

# A Person is Like a Tree is Like the Field: Tu BiShvat and Olive Trees in Israel & Palestine

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A note about this resource: This resource is a collection of texts that are meant to facilitate a conversation about the role of the olive tree in Judaism, as well as the importance of olive trees for both Israelis and Palestinians. As part of this source sheet, this resource explores Israeli settlers in the West Bank destroying olive trees. The term "settler" is contested and highly political, but for the purpose of this refers to Israeli Jews living in land that is currently under the governance of the Palestinian Authority. There has been immense tensions between the Israeli and Palestinians living there, with both the settlers and the Palestinian civilians being injured and in some cases murdered. Violence against Palestinians is mainly done in hopes of them leaving and the land becoming Israeli.

This resource is not meant to persuade or dissuade you in any particular direction, but is rather intended to be a resource for exploration and engagement with the reality of Palestinians and Israelis living together. The more questions you have, the better, even if you don't walk away with answers to those questions.

Why are we talking about this right now?: Many of us are living with immense heartache following the attacks by Hamas on October 7th. At the time of the writing of this resource, over 100 Israeli hostages remain in Gaza. Many Jews across the world are living with pain, sadness, confusion, and a multitude of other emotions as we try to reconcile and understand the amount of violence happening in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. Judaism is a tradition that values learning, responsibility, and *tochecha* - loving and honest rebuke. This resource guide is meant to offer space, scaffolding, and a container for you and your community to wrestle with all of the various parts of Israel, including the pieces that break your heart. *Tu BiShvat*, the Jewish new year of the trees, invites us to consider the sacrality of all living beings on our planet. *Ken yehi ratzon*, may it be Divinity's will.

source 1: deuteronomy 8:7-9

(7) For the Lord your G-d is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; (8) a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; (9) a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper.

(ז) כִּי יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְבִיאֲךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה אֶרֶץ נַחְלִי  
מַיִם עֵינֹת וְתַהֲמֹת יִצְאִים בְּבִקְעָה וּבְהָרִ: (ח) אֶרֶץ  
חֹטֶה וְשֵׁעֵרָה וּגְפֹן וְתַאֲנֶה וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ-זֵית שֶׁמֶן  
וּדְבַשׁ: (ט) אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא בְּמִסְכָּנֹת תֹּאכַל-בָּהּ לֶחֶם  
לֹא-תִחְסַר כָּל בָּהּ אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲבִנֶיהָ בְּרִזָּל וּמְהַרְרֶיהָ  
תִּחְצַב נְחֹשֶׁת:

*This text references the seven species that are celebrated on Tu B'Shvat.*

Discussion:

- What is the connection between the abundance of crops on the land and how people are meant to relate to the land?
- What is the relationship to the land that this text is offering?
- How do you personally connect with olives and olive trees?
  - Consider: In Judaism, olive oil was used to anoint the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. Additionally, in the Torah, the dove who returns to Noah to let him and his family know that the flood is over is carrying an olive branch.



**source 2: excerpt from pri etz hadar<sup>1</sup>**

O G-d, who makes, forms, creates, and emanates the highest worlds! You made the trees and grasses grow from the ground in the shape and pattern of these highest worlds. And this full moon is the beginning of Your work to renew and ripen the fruit trees, to bring forth the fruit of 'the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden.' May it be Your will that our eating and blessing and meditating on these fruits will strengthen the flow of love and blessing over the trees, to make them grow and bloom, for good life, for blessing and for peace. May all Creation return to its original strength and may we see the rainbow rejoicing in its colors. And may all the sparks of divine energy, whether scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the sin of the first human against the fruit of the tree, be returned and included in the majestic might of the Tree of Life.

Discussion:

- What does this prayer from the original Tu BiShvat seder haggadah reveal? Do you resonate with the words?
- How are you feeling about what is happening in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank? What is your prayer for this time? Do any of the ideas/themes/etc of Tu BiShvat connect to what you are thinking about right now?

**source 3: deuteronomy 20:19**

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?

כִּי-תִצּוֹר אֶל-עִיר יְמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְּשָׁהּ  
לֹא-תִשְׁחִית אֶת-עֵצָהּ לְנִדַּח עָלֶיהָ גֵרְזֵן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ  
תֹאכַל וְאֵתוּ לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָא  
מִפְּנֵיךָ בַּמִּצּוֹר:

Discussion:

- How do you understand this text?
- What do you make of the prohibition against destroying trees?
- How do you understand the connection between trees and human beings?

<sup>1</sup> Composed in Tzfat c.1600 – c.1700 CE. Seder for Tu BiShvat — written by an unknown author from the school of Rabbi Isaac Luria (Arizal) — first published as a pamphlet in Venice in 1728, often said before the start of the seder..

**source 4: “activist israeli rabbi helps palestinian farmers in west bank facing settler violence” (times of israel, november 2023)**

Stooping under the weight of his body armor but uncowed by the threat of violence, Rabbi Arik Ascherman guards an olive grove in the West Bank, protecting Palestinian farmers from rising settler violence.

“There is no excuse, there is no explanation, no justification for what Hamas did” in its October 7 attacks on southern Israel, said the 64-year-old, a veteran Israeli activist with the Rabbis for Human Rights group. “But the average Israeli today is not prepared or willing to distinguish between Palestinian terrorists and terrorized Palestinians,” he added, alluding to a rise in settler attacks since October 7. [...]

Since Hamas terrorists stormed southern Israel five weeks ago, killing some 1,200 people — mostly civilians — there has been a rise in assaults by settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank. [...] In late October, a farmer 14 kilometers (nine miles) north of Taybeh was killed by settlers while tending his olive trees, according to human rights group B’Tselem. [...]

The sprawling vistas of gnarled olive trees planted in the ochre earth of the West Bank have been the site of clashes between farmers and settlers for decades, with the disputes hinging on access to land.

For Palestinians, the hardy olive, which thrives in tough conditions and can live for hundreds of years, is a symbol of their rootedness in the territory, where an estimated 10 million trees grow.

But this year’s harvest coincided with the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas. [...] “Olives are very important to us, and without them we couldn’t live,” she said. “It’s the most basic thing in our lives.”

Ascherman turned to the Old Testament to explain the current plight of the Palestinians in the West Bank, citing the scripture when Abraham, the spiritual father of the Jewish faith, protests God’s wrathful decision to wipe out the city of Sodom to punish the sins of its residents. “How dare you, God, sweep away the innocent with the guilty?”

Discussion:

- What do you think of the work that Rabbi Arik Ascherman is doing? How do you feel seeing a rabbi support Palestinian civilians?
- What responsibility do we as Jews have to the Palestinians living in the West Bank?
- Do you believe that people have the ability to distinguish between Hamas and Palestinian civilians in our current political climate? If not, why, and what detriment does this cause?



IF THE OLIVE TREES KNEW  
THE HANDS THAT PLANTED  
THEM, THEIR OIL WOULD  
BECOME TEARS

MAHMOUD DARWICH

#### source 5: rabbi rami shapiro, "re/membering nature"

We fulfill our nature when we plant. We degrade it when we uproot. We plant when we live in a manner that reveals the connection between all things. We uproot when we live in a manner that separates and divides. When we see that *adam* (a person) is *adamah* (earth), we cease to be separate from our Place (*note: another name for G-d is Ha-Makom, The Place*). Ceasing to be separate, we cease to war within ourselves. Ceasing to war within ourselves, we cease to war among ourselves. And then we would have no need to stop our planting to greet the Messiah. For then we would greet the Messiah in each seedling we plant, in each sapling we water, in each tree we prune and harvest, in each face we meet.

#### Discussion:

- How does the way we interact with nature impact our internal state and our connection to something greater than ourselves? How do we plant and uproot not just in nature, but in our lives?
- In what ways do you relate to the ideas of internal and external peace being related?
- How do you believe these ideas relate to the violence in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank?
- What, if anything, does this learning call you to do for the world?