

UPENDED

As we hiked through the woods and preserves in our region this past summer, my wife developed a fondness for photographing the exposed roots of the many upended trees we discovered.

The appearance, position and angle of each tree and its root system hinted about how it may have been dislocated: a violent storm with its sudden bursts of lightning and gusts of wind, or the erosion of soil along a stream bed that gradually loosened the tree from its seemingly immovable place in the ground. We had little basis for learning about each tree's story, apart from what we observed, though this only deepened our fascination with those masses of tangled roots and rich soil, powerful anchors so easily yanked up from the belly of the earth.

Amazingly, almost none of the upended trees that we came across was dead. Because they had fallen at angles that brought them closer to our line of sight, we could see more distinctly that their leaves were still intact and fresh-green; their trunks and branches lacked the grey-green pallor so common on diseased and dead wood; and their slow decay into humus had not yet set in.

Stopping by trees on those slow, sunny mornings and afternoons, I wondered about the fragility underlying the easy toppling of such sturdy living things; yet I wondered even more about how trees continue to survive, even in such an upended state. The biblical book of Deuteronomy warns invading armies not to wantonly destroy the vulnerable fruit trees they find on the fields of battle: "Are trees of the field human, that they can withdraw before your advances into a besieged city?" Upending, as it were, the arboreal rhetoric of the Bible, as I looked at the roots of those giants, I realized how much, indeed, they are not like us: for all our self-made myths of power and prowess, we are the vulnerable ones, while these trees and their forests possess the real muscle driving nature's continuity.

Trees are also quite different from us because they lack the strange, awful qualities of existential consciousness that dignify and curse human beings. Tree scientists have demonstrated that the global community of trees and other species remarkably communicates on many complex chemical levels about their life cycles and when danger approaches. In some respects, trees are sentient beings. But a tree upended gradually returns to its source in the ground, unfeelingly making room for saplings, unthinkingly enriching the earth with its pungent rot. Trees don't argue about politics, culture, or anguished ethical decisions, neither do they celebrate the growth of new saplings, weep for their dead at funerals, fight, love, hate or reconcile. They likely don't reflect upon the circumstances of their upending or the meaning of their lives when they uproot and come to an end. But we do.

We Americans are being repeatedly, remorselessly upended by toxic shifts of the political, physical and cultural ground under our feet. With an ominous election looming and

irreversible changes in our climate, we are left, wounded, to wonder: how will we survive all of this? Are we human beings trees of the field that we can withdraw from these and other advancing assaults, into the hidden comforts of forests? We conclude achingly that we are not.

Yet here is where the resilient lives and gentle deaths of our wooded friends hold great wisdom for us. As I alluded to before, I am not a big fan of close metaphoric comparisons between the human and arboreal worlds. However, gazing this summer at all those upended, still-living trees, I realized that, in this one way, we are not so different from them. Yes, we are trees' far more vulnerable neighbors in the larger community of nature. Yet, like them, we human beings have suffered traumas swift and slow for millenia, yet we *have* persisted. The history of our people, the Jews, provides a superb example of this singular human resilience, yet it is by no means the only example. Some greater, deeper force drives humanity forward, at times blindly, at other times with dignity and purpose, to live despite death, to build and rebuild in the midst of destruction, to hope, even when surrounded by an endless void of meaning. We do come dangerously close at times to fulfilling species-wide death wishes, as global warming, racial hatred and our self-immolating politics seem to indicate. Yet I continue to have faith that we will nonetheless survive, and perhaps even thrive, if we apply our collective intelligence and decency properly.

The trees teach us every moment: being upended is not the same thing as being uprooted. So long as we persist, life will never cease existing.

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