

Bulletin Message October 2008

A few weeks ago there was a ominous note attached to a tree in my front yard. It was from the City of Gainesville: "Dear Resident: We have been watching this tree for many years now. As you can see it is located on the city's right-of-way and we have decided to remove this tree due to its poor condition. Thank you very much."

Now, I have to say that my first reaction was a bit of pleasure because as you all know it is very expensive to remove a tree and here is the city who is willing to come and do work at no cost! On the other hand, this was a particularly magnificent tree – with layers of moss hanging from high branches. It was one of the tallest trees in the neighborhood and at certain times of the year it served as a favorite perch for the Red-tail Hawks who come to scout the area. Looking up at the tree I could only see a tower of strength – a large round pillar reaching into the sky. Dead branches had been carefully pruned over the years and the leaves appeared healthy, strong and capable of weathering even the most vociferous hurricane.

But then again.... they've been watching this tree for years?! Has there actually been a city employee assigned to come visit my street and park near this tree watching its progress? Because of all the tree problems at the shul I was aware that there was a city arborist (once who even consulted at my home) but living in the 'city of trees' I just cannot imagine that any one tree could have been so carefully observed – my goodness there must be millions of trees on city right-of-ways!

In any event, as I left the house early one morning I was greeted by a crew who were eagerly climbing the tall limbs to disassemble this beautiful tree. I knew what was about to happen and so I quickly hurried on to shul so that I would not have to watch the sad destruction. Later I returned to find only the last stump being cut. It was very sad. I went up to the men working and they were eager to show me their work. Lo and behold, the tree that stood so magnificently was hollow! Age had taken a tremendous toll on this creature and it was clear that unless removed this tree would have never been able to sustain its own weight.

It occurs to me that exterior magnificence is sometimes deceitful. Great beauty hid what was clearly great danger in my own front yard. What I had perceived as awesome beauty was in fact hiding hollowness that only the city expert could see. If it were up to me I would have urged keeping this tree so that those hawks could once again survey the acres of northwest Gainesville.

In our own lives we sometimes miss the things that are right in front of us. We have a tendency to become swayed by beauty only to find out later that even in beauty there can be hollowness that contains dangers unperceived.

I believe we have great richness and depth in our Jewish tradition. Our Torah, in fact, is called "A Tree of Life" and the metaphors between Torah, Judaism, God and trees are many. For me it is the customs and traditions of our people that make the tree of Judaism rich and dense. Without the tradition there is still great beauty – magnificent and towering indeed, but without the tradition of mitzvot, commandment and deed – there could develop a hollow shell that can dangerously collapse.

Let us be strong in maintaining Jewish life in our community that appreciates tradition, blends modernity and is meant to provide continuity with generations past and generation's future.

B'virkat Shalom,
Rabbi David Kaiman