

## Planting Two Trees

Tu BiShvat 5776/2016



Thank you so much for giving me and my fellow rabbinical students in Israel the opportunity to plant trees in the Al-Jib Bedouin village in the West Bank and the Hand in Hand Bilingual School in West Jerusalem.



When we arrived in Al-Jib we paired off to go plant trees around the village. My wife Lindsay and I followed a young boy who had grabbed four small trees and motioned for us to follow him. He led us to the courtyard of his home and motioned where we were to start digging.

As I finished planting the first tree, he asked me in a quiet Hebrew what my name was. I told him my name was Nathan and I then asked him his name. "Hamid," he replied as he ran off to play with his sisters.

Hamid's father came out from the house and welcomed us in Hebrew. After we finished planting

the trees, he brought out some chairs and served us coffee. I asked him if all of the children I saw were his. "Yes," he responded proudly, "I have six children, four girls and two boys." He asked me where we were from. "I'm from California. I'm a rabbinical student spending the year in Israel," I told him. He told me about his uncle who lives in Florida. "Where is it more pleasant to live," he asked "here or there?" I paused and he answered his own question "Of course, it is more pleasant over there." "True" I admitted, "but it is so beautiful here." He asked me if I was married. I told him yes and that Lindsay is my wife. He asked if we had any children. "We are expecting our first in July." "Ah, *b'ezrat haShem*," he said smiling, with God's help. "Yes, *b'ezrat haShem*" I responded.



We reassembled as a group and heard from Mariam, one of the Bedouin women living in Al-Jib, who spoke firsthand of their struggles to maintain their traditional lifestyle on their land. Their homes are considered illegal by the Israeli government and they are currently challenging demolition orders in the courts. If the orders go through, this will not be the first time they have been displaced. Mariam recounted how, when she was a child, she



grew up on the hill on the other side of the valley, on land that is now an Israeli settlement. "That is where I grew up, that is where I dream of," she said as she turned her head to look across the valley at the Israeli homes behind a wall. The settlement is currently dumping sewage into the valley, and we learned the children were becoming sick as a result. They had gone to court and successfully stopped the dumping for a time, but it had recently resumed.

During our conversation Mariam asked us, "What would you do if you were in our situation?" I am still struggling to find an answer to this question. One thing I know I would do is

tell as many people as possible my story and my struggle for justice.

The day we spent in Al-Jib and the Hand in Hand Bilingual School demonstrated to me that planting trees is an incredible act of optimism and hope. We plant these trees in the ground knowing that so many things can happen between now and the time when our children will be able to eat their fruit. I will never again be able to hear about the destruction of Bedouin homes without seeing the trees that we planted or the faces of the children who served us coffee. It is my hope that these trees we planted will reach maturity and one day my child will be able to return to Al-Jib and enjoy their fruits with Hamid and his family. *B'ezrat haShem.*

*Nathan Roller is a student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles and a T'ruah Israel Fellow.*

