

Tales of an Ancient Whisperer (2018)

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Article abstract

In the fall of 2017, I found a series of books with the title *Lands and Peoples* at the University of Toronto Swap Shop. I went through the illustrations in the books and stared at the images featuring palm trees for longer than I would usually spend on any image.

After that, I started to notice the consistent presence of the palm in different contexts. It was “the image” of the date palm that became the centre of my attention and that triggered memories of my personal encounters with the date palm and its fruit.

Flashback to my grandfather’s burial and every funeral I have ever been to in Iran...

Memories! Not only of my own, but collective memories. I remembered many stories that directly involved dates. There were flashbacks perhaps shaped by my personal memories, those of others, and from the media. I was unable to tell them apart; deep-seeded roots of history.

During the winter of 2017, I gathered as much information as I possibly could about the date palm. In early spring of 2018, I bought a box of “Oriental Dates” from an Iranian market in North York, Ontario. I planted the “Oriental Date” seeds and they germinated within three weeks. A month after that, the first seed sprouted. A thousand different possibilities were shaped...

Tales of an Ancient Whisperer

Sahar Te

“Honour the date palm, for it is the brother of your father. It is taken from the earth that remained after Man was created. The date palm resembles Man: it is tall and upright, it is male and female. He that cuts off the head of the date palm, shall die; he that wounds its heart, shall himself wither. If its offshoots are cut away, no others will come forth in their place. So, too, the hands of a man do not grow again if they are cut off. The date palm is covered with fibres, like human hair. Is not Man then just like the date palm?”¹

Carefully arranged trays of dates for serving the mourners... Quran recitals in the air. Cold body wrapped in white cloth. We only followed, never asked. It would be rude to question.

Serving dates is a traditional gesture of Middle Eastern hospitality. When someone dies in Iran, dates are served at the funeral to help maintain one's blood sugar and to prevent fainting in grief. Imagine if each tiny pit was thrown into a grave; the graveyard would turn into a palm grove, filled with infertile trees.



¹ Words attributed to Prophet Muhammad. See Asaph Goor, “The History of the Date through the Ages in the Holy Land,” *Economic Botany*, vol. 21,

Wikihow says: “Soak the pits in fresh water for 48 hours. Fold 2 seeds into a damp piece of paper towel. Place both the seeds and paper towel into a plastic bag and seal it. Store the bag in a warm, dark place for 6–8 weeks.”

Phoenix dactylifera is the botanical name for the date palm, the flowering plant species in the palm family (*Arecaceae*), cultivated for its sweet fruit. *Dactylifera* (species) is Greek for “date-bearing.”

Phoenicia was an ancient civilization that originated in what is now Lebanon, west of the Fertile Crescent. The ancient Greeks and Romans called this northern stretch of Palestine *Phoenicia*, or “Land of the Date.”

Originally thought to be a Greek construct, Herodotus claimed that ancient Egyptians also had a sacred bird called the “Phoenix.” While according to Philostratus, it is a bird of India! She rises from the ashes and lives again, or another bird rises from her ashes and lives. Was the bird named after the tree, or the tree after the date?

Date palms originate in that region, and fossils found in Israel trace back as far as 50 million years ago. The history of date cultivation is as old as written history. While the source of the cultivated date is still unknown, some evidence points to Northeast Africa and Asia—in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, and India, with its epicentre in the Persian Gulf.



The palm tree is a symbol in many cultures:

The god *Ishtar* in Assyrian culture

For *Truth* in ancient Egypt

The *Tree of Life* in Judaism and ancient Assyrian culture

The *Perfect Man* in Islam

Victory for the Romans

Rest and *Hospitality* in Middle Eastern cultures

Life for early Egyptians

A paradox of *Peace* and *Victory* in Christianity. Victory over the conflict between Dualities, and victory over death as well.

Temples were immortalized by the palm leaves. For the Jews, it was a token of sanctity. They decorated booths at the Feast of Tabernacles with palm leaves. A Midrash,² Tanchuma Emor, suggests that the palm was chosen for its likeness to man's spine, the myrtle for its likeness to the human eye, the willow for resembling the mouth, and the citron for being heart-shaped.

Judea was known for its fresh, sweet dates. Greek and Roman conquerors praised the dates found in the Holy Land. They found the Israeli date to be the finest in the Middle East. Date-growers of the old world realized that pollen from certain male palms were incompatible with specific female dates. "There was a palm tree in Hamathan which bore no fruit. A skilled date-grower went by and saw it. 'This tree,' he said, 'is yearning for the pollen of Jericho.' When they pollinated it with such flowers it fruited."³ Further passages elaborate on the tale; how no local pollen helped, how a passing expert claimed that the tree longed in its heart for Jericho (pollen), and how the valley pollen instantaneously cured it.⁴



My grandfather, Tehran

"In Saudi Arabia, in the city of Medina, in the heart of Sunni Islam, there is a huge *nakhlestan*,⁵ where popular and high-quality dates are grown. The female palms are not pollinated, unless by the hands of *Sadaat-e-Nokhaveleh*."⁶

While there is no information about the Nokhaveleh family in English, I unearthed a fragment from a Persian website. The surname *Nokhaveleh* comes from the word *nakhl*, which is the Arabic term for "date palm." The bloodline of which I speak can

² Ancient Judaic authorities used Midrash; a specific mode of Biblical interpretation prominent in the Talmud (learning).

³ See Asaph Goor. "The History of the Date through the Ages in the Holy Land." *Economic Botany* 21, no. 4, 1967, p. 320–340,

www.jstor.org/stable/4252895, (accessed 14 July 2020).

⁴ Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah, 3, 1, etc.

⁵ Palm grove.

⁶ A Shiite family, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

be thought of as a large family whose ancestors were servants of the Prophet Mohammad's family and his descendants; they were working-class Shiites running the valuable date palm gardens of Medina.

In the Muslim tradition, some believe that the date palm is created from the dust that remained after the creation of Adam. Some Arabic cultures call it the "Tree of Life." The "Hayani" variety, which is derived from the word "life," is indeed believed to be life-giving. Childless Arab women swallow "Hayanis" to cure infertility. It is also recommended to consume the pollen from the male date palm to cure the same ailment.

Hayani

These famously soft, dark red dates originally come from Egypt and are grown there and in Sinai.



18th century, Jordan Valley

All the groves have vanished. Gaza and Khan Yunis were the only areas left for cultivation. Historians and travelers in the mid-1800s were searching for date palms mentioned in the Bible and in ancient historical books. They found none.

1833, Jericho

Barren lands; a single palm in the middle of nowhere...

1966, Israel

During the excavations of Herod's palace in Masada, archeologists found large storage rooms for food and the best water systems ever discovered in the Roman Empire. There was a cache of date seeds at the bottom of a jar. Radiocarbon dating at the University of Zurich confirmed that the seeds are dated between 155 BC and 64 AD.

37 BCE, Jericho

The son of an Arab diplomat from the desert and a princess from Petra (now known as Jordan), became the rulers of Judea. A third-generation Jew, Herod the Great, was not Jewish by blood; he was Jewish as a result of his grandfathers' conversion. Judea became a Roman client state, and this marked the end of the Hasmonean dynasty, a powerful religious Jewish family that ruled Judea.

According to the Bible, only a Jew can be king.

Masada

Built on a mountain in the middle of the desert, there is a fortress that towers a thousand feet above the Judean desert. Terrified of Jewish rebels, who never accepted him as ruler, Herod built an

unassailable fortress. He built a refuge for himself in the event of revolt.

66 AD

The Sicarii,⁷ later joined by Jewish families who were expelled from Jerusalem by the Romans during the destruction of the Second Temple, took over Herod's fortress in Masada. On the desert floor around the mountain of Masada, Romans have built a wall that surrounded the entire mountain. No one could escape...

Spring of 73 AD

Dead bodies scattered over Masada. The 960 zealots, trapped in their fortress, chose death over surrender, setting fire to every building in a mass suicide. "Wheat in plenty was laid up, ample for the needs of the beleaguered for a long time, and wine and oil in abundance, as well, all sorts of pulses and dates heaped up together."⁸

According to Jewish law it is forbidden to commit suicide. Josephus wrote that the men then drew lots, choosing ten of their number to kill all the others. The ten then drew lots and selected one to kill the other nine. He then killed himself, thereby becoming the only person to commit suicide.⁹

On the west side of the Dead Sea is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all the other tribes in the whole world as it has no women...

⁷ A group of Jewish zealots who opposed the Roman occupation of Judea.

⁸ The logistical Josephus adds, in Book VII, VIII, concerning Masada, that "the Jews used to keep emergency rations in their fortresses. Dates were stored for long periods and were most nutritious: remarkable were the great quantities of foodstuffs stockpiled in the strongholds and stored for many a day."

has no money and has only palm-trees for company...¹⁰

The Biblical dates faced extinction due to neglect and inattention. Romans believed that Jews had the best dates!

Israel's commercial dates come from the Gulf or from Morocco. Medjool and Deglet Noor were imported to Israel through California. 75% of the world's Medjool dates come from Israel. Not native to that land, they are imported from California, while originally grown in Morocco.

A seed does not germinate until it dies. For it to die, it has to dry. If the seed touches something unclean, it remains clean, since it is dead in itself. It holds silent information until water touches it. Life forms...

Then, if a dead body touches it, it becomes unclean.

⁹ This version of the story about the Siege of Masada told by Josephus is questioned by historians and they believe it could be mixed with the occurrences of another event that Josephus witnessed himself. In that event, it is said that *ten men killed the others, and then one man killed the rest.*

¹⁰ Pliny, *Natural History II*, trans. by H. Rackham, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1942, p. 277.



Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan

The seeds found in Masada excavations were held in storage for forty years. In 2005, Dr. Elaine Solowey sprouted the 2,000-year-old date seed. The palm was planted in the Arabah and was named *Methuselah* after the longest-lived person in the Bible.

The date palm will reach puberty at age sixteen and therein become an active pollinator. They fall in love with one another, lose teeth when reaching those elderly years, and produce no coal when burnt. They dry if the head gets hurt while moving and will drown to death if water passes their head or they become submerged for any length of time.

June 2008

Methuselah reaches 1.5 meters tall.

March 2011

Methuselah flowers and is discovered to be male.

November 2011

Methuselah reaches 2.5 meters tall and is transplanted from pot to earth.

May 2015

Methuselah reaches 3 meters tall and produces pollen. He can successfully pollinate female date palms. The closest date palm to him would be his extant relative from the Old World, the Hayani date, from Egypt. Additional Judean date palms have been grown and are female. The possibility of pollinating a Judean female is now greater, but is it more "pure"?

Methuselah was genetically compared with three other cultivars of date palm. His DNA shows that he is closely related to the old Egyptian variety Hayani, with 16% of his DNA identified as an Iraqi cultivar and 19% unknown.

Does Methuselah remember?

Scientists have long assumed that collective memories and experiences build up throughout one's lifetime and must be passed on by teaching future generations, or through personal experience. New research shows that it is possible for some information to be inherited biologically through chemical changes that occur during the reproduction of DNA.

If you eat a date, the seed carries your DNA. If a tree grows, it might whisper back.

Ancient Egyptians thought that it was the male species that fruited and the female that provided the pollen. Today, it is thought that pollination is carried through the wind alone.

Coachella Valley, California, early 20th century

"Date capital of the world!" American agriculturists brought date shoots back from Middle Eastern countries like Algeria and Egypt and found the desert's soil and climate to be the most optimal and nurturing for date palms. More than 100 years later, date cultivation is a multimillion-dollar industry. Towns were given names like *Mecca* and *Oasis*, and businesses took on Arabian themes.

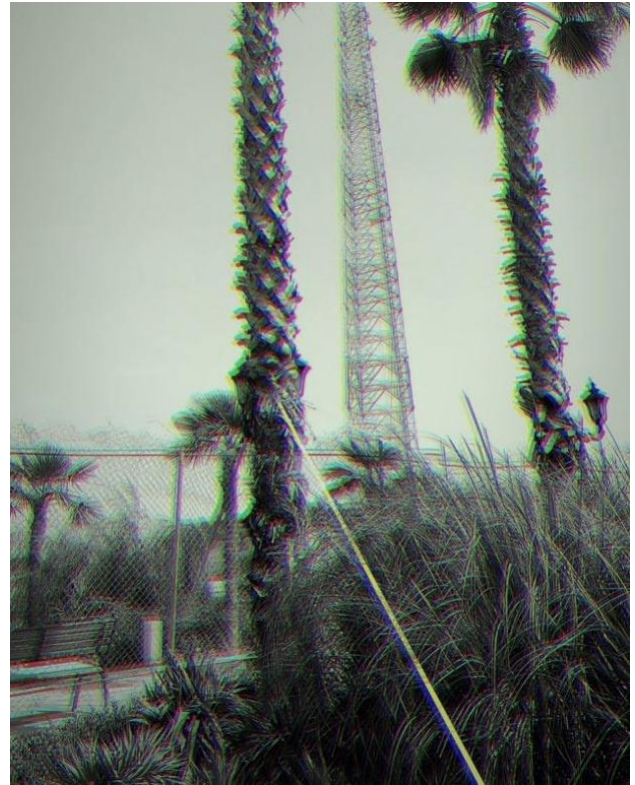
Coachella Valley High School's mascot was named "Arabs" and has since changed to the "Mighty Arab." The school's population is 90% Hispanic. Today's date festival, now called the *Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival*, features an Arabian Nights Musical Pageant, which includes a meet-and-greet with Queen Scheherazade, the annual winner of the Scheherazade Scholarship.

Διασπορά

A Greek word that translates to the "scattering of the seeds." A diaspore, in botanical terms, is a dispersal unit which consists of a seed or pores, and additional tissues that help the dispersal. Weedy or ruderal species are the more diasporic types. Any diaspore, seed, or spore that is modified for migration is called a disseminule.

Ants are seed dispersal insects that carry the diaspores for their nests. They eat the elaisome and discard the seed, which can then germinate.

Fruit-eating bats, birds, and wind are the more common vehicles of dispersal.



Methuselah,

The whispers of remembrance are human follies, not those of palms that offer some counter-narrative. As Milan Kundera said, "we have forgotten because those in power have willed our oblivion by altering recorded history, by erasing traces." We have forgotten.

Do you remember?