

Nomi Lerman
Kol Nidre 5778

A few years ago I was in Olympia taking an early morning walk in the woods along the Pacific Ocean, when suddenly a strangely- shaped tree caught my eye. I noticed that the sand had eroded from under its huge gnarly branches, and it was securely rooted on a slant that spanned a few levels. Its roots were not only completely exposed, but they fanned outward around the trunk, and beneath the roots a wide cave-like opening invited me right inside. I crawled in through the sandy earth, and realized that I had never seen so many living tree roots before. Here I was-- sitting on top of the earth and below the base of a living tree. For the first time it struck me that roots are the mirror image of a tree's branches-- and vice versa-- as if the ground is a body of water reflecting back each end of the tree's trunk. I sat on that cool ground gazing at the water ahead of me, and couldn't help but feel the magnificent and powerful role trees and their roots play in our world.

On this sacred day, our liturgy focuses on G-d as The Creator and shaper of the universe, and presents creation as continually unfolding. Since we are also part of creation, we too get to be renewed when we open ourselves to humility, change, and growth. We get to ask each other and ourselves-- are we acting in harmony with our community, with other communities, with creation, with this magnificent universe? Our Torah teaches that we should not cut down fruit trees in times of war, and then asks a slightly confusing question, *לְכֹא מִפְּנֵיךָ בְּמִצְוֹר?* Is the tree of the field human--that it should be besieged by you? Kabbalistic commentators read this line as

saying “the human **IS** the tree of the field”, as I learned from Rabbi Victor. By arguing that we humans **are** trees, the Torah encourages us to turn to our wooded friends, to pay attention to them, and open ourselves to what they have to teach.

Forester Peter Wohlleben understands trees as social beings who build community. In his book The Hidden Life of Trees, he explains that trees in old-growth forests share resources with each other and sometimes even with their competitors. When a tree is alone, facing the wind and weather can be more dangerous, so trees that stand alone tend to have shorter life spans. In these forests, trees grow closer to each other in order to create an ecosystem which stores water, moderates extreme temperatures, and also has a network of roots that communicates warning messages. Because of this intentionality, these trees tend to live much longer than trees that stand alone. In a healthy, thriving forest, each tree is valuable to the community. Each tree is worth sustaining for the greater whole.

In undisturbed Beech tree groves, the trees feed each other and synchronize their performance so that they are all equally successful and grow at the exact same rate. Even when some trees grow in stony soil, and some have more access to water, their roots intertwine in order to redistribute resources. Whoever has an abundance of sugar shares, and whoever is in need of more sugar receives. Because the trees are so close together, their branches reaching for sunlight are much smaller than the broadly-branched trees we are used to seeing. Individual Beech trees in this forest might not seem as beautiful or unique to us, but this is because they are focusing their energy below the ground to fairly redistribute water and nutrients. Their roots interlace tightly to

weave a beautiful web of connection invisible to our eyes. “A tree can be only as strong as the forest that surrounds it”, because they know that they need each other to survive and flourish.

This year as we gather to pray for personal and collective renewal, many other communities are gathering together “to create a just & equitable future for communities of color.” Soon, thousands of people will be filling the streets of Washington D.C and other cities across the country for the March for Racial Justice. The March for Racial Justice is a Black and Indigenous led movement aiming to **“harness the national unrest and dissatisfaction with racial injustice into a national mobilization that strengthens local and nationwide efforts for racial equity and justice.”**

This march was announced right after the events of Charlottesville, and guess which date was chosen? Tomorrow, which also happens to be Yom Kippur! There were quite a few Jewish people who were upset that a March for Racial Justice was scheduled for tomorrow, because it meant they needed to choose between observing Yom Kippur and marching for racial justice.

The organizers released a statement that acknowledged their error, and also expressed their intention of keeping this date because of its significance. They chose September 30th because it is the yahrzeit, the commemoration date, of the lives that were taken in the Elaine massacre. In 1919, Black sharecroppers gathered in Elaine, Arkansas as the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America to ask for fair pay from white plantation owners. They were met with violent white mobs who massacred hundreds of

Black people regardless of their connection to the sharecroppers. This year, Yom Kippur day falls on this important yahrzeit and day of remembrance.

After the statement was released, some Jewish people felt alright about the choice of this date, and yet there were also some who **still** felt upset at what felt like exclusion from an important march. As we learned before, trees are very good communicators through their interconnected root system. What would our wise tree neighbors do in this situation?

The march organizers reached out to Jews of Color, and Jews of Color and white Jews reached out to the organizers to talk about how to move forward. It was made clear that the organizers did not maliciously pick Yom Kippur to keep Jews out of the march-- they chose this date to commemorate fallen ancestors, and did not realize that Yom Kippur was on the same date! **This mutual turning towards each other** created space for another powerful statement of tikkun, repair. The March for Racial Justice decided to expand itself another day-- to organize marches for Saturday as well as Sunday, in order to include Jews observing Yom Kippur.

I would like to uplift some of the words from the second statement made by the March for Racial Justice so we can hold those who are marching with us tonight and throughout this weekend. The statement says:

We are marching in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters who are observing the holiest of days on the Jewish calendar. Holding fast to Jewish tradition is also an act of resistance, in the face of growing anti-Semitism. We recognize and lift up the intersection of anti-Semitism and racism perpetrated by

white supremacists, whether they wave Confederate flags, don swastikas, beat and kill people on the streets in Charlottesville, deface Holocaust memorials, or threaten and harass members of our communities and our religious and community spaces. And we recognize the need for all of us to work together in the face of an administration that condones widespread oppression of all those most vulnerable among us.

This is a long-term struggle and our relationship to each other transcends one day and one march. We hope that on that holy day, Jews in synagogues across our country will pray for racial justice - lifting up black and brown people, Jewish and non-Jewish - in hope for safety and wholeness. Spiritual sustenance is an essential part of this work for justice. We're committed to working together with the Jewish community throughout the year and every year until true justice for all of us is won.

What powerful and beautiful words. This statement reminds us just how interwoven our roots really are. It tells us that we don't need to be the trees that stand alone and rely solely on sunlight, water and ourselves, but that we can share nutrients and water with each other in an intricately connected system. It honors the lives and experiences of People of Color, some of whom are Jewish and some who are not, who are most directly threatened by our society's individual and systemic oppression. Just as the health and survival of the forest ecosystem depends on all trees to contribute to the greater forest, our forest, our community, is stronger when each one of us gives and receives from one another. As The March for Racial Justice statement says, spiritual

sustenance is an essential part of this work for justice-- and that is exactly what we are doing when we gather as a community to sing and pray tonight.

I hope we can take the powerful words from this statement of Tikkun, and carry them with us throughout this Yom Kippur. I'd like to share a song adapted by my friend Koach Baruch Frazier, who is a Black/Queer/Trans Jewish healer and musician. As we sing this song, I encourage us to imagine our roots stretching out to one another in this room, and to the Jews all over the world who are gathering tonight, and then stretch them a bit deeper and farther to all of the communities that are joining together to build resilience this weekend and for years to come.

Please repeat each verse after me.

Solid as a Rock (Solid as a Rock)
Rooted Like a Tree (Rooted Like a Tree)
We are here (We are here)
We are Strong (We are strong)
In our rightful place (In our rightful place)
In our rightful place (In our rightful place)

כי האדם (כי האדם)
עץ השדה (עץ השדה)
היננו (היננו)
אם אמן (אם אמן)
במקום קדוש (במקום קדוש)

This year, may we pay attention to the trees. May we learn how to interlock our roots and arms tightly with one another in interdependence and in solidarity. May we stretch

our roots out widely to expand the idea of what community can look like. May we share resources across boundaries knowing that we are responsible for loving and strengthening each other. May our roots stretch deeply into the ground as we face windy storms-- and may we know that our secure root systems will hold us in harmony with creation.