

# New Year for Trees

This week we celebrate *Tu BiShvat*, the New Year for trees. *TuBishvat* as we celebrate it today is a post-biblical creation of the great sixteenth-century mystic Isaac Luria of Safed and is concerned with life and nature.

Its origin lies in the Biblical laws of tithing produce and not eating the fruit of a tree for its first three years of growth. All of which required fixing a date, like the rule of a king when a new year begins. There are spiritual, political, and agricultural New Year's in Judaism.

In addition, the Bible reiterates the necessity of protecting trees, valuing them, and certainly not destroying them wantonly as a political tool. Particularly now that so many trees around the world are being destroyed with devastating effects on the environment. Yet trees, like human beings, are constantly being used as instruments of warfare. This is why the Bible stresses the link between the two "For man is like the tree of the field" Deuteronomy (20:19). Both are vulnerable.

In the constant, and ongoing conflict in Israel proper and the West Bank, violence is a terrible fact of life on both sides. It shows no sign of ending, quite the contrary. It has become an ongoing existential struggle for survival between two opposing camps. The question always is how to react with each side blaming the other and how to remain caring sensitive, and humanitarian in the face of the unspeakable.

On *Tu BiShvat* we acknowledge how violence has encompassed olive trees in Israel and on both sides. The West Bank is a minefield, a powder keg capable of erupting at any moment with catastrophic results. Each side blames the other. Perfectly innocent human beings get killed on both sides. Can anything be done? Why cannot the millions spent on both sides on arms not be put to better use?

There are on both sides, voices that are weary of conflict. Innocents are murdered on both sides. Yet nothing seems able to be done. Violence and hatred only encourage more. Some argue it is politics, corruption, and self-interest. This is what is happening everywhere. Inhuman beings are slaughtering, bombing, torturing, exiling, and expelling right across the globe in the name of their security and nothing seems able to stop it. From China, Burma Afghanistan, Persia, Syria, Russia, and Ukraine, across the oceans to the Americas. And everyone says "It's not my fault. I am only protecting what is mine."

I was pleasantly surprised when some politicians on the right who I despise for their demagoguery responded to the massacre at the Jerusalem synagogue by calling on their followers not to retaliate against Arabs, sadly not successfully. And some Palestinians responded by celebrating with fireworks, handing out sweets, and cursing all Jews. Yet on both sides, there are many genuinely seeking peace rather than violence.

I simply do not see a solution. Only escalating hatred and violence across the globe. The options are fight or die. Israel will not capitulate and cease to exist. Many Palestinians and Arab Israelis want that. Many Israelis want the Palestinians to disappear. Neither will happen. But there are deep internal divisions on both sides that make a peaceful resolution with or without international intervention as unlikely as it is unimaginable.

Perhaps one has to fall back on the Talmudic concept, sometimes translated as "Might is Right." *Kol D'Alim*

*Gvar*. (<https://steinsaltz.org/daf/bavabatra34/>).

However, it does not mean that at all. It means that sometimes taking possession through physical force is the only solution when no other solution is available. Where property is in dispute and there is absolutely no evidence as to whom it belongs to, whoever takes possession keeps it. The Land of Israel might be such an example. Over the millennia it has been possessed, conquered, and re-conquered time and time again by every western religion and one power after another. All claiming a right of possession through conquest. Was the land Egyptian, Amorite, Hittite, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian or Phoenician, Chaldean or Persian, Greek or Roman, Jew or Christian, or Muslim? Was there just one power that held it all that time? And on the other hand, were not Israelites or Jews ever living there building their cities and temples before they were destroyed and then rebuilt and then destroyed again?

Yet rational or historical arguments will not impress anyone. Logic rarely wins arguments. And I have no confidence that a solution of any variation currently proposed is viable or practical. So, it seems to me that all we can say when two peoples share the same land and cannot agree on how to divide it is that *Kol D'Alim Gvar* is the only argument left.

Where is peace on earth? We have been waiting long enough for a Messiah. Blame will not resolve the conflict so in the meantime, a country's priority is to keep its citizens safe. But surely not at the price of destroying one's humanity. If we lose our souls, then the victory will be a hollow one.

Must I conclude that there is something essentially defective and wrong with so many human beings? I think I prefer trees. If only we can have a real new year for trees.