

The Schmooze **Stories with a Yiddish Twist**

SAY IT WITH TREES--TU B'SHEVAT STORIES

The Yiddish word for “tree” is “boym.”

by
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Syosset, New York

The newspapers reported that New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio celebrated the planting of the city’s 1 millionth tree. His predecessor, Mayor Michael Bloomberg began the program.

“Today, we plant a tree that marks the completion of a great vision,” said de Blasio. (Note: It was a rare joint appearance between the two men.)

The millionth tree, a lace bark elm, was planted at Joyce Kilmer Park, named after the W. W. I soldier who wrote the poem, “Trees” before he was killed in action in 1918. If you recall, the opening lines to the poem are as follows:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

The closing lines:

Poems are made by
fools like me,
But only God can
make a tree.

Bloomberg said: “Trees really do improve the air and our mental health, and improve real estate values.” De Blasio pledged: “We’re not stopping: there will be 150,000 trees planted over the next three years to continue this tradition.”

According to Rabbi Steve M. Fink, “Israel has more trees now than it did in Biblical times and is one of the few countries in the world that has more trees now than it did a hundred years ago.”

Since its inception, the Jewish National Fund says it has planted over 240 million trees in Israel, By 1935, JNF had planted 1.7 million trees.

According to MyJewishLearning, today in Israel anyone who wants to destroy a tree must apply for a license, even if the tree is on his or her property.

Planting a tree has represented hope (“hofenung”) since ancient times. On Tu Bishvat in Palestine, trees were planted for children born during the previous year: for a boy, a cedar, with the wish that the child would grow tall and upright, for a girl, cypress, which was graceful and fragrant. Later, branches from the cypress and cedar of a bride and groom (“kale” and “khosn”) were used to make the huppah (canopy) for their wedding ceremony.

The planting was associated with two of the most important (“vikhtik”) times in an individual’s life--birth and marriage. On these two occasions we concentrate on the possibilities for the future.

So powerful is this connection that even in Theriesenstadt concentration camp, children planted a tree.

Planting a tree in Israel is the perfect (“perfekt”) way to show you care. You can plant trees “in memory” of your loved one and help green the land of Israel. And Rabbi Donald B. Rossoff wrote, “Give a Bar/Bat Mitzvah a tree and you give them everything.”

For just \$18 “Trees for the Holy Land” will plant a tree in the Holy land and mail you a custom printed certificate of tree planting. A matching pair of trees costs \$35, a Chai Garden of 18 trees, costs \$260, and a Forest of 100 trees costs \$1,000.

In Judaism, trees are regarded as extremely precious (“tayer”) and important (“vikhtik”). There are blessings over the first buds of spring (“friling”) and also whenever we eat fruits for the first time that season (“sezon”).

Tu B’Shevat is said to be the New Year for trees.

Shown below are some stories and sermons about trees:

1. Honi the Wise One was also known as Honi the Circle Maker. He would draw a circle (“krayz”), step inside it, recite special prayers for rain (“regn”), sometimes argue with God during a drought...and the rains would come.

One day, Honi the Circle Maker, was walking on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked the man, “How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?” The man replied, “70 years.”

Honi then asked the man, “And do you think you will live another 70 years and eat the fruit of this tree?”

The man answered, “Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father (“tate”) and grandfather (“zeyde”). Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees.”

2. In 1962, a tree was planted in Oscar Schindler’s honor in the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem.
3. This year (2015) some 600 children and youth from all over northern Israel attended a joyful event in Lavie Forest. Newly arrived immigrants from Ethiopia also joined in the fun. JNF held over 410 activities and Tu B’Shvat seders. About 42,000 people participated. The participants saw how tiny seeds develop into large trees.
4. Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple, Los Angeles, CA, gave a sermon about trees.

“When we are children, we carve our initials in trees. For we understand that unlike putting a name in pavement, the initials will grow with the tree. In later years should we see them again they will be

higher, and burnished by time....We are the custodians of the garden at the same time we are a shoot of the original planting. Human cultivation of the land is not only for sustenance, but an essential expression of the growth of human society.”

(Source: TREEsource, an interactive site providing free Tu B'Shevat sermons from rabbis around the country)

5. Rabbi Ilana Berenbaum Grinblat, Temple Beth Shalom, Long Beach, California, wrote,

“When a child excels we note, ‘An apple does not fall far from a tree.’ Firstly, we associate trees with joy in nature. Recall for a moment walking through a forest and feeling protected under the branches of a tree. The image of the tree is so powerful because trees evoke the cycle of life.”

(Source: TREEsource)

6. Rabbi David H. Lincoln, Park Avenue Synagogue, New York, NY, wrote,

“Some years ago I was part of a rabbinical delegation in Israel that planted trees and visited various projects of JNF. While praying at the Kotel, I met the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Police and told him that I was due to speak the next morning. He suggested that I use a theme expressed in the Talmud. It seems that if one was planting a tree in Israel and the news comes of the arrival of the Messiah, one has to continue planting and greet the Messiah LATER!”

(Source: TREEsource)

7. Rabbi Shawn B. Zell, Temple Beth O'r/Beth Torah, Clark, N. J., wrote, “Once upon a time, a great Rabbi was walking past a most beautiful apple tree. After reciting the Bracha Baruch....., the Rabbi noticed an apple tree branch covered with delicate pink blossoms laying on the ground. Overcome by its beauty, the Rabbi picked up the branch, brought it home, and gave it to his rebbetzin, who promptly placed it in a vase.

Realizing that this was the home of a great Rabbi and very much aware of its own natural beauty, the apple branch couldn't help but think a great deal of itself. What's more, the apple branch began to look down on other plants and flowers, especially the dandelion.

“Nebech,” said the apple branch. “It’s not the dandelion’s fault that it has such an ugly name (dandelion, like its Hebrew equivalent, means lion’s tooth). But it’s taste! Gevalt! So bitter! Not sweet like mine. No wonder it’s a mere weed!”

And just as it was feeling so smug and self-righteous, a poor Jew entered the home of the esteemed Rabbi. He had with him his three-year-old son, who was quite ill. Since the Rabbi was well versed in a variety of fields including medicine, the poor Jew turned to the Rabbi for help.

“Esteemed Rabbi,” said the poor Jew. “Please help my son! A neighbor said that if we fed him applesauce (“epl-tsimes”), he’d get better. But look at the poor boy!”

After examining the child, the Rabbi exclaimed: “Applesauce! Applesauce is of no avail! All the applesauce in the world won’t help him. But I’ll tell you what will. Juice from a dandelion! And with that, the Rabbi left the room only to return a moment later carrying a bunch of dandelions. Squeezing the dandelions gently, the Rabbi collected the juice in a glass, which he then gave to the child to drink. Almost immediately, the child’s health returned to him. And the apple branch? The apple branch realized that HaShem had blessed this lowly, ugly named, bitter tasting flower in His own way.

(Source: TREEsource)

8. Rabbi Steve M. Fink, Temple Oheb Shalom, Baltimore, MD, wrote, “Israel would not exist without Jewish National Fund. I don’t mean that Israel would be weakened or its survival threatened. The very State of Israel could not have come into being without Jewish National Fund. The pushke, or Blue Box, literally paid for the Land of Israel. How many homes possessed Jewish National Fund’s Blue Box? How many children would place nickels and dimes in the pushke or buy stamps so that we could purchase trees in Israel. I dare say that most of our homes had one and that most of us put our coins in the box and bought ten stamps for 25 cents each so that we could buy our own trees. The Blue Box became a symbol of the partnership between the Jewish people and Jewish National Fund in the redemption of the Land of Israel.”

(Source: TREEsource)

Note: Leo Rosten (“The New Joys of Yiddish”) wrote about a woman

named Sylvia Orzoff, who “in 23 years of collecting money in a blue-and-white tin can in front of Canter’s Deli on Fairfax Avenue [Los Angeles] has netted more than \$2 million for the Jewish National Fund.”

9. Rabbi Jonathan A. Schnitzer, B’nai Israel Cong., Rockville, MD, wrote, “There is a poignant Midrash, which captures the theme: “When God created the first human being and placed him in the Garden of Eden to inspect trees, God admonished him in the following way:

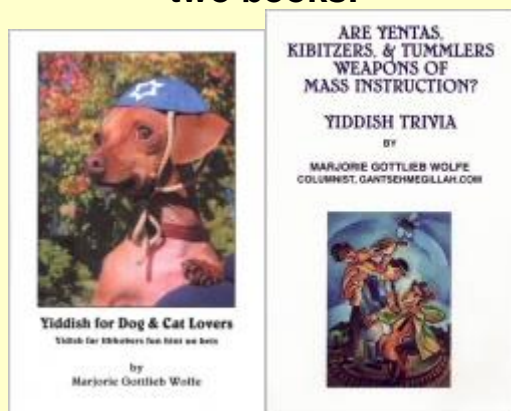
“Look how lovely and extraordinary my work has turned out to be! I’ve created it for you. Therefore, consider this responsibility carefully--and do not damage or destroy my world--for if you do, there is no way to repair it after you!” Ecclesiastes Rabba 7:13
(Source: TREEsource)

MARJORIE GOTTLIEB WOLFE agrees with this quote:

The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago.
The second best is now.
Anon.

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Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of two books:



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tumblers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish Trivia." To order a copy, go to her

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