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Tu 'Shvat and the Question We Can't Keep Avoiding: Is the Tree of the Field a Human?

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Many modern readers of the Torah point to Deuteronomy 20:19 as the basis for a Jewish ethic of environmental responsibility:

> When you besiege a city for many days in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human, that they should withdraw before you into the besieged city?

This verse is frequently cited on Tu b'Shvat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, which over the past several decades has taken on the character of a Jewish Earth Day. That evolution is itself worth pausing to consider. In its original context, Tu b'Shvat was not a holiday in any celebratory sense. It was a legal marker in the agricultural calendar of the Land of Israel, relevant to tithes and taxation. No tree-planting ceremonies. No ethical manifestos.

And yet, the instinct to turn to this verse when thinking about environmental responsibility is not wrong. Deuteronomy 20:19 is striking not because it speaks about trees, but because it speaks about **limits** — limits on power, limits on destruction,

limits that apply even in wartime.

The question is what kind of ethic the verse is really offering us.

What Does the Torah Mean When It Asks about Trees and Humans?

The crux of the verse lies in the enigmatic phrase *"ki ha-adam etz hasadeh*," which translates literally (and poorly!) as "for the human is a tree." Is this a question? A statement? A metaphor? Unsurprisingly, medieval commentators disagree.

One interpretive strand, associated with Rashi and followed by Seforno, reads the phrase as a rhetorical question: *"Is the tree of the field a human being?"* (Rashi, Deuteronomy 20:19, s.v. "ki ha-adam etz hasadeh"). The implied answer is no. A tree is not a person. It cannot flee. It cannot fight. It poses no threat. Precisely because it is defenseless, it must not be treated as an enemy and should thus not be destroyed.

Seforno makes this explicit: only someone capable of harming you may be fought (Seforno, *ad loc.,* s.v. "ki ha-adam etz hasadeh"). A tree, rooted in place, is not dangerous. Destroying it is therefore an act not of necessity, but of excess.

Another strand, associated with Ibn Ezra, reads the phrase quite differently. For him, it is not a question at all but a statement: *"For the life of a human being **is** the tree of the field"* (Ibn Ezra, *ad loc.,* s.v. "ki ha-adam etz hasadeh"). Trees sustain human life. They feed us, anchor us, allow us to endure beyond the immediate crisis. On this reading, cutting down fruit trees is self-defeating.

This idea appears already in the Sifrei, the tannaitic midrash halakha to Deuteronomy (piska 203): *"This teaches that a person's life stems entirely from the tree."*

These two approaches begin from different places: vulnerability in one case, interdependence in the other. But they converge on the same conclusion. Even in war, not everything may be destroyed. Even in war, some things remain off-limits.

Compassion as a Discipline

Later commentators make the moral stakes of this commandment crystal clear. Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto) writes about this verse that the Torah was given in order *"to strengthen in our hearts the compassion and forgiveness that we do not only take our own benefit into consideration"* (Shadal, Deuteronomy 20:19, s.v. "ki mimenu tochel v'oto lo tichrot"). Philo and Josephus, he notes, understood the commandment as a rejection of cruelty.

The point is not only the preservation of resources. It is the modeling of a certain kind of human being — one who does not allow violence, even justified violence, to spill outward indiscriminately toward the innocent.

Earlier on, Rashbam offered a narrower reading, permitting the destruction of fruit trees if they are actively being used by the enemy for protection or

escape (Rashbam, *ad loc.,* s.v. "ki ha-adam etz hasadeh lavo mipanecha bamatzor"). Even here, though, the exception proves the rule. Fruit trees are presumed protected unless a compelling and immediate danger overrides that protection.

Across these readings, the Torah articulates a moral grammar that insists on distinctions: between combatant and non-combatant, between necessity and excess, between power exercised and power restrained.

From Trees to People

Over time, this verse became the foundation of the broader prohibition of *bal tashchit*, the ban against wanton destruction. In the hands of the writer of Sefer HaChinuch (mitzvah 529), *bal tashchit* is no longer limited to trees. It is about unchecked destructiveness as a moral failure — a habit that corrodes the soul.

> The root of the commandment is known: to teach our souls to love what is good and useful and to cling to it… and through this, good will cling to us. And from this, we distance ourselves from every evil and destructive thing.

The problem, according to Sefer HaChinuch, is not the tree. It is what destruction does to the person doing the destroying.

And this is where the verse stops being about environmentalism alone.

If the Torah demands restraint even toward trees, it does so not because trees are more important than people, but because people matter so much that we must guard ourselves against becoming cruel.

Which leads, unavoidably, to a reversal of the verse's famous question:

If in some sense a tree can be likened to a human being, then surely a human being must never be treated as less than a tree.

Protective Presence and Inverted Values

For years now, many Jewish people — religious and secular, Israeli and non-Israeli — have engaged in protective presence work so that Palestinian farmers could harvest their olives on their own property, most often undisputed, without harassment or violence.[1] This is quiet work. It is deliberately non-confrontational. It aims to prevent escalation rather than provoke it.

It also embodies precisely the values that commentators like Shadal identify in Deuteronomy 20:19: compassion, restraint, and the refusal to let power dissolve into cruelty.

And yet, in recent times, we have seen hilltop

[1] T'ruah. "Armed Settlers Attack Rabbis, Other Volunteers Assisting with Olive Harvest in West Bank." November 4, 2025. https://truah.org/press/armed-settlers-attack-rabbis-other-volunteers-assisting-with-olive-harvest-in-west-bank/

youth brutally attack these very people — beating them, burning their belongings, sending them to the hospital.[2]

The question that forces itself upon us is not political but moral.

On what grounds are these individuals treated as enemies?

Protective presence activists are not armed. They are not attacking anyone. They are not laying siege. They are not a danger. To treat them as legitimate targets is to erase the distinctions that the Torah insists upon even in wartime.

What Deuteronomy 20:19 is Really About

Deuteronomy 20:19 is not a sentimental verse. It appears in a chapter about war. Its ethical demand is therefore all the more bracing. Violence may sometimes be necessary. But it is never morally free. It must be bounded, disciplined, constrained.

When Jews attack others who are acting to prevent harm, they are not choosing trees over people. They are choosing unrestrained power over Jewish ethics.

The Torah does not sanctify rage. It sanctifies limits.

It does not teach us to see enemies everywhere. It teaches us to know who is not an enemy — and to act accordingly.

If we cannot uphold that distinction, then we have misunderstood the verse entirely.

Old Mr. Kohen

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When I was a lad, maybe a teen
or perhaps even a little younger,
I used to sit in *shul* next to an elderly man,
or maybe he was even a bit older than that.
His name was Karl—Mr. K to me.
His younger brother—also Mr. K to me—
sat in the row in front and
called him "our kid" or sometimes "our Kaddishky."
Real cool to call such an old man "our kid,"
and real cool to call your *older* brother "our kid,"
but not real cool, I thought, to call him "our Kaddishky."

The two brothers, who were in the *shmatte* trade,
had sold their firm and had long since retired.
Young Mr. K went to college
and trained to be a teacher of Jewish Studies
as a retirement career.
But it was old Mr. K
who taught me a lesson about Judaism I've never forgotten.

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[2] Ynet, " מתנדבים זרים הוכו ונשדדו ע"י מתפרעים ביו"ש, איטליה וקנדה: 'נמאס מהתוקפנות' [Foreign Volunteers Beaten and Robbed by Extremists in the West Bank]," December 2, 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/byw3in311be

He said: "*Kaddish* is not about remembering the dead;
it's about teaching the living how to live."
How cool—that's so counterintuitive, I thought,
and how cool that an old man could be so wise,
how cool that *kaddish* is a prayer about life,
and how cool that I learned this lesson from "our Kaddishky."

> *Kaddish was a name given by parents who were happy to have birthed a son who would say the mourner's prayer (*kaddish*) for them, after their demise.*

Two Amish Women Walked into a Casino (Because I Drove Them There)

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It all started when I brought my Amish friend some water from the Holy Land and discovered that she had never seen the ocean. As a Fulbright post-doctorate scholar one year earlier, I had befriended an Amish family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which eventually changed my academic and personal life. My background was very different, but also very much the same. I am a feminist scholar who is also an observant Jewish woman raised within the Israeli National-Ultra-Orthodox community. Therefore, the Amish and I share similar restrictions, such as strict media censorship, which may explain why I had never heard of Atlantic City.

Due to my upbringing, my general knowledge of the world is very limited, even after my many years in secular Israeli academic life. I was raised in a family that was right-wing in both ideological and religious terms, and I grew up in a strictly halakhically observant community. My childhood was spent on a right-wing religious settlement in the Gush Katif area of the Gaza Strip, where the ultimate "others" were secular Jews and Arabs. One of the main rules of my childhood was that television was not permitted within the walls of our home. Secular newspapers and magazines, and most secular books, were also prohibited. So, my upbringing led me to combine my personal rebellion – going to university and writing a PhD dissertation about mass media and gender – with a deep love, respect, and appreciation for other people and communities that practice a strict form of religion; it was this that enabled me to become a critical and radical feminist scholar.

It was years later, after a long period of research within the ultra-Orthodox community, that I realized what had become my dream, and I developed a personal connection with an Amish family in Lancaster County while I was staying in the US as a Fulbright scholar. I lived with them on their farm for dozens of one- to three-week periods. I washed dishes and ran errands for, or with, the family in my rental car, driving them to shopping centers, church services, and youth groups, enabling me to establish contacts with

many people from various regions and deepen my understanding of the day-to-day lives of the Amish. We soon found out that our differences were a blessing – I was able to work in their garden on a hot Sunday to save the strawberries my hosts didn't have time to pick before their Sabbath, while they would shine a flashlight for me to light my way on mine. And while we shared the same table, I ate kosher food that I kept in a space set aside for me in the propane gas refrigerator. (The Amish rules differ by community, but this particular community allowed propane-powered appliances.) My modest religious garb, long sleeves, skirts, and hair covering, was similar to theirs – similar enough that I recently wore a Mennonite bonnet to Shabbat services – and expressed the common values that we shared. Our discussions about the religious commonalities and differences that defined our relationship helped create both deep closeness and openness, which led us to some meaningful insights.

When I gave Anna the water from Israel, her eyes were full of tears. She called in the whole family, and they looked at the water and touched it. It was one of the most sacred moments in my life – "Jesus walked on this water," she told her children. "We will buy small bottles and make kits for our family and friends. They will be so happy to have this holy water!"

The water led us into a conversation during which I explained to them about the Jordan "river" and the "sea" of Galilee. They were disappointed to hear that, in American terms, the Jordan River is hardly a stream and the Sea of Galilee is a small lake. But even so, she declared that "Jesus walked on this water; no matter the size of the lake, it doesn't change the miracle!"

During this conversation, I was shocked to learn that Anna, who was then 54 years old, had never been to the ocean. "I don't believe you!" I said; "you live on the East Coast and you've never seen the ocean?!" She answered matter-of-factly: "I was born in Lancaster County; I've left this area three times – I've been to the Botanical Gardens, I visited the Philadelphia Zoo, and I visited my sister in Indiana. I will die here; and if I die without ever seeing the ocean, that will be fine!" When her daughter, Suzanne, came home, I asked if *she* had been to the ocean. She had the same response: "I was born here in Lancaster County; I've left the area a few times – I've been to the Philadelphia Zoo, I visited my aunt in Indiana. And if I die without ever seeing the ocean, that's fine with me!" So I decided then and there to take them to the ocean. I just didn't know where it was.

They were happy with my offer, but they were at a loss when I asked them where the nearest seashore was. "Look, the ocean is very close to here; I saw it from the airplane, so where is it?"

"Rebecca, you always ask so many questions, but this one we can't answer," they said. "Why don't you have an Internet connection?" I asked them, frustrated. I tried to use my GPS, but it refused to find "the ocean." I smiled when she called me "Rebecca." My actual name is Rivka, the form found in the Hebrew Bible. But my Amish friends – like my other non-Jewish American friends –

simply can't pronounce it; so to them I am "Rebecca."

"Let's wait for the boys," Anna said. She always spoke warmly about her sons, who work for a construction company. "They know pretty much everything. They will tell you." The fact that her boys work outside the farm and "know everything" represents a social change within the Amish community: in the 1950s, more than 90% of Amish men worked on farms, but as the community has been doubling in size about every 20 years, there is not enough reasonably-priced land for them all. So nowadays, only half of Amish men work on farms, while the other half either have small businesses or work for small businesses.

When "the boys" came home, I ran up to them: "Where is the nearest ocean?" They weren't sure. One of them said, "I think…Atlantic City, New Jersey?" The other thought it was Ocean City, Maryland. Anna saw how disappointed I was, and suggested that we drive to the public library and use the Internet to find the closest seashore.

At the library, I opened Google Maps and plotted the routes between our location, Atlantic City, and Ocean City. We found that Atlantic City was 20 minutes closer than Ocean City, so we decided to go there the following Monday. (Afterward, many of my friends would ask me, "You already had an Internet connection; why didn't you Google those places?" The answer was simple – after two weeks of living deprived of the Internet, I'd simply forgotten that that was an option. I'd gone to the library like the Amish would – looking for a simple answer to a simple question: in this case, where the closest seashore was.)

The following Monday morning found three happy women in a rental car, heading for the ocean. On the way, we stopped by Anna's cousins and gave them some old chairs (this turned out to be our salvation later on). During the trip, I tried to imagine this Atlantic City place I had never heard of. The only American seashore I had ever been to was Cape Cod, so I imagined all the beaches in the US must be the same. I also assumed – world traveler that I was – that if I had never heard of it, it must be a pretty small place, maybe nice and clean like the Ashdod shore in Israel.

The reality, however, was somewhat different.

As we approached the city, we started seeing the billboard ads. They were not what my friends (or I myself) would have called modest, and some of them mentioned gambling. "This is odd; it's not like that in Israel," I said to them (and to myself). At this point, I knew that the Amish are very strict about modesty. However, I didn't know how much this community opposes gambling. I couldn't imagine that gambling might lead to excommunication punishment and other severe social sanctions.

We stopped at the tourist center to ask where we could park the car. Only later did I understand the surprised looks on the faces of the people there.

But they didn't say anything; they just gave us the address of a hotel that offered parking spaces. We parked the car and walked directly to the elevator. We wanted to find a restroom to change into dresses that were better suited to the beach. As three strictly religious women, we were all of us wearing long dresses that covered our knees, long sleeves, and hair coverings. Anna and Suzanne's dresses bore a clearly Amish stamp – they were cut from the same design and homemade, since – like almost all other Amish women – my friends sewed their dresses by themselves. I, on the other hand, was wearing a long dress that I had bought in one of the cheap stores in Jerusalem that serve religious women. Their hair coverings were the classic Amish white bonnet everyone knows from the movie *Witness* (again, homemade), while I had on a nice but simple headscarf. Since none of us owned swimsuits, we had brought old dresses with us of the sort they usually used for housecleaning, to cope with the dirt and the sand of the seashore; and since their bonnets – and my own headscarf – would have to be washed by hand, they changed to bandannas and I to the kind of five-dollar scarf that religious Israeli women often wear during housecleaning.

In the hotel, I looked for the "L" button – L for the lobby, which in Israel is located near the entrance doors – but couldn't find it. There were numbers, and then a C. I thought to myself, "Maybe in the US they have a different name for the lobby and they spell it with a C"; so I pushed the C button. I should point out that growing up in Israel tends to foster confidence and improvisation more than questioning and foresight, so I just took it for granted that they had replaced the "L" with a "C". Long story short, the doors opened and we found ourselves at the casino entrance.

Anna and Suzanne's faces went as white as their bonnets. My heart was beating fast. We were shocked. They kept saying, again and again, "Rebecca, what did you do? What did you do?", while I kept saying, "I didn't know, I didn't know!" I wanted to go back to the elevator and try the other floors, but I was scared – if the C is a casino, what will we find on 1, 2, and 3?

I was afraid to move, but from our vantage point near the elevators we could hear the loud music. I remember the bright lights and all the colors. Given my upbringing, I'd never been in a casino, but I had an image in my mind from the pictures I'd seen – the slot machines, the black, white, and red of the roulette wheels. I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes, open them again, and find that, what do you know, it was only a nightmare after all.

We might have stood there forever, but the elevator opened again, and a woman popped out: "You are Amish! You're not supposed to be here! I grew up in Lancaster County, so I understand that you're here by mistake! I left my family and ran back to save you!"

We thanked her, and she said, "I saw your faces when the elevator doors opened. You looked like fish out of water." So she accompanied us to the elevator, pushed 2, and walked with us out of the hotel and back to the street. "Here, if you just walk

straight you'll find the ocean," she said. She went along with us for several more minutes, smiled as we thanked her again and again, and disappeared.

I found a restaurant and suggested going into the bathroom to change our dresses; but when I opened the door, I found, to my surprise, that even the restaurant was a casino – surrounding the tables full of food, I could see the slot machines. What was going on here? I suggested that we try another restaurant, but Anna and Suzanne refused to open any more of the doors in this town. In the end, we found a small shopping center; I was brave enough to check whether this too was also a casino, and we changed our dresses there.

As we headed to the shore, they said they were happy that they knew me, and they accepted that this was a mistake on my part; but they also explained that the punishment in their community for visiting a casino was excommunication. I said, "Of course this was a mistake. I couldn't even have imagined this horrible place! In Israel, we don't have places like that!" But they were downcast – and so was I – until the moment when we saw the ocean.

They were quiet for a few minutes and just looked at the waves. Then Anna whispered, "The waves…they come and go, they come and go…are they always like that? I've only seen photos of the ocean; I didn't know that the waves are constantly moving."

Suzanne thought about it, and then asked me, "How can people see that and still not believe in God?" It was their first time seeing and touching sand and seashells, too. We were happily playing with them until I remembered that, because of the time difference, this was the last moment I could call my husband in Israel and say goodnight to him. He answered the phone, and asked where we were. "They wanted to see the ocean, so I drove them here to Atlantic City." He almost yelled at me, "Are you crazy? How could you take them to such a place? It's the Las Vegas of the East Coast!"

"How on earth did you know that?" I asked him, as it began to dawn on me that I was a "good Jerusalem girl" without any knowledge of such "horrible places."

The day after our adventure Anna didn't feel well, so I went to a community quilt without her. I joined the other women I had already met in church services and helped them with their quilting. Then, out of the blue, I heard the bishop's wife's voice asking me, "Rebecca, where were you yesterday? I came to visit all of you, but you weren't at home. Did you take them to visit their grandchildren?"

I tried to stay calm, not to lie, and to answer her politely; I searched for the right words: "No…we…we went to visit their cousins. We needed to give them some chairs." Thank God for those chairs – they saved us from the prying eyes and ears of the community.

When I returned home, I told Anna: “I was able to preserve your privacy during the quilt.”

“What do you mean, what happened?” she asked, so I told her about the bishop’s wife's question. Her face went as pale as it had the day before at the casino entrance. “What did you tell her?” she asked me anxiously, “I didn’t want to go there! It was a mistake!”

“Of course it was a mistake,” I said. “In fact, it was *my* mistake. In any case, I just said that we went to bring the chairs to your cousins.” She took a breath, clearly relieved, and said, "You are very smart, Rebecca. Very clever. I know you have some university degrees; and while I don’t really understand what that means, you are certainly smart! If you had told them what happened, they might have believed it was a mistake; but all the same we could easily have become fodder for the community’s gossip. All the families in the area would have been telling the story. Thank you for your careful answer.”

“I’m not smart at all,” I told her. “But just like you, I grew up in a tiny religious community…”

During our conversation, I could see the water I brought from the Holy Land on the shelf in Anna's kitchen. I could never imagine that this water might take me all the way from the Holy Land to the Gambling City. However, the connection was there. The Amish can look at water and think about spirituality: Anna’s tears when she said that “Jesus walked on this water,” together with Suzan’s first words when she saw the ocean and said, “How can people see that and still not believe in God?”