

The Ever-Enduring Olive Tree

By Samantha Shaps

A baby tree surfaces from the soil and heads for the sky, extending its reach toward its source of life. It only knows growth. Expanding with exuberance, it spreads its branches and twigs as far as they can reach. Mirroring the intimacy of two humans holding hands, the trees enkindle serenity only those paying attention can admire. Through leafless cold winters and burning hot summers, a tree's seasonal shift carries the beauty of nature's eternal love and unity. The familial bond between a tree and its neighbors will forever be etched in time. Roots run deep, and they interconnect in the unseen, exposed as history unfolds.

Jewish tradition and folklore reveal that trees hold a special place in Jewish identity. Particularly, the “thriving olive tree” described in Jeremiah 11:16 symbolizes beauty, fruitfulness, and perseverance. The olive tree is known for its resilience and endurance—it can thrive in challenging conditions and outlive many others. It withstands. It endures. It provides. Unlike most trees, the olive tree does not lose its leaves in the cold of winter. In rare circumstances where cold weather, drying winds, or unfortunate environmental conditions cause leaves to fall, new growth always reappears in the spring.

In January of 2019, I took a weeklong trip to Poland with a group of Jewish students from the University of Texas at Austin (UT) under the direction of a very special rabbi. As we traveled throughout the country to the various Jewish grave sites, concentration camps, and memorials scattered throughout the once-Nazi occupied country, we noted the coldness, the gray skies, and the atmosphere of pain and sorrow. As you walk the path of those taken before you—who could have been you, who *would* have been you—you realize that the story must not end with you.

I had many emotionally driven philosophical conversations with my rabbi about what we saw and what those before us had to endure. On a drive to Auschwitz-Birkenau, I reflected with my rabbi about what felt like the cyclical nature of pain and endurance of the Jewish people. Repeatedly, I thought: Jewish people must overcome. Whether it be a pogrom, or the events that foreshadow one—violence, harassment, destruction, exclusion—when and where does it end?

I do not remember the exact conversation I had with my rabbi that day, but I do remember him sharing a sentiment that I will never forget:

“Jews are like olives; even when we are crushed, we turn into a fine oil.”

Over the last 6 years, I have returned to this statement more times than I can count. In reflecting on my past, I feel that the mantra has been there all along.

I like to tell people that I am a New York Jew turned small-town cowgirl. I moved from New York when I was young and landed in the Cowboy Capital of the World in my teens. Bandera, Texas is home to me, but it did not always feel that way. As the only Jewish student in my entire high school, I sometimes felt like I had a spotlight on me. A classmate once jokingly asked me if I had horns hidden under my curly hair. Another compared Jews to pizzas cooking in ovens. Others nominated me for treasurer of the National Honor Society (NHS) because “Jews are good with money.” I tried to blend in. I tried to take the jokes in stride because I felt like I had no one to turn to—no one who would

understand the inappropriateness of these statements. But like an olive tree, I endured, though my roots struggled to find fertile ground.

Everything changed when I attended UT. I finally found my community. I met other Jews from small Texas towns, but also those who had grown up immersed in Jewish traditions. At times, I felt that I was not “Jewish enough” because I had not been exposed to the same rituals and teachings as others. In reality, though, I fit right in. I was an olive tree among other olive trees. I began attending Shabbats regularly and eventually led services.

Then came the cold and drying winds, threatening the very leaves we were raised to cherish. Our sacred Texas Hillel building was vandalized, people placed white supremacist symbols on UT’s Jewish sorority house, and, recently, a person was harassed for wearing a Star of David necklace. Despite these experiences, Jewish students have always entangled their roots, continuing to protect the whole forest. We grip each other. We persevere.

After walking through Auschwitz-Birkenau, we toured the accompanying museum, which included an exhibition called “The Book of Names.” The massive book filled a long room, and it included over 4.2 million names on thousands of large pages. I flipped through the pages, searching for my last name, “Shaps.” I found eight Eastern European individuals with my uncommon last name, people who were sent to concentration camps, some of whom were murdered in the Holocaust.

I do not know if these people were my blood relatives, but I consider them family. I consider each name in the book to be family. They were all olive trees, swaying in the breeze, caught in an unimaginably cold wind.

After staring at the book for a while, I could not help but think about all the inappropriate comments I endured and my NHS treasurer nomination. The people who killed my possible relatives spread the same stereotypes I faced in school. As I left Auschwitz-Birkenau, I picked up a pebble and took it with me. Along with that small rock, I carried the obligation to never forget.

I see preservation of my heritage as a central to my Jewish identity. Part of this duty means branching out to those who may not realize that there is a space in the forest for them, too. In my twenty-six years as a Jew, one thing I know for certain is that Jews love to *kvetch*—either to complain or persistently argue. I believe this quality is part of why we continue to endure. To know that you are safe among those whose roots are entangled with yours is to know true family.

In times of freezes and tumultuous winds, we must extend our olive branches to one another. We must water each other. We must protect and heal each other. And when our olives are inevitably crushed, may the remaining oil be used to light the pathway for renewal.