

## At Tu BiShevat, Digging for Spiritual Growth

By Edmon J. Rodman

Los Angeles (JTA) - While my neighbors were putting their Christmas trees to the curb, in what seems like a ritual of replacement, I was preparing to plant for Tu BiShevat.

My friend Freda recently presented me a cutting from an Angel's trumpet - a small tree with beautiful, large, pendulous white flowers that grows in her yard - and to observe the New Year of the Trees (This year on February 4), I wanted to get it in the ground.

Looking around the garage for a shovel, I wondered if there were a Jewish ceremony for planting a tree.

A Tu BiShevat seder introduces philosophical concepts into the holiday. But could I skip the four cups of wine - you start with white and gradually add more red to each cup - and just do something shorter, and well, more down to earth to help observe what some have called Jewish Arbor Day?

The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life had published a tree-planting service in a guide called "To Till and To Tend: A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action."

Though tilling and tending sounded like a lot more work than

I was up for, I gave it a look.

"There is an order to this, God's universe, that is beyond our comprehension," read a passage from the ceremony. Picking out the right spot to plant had often been beyond mine. Planting thorny rose bushes near the free-standing basketball hoop in the backyard had been one of my chief blunders. Another was not removing a ficus tree; its roots are now cracking our brick patio.

Freda had told to me that her trumpet tree had done well in a spot that was full sun to part shade.

I found a similar spot near a wall next to a bougainvillea vine that when it flowers bathes the area in magenta.

Recalling my pruning battles with the spreading bougainvillea, another passage from the service came to mind: "The world of nature was given to us to join with, not to conquer."

Perhaps the trumpet tree - it also spreads, Freda's husband, Stuart, informed me - would provide a more natural way to control the quickly spreading vine.



The planting of an Angel's trumpet for Tu b'Shvat by columnist Edmon J. Rodman was accompanied by an impromptu backyard service, January 2014. (Edmon J. Rodman)

Clearing the area of leaves and debris, I found something brown and pebbled sticking out from the ground. Pulling it out, I realized it was a chewed-up football that our dog, Oliver, used to bite and shake into submission.

Before lapsing into backyard nostalgia, I recalled what Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had to say about tree-planting interruptions: "If you are in the midst of planting a tree and word reaches you that the Messiah has arrived, do not interrupt your work; first finish your planting and only then go out to

welcome the Messiah."

Snapping back to my shovel, I began to dig. Almost immediately, another line from the tree-planting ceremony - "Take care not to spoil or destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you," from Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah - assumed a different shading as I struck a root from a nearby plum tree. Gauging that the loss would not be fatal, I chopped it out.

The service's warning "And do not wound your neighbors, for they, too, are part of the interdependent whole," reminded me

that when you plant near a property line, you are planting for two. Who could be upset by the tree's sweet-smelling flowers that are only fragrant at night? And by day, the Angel's trumpet called to hummingbirds.

However, after some research I also discovered that the Angel's trumpet, like other common landscape plants such as azaleas, rhododendron, and oleander, is poisonous if ingested. I would have to remember to keep it from growing into their yard.

As I pulled the two-foot shoot

from the plastic pot, I saw that it had already developed a good set of roots.

"People can sense God's presence in nature," read the text. "We pause in awe at nature's elegance."

I lowered the plant into the hole, filling in around it with a mixture of earth and potting soil.

"Originally, we got this plant as cutting from our neighbor," Stuart said a few days before I planted the trumpet. I wondered how many generations this plant, which is native to South America, had traveled to reach my backyard.

Looking at my little plant that had been passed down, I decided that not exactly a renewable resource, it was a source of renewed spirituality.

The service said that we protect the world "by planting and by remembering and by connecting, from generation to generation." As I watered the planting, I wondered, once it grew large enough for a cutting, who would be renewed by the next generation. ✪

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## Op-Ed: France's Wake Up Call

By Simone Rodan-Benzaquen

PARIS (JTA) — The kosher supermarket was chosen deliberately. Men, women and children were shopping and preparing for Shabbat. Only two days before the attack, terrorists had left 10 of the best-known satirical journalists and cartoonists dead at *Charlie Hebdo*. Three French police officers were also struck down, one of

and evaluating not only the future of our community but the fate of France itself.

Let's be clear: France is under assault. The enemy is in our midst. Extremists, faithful to a brand of Islam that celebrates violence and martyrdom, have no respect whatsoever for the core, longstanding French values of democracy, pluralism, freedom of expression —

about the developing and deepening threat that radical Islam poses to France. In March 2012, a lone, heavily armed Mohammed Merah murdered three French soldiers in cold blood and, a week later, slaughtered a teacher and three children at a Jewish school in Toulouse. The Toulouse attack was a game changer for French Jews. And although French political leaders voiced outrage, as time passed and the numbers and frequency of anti-Semitic incidents rose, the country seemed to get used to them — even anesthetized to this reality — while many Jews felt a sense of loneliness and isolation.

The recent attacks in Paris have shocked the entire nation, indeed the entire world. What is new this time is the depth and breadth of the reactions, crisscrossing French society, the realization that combating the threat of radical Islam must be, and remain, a national priority. But will this be the necessary wake-up call for France as a whole to confront the danger?

The terrorists who struck in Paris — as in Toulouse and at the Jewish Museum in Brussels last May — are not isolated lone wolves. They most likely are the tip of a radical Islamist iceberg, the small visible part. To counter this lethal trend, we must delve deeper and understand the factors that draw certain individuals to radical Islam, and find ways to counter this evil that endangers all of France.

French schools must teach mutual respect and responsibility, a component of the curriculum that today is stunningly missing. Indoctrination in extremist ideologies in prisons demands attention, as does recruitment by radical, vi-



Simone Rodan-Benzaquen

community regretted that no large solidarity movement rose up after the gruesome kidnap-murder of Ilan Halimi nine years ago, or after Toulouse, or during last summer's transparently anti-Semitic demonstrations. While the government did speak out after attacks on Jews and firmly decries anti-Semitism, many in French society and in the media refused to see that our French values were at stake and that Jews were indeed a target.

Hatred of Jews never ends with Jews. The menace of rising anti-Semitism threatens French society at large. The future of France will be decided in the coming days, weeks and months. The *Charlie Hebdo* massacre makes clear that the war against France's democratic values is in high gear.

Sunday's mass rally, with more than 3.7 million people across the country in attendance — including, in Paris, French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other political leaders — was a powerful statement of outrage and solidarity against this barbarism in France and in the rest of the world.

But what happens in the days and weeks ahead will truly test France. Now more than at any other time in its postwar history, the fate of France is entwined with the fate of its Jews. If France loses them, sooner or later it will also be lost. Is this the wake-up call that will help the French people understand the nature of the threat to our country, and will they respond firmly and effectively?

The very soul of France is at stake. ✪

(Simone Rodan-Benzaquen is the director of the American Jewish Committee's Paris office.)



Demonstrators carrying a sign reading "We Are Charlie" march in a Paris square during a unity rally following the recent terrorist attacks in the French capital, Jan. 11, 2015. (Dan Kitwood/Getty Images) Read more: <http://www.jta.org/2015/01/12/news-opinion/opinion/op-ed-frances-wake-up-call#ixzz3P1Gnvi6T>

them a Muslim. Each Islamist terrorist attack targeted a symbol of the French Republic, seeking to bring the country to its knees.

That Jews were targets of radical Islam was, alas, unsurprising. Four of the hostages — Yoav Hatab, Philippe Braham, Yohan Cohen, François-Michel Saada — were killed at the kosher market. Survivors of the attack are anguished. So, too, are most French Jews, who again are discussing

and, indeed, for life itself. Traditional forms of protest are alien to them. Instead, as seen in the carnage wrought by ISIS, al-Qaida and other jihadists in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, pure barbarism is their vehicle to achieve their perverted notion of salvation.

Tragically, the events of recent days are not a new phenomenon. The Jewish community, including the American Jewish Committee in Paris, has warned for years