

## **“The Survivor Tree”**

**Shabbat Shira/Tu B'Shevat 5773**

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I cannot imagine what it would mean to evaluate 5,200 architectural design proposals for *anything*...much less something as symbolically, emotionally, and historically significant for an entire nation. A special 9/11 commission made up of artists, sculptors, community leaders, a writer and professor collaborated to sift through renderings and drawings, each one attempting to evoke the sadness, loss, and devastation of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks as well as a sense of hope, aspiration, and honor for the victims and heroes of that infamous day. In the end, 5,200 proposals later, a design entitled “Reflecting Absence” was selected. It was created by the Israeli-American architect Michael Arad, and having visited this site for the first time this past week, I was absolutely overwhelmed by its power and austere beauty.

Twenty two students from Keshet, our post-b'nai mitzvah program, traveled with Rabbi Cohen, Ken Popkin (our chaperone extraordinaire), and me to New York City for an exciting several days of touring and exploring. We spent a lot of time wandering the streets of the Lower East Side, learning about waves of Jewish immigration to this country from Eastern Europe. I also made it my personal mission to fill them up with as much kosher corned beef, pastrami, knishes, and pickles as I could! We saw a Broadway show, explored museums, ice skated at Rockefeller Center, visited the Jewish Theological Seminary, and really had a wonderful time. But Rabbi Cohen and I thought it was important, in the midst of a very packed itinerary, for these kids—who were only three or four years old on September 11, 2001—to visit this place of national homage. Sari and I lived in New York City on September 11, 2001. I remember that day like it was yesterday. How a clear, sunny autumn morning quickly became a day of unspeakable tragedy. I remember the fear of not being able to reach Sari because cell phone service had been disconnected; I remember frantically worrying about where our infant daughter Mia was, somewhere in a city under siege innocently walking in a park with her babysitter. And like many of you, I remember watching those images of planes smashing into buildings replayed over and over again on television. Going to the 9/11 Memorial was actually not something I was anxious to do. It was enough to live through it. One week after the attacks I boarded a plane and flew to Huntsville, AL—my student pulpit—to officiate at High Holiday services. The emotion of the previous week combined with the angst of getting on an airplane so soon thereafter landed me in the emergency room at the Huntsville Hospital on Erev Rosh Hashanah. So, though I had been back to New York City numerous times in the past 11 years, not until this past week did I travel to the memorial at Ground Zero. It is a stunning place...on

the exact footprint where the two towers stood are two one acre reflecting pools. Water cascades down the sides of the pools and then descends into an inner shaft lined with cold black stone into an abyss the bottom of which cannot be seen. Around the sides of the pools, the names of the nearly 3,000 victims are engraved. The sound of the water falls is soothing, but the disappearance of the water into the depths of the structure struck a chord of terror as well—as if it is flowing down to *She'ol*...a bottomless underworld along with the victims. I could understand immediately why Michael Arad's design won the competition...it is one of the most effective memorials I have ever seen.

Four hundred oak trees are slated to be planted around the reflecting pools, and many of the saplings are already there. But right in between the two pools is one tree that is clearly *not* newly planted. A larger, taller tree, with broader branches and a metal guard rail around its trunk stands at the center-point between the pools. This tree was planted in in the 1970's in what was then the World Trade Center Plaza. During the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> this tree was buried in rubble and ruins until it was dug out a month later—the last living thing to be excavated from the remains of the buildings that it once stood between. Miraculously, the tree, a Callery pear tree, continued to live...it even blossomed and flourished. Today it is aptly referred to as the "Survivor Tree," not only for its resilience, but also because of the hope it represents for the many people who crowd around it and gaze into its foliage trying to imagine what those branches witnessed and survived. Like so many other groups, we too gathered around the base of this amazing tree. It was freezing cold, and a biting wind was whipping across the plaza. We stood close to each other and snapped a picture. As we were dispersing, someone in the group said, 'Look up there; look up at the top of the tree...' Since it was mid-winter, there were practically no leaves, just naked branches. But perched up at the top was a bird's nest. Not only was the tree a survivor, it was now home to new life as well.

I know that for many people, Tu B'Shevat is a sweet holiday when we celebrate Judaism's commitment to ecology. When I was in Hebrew school, we would buy trees from JNF, and invariably hear the same canon of stories describing how Jews in the State of Israel made the barren desert bloom. We would break our teeth on pieces of tough carob bark and sample some of the more exotic fruits of Israel at a Tu B'shevat seder. It's a lovely holiday, and one of the few when we're not recalling some genocidal maniac trying to kill us. Nevertheless, though I love trees as much as the next guy, I couldn't claim an especially deep spiritual attachment to Tu B'shevat...until now. Since this past Monday, I haven't been able to stop thinking about that Survivor Tree, and how its determination to live and thrive in the soil of destruction is so powerful; about how trees along with providing food, and shade, and oxygen, also stand for hope, and life, and opportunity. And then there are the birds...

There is an old Ashkenazic custom to feed birds on Shabbat Shira, *today*, when we read the Song of the Sea. It's not a mitzvah per se...there's no *berakha*, but it is a beautiful custom for which there are several explanations. According to one midrash<sup>1</sup>, when God parted the waters for *b'nai Yisrael* to cross to freedom, the nearby trees bloomed with fruit. On their branches birds chirped and tweeted sweet songs of celebration as the Israelites went free. It became customary to place bird seed outside prior to the beginning of Shabbat on this particular weekend, in order to remember those song birds. Some people would collect the bread crumbs from their Shabbes challah, and shake the table cloth outside to provide the birds a treat in gratitude for their songs of praise. Later sages taught us to listen to the sounds of birds every day and remember that everything we do can be an act of praise.<sup>2</sup>

All of these thoughts collided for me as I huddled with our precious teenagers in the cold, windy 9/11 memorial plaza earlier this week—the Survivor Tree and Tu B'shevat; the bird's nest high in the branches and the coming of Shabbat Shira. Next week too we will hear about birds...God says to the Jewish people "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, *v'esah etkhem al kanfei nesharim*, how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me."<sup>3</sup> Birds are God's chosen metaphor for how He carried us to freedom.

It turns out that Callery Pear Trees were planted extensively throughout New York City in the 1960's because they thrive even in cramped spaces, and are highly tolerant of environmental effects like pollution and street salt. They bear small, hard, half-inch fruits that birds consider a delicacy. In the process of munching on the fruit, they scatter tiny black seeds, which of course fall to the ground and regenerate new life. The wood of the pear tree is highly sought after for making woodwind musical instruments. How appropriate not only for Tu B'shevat, Shabbat Shira, and a national memorial designed to inspire both sadness and hope.

I encourage you to revive this old Ashkenazic minhag this weekend...place some bird seed in your yard, set up a bird feeder, or just shake out your Shabbat table cloth over the snow-covered grass. As the birds come to collect their meal, listen as they sing their songs. May they remind us to be hopeful even when we face life's challenges; and grateful when we overcome them. May we always remember that life springs from the most unlikely places...like a stubborn tree determined to live amongst the rubble, or a bird's nest perched high in its branches. And may the *Melekh hafeitz ba'hayyim*, our God Who loves life, bless us all with confidence and optimism in ours.

Shabbat Shalom & Tu B'Shevat Sameiah!

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus Rabbah 21:10

<sup>2</sup> Hammer, Jill. *The Jewish Book of Days*. Jewish Publication Society, 2006. Page 177

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 19:4