

EPISODE 2 TRANSCRIPT FOR WEB BRING ME A SHRUBBERY

Shira: Hello, Joshua.

Josh: Hello, Rabbi Shira.

Shira: How are you today?

Josh: Good. Glad to be here. Welcome folks to episode two of Chutzpod! Ancient texts for modern times, where we're going to try and look at modern life through a Jewish lense.

Shira: Welcome everyone, whether it's your first, second, or third time listening, we're really glad you're here.

Shira: I want to begin with a question for you, Joshua, which is this: I hear that you have a birthday coming up.

Josh: That is true. I mean, we all have a birthday coming up. Technically.

Shira: I guess that's true. Is there a certain way that you celebrate your birthday specifically in your home?

Josh: It's funny. I was about to say birthdays are not that important to me, but in fact, I've been accused accurately by my family of trying to celebrate Joshuary every year, which is to stretch out my birthday, uh, into an entire month of festivities. So basically I guess, really what I get to do is I get to choose to do certain things this year. I just want to, I want my wife and children to commit to having dinner with me and then playing games afterwards.

Shira: That sounds like fun. I'm in, I'm in from thousands of miles away. What is this? Your 40th? 45th? 50th.

Josh: I'll just lay it out there. It is my, it will, it will be –God willing– my 56th birthday on the 17th.

Shira: Until 120, as we say, *Ad Meyah v'Esrim*. So this idea of Joshuary, right? Some people say, well, the idea of celebrating a birthday once a year, it's like, well, shouldn't every day be a day that we celebrate Joshua Molina?

Shira: Why do we have just one day, or one month as the case may be that we celebrate Joshua, where do you come down on that argument?

Josh: We have so many meaningful Jewish holidays that things like birthdays to me. I don't think much of them, but the idea of everybody having a moment or a day where your loved ones pay

tribute to you and say, you know, I'm glad you're still alive and you're special. And this is why I, you know, that's, that's still a good thing. I get it. It's a, it's a sort of like, uh, a mindfulness about other people that is baked into the year.

Shira: Yeah. I actually agree with you. I used to not like my birthday at all. And I think all these years of working with so many millennials who really, really, as a generation really love their birthdays, and often have birthday months and often will say oh no rabbi Shira. I couldn't possibly see you that week because my birthday is two weeks hence, and I'll be preparing, and I've learned from them about sort of the importance of allowing myself to be celebrated and celebrating others and noticing them. I know as, as good liberals, we're not supposed to be pro trickle-down anything, but the way that it trickles down throughout the year, when you have one day that you can focus on one person. Or as the case may be one tree, because as you can imagine, I had an ulterior motive. Do you know what it is when I asked you about your birthday? Joshua? What was my ulterior motive?

Josh: I think we're leading into today's discussion of *Tu BiShvat*.

Shira: Yes, we were. I feel it would not be a week of Chutzpod if we didn't talk about the Jewish new years. We did it last week, we're going to do it this week. What is *Tu BiShvat*?

Josh: I didn't want to tip our hand, but the other request I've made for my birthday is that with my family, we're going to plant a tree since my birthday coincides with *Tu Bishvat*.

Shira: Now, why would someone want to plant a tree on *Tu BiShvat*, Joshua?

Josh: Well, my understanding is that *Tu BiShvat* is one of four, which I learned from your last episode, one of four new years, or "news year," which I believe is the correct plural, that the Jews have. And it is the new year of four trees.

Shira: Yes. But what the hell does that mean? Would you like me to explain?

Josh: I would like you to explain it to me because I will admit that in the past, this has struck me as kind of a minor holiday that I haven't done much around. We once as a family did plant a tree. We planted a beautiful pomegranate tree that my sister Toby sent me. So I have observed it, but I've never really quite dug (planting pun intended) into whether there's greater meaning to the holiday, then I have realized. And I suspect there is.

Shira: Yes, there is. Although your point is very well taken in that for much of its history and arguably even till today, *Tu BiShvat*, was a minor Jewish holiday. And until about 500 years ago, which in Jewish time is a blink of an eye, there actually wasn't that much of a way to celebrate it. It wasn't like Passover with its eating traditions and it wasn't like Purim with its noisemakers. It really was something that was like, oh, look, it's the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Shevat*. Let's move on. But in the last 500 years or so, it's changed a lot. And we can talk about that at some point or not, but first let me introduce you to trees. Anyone who has ever opened the Bible

or heard any Bible story, many of them will know that trees are actually a big deal in the Bible. We have the tree of knowledge from the garden of Eden. We have in the story of Noah and the arc, there is the bird that goes out to a light on a tree after the flood is over and so on and so forth and so on and so forth.

Josh: You got your burning Bush.

Shira: Are bushes trees?

Josh: I don't know. I should know. By next *Tu BiShvat*. I feel like they're in the same wheelhouse.

Shira: They have branches and berries sometimes. Leaves? Okay, we're going to say they're the same

Josh: Library's also branches and libraries are trees of knowledge in the sense, but carry on.

Shira: You have high expectations for me being able to hold a train of thought for a long period of time.

Josh: Somebody's got to.

Shira: This is really going to be a challenge for us.

Shira: Anyway, can we go to Leviticus? Yes, we can. In the book of Leviticus, we are taught that when a tree is first planted, and this is specifically talking about fruit trees, you are actually not allowed to pick the fruit from the tree in the first year, in the second year. In the third year, after you have planted the tree. Now in the fourth year, you are allowed to pick the fruit, but you have to donate it. God willing, we'll have a lot of episodes of Chutzpod about *Tzedekh* charity, but in the fourth year, you don't get to keep it. In the fourth year, you donate it. It is only in the fifth year after you plant a fruit tree that you are actually allowed to take some of the bounty –about 90% of the bounty to be exact– of the fruit tree, to use for yourself. To sell, to barter, to eat, whatever it is, but only in year five. Now, how do we know when the birthday of the tree is? So the rabbi said instead of every single time that the Molina family planted a new pomegranate tree, they had to sort of write down the tree's birthday on their, I almost called on their Palm pilot, but that's really dating me as a gen X-er and their iPhone on their Google calendar. Instead, once a year, it was set as the birthday for all the trees, whether it was planted the day before *Tu BiShvat* or six months before *Tu BiShvat*, there was one birthday, and then we would celebrate all the trees birthday every year, so that we would know at which point we were allowed to enjoy the bounty of their fruit.

Josh: If I'm correct. If I'm understanding you, the rabbis came up with *Tu BiShvat*. They minted a new holiday in order to address this first in Leviticus. So we needed the clock to start on a tree's

age. How do you know when it's one year old, two years old, three years old, and that's the raise on debt of *Tu BiShvat*?

Shira: And that's also about the extent of my French knowledge. The raise on debt of *Tu BiShvat*. Because remember we Jews, we are historically, we are an agricultural people. We actually lived off the land for many millennia. And now again, in certain ways, and we are a legal people, we have laws. And so this was nothing more than sort of a set of laws. Now what the rabbinic and Jewish imagination did with *Tu BiShvat* is actually a kind of a Rorschach test. It differed tremendously depending where we were living Jews, what we were doing with our time. All the different ways to celebrate *Tu BiShvat* have morphed, but you're right. Originally, it wasn't an arbitrary date that was set, but it was a date that was set. We can talk about what the date was supposed to be about in the moment. And it was for all the trees as a way of linking all the trees, which actually is quite beautiful when you think about it.

Josh: I think I know where you're headed, just because recent science has informed us that all trees are linked and that trees in the forest communicate. And there's this whole, what the native Americans have been onto and other traditions for many, many, I guess, millennia current science is catching up with, that trees communicate and are linked, and there's a lot we can learn from them.

Shira: I know that you and I are both fans of this book, uh, "Braiding Sweetgrass," which is, I cannot recommend it enough for anyone who cares about the earth, or actually I recommend the more people who don't care about the earth, so you can learn to grow to care about it. And one of the many teachings of this book is exactly that, that the trees are interconnected in ways that we are only beginning to understand that there are ways that grown up trees protect baby trees, that there are ways that trees talk to each other to tell each other when it's time to begin to let the sap rise, for instance. And if you go back to the Torah, there are many instances of talking about trees and in a few of them, the biblical author is talking about trees. And it's clear that they're talking about many, many trees, but they use the singular "eighths," as if they're talking about only one tree. And one of the understandings of that is that even in ancient times, there was some understanding that one tree and multiple trees, they are somehow the same and they are somehow connected in certain ways. And that's why it's not important to talk about trees in the plural, because even when you're talking about one tree, you're somehow implying that you're talking about all of them.

Josh: Oh, I love that. I love that a lot, but next, as we're going to the Bible, to Torah, there's an early section in "Braiding Sweetgrass" that started to make me feel bad. I remember saying to my wife, the lovely Melissa who gave me the book because she loves it so much, and saying "Uh-oh, I think Native American creation story might be better than ours. I might, I might want to convert to Native American because she tells the native, North American creation story about sky woman who comes from, the cloud world. She descends, she is caught, I think lovingly on the backs of geese, who then deposited her on the great turtle and then sea creatures go under the water and they bring up mud from below the ocean and deposit it on the turtle and is on this, that sky woman helps, and the animals help in the creation of the world. Robin Wall Kimmerer

wrote this incredible book and she shares this, I may have butchered it, but she shares this story of sky woman. And then does contrast it with a sort of Judeo Christian, creation story, where rather than participating in the creation of earth and all that is green and fertile, Eve –our proto woman– eats from the tree and is immediately banished from the garden. And I started thinking “Wow these are very different messages in tone and in explicit narrative about our connection to the natural world.”

Shira: Well, okay. I do want to say Joshua, that I had the same feeling when I read that passage of the book, except let me say a few things. First of all, I want to have a list of words that we should never say on the podcast. And one of them is Judeo-Christian. I think that Judeo Christian, whatever, is b****t. I think that there is Judaism and there is Christianity and they are both beautiful faith traditions. But the idea of, of them sort of being the same, it is a, it is a Christian hegemonic statement that tries to subsume Judaism under Christianity. Okay. There's a rabbi Shira rant number one of the day.

Shira: Here's what I do want to say, Josh. You can disagree with me, and this a defensive reaction, but I think that Kimmerer was actually commenting on the Christian tradition when she was talking about the Genesis creation stories, and not from the Jewish tradition the way that we understand those stories. But more to the point, Josh, I do think there is something that the Jewish tradition has to learn from indigenous traditions. And I think this is the beauty of living in the 21st century, is that we have the ability to learn this and to take it in and to be grateful that this knowledge is being offered to us, which is, in the book of Genesis, it is made very clear that, well, I don't want to say very clear. It is made clear that humans are at the top of the evolutionary, the pinnacle of the evolutionary world. That our job is to till and to tend to dominate, to name all the animals. Remember in the second creation story, Adam, even names all the animals. And, while you can take that teaching and really, use it to imply that we have a responsibility to this earth, there is definitely a hierarchy there. And I think in “Braiding Sweetgrass,” sort of the different take is, the lack of hierarchy and the, and the idea that everyone has a role. Every organism has a role including Single cell parameciums, that's what you said last weekend. Every organism has a role and we all just have to do our own. I think that's quite beautiful.

Josh: Yeah. I remember there even being a sense of maybe there is a hierarchy and humans, as the most recent, are on the lower end of it(Yes!) and others, that the Native Americans think of humans as the younger sibling of trees and of creatures and of life that has inhabited our earth longer than we have. That's a very different take from what I grew up with and it appeals to me, there's something to learn from. And then, and then you read her book and others, and there's this amazing book called *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. All about stuff I've never even contemplated before, about how trees communicate and work together. Just there is a sense that there's a lot to learn from trees and how they communicate. And you know, there are fungi in the forest underneath the ground, form kind of a neural network that allows them to benefit and the trees that they put in communication with each other. I mean, there's mind blowing science, that we can take, I think, and learn from.

Shira: And I think that when you look at the Jewish tradition, it is of two minds about how to approach trees. It's very clear that trees are quite important. They are critical. And there are texts that talk about trees as, as critical qua trees. The fact that you are not allowed to cut down a fruit tree once it has grown, except under certain circumstances, but it's not like here in America, where just because it's on your property you automatically get to cut it down.

Shira: Speaking of that, Josh, I want to throw to what is actually our first interview, your friend, Mark Donovan, AKA Santa Claus, who spent Christmas this past year sitting in a tree, trying to convince his neighbors not to chop down beautiful century old trees in his backyard.

Josh: So very exciting moment. It's time now for our first ever guest on Chutzpod! (Shehecheyanu). Dear friend of mine and righteous gentile: Mark Donovan. Mark and I, our kids went to preschool together many years ago, we became close friends. He moved away from Los Angeles some years back. We haven't kept in as good touch as I would like, I hope we will moving forward, but a couple weeks ago, I got a text from him with a link basically saying "I think you might get a kick out of this article." I clicked on the link to read the following headline: "Westport man dressed as Santa swings from 100-year-old tree in protest of new land developer." Santa was my friend Mark Donovan. (I always wanted to know who Santa was.) I was gonna say, I was raised to believe there is no Santa. I'm willing now to admit that I was wrong for all these years. There is a Santa, his name is Mark Donovan. Welcome to the show Mark.

Mark: Thank you Joshua. It is certainly a pleasure to be here.

Josh: So this is the perfect synchronicity, because today the rabbi and I are discussing *Tu BiShvat*: the Jewish birthday of the trees, holiday that recognizes trees— their importance. They're obviously important to you, first can you tell us about this endeavor of yours?

Mark: We lived in the city for many years and as a result of the pandemic and whatnot, we made an abrupt shift last January to leave the city to come out to Connecticut, where my mother still lives. We discovered over the summer that the property owners that had been directly next door to us had sold their property to a developer, a local luxury developer and found out through conversation between the developer and our neighbors that they were going to come in and cut all the trees down on the property. We tried to get them to make different decisions, maybe save some of the trees, change their plans a bit. Ultimately, they didn't really change anything they wanted to do. And so when the day came that they were going to start cutting all the trees, there were five particularly large red oak trees we enjoyed every single day. And when those trees were going to come down, we realized that our only option— we knew the trees were going to come down— our only option was to try and use this opportunity to draw as much attention to the issue as we possibly could. And so there's no better way to do that than throwing a swing over one of the branches that sat very squarely over our yard, which were in our legal right to do, and to swing on it and I realized as I was going to get the swing, "oh, what if I put the Santa costume on? We're days away from Christmas." And so all the local news showed up and the local blog

which replaced our town newspaper many many years ago was basically live blogging it as it was unfolding. And the ultimate goal was how do we change legislation in town, so this can't happen in this way?

Josh: It's a fantastic story. Look, the name of our podcast is Chutzpod! *Chutzpah* is the Hebrew and Yiddish word for brashness, for boldness. And so, I salute what you're doing and what you've done to make a statement.

Mark: So it's all about trying to draw attention to an issue. Normally this stuff just happens in the shadows, so the only way to stop bad things from happening is to start by getting it out in the open right.

Shira: What happened with the trees? Did they cut them down?

Mark: Yes. They came with chainsaws and large cranes and they were quite sizable trees. It's not just a tiny little tree. I mean, they're so big that you'd have to be a professional to climb them, right, they were sizable. And they came with chainsaws in an astonishingly embarrassment showing, at least from my perspective, of immaturity as they were cutting them down with chainsaws. All these guys from the construction company sat there cheering as these 100 foot trees were being dead dropped down to the ground as branches were coming down, and they would clap like teenage boys who don't have levels of maturity. It was not only embarrassing, but just confounding. It was shameful really, like it was some victory. It's almost like the same victory lap that people take when they kill a deer with a shotgun. And by the way, people can hunt, that's fine, but there's no real craft to that if you have to take a chainsaw. At least come in with an ax, make it something like there's effort.

Josh: Surely adding disgrace upon disgrace, that's disappointing to hear.

Shira: You know, this is just such a great example— or a terrible example— of the fact that somehow human beings see humans and trees as sort of others, and not necessarily as enemies but as not integrated or interconnected in a certain way. And it's just, it's ridiculous. It's factually inaccurate, and it's a little bit depressing. And I feel that the more we actually see trees as more connected to humans, the less things like this will happen. It makes me despair a little bit for humanity.

Mark: Well we live in a community, right? And the community is not one individual or even two individuals. It's a combination of many, many different individuals. I think we've lost the plot a bit, in general, in this country in particular, that just because something is legal and you have the right to do something, doesn't mean that it actually makes it right to do it. It's what, all tides lift all boats, what is it Joshua? You know that. (Yeah, tides boats, go go.) Yeah, right, the rising tide lifts all boats. And so I see it as an issue of something that clearly affects everyone in the community. It doesn't affect them all in the same way. And I think ultimately, you wake up one day, and you look around you and you say, "how did this happen?" And it happened because I don't know if we all look at what's right in front of our face. If it's not right in front of our face, it

tends not to bother us. And this is, I think, the challenge across the board, but I tend to look at things differently. How do I put in more effort to consider how everything that I do impacts everyone else, and hopefully the same is reflected back to me, and it doesn't have to be just about people. It's about the earth too, right? It's about thinking about how what we're doing affects the planet around us, because eventually that ends up coming back at you. Not in a good way.

Josh: First I want to give you a quick hat tip for referring to Manhattan as "The City." As a New York Jew, I was 20 before I realized there were other cities in the United States, the city. Second of all (laughter), I want to give you another hat tip also for just— I love that you went into the endeavor of dressing as Santa Claus and hanging from the branch, knowing that you would fail in one sense and that you certainly were not going to prevent these trees or that tree in particular from being chopped down. But you did something that is, to me, akin to planting a tree and there's, again there's some great idiomatic way of saying that you don't plant a tree for yourself because they take decades to grow it.

Shira: You're right Josh. There actually is a mention of that in the *Talmud*, where we learn that we plant trees quite obviously not for ourselves, but for the generations to come.

Josh: So what you've done while not saving, will never having a chance to save that tree, is something that might in future legislation, save future trees. So I think that's a great not only holistic way of thinking but a forward way of thinking because of course, if people before us hadn't planted trees, we wouldn't have them. If we don't plant trees, our kids won't have them. So I think it's an awesome, it's a beautiful thing that you're doing and that you've done.

Mark: I appreciate that. I mean, full disclosure it's really my mom, I sat with her as she wept, that obviously matters a lot to me. But I think just like you said, Joshua, that it's sometimes you got to think about the greater good and move beyond.

Shira: That image of your mom weeping. It sort of calls to mind, all those people, all the generations who have had land taken from them, and obviously your mother's stories, no offense, not comparable to some of the stories that we know— and yet even for her it was so painful. So how much more so for all the different peoples who have had their land taken from them and still continue to do so?

Josh: And I know we're going to get into that too. (Laughter)

Shira: Yeah, I think you're right.

Mark: Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, and look to a degree, these are the problems of the privileged, right? In terms of there's a little bit of that that runs around in my head a lot. But ultimately, again, I think that it impacts everything and everyone. I just think it's important to focus on doing well.

Shira: I would prefer if humanity was able to have deep compassion and empathy for the other without having personal experience, but that's just not how we're built. We need to have these personal experiences in order to be able to have the full compassion. That's exactly what you're talking about Mark. You've had this experience. It's from a privileged perspective, but you are going to use the experience to do good for many people. And that's what's really important.

Mark: Right. If I can find different ways to put it in front of people like this, then people become aware of it and then it is in front of their face.

Shira: Well, thank you so much, Mark, for taking the time to speak to us.

Mark: Absolutely.

Shira: Thank you so much Mark for your time and for your energy and for speaking with us. So there's the appreciation of trees as giving us food as giving us shade as critically important. And then there's tree as stand in metaphor for representation, for the human being and also for Torah, for sacred learning and sacred text.

Josh: *Etz Chaim He.*

Shira: That's exactly right.

Josh: On Shabbat after we've read the Torah, as we ceremonially return it to the Ark we sing *Etz chaim la'machazikim ba*, it's one of my favorites.

Shira This comes from the book of Proverbs. It's a tree of life to those who hold onto it, to those who are made stronger by it, and all who sort of engage with it. All who hold onto it are happy or richer, but not richer necessarily money-wise, enriched, I guess we should say.

Josh: So there's a reverence for trees built into our liturgy.

Shira: Well, so that's the question Josh. This is clearly a metaphor for Torah, because if you read that chapter of Proverbs, you do see how they're talking about, the authors are talking about Torah sacred learning as what we have reference for. And the tree is a metaphor here for Torah, as a stand-in for Torah. But I think considering how much Jews revere sacred learning, so therefore it shows that by comparing trees, we actually have a reverence for the natural world as well.

Josh: I like that.

Shira: Okay. So I want to ask you a question.

Josh: Sure.

Shira: I know you're supposed to ask me questions, but I like asking you questions. Why the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shvat, why was that the date that was set to be the birthday of the trees?

Josh: Hoof? I got nothing.

Shira: I'll give you a hint.

Josh: Please, I need a hint. I need, uh, a lifeline.

Shira: Okay. It has something to do with trees in a certain part of the world.

Josh: At the equator?

Shira: No.

Josh: It's in the middle of the month. It's in the equator of the month. It's the 15th.

Shira: Okay. So it's in the middle of the month.

Josh: Come on, make something smart out of that rabbi, please (laughter).

Shira: The equator of the month it is, which means we have a full moon. And a lot of harvest related celebrations happen and the full moon so that we can, at a time before electricity, you could actually see the harvest or the fruits on your trees in the country of...Israel, Joshua.

Josh: Yes. Israel. I was going to say that. I was just thinking that, I was actually, my mind was, I was perseverating. I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that we aren't agricultural people, but there's like a stereotype about Jews not being outdoorsy or Dharna Jewish farmers. And it's because over millennia, every country has kicked our asses off of our land.

Shira: That's right.

Josh: We've gone into the law. Yes. There's a profusion. There, there are a lot of Jewish lawyers now, and maybe there would be more Jewish farmers if they had let us stay in the various countries around the world that did not,

Shira: I think the number of Jews going into the law is going down. I would like to get the 2022 statistics on that, But your point is still very well taken. I think that in a lot of places where Jews had lived, we were not allowed to own land. So once we were kicked out of his thrill in 70-ish C.E., we didn't work the land in the same way, because we didn't know how long we'd be able to stay in any of these places.

Josh: Quick, quick digression antisemites. Many of whom like to reach out to me on social media, are always throwing the number 1 0 9 at me 1 0 9 is, do you know that that is an anti-Semitic dog whistle because apparently 109 countries have kicked Jews or expelled them, over the course of history. So 1 0 9 and 110, like, let's go for 110 is an anti-Semitic thing. And I'm always like, it actually just makes me laugh. Even though it's hatred and malice and enmity being thrown at me. I'm like, "You think that reflects on us? That's a bad reflection on us?" I'm supposed to go "yes, there was clearly something wrong with us, but all these countries kicked us out. It doesn't reflect badly on those countries." That's like some way of rallying the Jewish hatred. It's so stupid.

Shira: I really hope we somehow talk about antisemitism in every episode.

Josh: I suspect we will.

Shira: I don't think it will be hard. Back to the land of Israel.

Josh: Yes. So the land of Israel? Yes. Oh yes.

Shira: It is the 15th of Shvat. It is the land of Israel. And springtime is starting to spring. Now, here in D.C. We've gotten quite a lot of snow recently. I assume that is not the same for you in Los Angeles.

Josh: No, but it's chilly.

Shira: Oh, what is chilly for you? 65 degrees?

Josh: Exactly.

Shira: All right. You can get over yourself, but okay. Israel, but I digress. One of the teachings about why the 15th of Shvat is that it is the moment that the buds begin to bloom on some of the trees in Israel, specifically, for instance, the almond tree and those of us who did grow up, going to Hebrew school, might've grown up singing a song. The almond tree is just beginning to bloom. It is actually, if you have never been to Israel in February, I would recommend it because it is one of the most beautiful sites you've ever seen, it rivals Colorado in the summertime. But *Tu BiShvat* is not marked at the moment when the trees are heaviest with their fruits, nor is it marked after you have taken all the fruits, you are nodding Josh, what do you think I'm going to say?

Josh: It seems like it's a celebration of potential.

Shira: Yes. *Tu BiShvat* is the celebration of potential. And in the end, a sort of rabbinic imagination. When I use that phrase, the rabbis over the last few thousand years, it has always been marked as this moment when something great may happen and that too is a *shehechyanu* moment, as you and I would say, and I find that incredibly meaningful, what's

most important is not what happens at the end, but sort of what happens at the beginning and the energy that goes into making something grow.

Josh: Fantastic. While we're talking about the wisdom of the rabbis and pride, we can take in our attitude towards trees and our recognition of their bounty and sharing it and all good things. I suggest we also at least touch on some negative aspects of our relationship to trees.

Josh: I'm specifically of the heartbreak I feel every time I read in the news, another story, and they happen frequently, of settlers in the West Bank, preventing Palestinians from tending their own olive tree orchards. Sometimes it's worse. Sometimes I read about settler's uprooting the trees or burning the trees. So that goes from the sublime conversation we've had to these stories in the news of our fellow Jews preventing others from tending to their trees. It's very depressing and upsetting.

Shira: It is. I'm noticing in fact, while you're talking that I kind of just, I want you to shut up. I don't want to hear what you're saying. I'm like, "Shhh let's not talk about this. Let's go back to Robin Wall Kimmerer. But I think one of the things we want to do in this podcast as Jews and as Zionists, is really talk about what is happening in the occupied territory of the West Bank. Two things specifically, which you alluded to. One which is olive trees that belonged to our Palestinian siblings, and I, you know, use that phrase widely. Since I don't live in Israel myself, but trees that belong to our Palestinian siblings being burnt and uprooted, and the second problem, tragedy is farmers who have farmed this land for generations being separated from their olive trees so that they cannot farm them and harvest the olives. It feels like it is such a, as we say in Hebrew, a *chillul hashem*, it is a desecration of God's name and the fact that it is being done to a certain extent in the name of this country that we love so much, it makes me feel ashamed. I feel a deep sense of shame, meaning that I want to do more. Just surfacing this conversation is one way of doing more. I mean, all you have to do is Google and you just have to look within the last few days, weeks. It's not like you have to go very far back, but this is happening with regularity.

Josh: As I understand it, olive trees and olive oil production are a significant part of the Palestinian economy and I think olive trees also have cultural importance to the Palestinians. So I mean, our faith has a new year for the trees. And then here we have all this evidence of weaponizing and trees against the other. You know, we talked about the other last episode. It's disgraceful. Also, while we're saying this, I want to make sure when we talk about this difficult stuff that we don't paint with too broad a brush. It's not every settler is just if you want to read about, and we encourage you to do so, there's no scarcity of stories like this.

Shira: Yes, you are correct. It is not every settler. It is, in fact, a minority of settlers who are doing this atrocious act, but they're doing it a lot. And there are ways that the IDF—the Israeli Defense Forces— of which in some ways we are so proud, is permitting this to happen, which makes it even more egregious. Josh you reminded me of a verse from I think it's Deuteronomy, where Jews we are not a pacifist religion, we have laws of war and one of the laws of war is that if you are going into battle, you are not allowed to cut down the trees in order to make your

battle easier as it were. Even if, God forbid, we see those others as our enemies and I pray for a day when we do not, but even in that moment, cutting down trees. Yes, it's so problematic. There are Jewish groups that go into the West Bank to help re-plant or plant trees that have been uprooted by other Jews in the name of Judaism and to those people I'm grateful today.

Josh: Now I feel like you've come up with perhaps the most beautiful, meaningful way to observe *Tu BiShvat*. We've talked about appreciating trees. We're gonna have some more ideas later, but maybe the most substantial thing one could do is to help try to repair damage we've done through trees.

Shira: Luckily, there's a lot of damage to repair. Whether it's here in the United States, whether it's in Israel and the West Bank.

Josh: There are multiple opportunities.

Shira: There's so much work to be done. And I want to say one more thing. Part of our job as proud members of the Jewish people is to have this conversation and I do want to reiterate this for those of you who are listening, who are newer to Judaism, who don't play this sort of inside Jewish baseball game, that Josh and I play in our curated, emails every day. This idea of being able to critique your people, Hava, with love, is part of what it means. And especially this land of Israel, which I know Josh and I both love so dearly. This is part of what you will hear in Chutzpod. And I hope you see it as part and parcel of the Jewish conversation and not as a way of us keeping ourselves outside of it.

Josh: Well said and I agree, but also I think a lot of what you've said about what *Tu BiShvat* is about and what our, Jewish, thinking is on trees and on interconnectedness and on life and on bounty is something we can also discuss as something we can move closer to the, you know, we can see the gap between what our ideals are and what the rabbis have laid out for us and maybe some of the ways that we are falling short of that in practice

Shira: And I think Josh, that one of the beauties of *Tu BiShvat* specifically is that it has been a sort of Rorschach test that over the millennia we have understood *Tu BiShvat* quite differently depending on where we lived. For, I don't know, 1200 years, 1100 years *Tu BiShvat* had no way of being celebrated. And especially once we were kicked out of Israel and then the medieval mystical **Kabbalistic** rabbis sort of brought *Tu BiShvat* to the fore, because with the development of Kabbalah came a whole new way of entering into relationship with God and, to make a very long story short, it was a way that sort of privileged, experiencing God through the way that we moved in this world and not just seeing God only as some sort of transcendent being above. So we experienced God through eating the fruits of the trees and the nuts and the seeds. And so then in the 1500s, the mystical rabbis came up with the idea of the *Tu BiShvat* Seder. And for a few hundred years *Tu BiShvat* was all about mysticism, and getting high, not with drugs, but with certain eating practices and staying up late at night, and really trying to experience the immediacy of the world. And then as Zionists came to the fore, *Tu BiShvat* became more about building the land or entering the land of Palestine as it was called then, and

building it up. And, when I grew up and in school, we had to eat these terrible carobs. Did you eat the carob? They look like poop.

Josh: Is that what a boxer is?

Shira: That's it. If you want to make a kid love Judaism, it is the last food that you should give them.

Josh: I know, you want kids to love Judaism, get that and make a holiday where you eat a Snickers.

Shira: Amen, Unless you're allergic to peanuts, in which case you should not eat Snickers. And so for a while, he was connected to Israel and Zionism. And, but then in the last 10 or 20 years or so it started to become more connected to the earth? Because of climate change and the recognition that this is our only earth, this is what we got. And so *Tu BiShvat* is now, you hear people calling a Jewish Earth Day. It wasn't called Jewish Earth Day for the first thousand years or so, but now it is because we are recognizing that climate change has already, I mean as I said in DC, we had one day last week, it was 60 degrees. And then we had eight inches of snow the next day.

Josh: I watched a documentary about trees and it ended with a very simple, I didn't even know if it's accurate. It ended with a message saying something like if every person on the planet planted six trees, the effect would be, and it was staggering. I mean, since they are these just perfectly engineered machines for turning carbon dioxide into oxygen. I was just gonna say one nice way to commemorate *Tu BiShvat* is to plant a tree.

Shira: Yes. And you can plant a tree in your own backyard. You could plant a tree in Israel. and in the Palestinian territory through a program with Truah, the rabbinic call for human rights. What are other things that people can do this *Tu BiShvat* to make a difference?

Josh: Well, you know, something that's interesting is this all really resonates with me because for some reason, during the last two years of the pandemic, I have been jolted out of what I think has been, taking the natural world largely for granted for most of my life.

The lovely Melissa has gotten me into gardening and we started growing our own vegetables. It kind of, sort of, felt like a victory garden. Like they used to do during the war. We were like, okay, the pandemic's here, let's start growing our own food. And I love it and it's so rewarding. And it's led to all these concomitant revelations where I walk around realizing I was in a kind of I think some people call tree blindness where there's so much natural beauty and wonder, and these amazing processes happening in front of you.

And you don't even see them most of the time on your daily walk. And then I started reading things like *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Melissa gave me this Richard Powers book *The Overstory* which is one of the best books I've ever read. It's just a knock out piece of fiction that has multiple interlocking overlapping stories, but all of which are tree-laden. And it's like this incredible statement about our climate and the natural beauty and wonder that we need to

preserve in this country and in the world. But at the same time, it doesn't feel like a lesson, it's not tendentious. It's like a piece of activism that's nonetheless an incredible piece of literature and I highly recommend it. And all of these things have happened. We started composting during the pandemic, so somehow I'd been shaken up and it seems to me, any of those things are another step towards acknowledging and interacting with the natural world on *Tu BiShvat*. Start one of those books, maybe start composting, plant something in the ground or anything in that orbit seems like an appropriate way maybe to observe the holiday.

Shira: I think that's right. I want to say two things. The first is, you know how, where we get a FOJ a friend of Josh to say the Hebrew words and then translate them. We need to have another part where we take all the big words that Josh says like concomitant and tendentious, and have someone else come on to tell us to define them for us.

Josh: Or somebody can just come in and say he used 4 out of the 10 of those words correctly, which is entirely possible.

Back to the trees. I will also say in terms of Richard Powers, the author of *The Overstory*, we did invite him to be on the podcast today and he was not available because a winter storm had taken out all of the electricity in his house for a significant period of time. But he did say in his email to us that *Tu BiShvat* is his favorite Jewish holiday. So for that reason alone, I think you should celebrate *Tu BiShvat* on Sunday night and Monday, have we even said it is officially on Joshua's birthday this year, it begins Sunday night and goes till Monday of this year

Josh: Sunday night being Erev Joshua's birthday and then Monday being Joshua's birthday proper.

Shira: That's exactly right. There's different circles of obligation when we're talking about what we can do this *Tu BiShvat*. There is sort of the most personal, which is reading the books that we've spoken about. There is the part that is sort of most about the immediate community, which is the composting and the gardening and just sort of walking. I mean, I walk my dog two or three times a day. I can look up at the trees in my own neighborhood, which I never do. I'm always looking down at my phone and that's all really important. And then there's the global work that we can do. I gotta be honest. I think the best way to do it is number one, travel a little less, which we've all been doing, during COVID and number two, give money to organizations that make change in this world and help too, because a lot of the, as we all know, the worst effects of climate change come, not from the fact that I don't compost, even though I should compost.

Josh: It's very rewarding.

Shira: There's a compost issue in my house. Would you like to help me and my husband, the lovely Russel decide. So in D.C., you still have to pay to compost and Russell believes that dollar for dollar, we should instead just give the money to *Tzedek* rather than paying to compost.

Josh: And he may well be right.

Shira: Well we can do both by the way, but he likes to have the arguments, at 30,000 feet. So right now we're not composting, which maybe I'm shaming myself into doing it right now. Anyway, so that is a part of making sure that the major multinational corporations are a little bit more responsible to climate change, which I don't I don't think that you and I can do alone. I think we need organizations to help us do it.

Josh: Yes. I agree. Let me ask you this. Uh, is there anything liturgical for *Tu BiShvat*? Do we, are there any prayers we say, is there any ceremony that we do or the, I guess that's why in the past, it's just sort of come and gone and you know, we've come up with something to do to observe it or not, but usually there's something, you know, you open the prayer book, the siddur and you go "okay, this is what you're do on *Tu BiShvat*." Is there nothing?

Shira: I'm shaking my head guys. I mean look, there is the *Tu BiShvat* Seder now that the Kabbalists, the mystics created and people have recreated over the last 500 years. We think of a Seder as a Passover thing only, but really you can have a Seder on any Jewish holiday. So that is one way and there all sorts of Jewish contemporary earth songs. This is a holiday that was given short shrift for most of the time that Jews lived in the diaspora. And it is really only in the last 100, 150 years since the rise of contemporary political Zionism that the *Tu BiShvat* has come back into focus. So Josh, here's what I think we should do. I think we should write a blessing for *Tu BiShvat*.

Josh: That's a beautiful idea. I mean, I'm a little disappointed in the rabbi's imagination. Every other holiday it's like, oh, and this one, you blow through a Ram's horn. This one, you make a noise maker, this one, you take a chicken and swing it over your head. I mean, they've come up with an absurd number of odd things to do on other holidays, they were just completely stumped, so to speak? Pardon the tree pun. They were stumped when it came to *Tu BiShvat*.

Shira: I think you are a hundred percent correct. There is probably a correlation between how often the holidays are celebrated and how interesting the rituals are. Passover is number one because we have the Seder and the matzah. And then Hanukkah is number two, mostly because of Christmas. But also we have the menorah, which by the way, did you know there are people who say that the menorah was modeled to look like a tree?

Josh: No, I didn't know that, but it makes sense.

Shira: I didn't know that either until preparing for today for what it's worth.

Josh: It makes a lot of sense.

Shira: I mean, there are some.

Josh: Yeah. By the way, if you want to write in, on our website or to our email with suggestions, either share with us how you celebrate an observed *Tu BiShvat* or any suggestions you have for how one might we'd love to read it.

Shira: How's this for a blessing? *Baruch Atah Adonai Elohenu Melech Asher Kidshanu BMitzvotz Vitzivanu LeHagen u'Lih-Gadel u'Lih-Lamed May-HaEtzim*. We are grateful to the source of life who has given us life and sustained us and allowed us to reach this moment in which we are privileged to be able to protect and grow and learn from the trees. That's the blessing I would write.

Josh: And we all say amen, beautiful. By the way folks, amen is Hebrew for "amen."

Shira: Also for "I agree."

Josh: Learned from is nice.

Shira: Thank you. Thank you. That's what I took from Robin Wall Kimmering, see? There's a lot that we can learn from each other.

Josh: Exactly.

Josh: We've done it Rabbi. I guess we've completed another messy, but interesting.

Shira: There's another name for the podcast.

Josh: Messy, but interesting? I feel like I learned a lot from you and I'm going to make my *Tu BiShvat* more meaningful than it's ever been in the past for me and my family.

Shira: God-willing for me as well from Sunday night to Monday *Tu BiShvat*. But the truth is, if you don't get a chance to celebrate it then, then you can make your birthday of the trees whenever you want it to be.

Josh: That's right. There's a father's day and there's a mother's day, but every day is children's day. And I don't know what I mean by that.

Shira: But it's, concomitance with the tendentiousness of the rest of this.

Josh: Okay, and now I'm excited to welcome to our show our second righteous gentile from Westport, Connecticut. It's my good friend, Scott Foley. Now in addition to being professionally handsome Scott Foley is one of the funniest people I know. If you want to catch his funny check out his hilarious performance in the new Fox show "The Big Leap," you can catch up on season one on Hulu, but right now Scott is here to be our resident Hebrew/Yiddish scholar and go over some words in terms we learned in today's episode. Take it away Scott.

Scott: *Kabbalah*. *Kabbalah* is the Hebrew word for the school of thought of Jewish mysticism. Much of it pondering the essence of God; *Kabbalah*. Isn't *Kabbalah* also like a cult thing? What did Madonna do where you wear the red bracelet? *Leviticus*. *Leviticus* is the third book of the *Torah*, or the vintage testament. *Etz*. *Etz* is the Hebrew word for tree; please hug one. My new hometown where I live, in Westport, Connecticut, there is a movement of—I don't know if it's a charity or what— but people knit scarves or sweaters for trees and around all these large trees are these huge, they're wrapped in yarn that's been knitted together, and it looks beautiful but that's that's *Etz*. Hug a tree and wrap one in yarn. *Ad me'ah v'esrim* is Hebrew for “until 120 years.” It is Jewish tradition to wish someone a long life in this manner but are the years from 100 to 120 really worth it? I think not. I mean, at that point, everybody you know is dead, you've got a cat who's on its last legs, and you're all alone. *Tevet* is the fourth month of the civil year and the 10th month of the ecclesiastical year. *Shevat* as Josh Malina would say is the fifth month of the civil year and the 11th month of the ecclesiastical year. Does the ecclesiastical year... wait, well, this is why I don't use a Jewish count. I'd have to talk to you about *tevet* and *shevat*, which are very similar with the eve and ebb of it all. I wonder if there's something there.

Josh: Before we thank everyone without whom we could not make the show, we want to give everyone a head's up that as always, at the very end of our podcast, Rabbi Shira will give a little guided meditation for those who stick around and I strongly recommend you do stick around. We want to thank as always the people without whom we could not make the show. They include Tim Shovers, our executive producer and everybody at PRX. If you want to learn more about PRX, go to prx.org.

Shira: Yes. And please reach out to us. Engage with us. We love to talk to you on Twitter at [rabbi Shira at Joshua Molina](https://twitter.com/rabbiShira). [Molina on](https://twitter.com/Joshmalina). Okay. Sorry, please, please, please, please engage with us on social media on Twitter at [@Joshmalina](https://twitter.com/Joshmalina) or [@rabbiShira](https://twitter.com/rabbiShira) on Facebook, [rabbi Shira](https://www.facebook.com/rabbiShira), one word, [stutman](https://www.facebook.com/stutman) or [Joshua Molina](https://www.facebook.com/JoshuaMolina) on Instagram. I think it's [Joshua Molina's Joshua Molina](https://www.instagram.com/JoshuaMolina) and [Shira stuntman](https://www.instagram.com/ShiraStuntman). We want to talk to you. We look forward to being in touch soon.

Josh: We also have [Chutzpod!](https://www.instagram.com/Chutzpod!) accounts on Instagram, on Facebook and on Twitter. And please, if you're enjoying what you're listening to subscribe to the show and why not throw us a five star review on iTunes, we would appreciate it. We also wanna thank the group [Hadag Nahash](https://www.facebook.com/HadagNahash) for letting us use their equally fantastic song “Lazooz” that opens our show. We'll include a link on our website so you can listen to the whole thing. It's wonderful.

Shira: And now as we close the podcast, we're going to take a moment to breathe because of course the ability, the privilege to breathe is another gift that's given to us by the trees. So take a deep breath in. Let it go. Offer some gratitude for the trees that are in your backyard. On the sidewalk in front of your apartment, all the trees that help create the oxygen that allows you to live because we are after all more interconnected than we even yet know, there is a beautiful teaching by [rabbi Nochlin](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) a 19th century Hasidic teaching about the interconnectedness of

humanity and the natural world around us. So take a moment to think about a place that you love that is in the outdoors. It could be a beach that you've been to with your family or alone. It could be a mountain that you've climbed. It could be your local park. It could be the rocky desert of the Negev in Israel, just hold it in your mind and offer it gratitude. Rabbi Nachman teaches through a play on the words, *sicha* conversation and *siah* shrubs of the field, that these two words are connected in the same way that humans are connected to all the grasses of the field and that when humans pray, so do the grasses and trees of the field as well. And it's not just our prayers that reach up to the heavens and it's not just theirs. It's all of ours together. All of the earth, all of God's creation together. The sum is greater than its parts. Thanks everyone. Have a great week.

Scott: Hey this is Scott Foley wishing you a peaceful and meaningful Shabbat Shalom.