



## How MLK Speaks to the Trees



Every so often Jewish holidays intersect with US holidays. Today, January 21, 2019, [and again today, January 17 2022] is one such day. Americans gather to celebrate the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while Jews across the world celebrate Tu BiShvat, the “New Year for Trees.” (Yes, there is such a holiday!)

As I reflect on our work at Speak for the Trees, I can think of no better twin holidays that capture our mission, values, and work. **For us at SFTT, trees are more than just natural objects: trees are a critical part of how we discuss and challenge the inequities rooted in culture.** In the spirit of Dr. King, planting and caring for trees also plants hope, community, and brother- and sister-hood for future generations.

Dr. King was no stranger to the layers of inequity that persist in our society. He preached passionately about equal rights for all people, no matter their race, faith, work, and class. He did this by speaking across lines that have long divided Americans. His dream was of a society where all people would be treated with dignity and respect, no matter the color of their skin or the origins of their family. Actualizing his bold vision is the challenge that we, as Americans, continue to face. His words echo through history and demand us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. His words inspire us today and everyday.

Also on this day, the holiday of Tu BiShvat (the 15th of the month of Shvat), many Jews gather to celebrate the “New Year of the Trees.” Often fruits such as figs and dates are eaten; they serve to connect participants to the earth and its trees. In Jewish tradition, trees also serve as a longtime symbol of hope and power (both good and bad). In the Garden of Eden, for example, Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge - a tree whose forbidden fruit, once consumed, opened their eyes to knowledge and expelled humanity from utopia.

**Yet, perhaps a less well known tree in the Garden of Eden is the Tree of Life.** This tree eluded Adam and Eve and continues to elude us today. This second tree has framed Jewish thinking for centuries and is characterized, in the words of Proverbs 3:17-18, as providing “ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” This is the tree of eternal hope.

Today, as we celebrate both the legacy of MLK and the Tu BiShvat, we pause to reflect on how all trees are Trees of Life: they serve to further King’s vision of furthering economic, social, and environmental justice. **And these trees of life exist not in the Garden of Eden; they are here with us in our own gardens, parks, yards, and streets.**

Nothing better captures that sense of dogged hope than the spirit of Dr. King. No matter how dark the times [this feels even more so today than in 2019], **trees provide hope for our collective future.** As we face multiple challenges across our country and world, few acts are nobler and less self-serving than the planting of a tree. Here in Boston and across the country, when we plant trees we further. Dr. King’s vision of bringing people of all backgrounds together to heal and build justice in our shared and often-times fractured communities.

I hope you will join us in recommitting to Dr. King’s vision by celebrating trees which give us life, community, and hope for a brighter, healthier, and greener future for all.

In gratitude and blessings on these twin holidays,



David

PS - In April 2021 we celebrated trees and faith in a Symposium entitled: "Trees, Faith, and Tradition". It feels appropriate to share it again today

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