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## Redwood Rabbis

by Seth Zuckerman

It was a ritual at once traditional and radical that drew 250 people to an ancient redwood grove ten miles from Northern California's Headwaters Forest on a stormy January day in 1997. Between rain squalls they were celebrating Tu B'shevat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees. But this ceremony was not just about spiritual connection with the plant kingdom, and included more than the usual ritual meal of fruits, nuts, and wine. The forestry chair of the local Sierra Club chapter gave an overview of the threat posed to the old-growth redwood forests by the Houston-based Maxxam Corporation. Another worshipper chanted the haunting Kaddish, or mourner's prayer, in memory of creatures displaced or killed by logging.

Most radical of all, the ceremony set the stage for an act of civil disobedience: the planting of redwood seedlings on an eroding stream bank on Maxxam property to symbolize hope for the restoration of land already clearcut and creeks stripped of their tree cover. Maxxam had refused permission to plant, but the worshippers vowed they would break the law and trespass, seedlings and shovels in hand.

The religious action was part of a larger campaign to invoke Jewish traditions in defense of Headwaters Forest, the largest tract of unprotected ancient redwoods in the world, acquired by Maxxam in a hostile takeover of Pacific Lumber Company in 1986. Because Maxxam CEO Charles Hurwitz is a leading member of Houston's Jewish community, organizers have been seeking to appeal to him by contrasting his actions with Jewish teaching. They're also working to build a strong Jewish constituency for the protection of old-growth redwoods and other ecosystems, a campaign that's part of a nationwide interfaith effort to apply spiritual principles in environmental battles.

Such applications are hardly new—the Book of Deuteronomy, for example, prohibited the Israelites from destroying the fruit trees of cities they besieged. Activists tapped this tradition in 1995 by sending a letter to Hurwitz just before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when observant Jews reflect on their actions of the preceding year. A small congregation in northwestern California, B'nai Ha-Aretz (Children of the Earth), wrote to Maxxam's CEO urging him to repent his destruction of the forest. The lead author, student rabbi Naomi Steinberg, explains: "Repentance isn't a private, ascetic process. Judaism is a very communal religion, and part of our duty as Jews is to help each other to repent."

The invocation of Jewish values may have touched a nerve at the top of Maxxam. At an interfaith press conference on Headwaters in the spring of 1996 in nearby Eureka, Rabbi Lester Scharnberg wondered aloud whether "perhaps Mr. Hurwitz has forgotten the faith of his ancestors." Scharnberg's remarks, carried on the wire services and picked up by the Houston press, drew a stinging phone call from Hurwitz's rabbi, Samuel Karff, who disputed whether this member of his congregation deserved rebuke. Karff defended Hurwitz as a charitable man; the Hurwitz family has donated heavily to Karff's Temple Beth Israel, and the synagogue's school is housed in the Hurwitz Building. Despite their disagreement, Karff arranged for Scharnberg to speak with Hurwitz directly.

In the 45-minute conversation that ensued, Hurwitz was taken aback to find a rabbi on the other side of the Headwaters battle, recalls Scharnberg. "He didn't know me, but he has an image of what a rabbi is," Scharnberg says, "and he expressed surprise that I was aligned with 'conga drums, dreadlocks, tie-dye, and

hippie radicals who threaten to kill, maim,' and so forth. I said, 'I'm not aligning myself with people who kill, but I am an environmentalist.' "

Scharnberg didn't have an opportunity to confront Hurwitz again until the May 1998 Maxxam stockholders meeting, armed with a proxy signed over to him by another Headwaters activist. Christian and secular speakers addressed issues of science, economics, and corporate responsibility, and left religion up to Scharnberg. That was probably a wise call given that the roster of Maxxam's officers and board members has a substantial Jewish representation.

Scharnberg asked the board if Maxxam had considered moral questions in the course of its operations, and if not, how the firm could hope to act ethically. The very question provoked a firestorm of response that continued after the 90-minute official meeting. "The directors of Maxxam were outraged that we should introduce religion into this board meeting," Scharnberg says. In fact, when the rabbi tried to talk with Hurwitz afterward, the CEO directed him to board member Ezra Levin, who began debating Scharnberg in a conversation peppered with Hebrew and Aramaic. "I finally said, 'You and I could go on all day like this. You quote your Talmud passage and I quote mine. Both of us know there's no environmental mandate there. But nowhere in the entire Torah does it forbid rape, and that doesn't make it right. There's nothing in there that forbids slavery, and that doesn't make it right either.' "

Hurwitz, Levin, and Scharnberg left the Houston hotel in a theological stalemate, but the case is being pressed in many other forums. Last summer, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life which claims such prominent member groups as Hadassah, Hillel, B'nai Brith, and the American Jewish Congress called for stronger habitat protections in Headwaters and in all remaining old-growth redwood groves. Several other major Jewish organizations have adopted or are considering similar resolutions. And on Hurwitz's home turf, a group of Houston Jews rented the Jewish Community Center for another ecologically oriented Tu B'shevat. Maxxam reps called officials at the center alleging that the ritual would be "political" and that "activists would be stapling themselves to trees," says organizer Annette Lamoreaux. But the event went on without incident.

Back in the redwoods in January 1997, a caravan of 100 worshippers some wearing talliths, or fringed prayer shawls, as Jews have for thousands of years hiked onto the timber firm's property and planted two dozen redwood seedlings along a barren stream bank. Some used shovels, some trowels, some their bare hands. Longtime Earth First! activist Darryl Cherny described it as a miracle. "At a place where demonstrators before have been met with billy clubs, nightsticks, and arrests, we are now walking freely," he said. "It reminds me of the parting of the Red Sea."

Nearly two years have passed and student rabbi Steinberg who lives just a few miles away hasn't revisited the site. "I'd rather remember the trees beautifully planted than to see that Pacific Lumber has pulled them up or that the whole bank has fallen away," she says.

At presstime, the fate of Headwaters Forest was hinging on Governor Pete Wilson's approval of controversial plans for Maxxam to sell 9,500 acres of key old growth to the public while agreeing not to log ten other old-growth groves for the next 50 years. Maxxam stands to gain \$480 million from the sale and would be allowed to log on most of its remaining 200,000 acres. The proposed safeguards for coho salmon in this huge remaining tract, though improved over earlier drafts, are still inadequate, says the Sierra Club.

Steinberg reminds activists to look at the big picture. "If you approach a campaign like this as spiritual work, the moments along the way can be transformative to you as an individual soul." It's that transformation of souls that will determine whether "the forest trees shout for joy," as the Psalmist sang.

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Seth Zuckerman's most recent article for *Sierra* was on wood certification. about North America's coastal temperate rainforest.