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 Beth Chayim Chadashim
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 Parashat Beshalach
 Shabbat Shira/TuBishvat

The window of my 2nd floor study looks out into the tops of several different kinds of trees. During the course of an afternoon while sitting at my computer, I am often treated to a sideshow of squirrels leaping from branch to branch, parrots squawking together in the palm trees, spiders spinning webs across our rain gutters, and the occasional wasp flying in through my open window. What better place to think about Tu Bishvat – what Jewish tradition calls the new year of the trees?

And across the street from me, also within view from my study window, pigeons like to gather on the red tiled roof of the beautiful gray stone Methodist Church, where services are held every Sunday morning in four different languages – English, Spanish, Korean and Pilapino – a blend that reveals much about both religion and Los Angeles here at the beginning of the 21st century, where the idea of melting pot – everyone blending in -- has given way to the idea of tapestry -- different colors and textures woven together, but still maintaining their separate identities and integrity.

I like to think that the Jewish books I read inside my study help me contribute to the harmony and the mix I see outside. In general, I don't wipe away the spider webs. I usually let the wasps fly in and out, noting that eventually they, like me, choose to be "out."

And while I haven't gone to a Sunday morning church service across the street, I have wandered once or twice into the sanctuary to listen to the organist rehearse, and more than once I've attended the rainbow Angel City Chorale concerts there, where our friend Sue Fink brings together people of different ethnicities, colors, genders, and sexual orientations to sing songs from across a wide spectrum of generations and places – world music, I guess they call it.

And outside our *living room* window, a fig tree has grown up to remind me of the verse from the prophet Micah, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war; but every person shall sit under their vine or fig tree, with none to make them afraid" (Micah 4:3-4)

Torah often reminds us our relationship to trees. It teaches that even in war we are not permitted to cut down trees that yield food [Deuteronomy 20:19-20]; and our tradition refers over and over again to Torah itself as *eitz chayim* – the tree of life. We fasten our Torah scroll on to wooden poles – also called *eitzay chayim*, trees of life – to perpetuate this idea of trees and Torah giving us life. Think of the verse we recite when we put the Torah scroll away: *eitz chayim he l'machazikim bah* – it is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it.

But we don't have to look far to see that our symbiotic relationship to trees isn't always so symbiotic:

How many more trees have human beings cut down, I wonder, than planted? I doubt we would have been instructed not to cut down fruit trees if we weren't already doing so.

And one has only to walk around in LA to note the sometimes tenuous relationship we have to trees, whose roots are so strong they can raise up huge segments of sidewalks to trip us as we go.

A few years ago on Tu Bishvat we shared the story of the Redwood Rabbis – a group of rabbis who at that very moment were camped out in the Redwood forest in Northern California holding a Tu Bishvat seder and attempting to stop a Jewish owned company that was logging ancient redwoods.

In writing about that event Rabbi Arthur Waskow remembers a moment of sitting under those trees that were more than 200 feet tall, *the tallest living beings on the planet*.

A friend turned to him and said:

'Imagine if those 200-foot-tall eytzim (trees) were the eytzim (wooden poles) of a Sefer Torah!_" - What a Sefer Torah it would be. . . And we ourselves would each be just the right size to be a letter in that Sefer Torah!'"

To which Waskow adds: "We are of course the living letters of a living Sefer Torah . . .
And in the Sefer Torah, no letter stands alone. In Hebrew there is no word that can be written with a single letter."

I was so struck by this lovely teaching by Rabbi Waskow – in Torah no letter stands alone. In Hebrew no word is written with a single letter.

What a contrast to English – what's the most obvious single letter word? "I."

Waskow's teaching continues: "[In Hebrew] We appear in clusters to make words, verses, books. We live and breathe together."

[[http://www.shalomctr.org/Celebrating the Tree of Life -- February 10, 2006](http://www.shalomctr.org/Celebrating%20the%20Tree%20of%20Life%20--%20February%2010,%202006)]

Tu Bishvat and Rabbi Waskow's teaching made me think a little differently about an event in this week's Torah portion *Beshallach*, where we not only witness the parting of the sea, we receive *manna* for the first time:

Man hu? 'What is it?' ask the bewildered Israelites as the strange substance falls from the heavens covering the wilderness. "And Moses said to them, 'That is the bread which God has given you to eat. And this is what God has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you requires to eat, one measure per person...'

"And the Israelites did so, some gathering much, some little. But when they measured it by the measure, the one who had gathered much had no excess, and the one who had gathered little had no deficiency: they had gathered as much as they needed to eat." [Exodus 16:15-18]

The story begs the question: how could it be that the one who had gathered much had no excess, and the one who had gathered little had no deficiency? And the answer comes to us of course: The one who gathered much gave some to the one who had gathered little.

The miracle of the manna, then, is not that it fell from heaven, and not that it was miraculously a totally nourishing food. The miracle of manna is that people learned to share it equally, and learned to eat just until they were satisfied and not more. No greed, no hoarding ...just sharing, just *plenty*.

It's something God still wants us to know, don't you suppose? -- that in this world as God created it there is plenty for everyone. Plenty - if only we humans, never alone, but in the company of one another, could come together and share, could come together and plant trees, and then sit, each one of us, *AND* all of us together, under the vines and fig *AND OLIVE* trees, with none to make us afraid.

Shabbat shalom