EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE

Do Not Destroy

TREES ART AND JEWISH THOUGHT

An Exhibition and The Dorothy Saxe Invitational

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MUSEUM

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Educator Resources Guide

This Resource Guide provides information and ideas for exploring themes related to the exhibition *Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art and Jewish Thought* including environmentalism, tree as universal symbol, and the tree in Jewish tradition.

Background Information: *Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought*

Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought, organized by the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, is a major contemporary art exhibition that highlights how artists examine and celebrate the tree. The exhibition features the works of over 70 artists from around the world who reflect on trees and the environment, explore the concepts of "do not destroy" (*ba'al tashchit*), "repairing the world" (*tikkun olam*), and celebrate the Jewish holiday of the Trees, Tu B'Shevat.

The exhibition includes:

- A survey of work by international contemporary artists who have used the tree as a significant visual and conceptual element in their work
- The Dorothy Saxe Invitational, a series of new artworks by local and national artists commissioned to create artwork incorporating reclaimed wood in response to the Jewish holiday Tu B'Shevat, a "New Year" for the trees
- An immersive graphic environment, "Seeing the Forest Through the Trees," created by artist Dov Abramson, mapping out trees in Jewish sources and tradition
- *Nomadic Grove*, an interactive installation on Jessie Square in front of the Museum

About this Resource

These resources are designed to enhance your learning with or without a visit to *Do Not Destroy, Trees, Art and Jewish Thought* at the Contemporary Jewish Museum.

This resource provides

- An overview of the exhibition *Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought*
- "From Roots to Fruits: The Life of Trees and the Tree of Life," by Dr. Jeremy Benstein. An essay from the exhibition catalogue on the interconnections of Jewish people, Torah text, and the environment
- Jewish source texts on trees. Topics include: the relationship of trees with agricultural cycles, environmental stewardship, and spiritual teachings
- Images of new works from the exhibition with guiding questions for classroom use
- A list of additional resources for learning about Judaism and the environment

Suggestions for using these resources:

- Provide students with background information on the role of trees in Jewish tradition
- Use the source texts or "Seeing the Forest Through the Trees" to engage students in a text study examining the connection between Jewish texts and environmentalism
- Explore the connection between Jewish holidays and agricultural cycles
- Practice analyzing and interpreting works of art related to environmental themes
- Use the artworks as inspiration for a creative class assignment on environmental themes.

Using this resource in conjunction with a Museum visit

These resources will familiarize you and your students with the Jewish and artistic content in the exhibition. You can prepare for your visit or extend the experience after your visit by further examining Jewish source texts related to trees. Additionally, you may use the images from the exhibition and questions included in this resource to hone your students' visual literacy skills of observation and interpretation.

To book a tour

Email tours@thecjm.org or call 415.655.7856. If you are not able visit *Do Not Destroy* with your class, you may use the images provided to discuss the works on view in the exhibition.

About the Contemporary Jewish Museum:

With the opening of its new building on June 8, 2008, the Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) ushered in a new chapter in its twenty-plus year history of engaging audiences and artists in exploring contemporary perspectives on Jewish culture, history, art, and ideas. The new facility, designed by internationally renowned architect Daniel Libeskind, is a lively center where people of all ages and backgrounds can gather to experience art, share diverse perspectives, and engage in hands-on activities. Inspired by the Hebrew phrase "*L'Chaim*" (To Life), the building is a physical embodiment of the CJM's mission to bring together tradition and innovation in an exploration of the Jewish experience in the 21st century. To learn more about the CJM visit thecjm.org

Exhibition Overview: *Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought An Exhibition and the Dorothy Saxe Invitational*

Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought

As keen observers of the natural environment, contemporary artists continue to examine the Earth, and specifically the tree, to draw our attention to the natural world and our impact on it. The tree appears as a symbol, a marker of time and place, a call to action, an object of beauty and wonder, a shaman with spiritual significance and healing power. One component of this exhibition features works by national and international artists who use the tree as a significant visual element in their work. Artists whose work is in this inhibition include Joseph Beuys, Rodney Graham, April Gornick, Charles LaBelle, Yoko Ono, and Roxy Paine, Rona Pondick, and Yuken Teruya.

The Dorothy Saxe Invitational

The Invitational component of the exhibition continues the Museum's twenty-seven-year tradition of inviting artists from different backgrounds to creatively explore traditional concepts and highlight their universal and on-going relevance for a contemporary and diverse audience.

The Jewish holiday of Tu B'Shevat marks the cut-off date in the Hebrew calendar for calculating the age of a fruit-bearing tree and is celebrated by planting trees and eating certain species of fruits and nuts. In recent times the holiday has evolved into an environmental movement—similar to Earth Day—where the natural environment in general and the life of the tree in particular, are celebrated and preserved.

Because there is not a ritual object associated with the holiday of Tu B'Shevat, the concept of environmental awareness embedded in the holiday has been transmitted by each artist using reclaimed wood. The artists were asked to incorporate the wood while considering the rituals and themes surrounding Tu B'Shevat: the eating of the various species of fruit, tithing (from the ancient relevance of the holiday), planting trees, environmental awareness, and other meanings of the holiday. The artists have created an array of thoughtful works that speak to many different themes of Tu B'Shevat and its contemporary relevance.

Seeing the Forest Through The Trees

Designed by Israeli artist Dov Abramson, this immersive educational installation explores how Jewish life and the cycles of trees are intertwined. Taking visitors through an orchard (*pardes*) of images, ideas and language, the installation brings ancient texts, contemporary rituals, and mystical ideas to a wide audience.

Dov Abramson is an internationally recognized, Jerusalem-based artist and graphic designer. His projects have been featured in *Zeek Magazine*, *Forward*, *Maariv*, and *Haaretz*, and his art has been exhibited at The Jewish Museum in New York and at The Israel Museum in Jerusalem. An adapted version of "Seeing the Forest Through The Trees" is included in this resource.

Nomadic Grove

Rebar, a San Francisco–based art and design studio, is recognized for creating reconfigurable, reprogrammable spaces for changing urban conditions. In conjunction with the exhibition *Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought*, the Contemporary Jewish Museum invited Rebar to create a project on Jessie Square in front of the Museum. The CJM asked Rebar to consider the themes of Tu B'Shevat in designing an installation that includes casual seating for lounging and audience seating for outdoor museum programming related to the exhibition. In response, Rebar created a group of brightly colored gem-shaped planters that can be moved into various configurations, both practical and playful.

Rebar describes *Nomadic Grove* as "a meditation on rootedness in the relentlessly changing city. To sit, relaxed, looking up at a tree framing the sky is a simple and profound human experience, but one in surprisingly short supply in modern cities. Perhaps it is because trees resist the city's constant motion, the city's ruthlessness—they are specific in a world of impatient cosmopolitanism." To fill the planters, Rebar selected oak, and olive trees that are adapted to the climates of both Israel and the Bay Area, representing the Mediterranean biome that is shared between the two regions and resonating symbolically with the holiday of Tu B'Shevat.

From Roots to Fruits: The Life of Trees and the Tree of Life

Dr. Jeremy Benstein

יש תקווה לעץ—Yesh tikva la'etz—There is hope for a tree—
When it is cut, that it will sprout again,
That its tender shoots will not fail to come forth.
Though its root remains and grows old in the earth, and its trunk lies dead in the dust;
The very scent of water will make it bloom, and send forth boughs, like a sapling.
But mortals languish and die, adam perishes. Where is he?

—Job 14:7–10[1]

In the Beginning—yes, that Beginning—there was one Garden, one couple, one rascally reptile, one pair of Trees, and one simple rule: look, don't touch. But even that was one rule too many. The Edenic duo picked from the protected species and they were summarily evicted from Paradise. If you're one of those tree huggers who thinks that trees are simply divine, all sacred xylem and holy phloem, remember this: that first divinely designated tree whose fruit was so irresistibly seductive was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Not one or the other, but both together: the sanctioned and the forbidden, the sacred and the profane, salvation and sin. And ever since, the tree has been what's known in semiotics as an ancipital symbol: like a two-headed axe, or a double-edged sword, it cuts both ways.

Of course, trees are great. We Jews love trees (or at least the idea of them): "Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai used to say: 'If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, complete the planting, and then go greet the Messiah.'"[2] Now there's a mitzvah you won't get to fulfill too often. But the idea behind it goes to the heart of how we think about trees. Trees are in it for the long haul. They provide, and therefore symbolize, long-term sustenance. They make us wait years for their fruit, and so they come to signify patience, perseverance, permanence. With their deep reach into the soil, they epitomize rootedness.[3] When protesters sing, "We shall not be moved," they take their cue from the prophetic image of the steadfast tree firmly planted by the waters, a metaphor for the perseverance of God's love and care (Ps. 1:3, Jer. 17:8).

Trees give us many different physical, tangible things: basic foods like fruits and nuts; cool shade on a hot afternoon; sturdy support for hammocks and tree houses; and all the wood that panels our lives, from cradle to casket. But even more than what they give is simply that they give, freely and unstintingly. Abraham planted a tamarisk (אשל, eshel) in Be'er Sheva (Gen. 21:33), and the very name of the tree came to signify the grace and generosity of his legendary hospitality: Abraham would always lavish his guests with food, lodge them, and accompany them as they set off to complete their journey. The Hebrew word eshel, spelled 'aleph-shin-lamed, was later Midrashically understood as an acronym for these courtesies: ('achila–food, shtiyah–drink, levaya–accompaniment).[4]

But even more fruitful is trees' symbolic, metaphoric significance: they embody quiet grace and wisdom, flexibility and strength, long-term growth and commitment to future generations. They are both a focal point for human activity and a home for animals and birds, and thus they engender and connote community. And sitting under one's vine and fig tree (1 Kings 5:5)—that's true peace.

So it's no wonder that when the Bible wants to present a central environmental torah, or teaching, it speaks of trees and our relationship to them. That teaching is called bal tashchit—not destroying (or wasting)—and it's a fundamental Jewish environmental value (see Deut. 20:19–20). Briefly put, the original context speaks of not cutting down fruit trees in order to win a war, a directive later expanded to include not destroying or wasting anything of value.[5] But while this principle is Halakah, or Jewish law, it's far from dry policy. The text itself is profound, nuanced, and evocative of several layers of truth, spiritual as well as ecological. It gives us a phrase that has echoed down through the generations to contemporary Israeli poetry and music: כי האדם עץ השדה, ki ha'adam etz ha'sadeh, literally: "for the human (is a) tree of the field."

Strikingly, it is only in its current incarnation in modern Hebrew poetry, in Natan Zach's canonic 1974 poem "Ki Ha'adam," that the similes flowing from this seminal phrase come to the fore: like the tree, the human stretches upward. We thirst, we grow, we can be cut down or burnt in the fire. Significantly, Zach's poem, with its focus on mortality and its melancholy musical setting by contemporary Israeli songwriter Shalom Hanoch, has become popularly associated with deaths and memorials, and for many Israelis it is connected to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the commemorations after the former prime minister was cut down in his prime.

But while the verse from Deuteronomy famously admits several readings, this anthropomorphic one isn't one of them: the Torah here does not speak the poetic language of metaphoric similarity between trees and people. Instead, two other approaches come into play. This phrase comes to explain the mitzvah presented in the text. One interpretation is that our lives as human beings depend on trees—and therefore we should preserve them for our benefit. The second is an ethical-philosophical assertion that reads the four-word phrase ki ha'adam etz ha'sadeh as a rhetorical question: Are trees of the field human? Can they fight, protect themselves, run away? Answer: Of course not! There is a radical existential difference between trees and people, and we shouldn't cut them down, not simply because of our (long-term) needs, but because of their inherent innocence, and worth.

This second idea became the basis for a series of laws that in many cases extended the scope of the ruling, as well as the foundation for many striking rabbinic commentaries about the lives and deaths of trees. Rabbi Haninah states that his son Shibhat died only for having felled a fig tree before its time (Talmud, Bava Kamma 91b). It is important to pause and dwell for a moment on the idea of a bereaved father ascribing the death of his son to divine punishment for cutting down a fruit tree. Likewise, a mystical medieval Midrash evokes both the inner life of trees and the similarity between a person's death and the cutting down of a tree, a sentiment that contrasts starkly with economic reasoning, by which a tree's life is measured solely in terms of its worth in fruit or wood: "When people cut down the wood of a tree that yields fruit, its cry goes from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible. . . . When the soul departs from the body, the cry goes forth from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible" (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, 34).[6] And the Talmudic tractate of Pesachim (50b) claims that one who cuts down good trees, even non-fruit-bearing ones that give shade or add beauty, will never see blessing in one's life.

Felling trees is also a metaphor for apostasy, such as that of Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya (known as Acher, "The Other"), who is said to have lost his faith and קיצץ בנטיעות, kitzetz baneti'ot—"chopped down the saplings" or "mutilated the shoots." Continuing the tree metaphors, Elisha is said to have done this after a metaphysical experience, or mystical encounter, known as "entering the pardes"—literally, the orchard (BT Hagigah 14b, JT Hagigah 2:1).[7] The pardes of rabbinic literature seems to have meant theosophical or mystical speculation, or some sort of ecstatic, epiphanic episode.

In later Jewish tradition (around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), pardes increasingly became understood as an acronym standing for the four different levels, or types, of textual exegesis: peshat, the simple or contextual meaning; remez, allegorical or typological interpretation; derash, Midrashic or homiletical reading; and sod, or "secret," the mystical layer. Thus the Hebrew word embedded in a wall in the lobby of the Contemporary Jewish Museum is one of the great tree images of Jewish tradition, symbolizing the many layers of the Torah, its interpretation, and application. Given the Jewish tradition's rich concern for and connection with trees, it makes sense that we have a holiday for them, a New Year all their own, which has its own multifaceted historical and spiritual symbolism.

But before turning to Tu b'Shevat, let's consider the other side of the story, for it's not all leafy boughs and juicy fruit. Trees have a dark side—and I'm not talking about that delicious late-afternoon shade. Like the great oak-like terebinth that enmeshed the flowing tresses of David's son Absalom, "suspending him between heaven and earth" (2 Sam. 18:9), trees can be a snare. Seemingly innocent, yet with a commanding, even majestic presence, they are dangerously alluring. In classical literature they stand by the side of the path and tempt the unwary traveler off the straight and true, into a world of dryads and tree sprites. When the rabbis warn of the seductions of idolatry, of distraction from God and God's Torah, they warn of the enticing beauty of a tree: "Rabbi Ya'akov says: 'One, who while walking along the way, reviewing his studies, breaks off from his study and says, "How beautiful (na'eh) is that tree! How beautiful is that field!" Scripture regards him as if he has forfeited his soul" (Ethics of the Fathers, 3:7). This is a very rich, evocative text, with an even richer tradition of commentary, but for our purposes here, suffice it to say that the teaching makes clear that an aesthetic appreciation of nature is a threat to Torah, and thus is spiritually perilous.[8] Lurking just below the surface is the specter of nature-worshipping paganism.

Tree worship is ridiculed in Isaiah's scathing parody of the idiocies of idolatry, where a man takes cedars and oaks, using part as fuel for the fire to warm himself and cook his dinner, and carving the rest into an idol to worship (Isa. 44:12–20). Moreover, in contrast to the previously quoted sources about the value of planting trees and the pain and violation of cutting them down, the Torah inveighs against using natural elements, including sacred trees, in pagan rituals and even commands their destruction: "You must destroy all the sites at which the nations … worshipped their gods … under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire" (Deut. 12:2–3).

The physical and symbolic allure of trees is liable to lead astray those who, while perhaps beginning with good "green" intentions, slide down that slippery slope from appreciation to wonderment to druid-like deification and worship. Some religious traditionalists are wary of contemporary nature-appreciating environmentalism for its appearance of crypto-neo-paganism.

In response to these fears, there are several points to be made. The first is that in today's globalized, technology- and consumer-driven economy, the sacralization of trees is far from being the most threatening manifestation of idolatry. Contemporary materialism, acquisitiveness, and consumerism are not only more alarming and hazardous, they are arguably more idolatrous than preserving God's creation. Already in the Psalms (115:4), we are warned: "their idols are silver and gold …." Perhaps we are now in a position where we can learn from the nature-centered traditions of the world. As Orthodox Jewish scholar and theologian Michael Wyschogrod maintains:

To be perfectly honest, I have long felt that the religion against which the prophets expounded so eloquently in the Hebrew Bible did not get a full hearing from them. I wonder whether the prophets gave a really fair representation of the point of view and theology of the worshipers of [the pagan gods] Baal and Ashteret…. Perhaps it would have been better if the prophets had occasionally sat down with them and said, "Tell us how you see the world." Could there be some insights in what they taught which we need to learn? I am convinced there were; and even if we don't agree with much of what they believed, I think we would profit by better understanding their point of view.[9]

But perhaps we don't even have to go so far afield. Let us return to the orchards of the world and the pardes of Torah, and to the mystical text of the Zohar, where the fears of certain Talmudic sages are transmuted into an opportunity to make sacred connections between Torah and trees, and between the spiritual and the material: "Rabbi Shim'on, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Abba, and Rabbi Yossi were sitting under the trees in the valley of the Sea of Ginnosar (Kinneret). Rabbi Shim'on said: 'How beautiful (na'eh) is the shade with which these trees protects us; Let us crown them with words of Torah!'" (Zohar, Parashat Teruma, 127a.)

This brings us back to the holiday of Tu b'Shevat, an appropriate moment to crown trees with words of wisdom. This New Year for the Trees, however, wasn't always spiritual, or even ecological. In antiquity, Tu b'Shevat, the fifteenth of Shevat, was comparable to modern-day America's "Tu b'April"—a date relevant to the calculation of taxes. The exact middle of winter was chosen as the end of the arboreal fiscal year: tithes on fruit after this date belonged to the next year. So the Mishnah in Tractate Rosh Hashanah labels it "the New Year of the trees." The Israelites didn't sweat over tax forms, though, worrying about getting a check to some priestly IRS. Economics and spirituality were more integrated: part of the fruitful bounty received from God via trees was "returned to God" via the priests and the Temple, while part was redistributed to care for the poor. After the Exile, with no trees of their own to tithe, the date's significance waned. Like a tree, the holiday remained dormant—blooming again over a millennium later.

Sixteenth-century kabbalists gave Tu b'Shevat a second efflorescence. They taught of the cosmic Tree of the sefirot, the divine emanations, conceived as the blueprint for the creation of the world and a map of the mind of God. The Tu b'Shevat seder was born of their innovative ritual creativity, and, like the Passover seder, centered on four cups of wine and symbolic foods. Here, though, the wine progresses from white to red, moving from quiescence to full flowering. And the foods eaten at this uniquely vegan Jewish feast are all fruits—from those with thick peels, symbolizing gross physicality, through pure, unprotected fruit, suggesting a more spiritual realm. The wines and fruits signify the four worlds or levels of creation and the soul, often labeled as the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

With the Zionist return to the Land of Israel, Tu b'Shevat was transformed yet again. In a new act of ritual creativity, Jewish schoolteachers in pre-state Palestine made Tu b'Shevat a day of tree planting, a festival of reforestation efforts, and a symbolic means of re-rooting and reconnecting to the land and landscape. Today, the thoroughly modern innovation of observing the holiday through tree planting, in person or by proxy, remains prevalent. Meanwhile, trees have tragically become political pawns in national struggles over this land. The aggressive plantings and uprootings taking place on both sides underscores the visceral significance of actually rooting a tree in the soil, establishing an undeniable physical connection with the land.

In each of these separate conceptual approaches to the holiday, our relationship with the natural world can easily get out of whack: the economic can become merely utilitarian, and the spiritual, overly abstract, while the national risks degenerating into chauvinism. In celebrations of Tu b'Shevat, we can integrate the particular—the personal, fruit-giving tree of the Mishnah and the replanted national trees of Israel—with the universal: the life-giving global trees of the ecosphere and the Life-giving cosmic tree of kabbalah. In their Tu b'Shevat seder, the kabbalists aim to unite all the realms and worlds. We, too, can strive to integrate the four interlocking realms that define our relationship to life and land: economic, spiritual, national-political, and ecological. Each can—indeed, must—inform and help guide the others, together creating a healing, balanced, sustainable, and sustaining whole.

We shall conclude where we began, returning home to the Beginning. We spoke of the Tree of Knowledge that signified both Good and Evil, and the discernment between the two. Interestingly, while the Torah is filled with values and laws that help us distinguish between right and wrong, prescribed and proscribed, it is never compared or likened to that Tree, but only to the other one that stood in the first pardes. For, like the aboriginal human couple, there were two ur-Trees placed in the Garden. The other one was less bivalent or ancipital—it was simply the Tree of Life, Etz Chayim. And Adam and Eve's eviction from Eden was meant to prevent them from eating its fruit. Cherubs with a fiery sword were stationed at the entrance to the Garden to make sure that they (we) could never re-enter and partake (Gen. 3:24).

So why has the Torah been compared to that unapproachable tree? Here we find a startling connection. The only other place that cherub-angels appear in the entire Torah is in Exodus (25:18–22), where the people are commanded to fashion two gold cherubs and place them over the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle.10 But no sword this time—just wings spread in a position of longing or embrace. And what are the cherubs guarding? That's right—the tablets of the Decalogue, i.e., the Torah. Thus, the two sources of Life, the Torah and the Tree, are linked profoundly and eternally. Yet, unlike the Tree in the Garden, the revealed words of the Torah are approachable, touchable, and taking hold of them becomes the way to fulfill life in this world: "She is a Tree of Life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy" (Prov. 3:18).

It is a very inspirational image, yet it would be wrong to end an essay about trees with a comment, evocative though it may be, about a book, even the Book. For too long we Jews have looked to the Book, to God's words, as a virtual reality, as some sort of stand-in for the real, created world—God's deeds, as it were. Contemporary Jewishly informed or inspired environmentalism is about reconnecting word and world, with both standing to gain from the renewed relationship. Torah will be connected to today's world and today's challenges, made compelling and relevant, fulfilling its destiny as a genuine Etz Chayim. And the environmental movement will profit from the wisdom of eternity,

from profound teachings that have sustained a civilization over several millennia.

The bottom line of the Garden story is that we have a job to do—we have been put here לעבדה ולשמרה , le'ovda uleshomra (Gen. 2:15). Le'ovda, from avoda, is work or labor (including agricultural cultivation), and leshomra, from shmira, is guarding or protecting. So this couplet can be translated as "to work and to watch," or "to till and to tend," or even, "to serve and preserve." Cultivating the soil and worshipping God are the same word in Hebrew (avoda); indeed the English word worship derives from work, just as cult is the root of cultivate.11 We are enjoined to do for the Garden what God does for or to us (shmira—protection), as in the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24: "yevarechecha . . . veyishmerecha, "May God bless you, and watch over you."

But from what, exactly, are we meant to protect the Garden? The main threat to the Garden, and by extension, the world, is precisely the other half of the le'ovda uleshomra dyad—the cultivation, the human work. The mission is to labor, to produce—but at the same time to preserve, to guard, to be vigilant that the work doesn't get out of hand. It must remain, in a word, sustainable. Indeed, perhaps the best translation of the biblical phrase le'ovda uleshomra is "sustainable development." Working the land is crucial for human flourishing—but guarding the earth is the critical complement. In our struggle for the earth's fruits, we sow the seeds of our own, and the world's, destruction—unless we temper our toil with responsibility and concern for posterity.

As Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah (7:13) so presciently relates, this job of guardin' the Garden may be the biggest challenge we face: "When the Holy One of Blessing created the first adam, God took them and warned them about all the trees in the Garden of Eden, saying: 'See My works, see how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created—I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy My world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you.'"

Further Reading

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[1] Translation the author's, based on Rabbi David Neiman's The Book of Job (Jerusalem: Massada Publishers, 1972), and the Jewish Publication Society's The Book of Job (Philadelphia: JPS, 1980).

[2] Avot d'Rabbi Nathan, 31b. Compare this attitude to that of the former secretary of the interior under Ronald Reagan, James Watt, who testified in favor of clear-cutting logging practices and against the protection of forests for future generations, saying: "My responsibility is to follow the Scriptures. . . . I don't know how many generations we can count on before the Lord returns." Quoted in J. Baird Callicott, Earth's Insights (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), xix. This of course is not a question of whether Judaism or Christianity is more environmentally sensitive or aware, but rather an eschatological debate about the nature of the Messianic era and the transition to it.

[3] To be rooted like a tree can be problematic as well. French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed their well-known metaphor of the rhizome to promote a different kind of connectedness: decentered, less hierarchical and incarcerating, and explicitly anti-tree. They wrote, "We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicals. They've made us suffer too much. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes." See Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (New York: Continuum International, 2004), 15. Indeed, this sociopolitical point regarding the threats of rootedness is not too far from the other, more theological points regarding trees and their symbolism expanded upon in this essay. I am indebted to Dr. Annabel Herzog for this point.

[4] Today, Israeli employees are reimbursed for eshel outlays, the term having been adopted to describe expense accounts that pay for food, drink, and lodging.

[5] See Eilon Schwartz's masterful exploration of the text and its hermeneutic career, "Bal Tashchit: A Jewish Environmental Precept," Environmental Ethics 19 (1997): 355–74, reprinted in Yaffe's Judaism and Environmental Ethics and Waskow's Torah of the Earth; and this author's discussion in The Way into Judaism and the Environment, chapter 3 (see Further Reading).

[6] Sixteenth-century Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, who authored the classic Yiddish work of Bible interpretation Tze'enah u-Re'enah, wrote similarly: "[The Torah compares humans to trees] because, like humans, trees have the power to grow. And as humans have children, so trees bear fruit. And when a human is hurt, cries of pain are heard throughout the world, so when a tree is chopped down, its cries are heard throughout the world."

[7] From the Old Persian meaning "walled garden." There are Greek and Latin versions of this term as well, related to the English word paradise.

[8] Considerations of space make it impossible to elaborate on them here. See the author's "Nature vs. Torah," JUDAISM Quarterly 44, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 146–70, reprinted in Waskow and in Yaffe.

[9] Michael Wyschograd, "Judaism and the Sanctification of Nature," Melton Journal 24 (Spring 1991): 5, 7.

[10] One could certainly draw a parallel between the Ark of the Covenant, transporting precious cargo and preserving everlasting life, with that other Ark, Noah's—charged with a similarly valued cargo and task. But that pun is only good for English speakers, since in Hebrew, the Ark of the Covenant is the aron, while Noah's Ark was the teivah. Now, coincidentally, teivah also means "word,"—so there's still a fruitful connection to be made between the physical and spiritual, between the word and the world.

[11] See also Genesis Rabbah 16:5 for explicit Midrashic connections.

Seeing the Forest through the Trees

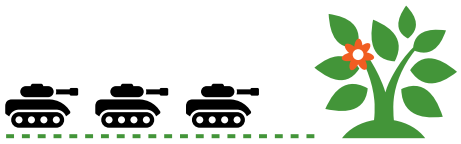
Trees and Jewish Thought

From the very first chapters of the Torah where we encounter trees in the Garden of Eden, to the biblical injunction of *bal tashchit* (do not destroy) to the resurgence of the holiday of Tu B'Shevat, trees are a centerpiece of Jewish culture and ritual.

To make sense of the richness of Jewish engagement with trees, the Contemporary Jewish Museum worked with Israeli artists/designers Dov Abramson and Tal Hovav who created a graphic representation of the various Jewish laws, commentary, traditions, and concepts related to the tree. The CJM has utilized these graphics to create this downloadable resource for educators.

Do Not Destroy בל תשחית

Contemporary Jewish environmentalism relies heavily on the key biblical text that prohibits the unnecessary destruction of trees (bal tashchit). The title of the CJM exhibition, *Do Not Destroy*, comes from this passage. Here are Jewsih source texts that implore us to protect the environment:



Deuteronomy 20:19–20

"When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, do 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? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed…"

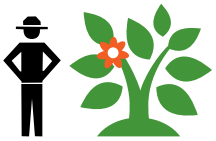
"Is the human a tree of the field? "Ki ha'adam etz ha'sadeh"

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

This question from Deuteronomy (now part of a famous Israeli pop song), is part of a longer passage imploring humanity not to destroy trees unnecessarily (*bal tashchit*). Here the Bible asks how a person might be similar to a tree. One interpretation is that our lives as human beings depend on trees—and therefore we should preserve them for our benefit. The second interpretation is an ethical-philosophical assertion that reads the four-word phrase as a rhetorical question: Are trees of the field human? Can they fight, protect themselves, run away? The answer is: Of course not! There is a radical existential difference between trees and people, and we shouldn't cut them down, not simply because of our (long-term) needs, but because of their inherent innocence, and worth.

Steward of Nature

Midrash Ecclesiastes, Rabba 7:13



"When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: 'See My works, see how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created – I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy My world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you."

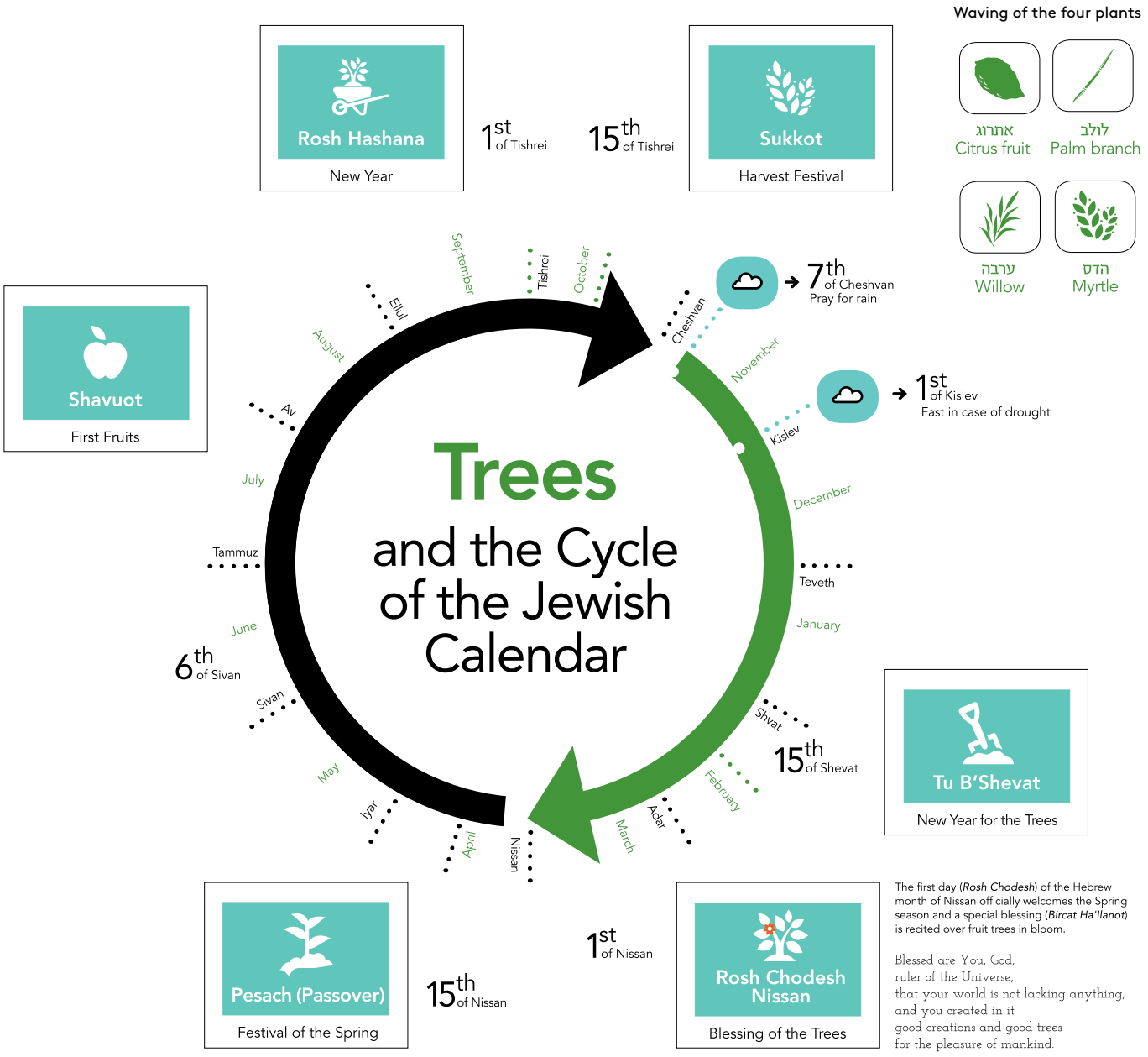
Reduce, Re-use, Recycle

Maimonides in Mishneh Torah, Book of Judges, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8, 6:10

The Jewish concept of *bal tashchit* has been extended in contemporary eco-Judaism to encompass humanity's responsibility to shield all of nature from unnecessary harm. In fact, a distinctly Jewish environmental movement has grown with its foundation based on this ancient dictum. This injunction has also been broadened to reflect the larger moral prohibition of destroying anything without absolute need. "Whenever someone destroys a useful artifact, or rips clothing, demolishes a building, plugs up a spring, or senselessly destroys food, it violates the spirit of the Torah's 'do not destroy' rule. Such actions are disgraceful."

Agricultural Cycle and Jewish Life

Despite centuries of living in the Diaspora, Jewish holiday and ritual life today remains tied to the agricultural cycle and to the ancient practice of giving sacrifices and tithes to support the priests and the poor. This ancient communal system manifests itself in contemporary celebrations of Jewish holidays, starting in the fall with Rosh Hashanah and the harvest holiday of Sukkot and culminating in the spring with Shavuot.



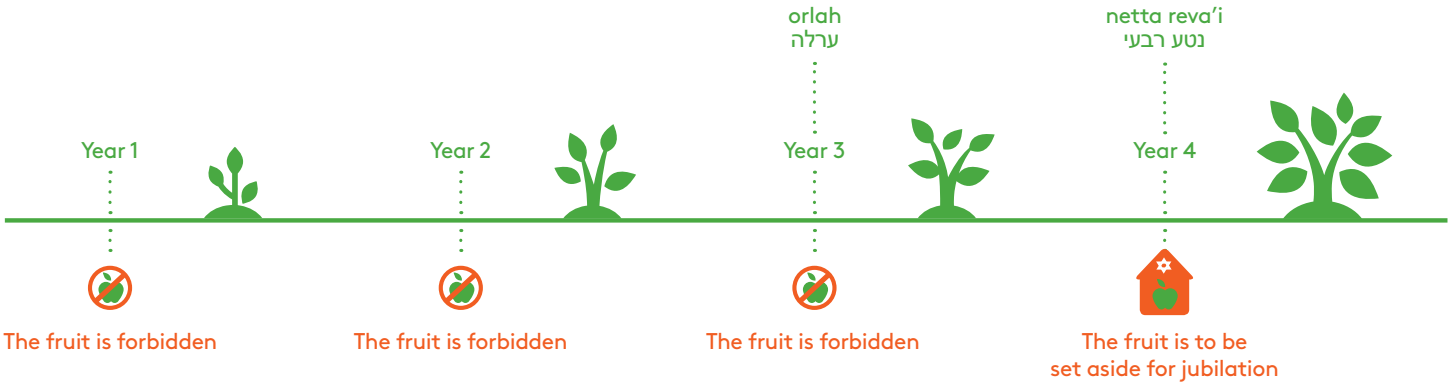
The first day (*Rosh Chodesh*) of the Hebrew month of Nissan officially welcomes the Spring season and a special blessing (*Bircat Ha'Ilanot*) is recited over fruit trees in bloom.

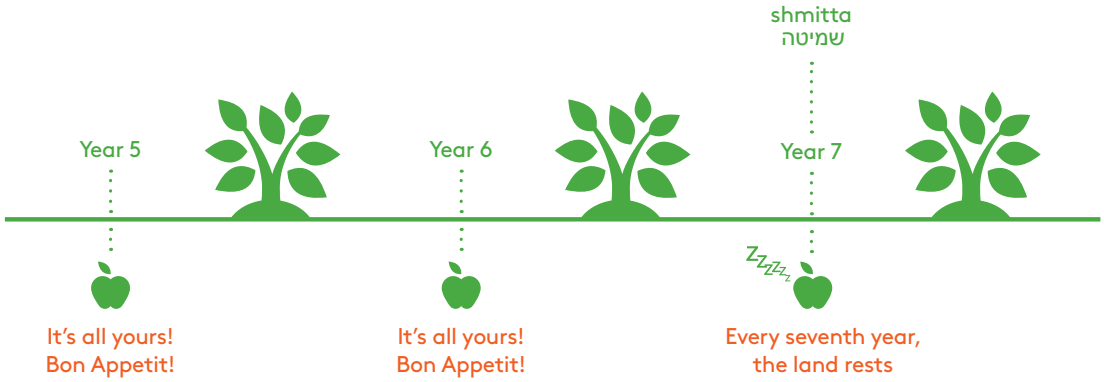
Blessed are You, God,
ruler of the Universe,
that your world is not lacking anything,
and you created in it
good creations and good trees
for the pleasure of mankind.

Trees and the Agricultural Cycle

"When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its fruits as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden for you, not to be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit shall be set aside for jubilation before the Lord; and only in the fifth year may you use its fruit—that its yield to you may be increased."

Leviticus 19:23–25





Trees in the Torah and Torah as a Tree

Human beings, first and foremost, are physical creatures. Our relationship with trees is fundamental to our survival, and Jewish tradition recognizes this in its foundational stories, laws, and theology.

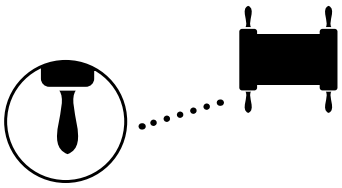
The tree is a particularly potent symbol in the Torah: it represents paradise, regeneration, shelter, the bounty of the earth, longevity, and is even a precursor to the coming of the Messiah. Additionally, the Torah is also referred to as a tree, specifically the Tree of Life.

Garden of Eden גן עדן

In *Genesis*, God placed two trees in the center of the Garden of Eden; the tree of life and the tree of knowledge.

Tree of Life ועץ החיים

Etz Chaim



Etz Chaim means Tree of Life. Tree of Life is also a name for the Torah and refers to the rollers to which the Torah scroll is bound. "She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy."

Proverbs 3:18

What was the Tree of Knowledge?

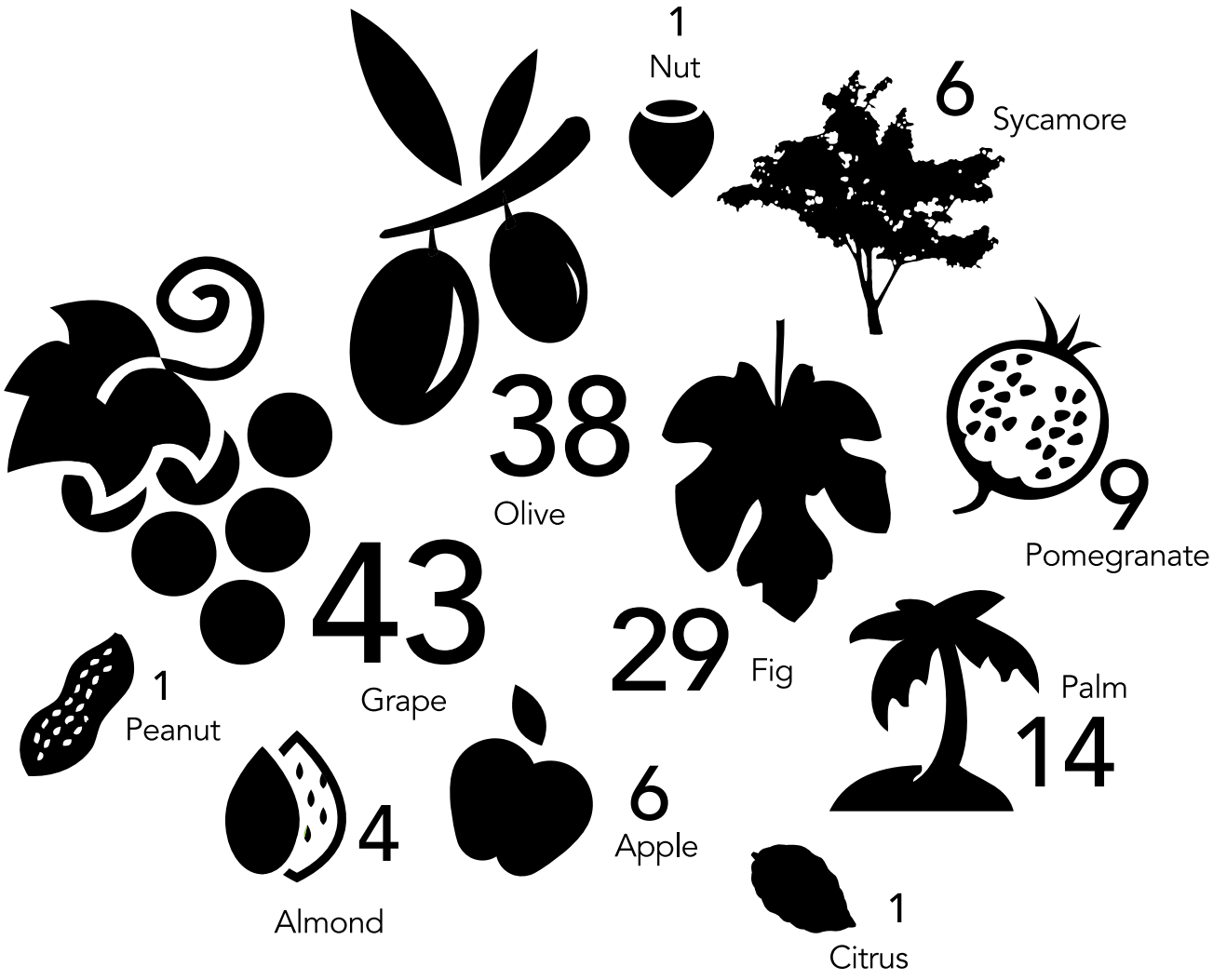
Rabbi Meir says that the fruit was a **grape**, made into wine. The Zohar explains similarly that Noah attempted (but failed) to rectify the sin of Adam by using grape wine for holy purposes.

Rabbi Nechemia says that the fruit was a **fig**, as it was from fig leaves that God made garments for Adam and Eve upon expelling them from the Garden.

On the other hand, Rabbi Yehuda proposes that the fruit was **wheat**, because "a babe does not know to call its mother and father until it tastes the taste of grain. On this, Tosafot explains, "And this is called the Tree of Knowledge."

Trees mentioned in the Torah

The number indicates how many times that type of tree is mentioned in the Torah.



No Worshipping, Please

Traditional Jewish respect for trees is balanced, in part, by a longstanding anxiety about the idolatrous potential of "tree worshipping."

לא תיטע לך אשרה כל עץ
"Thou shalt not plant thee an Asherah (sacred post) of any kind of tree."

Deutronomy 16:21

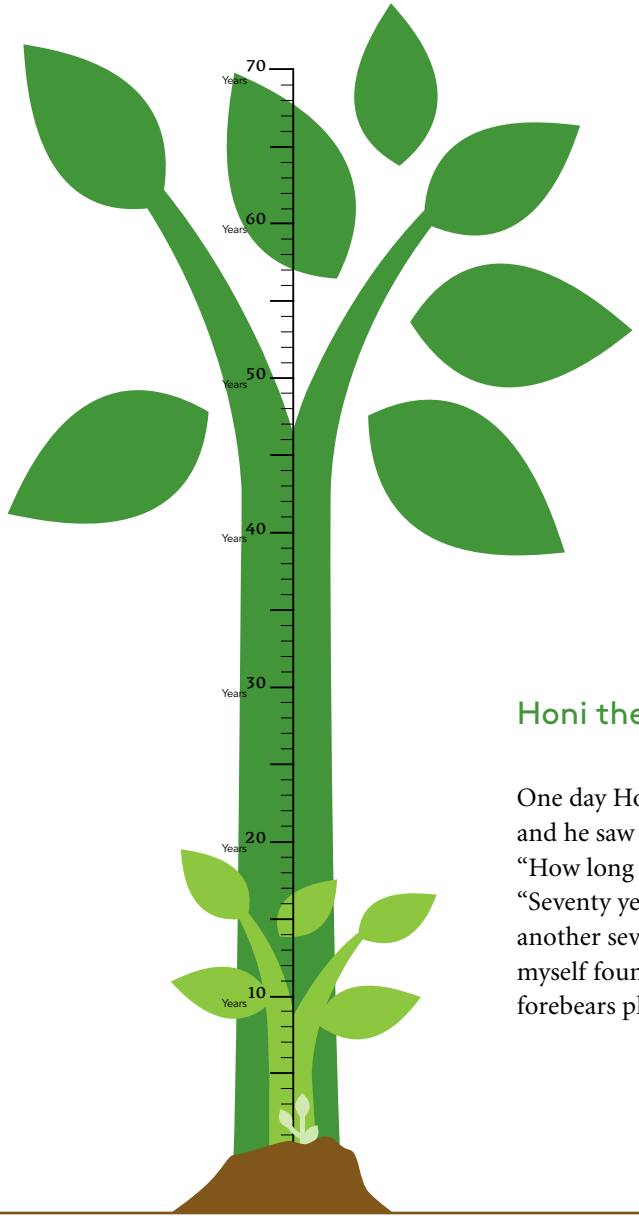
Trees and Future Generations

"Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai says: If you are holding a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you, 'here comes the Messiah!'—come and plant the sapling, and afterwards go and welcome the Messiah."

Avot de Rabbi Natan B 31

"The appearance of the Messiah is described through the language of trees: a "shoot" that will 'grow out of the stump of Jesse [the royal house of King David], a twig [that] shall sprout from his stock.'"

Isaiah 11:1



Honi the Circle Maker

One day Honi the Circle maker was walking on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked the man, "How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?" the man replied, "Seventy years." He asked, "Are you quite sure you will live another seventy years to eat its fruit?" The man replied, "I myself found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my forebears planted for me, so am I planting for my chilrdren."

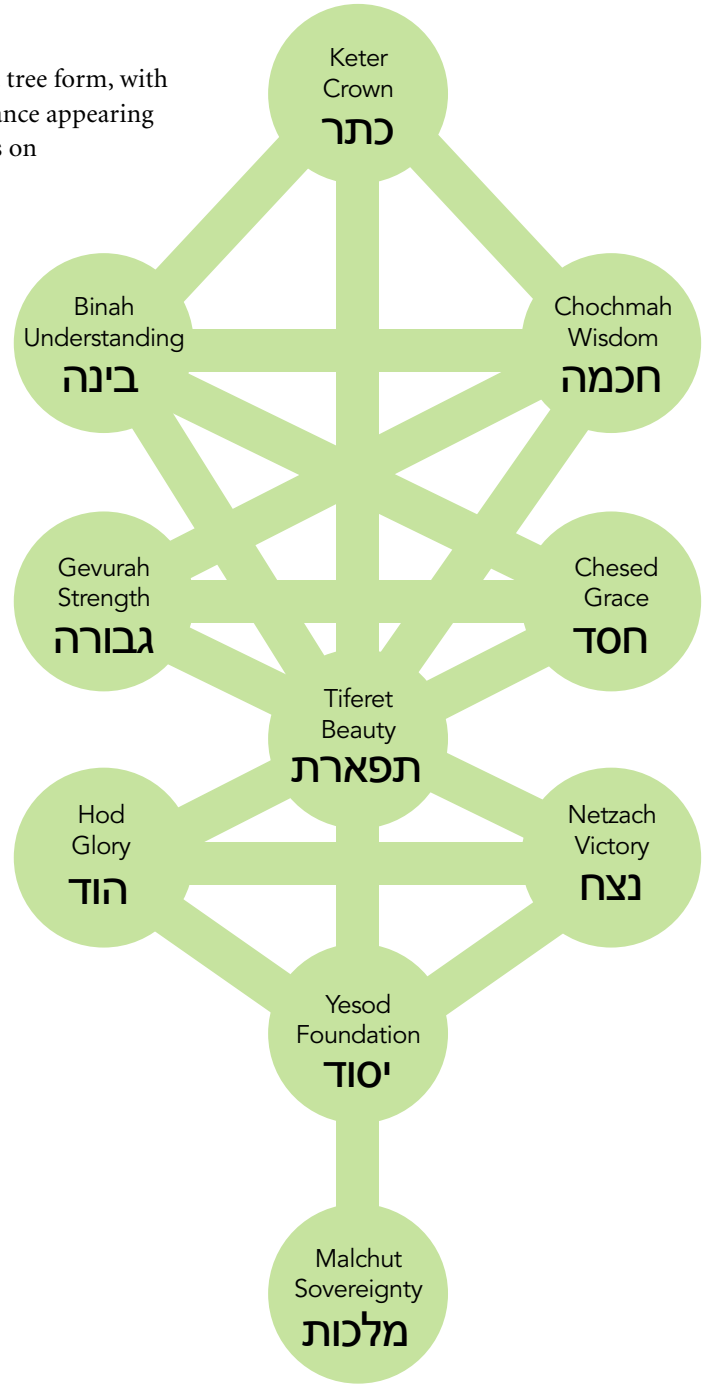
Based on Talmud Ta'anit 23a

Mystical

Jewish mysticism, known as Kabbalah, is a set of teachings that explain the nature of the universe and human beings, the origin of existence, and other philosophical and existential issues. There are several occurrences of the tree as a symbol in Kabbalah.

Kabbalah

The primary imagery from *Kabbalah*, involves a tree form, with roots in heaven and the "fruit" of divine abundance appearing below in the earthly realm. There are ten entries on the tree-like diagram for each of the Kabbalistic emanations (*sefirot*).

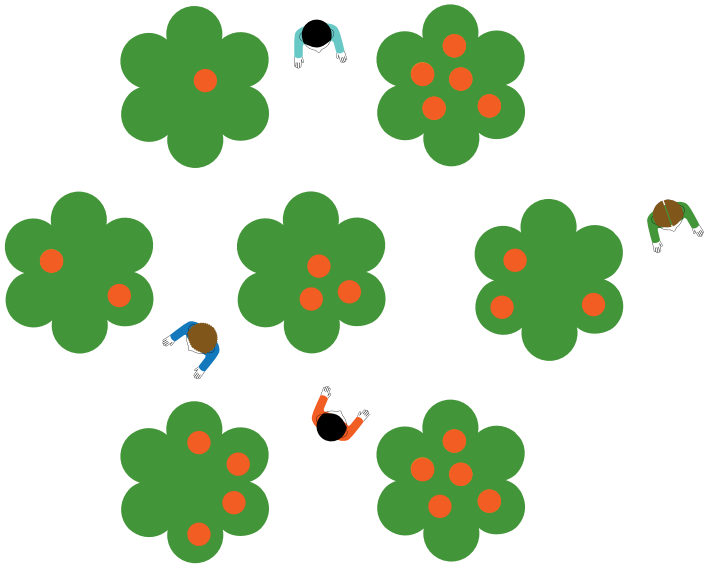


Four men entered the pardes

ארבעה נכנסו לפרדס

Talmudic doctrine forbade the public teaching of esoteric doctrines connected with the Kabbalah, warning of their potential dangers. In fact, in the Mishnah, rabbis were warned to teach the mystical creation doctrines only to one student at a time. Because of its inherent complexities, there is a tradition that Kabbalah should only be taught to a select and expert few. To highlight the danger, one legendary Jewish anecdote tells the story that during the first century CE four prominent rabbis—Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Akiba—visited the Orchard (that is, Pardes). The story ends with one rabbi dying, another going crazy, and a third becoming a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva "entered in peace and left in peace."

Mishna Hagigah 2:2



PaRDes

PaRDes is a Hebrew word meaning "orchard" or "garden." This term is also applied to a method of studying Torah. The fact that a system of Jewish interpretation blossomed within the metaphor of an orchard is already suggestive of the deep interconnections between Jewish life and the life of trees. In the traditional system of analysis, the word *PaRDeS* is used as an acronym to mark ever deeper levels of interpretation – P stands for *P'shat* (literal meaning); R for *Remez* (allegorical understanding); D for *Derash* (comparative meaning); and S for *Sod* (secret or mystical revelation).

Spanning the lobby of the Contemporary Jewish Museum is the *PaRDes* wall, an architectural installation incorporating an abstract representation of the concept of *PaRDes*. You can see the four Hebrew letters that create the word *PaRDes*—*Peh*, *Resh*, *Dalet*, and *Samech*—embedded in the wall and floor.

Tu B'Shevat

Thousands of years ago, when the Israelites lived a rural existence in their own land, the holiday of Tu B'Shevat—Hebrew for the fifteenth of the month of Shevat—was established for the purpose of tithing. Every year, one-tenth of the crop was given to the temple to support the priests and the poor. The anniversary also helped regulate the harvesting of fruit. This holiday bound early Jewish law to the agricultural calendar and established the connection between human behavior and the earth's natural rhythms. Tu B'Shevat was part of a series of agricultural pilgrimages and holidays that connected the bounty of the land with ritual and theological commandments.

Tu B'Shevat waned in importance after the expulsion of Jews from Israel two thousand years ago, causing laws related to the physical land of Israel to become more theoretical. Starting in the middle ages, the holiday was resurrected as a feast of fruits. And in the seventeenth century a group of mystics in the Galilee hill town of Sfat created the "Tu B'Shevat seder," an intricate ritual meal based on the Passover seder that elevated trees, fruits, and nuts to a higher spiritual plane.

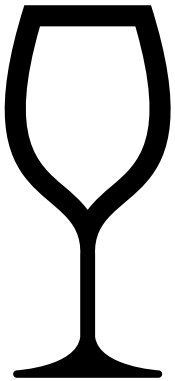
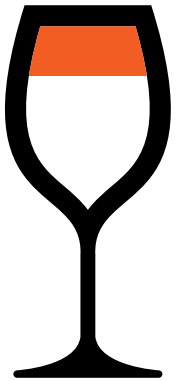
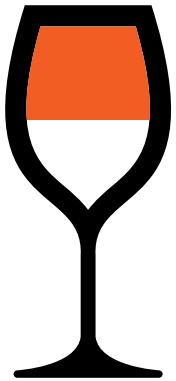
At the end of the nineteenth century, when the modern Zionist movement brought Jews back to the land of Israel, Tu B'Shevat became a more popular holiday as the planting of trees symbolized the rebirth of a Jewish nation. The symbol of twentieth-century Zionist activism was the little blue Jewish National Fund collection box, which raised funds to plant almost 250 million trees in pre- and post-state Israel over 110 years.

In the last generation, Tu B'Shevat has emerged as a popular holiday among younger people. As concern for the environment becomes a rallying cry for people of all faiths, many Jews have rediscovered a connection with their tradition through the rituals and insights of Tu B'Shevat.

The Bay Area, home to innovative Jewish organizations like Wilderness Torah and Urban Adamah (a teaching fellowship and farm program), is an international center for Jewish environmental thinking. Each February, groups throughout the region gather to plant trees, explore the biblical injunction to respect trees (the "do not destroy" of the exhibition title), and celebrate with Tu B'Shevat seders. Every year more and more people come together to eat a meal of symbolic fruits and nuts, drink wines corresponding to different "spiritual levels," and be inspired by what many now call "Jewish Earth Day."

The Tu B'Shevat Seder

Beriah בריאה	Atzilut אצילות	Yetzira יצירה	Assiya עשיה
			
Inedible shell: walnuts, almonds, bananas, pomegranates	Inedible inner pit: olives, dates, plums	No pit or shell: grapes, figs, carobs	No fruit or nuts

First cup	Second cup	Third cup	Fourth cup
			

Suggested Questions for Exploring Artwork from *Do Not Destroy*

Looking at each piece, ask students to articulate answers to the following:

What stands out to you about this artwork?

What is familiar? What seems unfamiliar?

How did the artist interpret the assignment to incorporate reclaimed wood into the piece?

What Jewish concepts or texts do you think inspired this work?
What do you see that makes you say that?

What does this piece inspire you to think about or want to take action on?

What aspects of the artwork inspire you to think this?

Feel free to integrate the text from each artist's statement as your conversation unfolds.

Selected artworks related to *Do Not Destroy*

Lynne Avadenka
(b. United States 1955, based in Huntington Woods, MI)
K'etz
Kiln-fired glass, fabric decal
78 x 15 in.
Courtesy the artist

In this work, the artist composed Psalm 1:3—"And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water that brings forth fruit in its season and whose leaf will not wither"—out of fallen elm twigs gathered from her front yard. The passage equates the tree with happiness, equanimity, and faith. The elm that served as the source for this work stood in front of the artist's home for over thirty years. Avadenka arranged the twigs to form each word of the passage and then photographed them, turning the digital images into decals that were affixed to glass tiles and kiln fired.

Lisa Kokin
(b. United States 1954, based in El Sobrante, CA)
Fauxliage: No Birds Sing
Thread, wire, page fragments from Silent Spring (1962) by Rachel Carson
70 x 24 x 8 in.
Courtesy the artist and Seager Gray Gallery, Mill Valley, CA

Fauxliage incorporates Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which criticized the chemical industry and its detrimental effects on birds in particular. Out of the text and other materials, Kokin created a prosthetic branch, ostensibly a resting place for birds and other fauna.

Beth Grossman (b. United States 1958, based in Brisbane, CA)
Yearnings
Pyrography, watercolor, and ink on reclaimed wood panel
43 x 20 1/2 x 1 1/2 in.
Courtesy the artist

"In 1958, the year I was born, a tree was dedicated in my name in Israel. It came with a promise that one day I would visit the land of milk and honey. Then in nursery school, we loved to collect coins in a blue Jewish National Fund tin to plant more trees in Israel. We were building a Jewish nation, one tree at a time.

"My love for Zion was planted in my heart through a symbolic tree. This is my story and my tree. It stands as a witness to Israeli history through my American Jewish experience. The 'ghost' of this tree is memory. Each line embedded in the landscape surrounding this tree is a chapter heading for the story of my complicated love for Israel."

Amy Klein Reichert (b. United States 1959, based in Chicago, IL)
Man Is a Tree of the Field
Elm wood reclaimed from urban forest, gold leaf, brass, glass
2 1/4 x 22 x 21 in.
Courtesy the artist

Reichert used a cross-section of an elm to create this topographic map, reinforcing the idea of the tree as a landscape of memory. Hovering above the landscape, brass and glass stands hold samples of the seven species mentioned in the Torah as the main agricultural products of ancient Israel: wheat (chitah), barley (se›orah), grapes (gefen), figs (te›enah), pomegranates (rimon), olives (zayit), and dates (tamar or d›vash).

The Sarah Gray Research Headquarters
Merav Tzur (b. Israel 1967, based in Oakland, CA)
Grafted Arboreus sabius, or a failed attempt to propagate the Tree of Knowledge
Scrap wood, video
Link to video: Show 5 minute video:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdqgS5QKLm8
53 x 23 x 24 in.
Courtesy the artist

Tzur's Arboreus sabius project is an attempt to propagate the Tree of Knowledge, whose species is not defined in the Book of Genesis and is the subject of ongoing speculation. Various texts, interpretations, and misunderstandings have proposed a wide variety of potential species including fig, pear, oak, grape, date, cedar, apple, and even wheat. The artist grafted various kinds of trees proposed by biblical scholars, recording this process for the accompanying instructional video.

"My work centers around ongoing investigations done by my alias, Sarah Gray. Ms. Gray dedicates her life to the collection, identification, and archiving of material in an attempt to create a cohesive narrative and confirm the existence of her universe. Gray's comical investigations confront the viewer with a world where past, present, and future fold into each other and there is no distinction between fact and fiction. Through Ms. Gray's activities I 'excavate' methods through which cultural narratives are constructed and then use those methods to create a set of alternative—albeit absurd—hypothetical and implausible scenarios."

Yves Behar (b. Switzerland 1967, based in San Francisco, CA)
Aleph of Life
Bay laurel
14 x 14 x 3 in.
Courtesy the artist

Behar created the form of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, out of pieces of bay laurel wood. Using only four cuts and sanding the wood down, Behar reveals the age, decay, and beauty of the wood's interior.

"Our awareness of nature needs to be first, like the first letter Aleph. The expression 'From Aleph to Tav' means something from beginning to end; translated in English it is 'From A to Z': trees represent this permanence."

Additional Resources: Judaism and the Environment

The list below highlights online, downloadable resources specifically connected to Judaism and trees.

Hazon
Healthy, sustainable *Tu B'Shevat*
http://www.hazon.org/healthy-sustainable-tu-bshvat-resources-2012-edition/

G-dcast
An animation of Honi the Circle Maker's Story with teacher's guide.
http://www.g-dcast.com/tu-bshvat

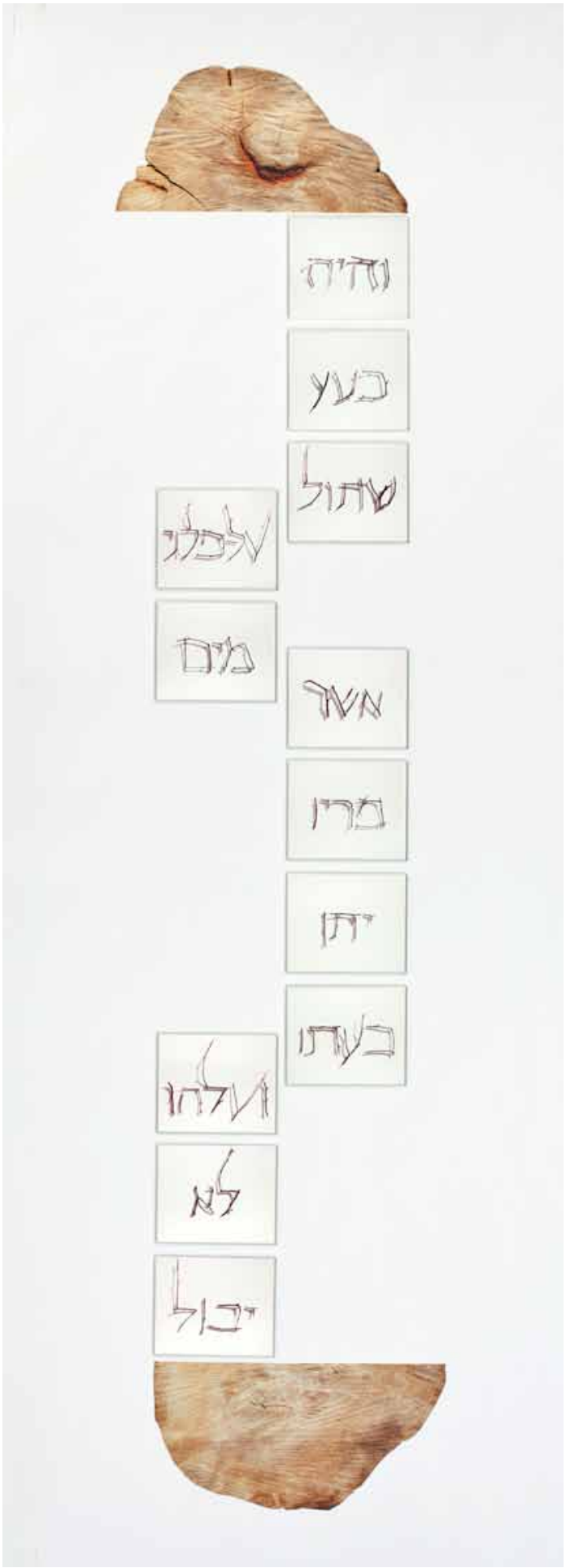
Canfei Nesharim
Torah-based resources for *Tu B'Shevat*
http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php

Jewish National Fund
Tu B'Shevat Across America
http://support.jnf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=treesource#treesource

Jewcology
Year of Jewish Learning on the Environment
http://www.jewcology.com/content/view/Jewcology-Launches-Year-of-Jewish-Learning-on-the-Environment

On1Foot
Jewish texts related to social justice. A project of American Jewish World Service
http://www.on1foot.org/

Babaganewz
Babaganewz searchable resource library
http://www.behrmanhouse.com/resource-libraries




No Birds Sing


NEXT YEAR IN TEL AVIV
I LOVE THE SINAI
1958 A TREE IS PLANTED IN MY NAME IN ISRAEL