and bowls and coffee cups. We will be using them for Friday night dinners and Oneg Shabbats. Follow the principle of reusing and reducing waste.

We are changing our light bulbs, looking into solar power on the roof, Lucas Friedfeld, planted a garden in the back for our NS and RS kids to learn from and to eat from. Even though we don't have recycling pick up we will be working with our teens to have them collect our recycling and take it to the town's recycling center.

The Eco Friendly Committee took a field trip to Westchester Reform Synagogue to see how they operate as a zero waste facility. Once there we were inspired by their composting efforts and the transformation they have created in Scarsdale. We want to do something similar here. So, we started researching composting on Long Island of which there are very few facilities. In an effort to find out how other businesses compost, a member of our committee went to Chopt and Whole Foods and Core Life- places that have you sort your trash - recycling | food | and other compostables and then if anything is left - goes in the regular trash. She asked them, "who picks up your composting?" After several blank stares and being shuffled from person to person - she gets the same answer at each place - "Oh, it all goes into the shopping center's trash dumpster in the back." After being appalled and depressed, we realize that we have a opportunity to effect change on Long Island. So that is something we are going to do. We are working with legislators and other businesses on Long Island to get laws passed and more facilities opened so that composting can become a reality where we live.

This sounds daunting. But who would have thought, 10 years ago, we would be bringing our own bags to the grocery store. It used to be a weird, California thing to do, now it is a law and more importantly, a common, earth saving practice.

### **There is one more tree - The tree of life which is really two trees**

The one in the Garden of Eden and the Torah. They speak to us with similar messages:

"We call our ancient scroll of wisdom, the Torah, an "eytz chaim," a tree of life, for it, like the Earth's great forests, sustains us. Torah teaches us that creation, in its great diversity, is harmoniously interconnected. Like trees, we too need strong and deep roots for nourishment. The uplifted branches of trees point to our future. God let us be strong, as strong as ancient trees. We are grateful for the life we are lent. We pledge to lift up our voices both in praise of You and in defense of Your Creation. ([www.greenfaith.org](http://www.greenfaith.org) - Rabbi Warren G Stone)



We read in the Torah today - Think Beyond Today. It says “I call heaven and earth to witness you today: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse — therefore choose life!” All of our trees are telling us “choose life.” Choose life through planting, through taking care of the earth, by recycling and not creating waste in the first place, by realizing how amazing the life we have been given with plants creating what we need, oxygen, and we humans breathing out carbon dioxide, what plants need.

Jane Goodall said at the Climate summit last week "It's important to understand that each one of us makes an impact on the planet every single day. We have a choice when it comes to that impact—what we eat, buy & wear. Does it destroy forests? If it does, we have to be strong enough to not buy it." [@JaneGoodallInst #GCAS2018](#) And let's add, if it hurts our oceans, don't use it. If it hurts our children, and their children, fix it.

I believe that each of us can make a little difference by listening to the trees, and that all of us together as TBT can have a huge impact as we Think Beyond Today.

#### General Sources

Rabbi Laura Geller, RH Sermon 5768, Temple Emanuel Beverly Hills.  
9/13/2007 (Found on Interfaith Power and Light)

<http://rabbisacks.org/environmental-responsibility-shoftim-5775/>