



IFR NEWS Shevat-Adar 5772

Volume 2 Issue 20

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TU B'SHVAT / טו בשבט

Once a poor melamed, a Hebrew teacher, in a small village in Poland struggled to teach the simple farm boys who were his students. They preferred playing to learning the Alef Beit.

All through the summer the melamed had plenty of time for himself. The Jewish farmers needed their children to help in the fields mowing corn and loading hay instead of learning to read and write Hebrew. Summer was gone; now it was winter. A heavy snowfall covered every inch of the ground upon which the poor melamed walked. This was his day off as it was Tu B'shvat.

This melamed thought of the meaning of Tu B'shvat, as he left the village and walked towards a nearby forest. He knew very little about trees and nature in general. Always the scholar, he wondered how the trees celebrated their "Rosh Hashanah." Were they budding and putting on their coat of green, or was there any other form of celebrating New Year of which he did not know?

When he reached the forest, he was deeply disappointed to find the trees and bushes covered with thick coats of snow. "Who knows," he pondered, "perhaps they wore tallisim and kittels like pious Jews on their High Holidays!" Just then a strong wind blew through the tree-tops, and the sounds of the swaying branches sounded like the whispering of devout prayers. The melamed stood in awe amidst the noise of the windy forest, as fervent melodies passed through his head.

Again he asked himself: What kind of a New Year do the trees celebrate? Heaven forbid, they look as if they were dead.

Suddenly, the entire scene became transformed. The melamed was able to see through the glittering, sparkling snow, as if the bark was made of pure, transparent glass. From deep inside each branch, tender sprouts pushed closer to the surface; yet they were careful not to go too far. It was still too cold for them to face the harshness of the world beyond the casing of the branches. But within, life was stirring, and the beginnings of new, strong branches were marking time until the Master of the trees and bushes would bring them out.

The melamed eagerly drank in the full beauty of this winter wonderland. His strained eyes had never looked beyond the bark of various trees lining his village streets. Now he saw and understood that they, too, were unique; each one with a soul and living spirit. The New Year of Trees was no longer meaningless to him.

A sudden gust of wind sprayed millions of powdery snowflakes into the air, and the melamed's eyes were closed as by a curtain. When he opened them the wondrous scene had disappeared. Only the slender fir-trees swayed back and forth, and their naked branches seemed to shake with mockery. He was changed forever. Deep within him budded spirited life, the blossoms of a hopeful future.

What did it matter that his students were simple country boys? He realized that deep within them lay seeds of knowledge and potential learning. He knew that he had only to supply the warmth of loving understanding to lure the sprouts out of their hiding, so that they would blossom like the trees. They would one day become formidable students of Torah.

—Rabbi Dov Forman





IFR Mission Statement

The IFR is a professional organization of rabbis united by a commitment to Jewish tradition and a desire to facilitate the Jewish spiritual growth and life cycle needs of all.

IFR provides a progressive, pluralistic forum, linking member rabbis in a spirit of friendship and a sense of community.

IFR provides support for members in their professional endeavors and offers continuing education. IFR encourages professional relationships with rabbis and other rabbinic organizations.

Tu B'Shevat "Tasting" Seder

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

Opening Song: *Hi Ne Ma Tov*

Tu B'Shevat

New Year of the Trees

The words Tu B'Shevat literally means "the fifteenth [day in the month] of Shevat."

More than any other Jewish holiday, Tu B'Shevat has evolved over two thousand years of Jewish history.

Originally, in ancient times - Tu B'shevat was TAX DAY – to pay the government for the number of trees you had on your property and for the amount of fruit you were able to harvest from them.

Then, Later, the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics developed a Tu B'shevat Seder. In the 1500's the famous Rabbi Isaac Luria wanted to do something positive in reaction to the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain – so they created the Tu B'Shevat Seder as a way to teach about Tikkun Olam, respect for and repair of the world. They created the idea of the Cosmic Tree.

However, the seder idea didn't catch on until much later, when the Zionist movement taught Jews about the land of Israel and how important tree-planting was to making the land green and fertile.

Then, in 1948, with the creation of the State of Israel everything came together. - planting trees, and respect for the environment. A Jewish Earth Day evolved and the Seder became popular again.

(Add a poem or reading here "Yesterday we planted a tree")

In the Bible, the Hebrew word for tree *Etz* appears over 150 times and more than 100 different kinds of trees and plants are named in the Bible. When we add the Talmud and other important Jewish books, over 500 different plants are mentioned in classical Jewish sources.

What are trees?

Trees are the tallest and longest living plants on the earth. It's easy to forget how big trees really are. We have buildings that are bigger. But in ancient times, the tallest thing you could see was a tree!

(ADD the story of "Honi" here)

The Tu B'Shevat Seder demonstrates our respect for all of nature, and our love for trees and all they do for us.

We drink four different cups of wine (or juice). The first cup represents winter. It's white color is a reminder of the cold.

Continued on next page

Tu B'Shevat "Tasting" Seder

Pass out the white grape juice or wine – make the blessing

The fruit – first group: Hold plate and make the blessing: (borei puri ha-etz)

The first group -, fruits with hard shells or coverings inedible shells or skins. Fruit of this type, such as **oranges, coconuts or pineapple**, symbolize earth's protection, How can we protect the earth? As we grow older and our faces "harden" we focus on the inner beauty of our loved ones.

TASTE

Pass out the white grape juice or wine and make the blessing. Say, "Now it's early spring.. and still chilly so we take a drop of red wine or juice and add it to the white wine/juice. "Now it's getting warmer!"

The fruit – **SECOND** : Hold plate and make the blessing: (borei puri ha-etz) .

The second type of fruit, is fruit with a soft outside and a hard inside , like **olives, apricots, avocados, dates or cherries**. The core symbolizes re-growth and a strong heart. We have a strong character, sense of justice, but move forward softly, with love and compassion. Say what you mean, mean what you say, but don't say it mean!

TASTE

Sing: Yedid Nefesh

Pass out the **red grape juice/wine** – make the blessing – now it's summer... red juice shows us it's getting hotter .

2. The fruit – THIRD : Hold plate and make the blessing: (borei puri ha-etz) . The third fruit, and the summer season, may be eaten whole, such as **blueberries, black berries, raspberries, strawberries, grapes (seedless) and figs**.

Symbolize the whole of our Judaism is Torah and that a person's fruits are her or his good deeds.

TASTE

Sing Etz Haim Hi

Drink the fourth cup – represents Autumn .. - L'Chaim

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
בורא פרי העץ.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam, borei pri ha'etz.

Praised are You, Adonai, our God, Sovereign over all, that creates the fruit of the tree.

To Life to Life L'chaim ... L'chaim L'chaim to Life ... If good fortune never comes, here's to whatever comes.. drink L'Chaim to life...

To Life to Life L'chaim ... L'chaim L'chaim to Life - it gives us something to think about, something to drink about..

DRINK L'CHAIM TO LIFE!

IFR News Editors

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

Rabbi Frank Tamburello

Design/Layout: shosh

THE KABBALAH AND TU B'SHEVAT – WHAT DO OUR MYSTICS SAY ABOUT THE FESTIVAL? RABBI BARBARA AIELLO

SARASOTA, FLORIDA AND SERRASTRETTA, ITALY

As our Sunday school teachers tell us, the festival of Tu B'Shevat celebrates the birthday or the New Year for the trees. One of the four Rosh HaShanah or New Year celebrations on the Jewish calendar (That's right, there are four Rosh Hashana's !

The first of Nisan, the first calendar month and the month of Passover, The First of Elul, the Rosh HaShanah for tithing or giving 10 percent of your resources to the synagogue or Jewish community, the First of Tishrei, the Rosh HaShanah of the Fall, the one that we are all familiar with as the Jewish New Year, and Rosh HaShanah La Ilanot, or Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for the Trees).

It was the Kabbalists in Safed in th 1600's who first came up with the idea of the Tu B'Shevat Seder (as well as the Rosh HaShanah seder that is celebrated in Italy and other Mediterranean countries).

My colleague, Rabbi Michael Berg looks at the fourth Rosh HaShanah from the Kabbalistic point of view and finds that "Kabbalah teaches that the holidays are channels on which specific spiritual Light is revealed. Holidays enable every person on earth to connect to the unique Light that is available on that day, thereby drawing more Light into their lives."

Indeed we know that Tu B'Shevat occurs on the 15th day in the Hebrew month of Shevat, a day selected because the light of the fifteenth emanates from the full moon, rather than the new moon that characterizes the beginning of the Hebrew months.

Rabbi Berg goes on to say that "Kabbalah teaches that every aspect of this world is filled with the Light of the Creator, and that every part of the universe works together for the betterment of the world. Trees and vegetation are an important aspect of both our spiritual and physical world."

So, nu, how can we use this year's festival of Tu B'Shevat to bring new light to the world? This is a question especially important to those of us who live outside of Israel or in colder climes where the traditional planting of a tree might mean digging through snow and ice!

At the Kobernick House and Anchin Pavilion Jewish senior residence where I am resident rabbi we make sure to include the greater community in our Tu B'Shevat festivities.

Last year our Rabbi's Mitzvah Club created nearly 70 dish gardens to give as tribute gifts to the teachers and staff at the Tuttle Elementary School. We honored them for their service and shared our Jewish traditions with them, all at the same time.

This year we will hold a Tu B'Shevat tasting party. We will eat fruits and nuts that have symbolic meaning in making our lives more positive and fulfilling and making the world a better place.

We will plant a tree in honor of our environment because, after all, Tu B'Shevat is Jewish Earth Day! And we will make a special blessing for the care givers of our five Assisted Living pets – service dogs, Callie, Ben and Kira and cats Petyon and Jordon - as we thank God for those who care for God's creatures.

They say there is no special greeting for Tu B'shevat so let's make up one. There is always, "Hag Sameach," or "Happy Holiday," but how about "Yom Huledet Etz Sameach" Happy Birthday and Todah Rabah to our world of trees.

From Kolel Center for Adult Jewish learning, Toronto, Canada



Tu B'Shevat Seder Themes Chart @ a Glance

WORLD English "aspect"	ASSIYAH Action physical	YETZIRAH Formation connec- tion/emotion	BERIYAH Creation ideal/intellect	ATZILUT Emanation essence/spirit
FRUIT	Hard outer / soft inner example: pomegranate	Soft outer / hard inner example: olive, date	Soft outer / soft inner example: fig, grape	Pure spirit: cannot be represented by fruit
WINE	White	White with red	Red with white	Red
TIKKUN 1: SOCIAL	"Fruit" of our labour taxed and given freely for preserving society.	Civic participation, forming community	Political economy, law	Justice and peace
TIKKUN 2: COS- MIC/EXISTENTIAL	Conscious eating, performing mitzvot.	Prayer, song	Torah, meaning	Redemption, attachment to God.
TIKKUN 3: NATIONAL	Planting trees in Israel, general financial and physical support of Israel.	Love of fellow-Jews, visiting Israel	Zionism.	Am Yisrael Chai! (The people of Israel lives!), Aliyah
TIKKUN 4: ECOLOGICAL	Reduce, re-use, re-cycle, preservation & restoration.	Walk in the woods, go to the zoo, "cute animal environmentalism"	Environmental science	Internalized inter-connection with the web of life and creation

Ravenous Ravens

Rabbi Frank Tamburello's column featuring
Jewish holiday Eats and Treats

Shevat and Adar Recipes



Fig & Almond Bundt Cake
for Tu'Bishvat

Ingredients:

- 2 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup almond (toasted)
- 1 1/2 tsp baking powder

1/2 tsp ground cinnamon

1/4 tsp salt

1 1/4 cup granulated sugar

1/2 cup vegetable oil 2 large eggs

1/2 tsp vanilla

1/2 tsp almond extract

1/2 cup fresh orange juice 1 cup fig (finely chopped fresh)

Preparation Steps:

1. Grease and flour a 9-inch Bundt pan.
2. In a food processor pulse with a metal blade almonds to a fine crumb add flour, baking powder, cinnamon, and salt pulse to mix and lighten.
3. Beat together sugar and oil until light and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating after each addition. Add vanilla and almond extract.
4. In a mixer at low speed, beat flour into egg mixture a little at a time, alternating with orange juice. Stir in figs. Spoon batter into prepared baking pan; smooth top.

Bake cake at 350° for about 40-45 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool fig cake in pan on rack for about 5 minutes; remove from pan to rack to cool completely. Dust with powdered sugar if desired.



SPINACH RAVIOLI FOR PURIM

This is an Italian Jewish recipe for ravioli, and since it is designed to be followed by dishes containing meat, it omits the cheese

one often finds in green-based ravioli fillings, substituting for it with chicken breast or veal.

To serve 6:

Prep Time: 40 minutes

Cook Time: 40 minutes

Total Time: 1 hour, 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- ** For the Pasta **
- 4 1/5 cups (500 g) flour
- 3 eggs
- 2 eggshells of water
- ** For the Filling **
- 2 1/4 pounds (1 k) fresh spinach
- 6 ounces (150 g) chicken or veal, ground
- 2 eggs
- Half a small onion and half a small carrot, minced
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preparation:

Wash the spinach well, trimming the roots if need be, shake them dry, and wilt them in a pot with just the water that stuck to the leaves.

While they're heating, sauté the onion, carrot, and ground meat in a little oil in a fairly large skillet, and as soon as the spinach comes to a boil drain it and add it to the meat mixture.

Cook for a few minutes more, until the mixture is moist but not dripping, and then blend it and mix in the two eggs.

Make the pasta (see instructions if need be -- you could also buy 1 1/4 pound (550 g) fresh pasta sheets if need be), divide the dough ball, and roll it out into two thin sheets. Set teaspoons of the filling two fingers apart on one of the sheets, lay the other sheet over it, and press down between the ravioli to make the sheets adhere.

Cut the ravioli free with a serrated pasta wheel or a glass. Cook them in abundant lightly salted water, and serve them with a tasty sauce.

Ravenous Ravens



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Baba Beh Tamur

Iraqi Filled Pastries for Purim



Prep Time: 1 hour

Cook Time: 10 minutes

Total Time: 1 hour, 10 minutes

Ingredients:

- DOUGH
- 2 pounds all-purpose flour, sifted
- 2 ounces fresh yeast
- 1 3/4 cup warm water
- 8 ounces margarine (pareve), cut into cubes
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 2 tablespoons vanilla sugar
- 3 tablespoons sugar

FILLING

- 16 ounces pitted dates
- 8 ounces walnuts, ground
- 1 egg beaten with a little water for glazing sesame seeds

Preparation:

1. Combine water with yeast, sugar and a handful of flour. Allow to sit in a warm place until it becomes frothy (around 10 minutes).

2. Add the cubed margarine, oil, vanilla sugar and most of the flour. Knead with a dough hook and add the remaining flour.

Continue kneading until combined completely and the dough is smooth.

3. Remove the dough hook and oil the bowl (use oil spray). Return dough to the bowl and cover with a cloth.

Stand in a warm place until dough has doubled in bulk (around 3/4 hour).

4. Prepare the filling by combining the walnuts and dates in the food processor.

Set the oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit.

5. Divide the dough in half and roll out as thin as possible. Cut into rounds with either a scone cutter or a glass.

Put a small teaspoon of filling in the centre and pinch the sides together.

Arrange on a greased tray and stand again in a warm place to rise (about 10 minutes).

Brush with eggwash and sprinkle with sesame seeds.

6. Bake in oven for 8-10 minutes until golden brown.

This recipe makes about 70.

IFR Rabbis News & Shmooze

IFR DUES 2012-2013

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The International Federation of Rabbis

Send your check (s) to the IFR President

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Tuesday March 5 – Thursday March 7

Duncan Conference Center

Delray Beach, FL

www.intfedrabbis.org/eilat.html

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Donation made by IFR membership to:

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In memory of Tammy Coffsky z"l, beloved daughter of Rabbi Barry Coffsky

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Earthquake in Haiti

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IFR Conference 2011 Duncan Center-Delray Beach FL.

According to The Book of Formation (Sefer Yetzirah) Each month of the Jewish year has a corresponding color, a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, a zodiac sign, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, a sense, and a controlling organ/limb of the body.

THE MONTH OF ADAR

FROM THE GAL-EINAI INSTITUTE

Adar is the twelfth month of the Jewish calendar. The word Adar is cognate to the Hebrew "strength" (אֶדָר). Adar is the month of good fortune for the Jewish people. The sages say of Adar: "Its mazal [fortune] is strong."

Purim, the holiday of Adar, commemorates the "metamorphosis" of the Jews' apparent bad fortune (as it appeared to Haman) to good. "When Adar enters we augment with joy." The festival of Purim marks the high point in the joy of the entire year. The Jewish year begins with the joy of the redemption of Pesach and concludes with the joy of the redemption of Purim. "Joy breaks through all barriers."

The joy of Adar is what makes the month of Adar the "pregnant" month of the year (i.e., seven of the nineteen years in the cycle of the Jewish calendar are "leap years," "pregnant" with an additional month of Adar). When there are two Adars, Purim is celebrated in the second Adar, in order to link the redemption of Purim to the redemption of Pesach. Thus, we see that the secret of Adar and Purim is "the end is wedged in the beginning."

Letter: Kuf (ק)

The letter *kuf* means "monkey" (קוף), the symbol of laughter of the month of Adar. In accordance with the idiom "as a monkey in the face of man," the *kuf* also symbolizes masquerade, an accepted custom of Purim. Before the miracle of Purim, God Himself "hid His face" from His children Israel (in the entire story of Purim, as related in the book of Esther, His Name does not appear even once). By initially hiding one's true identity, pretending to be someone else, the innermost essence of one's true self becomes revealed. On Purim, we reach the level of the "unknowable head" ("the head that does not know itself nor is known to others"), the state of total existential hiddenness of self from self, for the sake of "giving birth" to one's ultimate self anew.

The word *kuf* also means the "eye of a needle." The sages teach us that even in the most irrational dream one cannot see an elephant passing through the eye of a needle. Yet, on Purim one experiences this great wonder, which, in Kabbalah and Chassidut, symbolizes the truly infinite essence of God's transcendent light entering into the finite context of physical reality and revealing itself in full to the Jewish soul.

Mazal: Pisces (Fish)

Fish are the creatures of the sea, which in Kabbalah is a symbol for the "concealed reality." Likewise, the souls of Israel are likened to fish that swim in the waters of the Torah. The true identity and fortune of Israel is invisible in this world. The revelation of Purim, the revelation of Israel's true identity, reflects the revelation of the World to Come (the miracle of Purim is understood to reflect in this world the ultimate miracle: the resurrection in the World to Come).

The singular form for "fish" in Hebrew is דג.

It represents the *tikun*, the rectification of worry; the three letter root of "to worry" is דאג (pronounced *da'ag*). In the Bible, the singular form of fish (דג) actually appears once written as the root, worry (דאג). The Bible relates that in the time of Nechemiah, certain unobservant Jews desecrated the holiness of the Shabbat by selling fish in the market of Jerusalem. But, their fish (דג) had turned into excessive "worry" (דאג) over earning a livelihood. In the opposite direction, the fish of the joy of Purim, the strong (though initially hidden, as fish) mazal of Adar, convert all the worry in the heart of man to the ultimate joy of redemption with the new birth of self from the "unknowable head."

ADAR 7

Yahrtzeit of Moshe Rabbeinu 1273 BCE (Jewish year 2488), on the same day of his birth 120 years earlier.

(Consequently, "May you live to 120" has become a common Jewish blessing.)

continued from last page

Tribe: Naftali

In Kabbalah, the name Naftali (נפתלי) is read (as two words) that mean "sweetness is to me" (נפת לי). The *mitzvah* on Purim to reach the level of the "unknowable head" by drinking wine etc., is expressed, in the words of our sages, as: "one is obligated on Purim to become sweet, until he is unable to differentiate between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordechai'."

This is the expression of joy and laughter at the level of Naftali, "sweetness to me." Our patriarch Jacob blessed his son Naftali: "Naftali is a sent-off [messenger] deer, who gives [expresses] eloquent words." The "eloquent words" of Naftali give rise to joy and laughter in the ears of all who hear. At the end of the Torah, Moses blessed Naftali: "The will of Naftali is satisfied..." In Chassidut it is explained that "satisfied will" (*seva ratzon*) refers to the level of will in the inner dimension of *keter*, where all experience is pure delight, the state of being that one wills nothing outside oneself.

The three letters that compose the name Haman can be permuted in six ways. The gematria of Haman is 95, so the total value of all six permutations is $6 \cdot 95 = 570$, the value of the word for "a wicked person" (רשע). Indeed, Haman is usually referred to as "Haman the wicked." 570 is also the gematria of Naftali (נפתלי), who takes joy and laughs in playing the six permutation game of Haman. In Kabbalah, it is explained that the "eloquence" of Naftali reflects his wisdom to permute words in general, as well as to examine gematriot, the most "delightful game" (*sha'ashu'a*) of Torah study. Naftali would look at the numerical values of the famous phrase "Cursed is Haman, Blessed is Mordechai" and realize that the two halves both equal 502: "Cursed is Haman" (ארוור המן) is equal to "Blessed is Mordechai" (ברוך מרדכי).

As previously explained, the months of *Tishrei* and *Cheshvan* correspond (according to the Arizal) to the two tribes of *Ephraim* and *Menasheh*, the two sons of Joseph. Jacob blessed his two grandchildren *Ephraim* and *Menashe* to be like fish: "and they shall be like fish in the midst of the earth." These two tribes (the beginning of the year from *Tishrei*) reflect themselves in *Adar* and *Naftali* (the end of the year from *Nissan*),

for *Adar* divides into two (just as Joseph divides into two) fish (*Ephraim* and *Menasheh*). The numerical support for this is that when Ephraim 331 (אפרים) and Menashe (395, מנשה) combine with Naftali (נפתלי), the sum is $1296 = 36^2 = 6^4$.

Sense: Laughter

Laughter is the expression of unbounded joy, the joy which results from witnessing light issue from darkness--"the advantage of light from darkness"--as is the case with regard to the miracle of Purim. The epitome of laughter in the Torah is that of Sarah at the birth of Isaac (יצחק) whose name derives from the word for laughter (צחוק): "God made me laugh, whoever hears shall laugh with me." Giving birth at the age of 90 (and Abraham at the age of 100), after being barren and physically unable to have children, is witnessing Divine light and miracle emerging from total darkness. The word in Hebrew for "barren" is composed of the same letters (in the same order) as the word for "darkness." Purim (פורים) comes from the word meaning "be fruitful [and multiply]" (פרו). Of Isaac, the archetype personification of laughter in the Torah, it is said "the fear [source of awe, i.e. God] of Isaac." This phrase can also be read as: "fear shall laugh"--the essence of fear shall metamorphize into the essence of laughter. In relation to Purim, the fear of (the decree of) Haman transforms into the exuberant laughter of the festival of Purim.

Controller: Spleen

Our sages explicitly state that, "the spleen laughs." At first sight, this appears most paradoxical, for the spleen is considered the seat of the "black humor," the source of all states of melancholy and despair. Just as we have described above, all of the phenomena of *Adar* and *Purim* are essentially paradoxical, for they all derive from the "unknowable head," and they all represent states of existential transformation and metamorphosis. The "methodology" in Torah which "models" these phenomena is the wisdom of permutation, as described above. The letters of "black humor" (מרה שחורה) in Hebrew, permute to spell the words "happy thought" (הרהור שמח). This is the funniest joke of all!

Queen Esther's Legacy

The Month of March Queen Esther's Legacy

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

In his compelling book, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*, David Von Drehle reminds his readers in vivid detail of the events of March 25, 1911. By day's end 146 young girls, burned from the fire or crushed and mutilated by death-defying leaps from nine stories up, lay dead on the sidewalk. Until the tragedy of 9/11 happened, the Triangle fire was the worst workplace disaster in the history of New York City.

In a review of the book Vince Piro writes: "*Back in 1911, the Triangle Waist Company employed hundreds who sewed blouses (or shirtwaists) in its 10 story factory located in Manhattan. Most of these employees were immigrant women, of which 40 percent were Italian and about 60 percent were Eastern European Jews.*"

Just one week before the fire, on March 19, 1911, Europe marked its very first International Women's Day when more than one million women and men in four countries rallied for a woman's right to vote and right to work. Ironically, only six days later the deaths of teenage immigrant girls half a world away led to sweeping changes in labor legislation and to a worldwide observance of International Women's Day.

But if ever there was a first Women's Day it had to be the one more than two thousand years ago on the 14th day in the Hebrew month of Adar, the day that marks the feast of Purim. The hero of the story is not a man. She's a woman and her name is Esther. Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller writes about Esther's ordinary and humble beginnings: "*Her father had died while her mother was pregnant with Esther; her mother died at her birth. Thus, she came into this world with the gaping wound of belonging to no one.*"

As Esther grew into girlhood, the Jews of Persia descended into despair. King Achashverosh assumed power and, aided by his wicked henchman, Haman, systematically began to repress the Jews. Rebbetzin Heller reminds us that the root for the Hebrew word "ester" is "sa'iter," which means "concealment." Our little Ester at first concealed her Jewish identity but later broke through a self-imposed and society-imposed barrier to reveal her background. Esther spoke the truth and with that act she pierced through the armor of public hatred and personal denial which defined her no more.

A Google search of the topic tells us that International Women's Day is a way to recount the stories of ordinary women who made history. One site takes us back to ancient Greece where Lysistrata organized what was probably the world's first strike. She encouraged women to withhold sex from men who made war. From the women of the French Revolution who stormed Versailles calling for "liberty, equality and fraternity," to the bravery of Michela Marciano whose life began in the ashes of a tiny Italian village at the foot of Mount Vesuvius and ended in the ashes of the Triangle fire, International Women's Day in the month of March remembers them all.

Here in Italy we celebrate our International Woman's Day, "La Festa della Donna" on March 8 when it is customary to give sprigs of bright yellow mimosa to every woman you know. Men give mimosa to women but maybe more important, women present the flower to one to another. Why mimosa? Romans say that the mimosa signifies sensitivity, a trait that propels many women to stand strong for their beliefs. Others say that the mimosa represents "concealed love," the love that Esther had for her people that led her to make her awesome declaration. And then there is the memory of the few young girls who survived the Triangle fire.

On that fateful day some recall seeing wild mimosa blooming in the vacant lot adjacent to the factory. For nearly 150 beautiful, vibrant and determined Italian and Jewish women the ordinary mimosa was the last flower they ever saw. It makes me think that if Esther were here today she would wear mimosa in her hair.

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