

ט"ו בשבט ה'תשס"ה Tu B'Shevat 2005



Compiled & Prepared
by
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This compilation and study guide is dedicated to the victims of the Tsunami disaster of December 2004.

The Banyan (Banyan) Tree is typical of the southeastern part of Asia affected by the tsunami, and the tree is greatly revered by the inhabitants.

www.bjesf.org

Tradition and Innovation

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Banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*)

Folk Names: Arched Fig, Banian, Barh, Indian Fig Tree, Indian God Tree, The Many-Footed Banyan, Strangler Fig, Vada Tree, Zeyton Maskhout

Description: The Banyan is a tropical evergreen member of the fig family. The Banyan is native to India, growing to a height of one hundred or so feet. It begins its life as an epiphyte. Seeds dropped by birds sprout and take up residence in other trees. Gathering nourishment and water from the air, eventually the lateral branches send roots down to the ground. These support, then grow into trunks, and develop new branches. In time, the Banyan kills the host tree by strangling it.

Young specimens can be kept in a green house, but they will remain bushy and never fruit. Like most members of the fig family, aerial roots grow down from the spreading branches. These will first absorb moisture from the air until they reach the ground to become new roots and supportive trunks still attached to main plant. A mature Banyan canopy may cover an area more than 1,000 feet in diameter. The stems below the canopy form a kind of columned room. Its original trunk may decay, leaving the younger ones to support the tree. The eight-inch long leathery leaves are ovate and dark green with light green veins. The leaf stalks and young branches are downy. The Banyan produces red, round fruits.

Traditions: The Banyan is revered by Hindus and planted near temples. It is connected with worship of the demi-god trickster Maui in Hawaiian and Polynesian religions.

Three thousand years before Pliny described it to the Roman Empire, this mighty shade tree struck awe in the Aryan nomads sweeping across Asia. Called "The Many-Footed" after the aerial roots pouring from its trunk to form a small forest, the canopy of a single Banyan tree has been known to extend two thousand feet. The Aryan priests linked the Banyan's vitality to a flow of light or to a liquid immortality overflowing onto the earth from the goblets of the gods themselves. Their chiefs drank ritually of its sap, believing it could increase their virility and ensure their hold upon conquered lands.

Tradition: It is said that to sit under or even look at tree brings luck. Marriages performed under the tree bring happiness. The banyan trees in ancient Arabia served as places for holding council and negotiating treaties. This same tree is revered as a tree of justice among many cultures.

Medical Indications: Parts Used: Latex, bark, fruits, leaves, roots and root bark, buds, bark, aerial roots.

The tannins and flavonoids relieve capillary bleeding. The latex has antibacterial effects; excellent for minor cuts and skin diseases like scabies, and the bark is tonic, astringent, and cooling. Young buds and milky juice are also astringent.

Nutrition: The fruit is considered a famine food, not good to eat unless you have nothing else.

Mercantile Uses: Its sap is white and sticky latex. This is used to prepare birdlime, which hunters use in capturing birds. The porous wood also makes excellent tooth brushes. In the past, the straight roots were used to make tent poles.

Marriage of two trees

Sometimes Banyan trees and Peepul trees are planted by the roadside on fallow land. They grow as one tree. The two trunks are joined together, though their leaves, fruits, and color of the branches differ. When they grow sufficiently and are considered to have attained maturity they are married like human beings. Rich people spend lavishly in the performance of this marriage. Poor people also spend their life savings on this occasion. They plant the tree in early life and the marriage is celebrated in their old age. The planter may die prematurely. Then somebody else may come forward to perform the ceremony. People take it to be a pious act. Nobody dares cut a single branch from either of these trees as it amounts to breach of conjugal life and love and is a great sin.

<http://www.angelfire.com/de/poetry/COB/Weekly031203.html>





The Banyan tree



The Tree That Walks

SANTINI GOVINDAN

Of all the different trees growing in India, none perhaps is as respected by people as the great Banyan tree. This wonderful tree, which belongs to the Fig tree family, is a very special tree.

The beginnings of these trees are most unusual. The seeds of the trees are carried by birds and sometimes they drop them on top of tall palm trees. The seeds, nourished by the moisture and warmth within the host tree, quickly sprout and grow small branches. These branches grow long aerial roots that reach downwards eagerly towards the ground. Once these grasping roots reach the ground and get a firm grip in the earth, they enlarge to become strong trunks that wrap themselves firmly around the trunk of the host tree.

Banyan trees like to have lots of space in which to spread themselves out. As the tree grows and matures, new roots grow from all its branches, pushing into the ground and forming new trunks. Thus, a single tree may have dozens of trunks. One of the largest known Banyan trees is in Sri Lanka. It has 350 large trunks, and about 3,000 smaller ones. This one single tree resembles a small forest in itself, and it is impossible to tell which was the original trunk. And the tree is still growing. A magnificent Banyan tree growing at the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta is over a 100 years old, and its trunk is over 13 feet in diameter. Banyan trees may grow up to a hundred feet in height. Their branches, which spread out, are thickly covered with broad, flat leaves that create a majestic and refreshing canopy of green above their trunks. The canopy of a mature Banyan may cover an area of more than 1,000 feet in diameter! A small reddish brown fruit like a fig also grows on the Banyan, but this fruit is not fit for human consumption. Many birds like mynahs, parrots and bulbuls love to feast on it, however, and during the season when the Banyan is full of fruit, it is a very noisy place indeed!

Banyan trees are known as "many footed ones" and "trees that walk," because, unlike other trees that have to stay rooted in one place all their lives, the Banyan tree actually moves forward slowly with every new trunk it puts out. It is always cool and shady under a Banyan tree, and, because of the number of trunks it has, this tree is full of cozy, dark niches and interesting little cubby holes that house a variety of creatures. Squirrels, bats, lizards, mice and rats, snails, snakes, and all kinds of insects make their homes in Banyan trees. Egrets, owls, crows, and a variety of birds nest in the trees, which are also a

favorite with monkeys who love to leap among its many twisting branches. For all these creatures, the noble and hospitable Banyan provides a safe and friendly environment.

Banyan trees are found in almost every village in India, and they are the centre of village life. Since Banyans are believed to be sacred trees, little shrines are usually built under them. Merchants, traders passing by, the village barber, and fortune teller also usually set up shop under the spreading branches of the Banyan, for it is a cool, shady spot with plenty of room for waiting customers. In fact, the Banyan tree gets its name from the Hindi word banian which means "trader."

Village schools often hold classes under Banyan trees, and meetings of the Village Council or Panchayat are also conducted there. During summer, the kind Banyan provides cool and peaceful resting place to villagers seeking to escape the searing heat of the sun. Children especially love the Banyan tree, which is a wonderful tree for climbing and sitting on, with its broad, sturdy branches. Its numerous roots that hang down like thick vines are ideal to use as a swing too.

Banyans flourish in humid, tropical climates, and are found in parts of Africa, in the Hawaiian Islands, and throughout Asia. The city of Fuzhou in China became known as the city of Banyan trees more than 900 years ago, after its Prefect or Mayor ordered people to plant them everywhere.

In Bali in Indonesia, Banyan trees are considered "elders" of the tree kingdom, and are accorded special respect. Motorists will honk if they pass a Banyan tree on the road. This honk is not an impatient one - rather it is a polite greeting to the tree. There is an enormous Banyan tree on Maui in Hawaii. This magnificent tree was brought from India in 1873, when it was only eight feet tall and had one trunk. Now, this tree is over 50 feet tall, has 12 major trunks, and covers 2/3 of an acre. During weekends, local artists display their paintings under the tree. The Banyan tree grows throughout Cambodia, and is found embedded with the stones of the ancient temples of Angkor. Cambodians believe that their history is rather like that of the Banyan tree - made up of a thousand branches intertwined together, merging the past and present, yet forever changing and growing.

The Banyan tree has always been venerated and honored by humans, and perhaps this is because it has all the qualities we all so cherish - longevity, serenity, wisdom and resilience.

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/10/13/stories/13131101.htm>

More about the Banyan:

<http://www.the-tree.org.uk/Sacred%20Grove/Buddhism/bodhi5.htm>

STUDY GUIDE

1. Locate on the map the path of the December 2004 Tsunami that hit South-East Asia and East Africa.
2. How many people are estimated to populate these regions?
3. How many have been estimated to perish in this natural disaster?
4. What are the sources of income sources in these regions?
5. Present a story of an individual affected by the tragedy. Use an Internet search engine, newspaper, magazine, etc.
6. Why is the Banyan tree considered to be so special?
7. List the different ways people benefit from this tree.
8. Would you choose the Banyan tree to symbolize the Tree of Life? Please explain your answer.
9. Choose a tree from your own surroundings to symbolize your region. Please explain your choice.
10. What tree will you choose to symbolize the Tree of Life? Why? (You may choose an imaginary tree. In this case – please create an art project depicting your tree.)
11. Compose a short story involving the tree of your choice (the one you chose to symbolize your area or the one you chose to symbolize the Tree of Life).
12. Compose a short story linking *Your* tree of choice with the Banyan tree.
13. Art: Create a picture or a comic strip to tell your story.
14. What can you do to help the tsunami victims?
15. Please use an Internet search engine to look for Jewish and non-Jewish relief organizations. Which organization/s would you choose? Why?

Some Helpful Sites:

<http://www.ajc.org/>

<http://www.ajws.org/>

<http://www.jdc.org>

<http://www.sfjcf.org/whoweare/news/2005/tsunami-fed-0107.shtml>

<http://www.ujc.org/>

http://www.jewishreview.org/tsunami_aid.htm

<http://www.worldjewishaid.org/>

<http://www.jewishthailand.com/>

<http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/asiapcf/12/28/tsunami.aidsites/>

http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/tsunami/ngolist.html

<http://www.zakausa.org>

<http://secure.jesna.org/j/tsunami.asp>

