

Anyone who knows me for longer than five minutes knows that I'm a passionate environmentalist. When I moved to my woodland home on Schunemunk Mountain, I had no clue that events would lead me to Eitz Chaim's door and back into an exploration of Judaism, which I'd abandoned 35 years earlier.

If a violent individual had not torn limbs from trees and painted swastikas on the rocks in the woods in 2002, I might never have wandered through the doors of Eitz Chaim on a Friday night and met the "Rabbi Who Sings and Dances in a Circle." I didn't know Jews could pray that way. I thought that was only for Native Americans. While the monster responsible for desecrating the woods will never stand trial for his crimes, I have benefited from meeting some extraordinary individuals. It's the behavior of the people at Eitz Chaim that inspires me to seek answers in Halacha to my sincere commitment to protect and restore God's original creation.

Last week I caught another man cutting down trees in my woods. A neighbor had rented his house to this tree cutter, who was determined to continue vandalizing my property. Adding insult to injury, the police department insisted I file a Freedom of Information Request for a copy of the incident report. I may or may not get that police report.

As I wept for the massacred cherry, hawthorn, and viburnum, I also knew that this wasn't about a stubborn man and a dysfunctional criminal justice system. Instead, it was an opportunity to connect my passion with something deeper. My anger and frustration compelled me to take action.

It's an enormous relief and a blessing to feel you're part of a community when you need comfort. I felt as if once again, I had failed to protect the trees that I love. When I emailed Rabbi Kligfeld, [I would have phoned him, but I was sobbing and couldn't speak], he explained that Judaism would say for me to mourn for the lost trees by planting trees to replace them – "to give back to the earth, and to God, what has been taken." He took the time to share a great deal more and to encourage me to write about this experience and my search for guidance through Judaism.

I grew up on a chicken farm in Guilford, CT in the days before the CT Turnpike. There were only 15 Jewish families in town. My childhood memories can't separate Judaism from environmentalism. I recall being 7 or 8-years-old, determined to rescue a baby bunny from one of our cats. My Dad would not let me interfere. He told me that if all the bunnies and mice ever born lived to adulthood, they'd eat all the grain. He said that God meant for there to be balance, prey eats grain, predators eat prey; it's the cycle of life. As I grew older and met urban Jews, Judaism became less relevant. The answers to so many of my questions seemed to be in the spirituality of people I believe God first put in North America.

My Dad has always said that everything happens for the best, even when the event appears to be horrible. Is that Judaism? I don't know. What I do know is that I like to sing and dance in a circle and that I found a place where I feel comfortable being an environmentalist and a Jew.

Judi Murphy

