

“The Sky Today is Incomplete”: Becoming the Verdant Cypress
A Drash for Shabbat Shuva 5782

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“When I respond and look to Him, I become like a verdant cypress.” - Hosea 14:9

*“And a girl said: The sky today
is incomplete because the cypress broke.”*

- Mahmoud Darwish, from “The Cypress Broke” translated by Fady Joudah

The oldest-known living tree in eastern so-called North America [is](#) an approximately 2,600-year-old eastern bald cypress residing deep within North Carolina’s coastal swamps. Accessible only by small boat, this tree dwells unassumingly within a community of other millenia-old cypresses whose roots vanish into the Black River.¹ Biblically old trees are humbling models of interconnectedness and “potent teachers of regeneration,” as Kohenets Rebekah Erev and Nomy Lamm write.² Their vastness and timescale frankly defy the capabilities of language.

Trees also hold and metabolize the trauma of the land and the people who live(d) there. North Carolina’s wetlands bore witness to the congenital violence that forged the United States. Cypress trees reside where European settlers first murdered, and displaced the Lumbee and Tuscarora peoples and where they enslaved people stolen from the African continent to produce wealth for a nascent colony. These historical processes established the U.S. as a settler colonial state, with that relation, “not an event that we can neatly box into one historical moment, but rather as a persistent structure that impacts everything.”³ Black and indigenous people have struggled against that persistent structure since its inception through efforts as persistent and ongoing as the violence generated at the root. For those of us who are settlers, especially for those of us who consider ourselves anti-zionist Jews fighting for the liberation of Palestine dwelling in a different settler colony, our role in this struggle requires introspection, relationship, action, and risk, all which map onto the processes of teshuvah.

¹ [According to an article published earlier this month](#), this tree has survived since around 605 BCE and is part of the fifth-oldest living non-clonal tree species in the world. For the non-arborists: clonal trees live in genetically identical colonies sharing a single root system that can sprout new trunks. In non-clonal trees, however, the tree you behold is as old as the root system.

Ayurella Horn-Muller. “The oldest tree in eastern US survived millennia – but rising seas could kill it.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/01/oldest-tree-eastern-us-climate-crisis>

² From the planner Verdant Dreams of Olam haBa, <https://www.dreamingtheworldto come.com/>

³ Liza Minno Bloom & Berkley Carnine, *CounterPunch*. “Towards Decolonization and Settler Responsibility.” *Unsettling America*. <https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/tag/big-mountain/>

Shabbat Shuva, falling between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is an opportunity scaffolded into the high holiday season to deepen our attention to repair, or teshuvah. The word “Teshuvah” (תְּשׁוּבָה) is a noun derived from the root letters שׁוּב (shin vav bet) meaning “to go back,” or “to come back,” to return. Another form of the verb root means “to bring back, return, or restore.” Many translate teshuvah as “repentance” but the Hebrew suggests a more dynamic process of turning or restoration. Shabbat Shuva takes its name from the first word of the special Haftarah portion read from the book of Hosea: *Shuvah* (Return), the verb from which the noun teshuvah is derived. Dated 760-720 BCE, less than one hundred years before the roots of the eastern bald cypress nudged its trunk through the earth, the book of Hosea prophesied the decline of the Jewish people. Almost the entirety of the book of Hosea consists of prophetic warning of destruction by Assyrian empire, unless the Jewish people returned to G-d. The Haftarah read on Shabbat Shuvah, however, draws from the final chapter that offers a way (and a plea) for the people to return.⁴ Crying, “Assyria shall not save us,” Hosea urges the people to not seek absolution from empire or idols, and outlines a pathway to return through the vibrant, rich imagery of the natural world. In the chapters leading up to the Haftarah portion, Hosea unrelentingly chastises the tribe of Ephraim for idolatry. In this chapter, however, Hosea imagines Ephraim saying: “When I respond and look to Him, I become like a verdant cypress.” The verdant cypress serves as the north star, and final opportunity, of return.

I will be to Israel like dew; He shall blossom like the lily, He shall strike root like a Lebanon tree. His boughs shall spread out far, His beauty shall be like the olive tree's, His fragrance like that of Lebanon. They who sit in his shade shall be revived: They shall bring to life new grain, They shall blossom like the vine; His scent shall be like the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim [shall say]: “What more have I to do with idols? When I respond and look to Him, I become like a verdant cypress.”

While Hosea offers olive, lebanon and cypress trees as ideals with abundant redemptive possibilities for the Jewish people, today, these same fruits are sites of anticolonial struggle against Jewish ethnonationalism. Jewish settlers and soldiers, in their attempt to eliminate Palestinians from the land, destroy these same fruits and trees. They burn olive groves rapidly and disrupt ecosystems through dispossession and accumulation. They futilely and desperately erect apartheid walls and jails and write citizenship laws and build settlements in order to ethnically cleanse Palestine and make return almost impossible. And yet, “Return” endures as a demand by Palestinians living under occupation and in diaspora since the Nakba.

Alongside movement leaders, Palestinian poets and writers keep that demand of return alive against attempts at narrative erasure. Mahoud Darwish, perhaps the most well-known Palestinian poet, whose poetry and words endure as testimony to the Nakba and the ensuing Palestinian freedom struggle, has crafted a contemporary

⁴ For context, Hosea 14:1 reflects this increasingly severe tone:

“Samaria must bear her guilt, /For she has defied her God./ They shall fall by the sword,/ Their infants shall be dashed to death,/And their women with child ripped open.”

counterpart to Hosea.⁵ In his article titled “The Disaster in Mahmoud Darwish Poetry,” Muhammed Fwu’ad Deeb observes the range of trees and plants native to Palestine that emerge in Darwish’s poetry: “cypress, pines almond, olive trees, palm, fig trees, grape trees, lemon and orange trees, thyme, lily, willow, and wheat to emphasis his deep rooted existence there and his bonds with land.”⁶ Darwish’s poem, “The Cypress Broke,” however, explores the emotional terrain of apathy and grief through the image of a lone, toppled cypress.

Hosea and Darwish evoke the cypress in divergent ways, millenia and empires apart. If Hosea articulates the path back to becoming the verdant cypress, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish expresses the aftermath when the cypress breaks. “The Cypress Broke” is a eulogy, a warning, a metaphor for the reality of the totalizing routineness of the colonization of Palestine. Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shahib Nye characterizes Darwish’s style as “lyrical, imagistic, plaintive, haunting, always passionate, and elegant—and never anything less than free—what he would dream for all his people.” Indeed, Darwish crafts a mirror of the broken world in the fallen cypress. His words offer a blueprint for observing, feeling, and responding to wreckage wherever it surfaces. Notably, the Mediterranean cypress, the conical tree native to present-day Lebanon and Palestine evoked in the penultimate verse of Hosea and the Darwish poem, is a symbol of mourning from antiquity because the tree fails to regenerate when cut back.

Beginning with Bassam Hajjar’s circular epigram: “The cypress is the tree’s grief and not the tree, and it has no shadow because it is the tree’s shadow,” Darwish begins his poem with a titular sentence: the cypress broke. The opening simile describes the cypress breaking “like a minaret,” a tall slender tower, often part of a mosque, from which a muezzin calls Muslims to prayer. Observers absorb the wreckage and make meaning dispassionately:

The cypress broke like a minaret, and slept on
the road upon its chapped shadow, dark, green,
as it has always been. No one got hurt. The vehicles
sped over its branches.

And a woman said to her neighbor: Say, did you see a storm?
She said: No, and no bulldozer either ... / And the cypress
broke. And those passing by the wreckage said:
Maybe it got bored with being neglected, or it grew old
with the days, it is long like a giraffe, and little
in meaning like a dust broom, and couldn’t shade two lovers.

⁵ Born in al-Birwa in Galilee, a village Israeli soldiers later razed to the ground during the Nakba, Darwish later lived for years in exile in Beirut and Paris where he published over 30 books of poetry and eight books of prose. In the 1960s Israeli soldiers imprisoned Darwish for “reciting poetry and traveling between villages without a permit” and later placed him under house arrest when Palestinians turned his poem “Identity Card” into a song of protest. From 1987 to 1993 he served on the executive committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

⁶ Deeb, 2000: 155. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/28619/1/MR69035.PDF>

Toward the end of the poem, Darwish offers an interruption: “And a girl said: The sky today is incomplete because the cypress broke.” In a sea of speculation, morbid curiosity, and rationalization, only a girl stopped to mourn the incomplete sky. Settler colonial states and former imperial powers are full of broken cypresses and dispassionate, apathetic, observers. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist, describes settler colonialism as an “overwhelming, violent, normalized and dishonest reality.” States such as the U.S., Israel, Australia, Canada murder and displace indigenous peoples to gain access to land and resources, imprison, surveil, police, break the land into pieces, break apart families, poison the water, try to erase indigenous ways of knowing, watch the land flood and burn and pretend to not know why.⁷

In the wake of the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001, the image of an incomplete sky evokes specific images of the sky burning. The world saw footage of the towers falling. Most New Yorkers beheld the skyline as incomplete after September 11, 2001. Many people in the U.S. experienced the trauma and loss of people whose homelands are targeted by acts of war: the destabilization of violence, fear of losing loved ones at any moment, and the lasting effects of the trauma. For our Arab, Muslim, and South Asian comrades, September 11 was a catalyst for a new era of racism and Islamophobia. Anyone who lost someone on September 11, 2001 lives with the aftershocks of grief. Those of us who came of age or were born after the attacks only know a U.S. Foreign policy shaped by them: the political terrain upon which we fight has been one of murderous nationalism and endless war. Twenty years later, the United States has become the latest imperial power to politically and ecologically devastate Afghanistan and displace millions of Afghans. Just as we fight as Jews against an occupation of Palestine done in our name, for those of us who are U.S. citizens, we fight for an end to U.S. imperialism.

Teshuvah, for those of us who dwell in the heart of a dying empire fighting for the end of occupation, war, and dispossession, first requires that we tell the truth and hold contradiction. We can hold that September 11, 2001 was a moment of rupture and grief without indulging in jingoism. We hold that class oppression leads many people to see the military as the only viable option for upward mobility and that members of the U.S. military are imperial agents who killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans because politicians and weapons contractors exploited fear for profit. We can grieve those killed while maintaining that: the Pentagon represents the U.S. military, a force of destruction to all forms of life on this planet. The World Trade Center embodied the consolidation of capital and resources in a few hands in one of the most economically unequal cities on the planet.⁸ And we hold that those of us who pay taxes fund occupation, war, and empire building that impacts all of the people and species on earth. Being aware of all of this is not teshuva; Teshuva requires actually changing. As Holly Lewis writes in *The Politics of Everybody*, “Changing is a collective action that requires more than awareness. But it is an action that everybody can join.” Solidarity materializes through action and repeated

⁷ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “As We Have Always Done, Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance.”

⁸ Estelle Sommeiller and Mark Price. “The new gilded age.” *Economic Policy Institute*.

<https://www.epi.org/publication/the-new-gilded-age-income-inequality-in-the-u-s-by-state-metropolitan-area-and-county/>

behavior. The point of struggle is not to engage in atomistic self-flagellation, but rather join with others to destroy the relationship between people who sustain the world and those who expropriate and extract from it.

Talmud teaches us that teshuvah preceded the creation of the world.⁹ One way to understand this is that the pathway to restore relationship existed before the creation of humankind. In other words, Teshuvah is the antecedent of humanity. This rabbinic teachings supersedes interpersonal harms into the systemic. In her writing on Teshuvah and reparations, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb outlines 5 steps of Teshuvah for healing both victims and perpetrators of systemic harm. The second step, after a perpetrator of harm embraces one's ability to heal is "acknowledgement of the web of accountability and one's place in it." When we cannot face the brokenness and impact of harm on collective well-being, we cannot do teshuvah.

Can those of us who are U.S. citizens, especially those of us who are white settlers, become like a verdant cypress in the heart of empire? Settlers do not get to dictate what return and restoration looks like nor we do not get to passively desist from action. Teshuvah begins, for those of us whose ancestors emptied the now incomplete sky, when we acknowledge not only that "the sky is incomplete" but work toward destroying a system that created the harm so it no longer exists. Instead of insisting "no one got hurt," Teshuvah demands the admission: "Not only did people get hurt, but I participated in the harm." As Nick Estes writes: "You cannot heal from a system that continues to violate and kill the land and our relatives unless you dismantle that system."¹⁰ Teshuvah begins when we stop to mourn each fallen cypress, burned olive tree, demolished home, detained child, and displaced family and continues when we put our bodies and resources where our grief lives to support the liberation of colonized peoples knowing our collective ability to exist on this planet depends on it. We fight under the absent shadow of the fallen cypress. Everything is broken. We do not have enough time to fix it. But when we turn away from denial of loss and towards each other we enter the verdant generative terrain of living upon which our humanity depends.

The sky today is so staggeringly incomplete, but it is not yet empty. The river basins upon which our chapter meets run parallel to the flood-prone basins of the eastern bald cypress, which may become the latest casualty of the anthropocene, or may outlast U.S. empire. Floodwaters have not yet engulfed the cypresses that took root shortly after Hosea's prophecy. Its fate may no longer be within the realm of human control. The earth, however, will breathe as deeply as our commitments against forces that produce dispossession and death. Palestinians continue to fight the occupation in the largest uprisings, break free from prisons, plant olive trees, and refuse to leave their homes. Indigenous peoples of turtle island continue to lead the charge of fighting pipelines and the last flailing extractive lunges of dying empire. Those of us whose ancestors survived fascism fight it at every hint of reemergence. Teshuvah is not a statement of shallow hope for absolution, but a practice of prefigurative returning.

⁹ Joanna Katz. "Teshuvah / Repentance." *JTS*. <https://www.jtsa.edu/teshuvah-repentance>

¹⁰ Nick Estes, "Native Liberation, the Way Forward." <http://therednation.org/native-liberation-the-way-forward/>

If we mourned the devastation of our planet in its true form, how could we keep living? Faith requires us to behave as if we believe return to be possible despite evidence to the contrary. Kriti Sharma paraphrases a hadith: “Even at the eve of the end of the world, plant a tree.” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes: “I think that the impetus to act and to change and to transform, for me, exists whether or not this is the end of the world. If a river is threatened, it’s the end of the world for those fish. It’s been the end of the world for somebody all along. And I think the sadness and the trauma of that is reason enough for me to act.”¹¹ When those of us in the heart of empire collectively challenge it in an accountable manner rather than acquiesce to its demands, we practice teshuvah. May teshuvah then be a collective process of tapping into an infinite terrain of belonging to each other, of returning the land to its rightful stewards, and, for those of us who are settlers in empire, of confronting head-on what we are willing to release. For those of us fighting for return in its most expansive form, may we look to the divine in each other and lead with our deepest longings. May we become like the verdant cypress.

The North Carolina Triangle Chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace asks our members to [donate](#) to Earthseed Land Collective.

¹¹ "Dancing the World into Being: A Conversation with Idle No More's Leanne Simpson."
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2013/03/06/dancing-the-world-into-being-a-conversation-with-idle-no-more-leanne-simpson>