

*Two Stories from  
Weelaunee Forest*



*One Rabbi's  
Purim in  
the Forest*

&

**WE ARE  
NOT IN  
THE LEAST  
AFRAID  
OF RUINS**



# *One Rabbi's Purim in the Forest*

by Nate DeGroot

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*Food Autonomy in the Weelaunee Forest*

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“Willow trees grow relatively quickly and propagate easily, so they’re good for holding the soil in the short term,” an attendee told ACPC. Another attendee stated that there are also plans to plant oak trees in the clearings.

As forest defenders poured in and out of the forest for a clean-up event, a booth hosting a herbal medicine workshop was set up in the parking lot. The person standing behind it happily answered questions about different ailments affecting forest defenders, as well as different herbal approaches to treating them. Young children stood behind the booth, too, showing off the herb identification booklets they made earlier in the day.

As the sun set, the remaining attendees gathered around the fire in the parking lot for a closing discussion.

With the end of the Food Autonomy Festival came the end, too, of 10 days of mass mobilization in the forest. As the movement grows and mobilizes new kinds of engagement, more possibilities open up for the Weelaunee Forest and those who choose to protect it. Alongside the student organizations, faith leaders, and Black-led organizations catalyzed by the movement, an assortment of farmers and botanists across the continent now have multiple-year investments planted in the forest along with a combative vision to foster them.

Two years into the movement to Stop Cop City, the Atlanta Police Foundation’s vision of a future wrought with violence and ecological destruction continues to be challenged. People from disparate backgrounds have come together to halt the destruction of the forest utilizing a myriad of different tactics, but all contributing to the creation of a free Weelaunee Forest.

## *"We are not in the least afraid of ruins"*

On December 12, 2022 Shadowbox (previously Blackhall) Studios founder Ryan Millsap entered Weelaunee People's Park and began clearing large swaths of trees. Plaintiffs in an ongoing legal battle against Blackhall, known as the "Stop the Swap" lawsuit, filed an emergency motion to stop the clearing. In Blackhall's memorandum of opposition to the motion, the company states that it was clearing undergrowth and trees at the request of the GBI and Dekalb SWAT to inhibit the ability of "anarchists" to traverse the forest under the cover of its canopy.

On Monday, March 13th, the last day of the Food Autonomy Festival, dozens of participants planted willow and long leaf pine trees throughout these clearings.



*Participants in the first annual Weelaunee Food Autonomy Festival plant fruit and nut tree saplings in Weelaunee Forest.*

## ***One Rabbi's Purim in the Forest***

by Nate DeGroot

### *Getting to Know the Forest*

Walking into Atlanta's Weelaunee Forest last Monday night to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Purim, I was nervous in a way that I hadn't been just one day before.

I arrived in Atlanta on Sunday morning, on a solidarity trip to support the forest protectors at Weelaunee Forest. In my role as rabbi and as a staff member of The Shalom Center, I followed the story of "Cop City" for months, wrote about the issue from a Jewish perspective, and supported some of the local Jewish and interfaith clergy organizing from afar. I was now responding to local organizers who put out an invitation for folks from all across the country and world to come to Atlanta for the latest Week of Action.

I knew that being in the forest carried risk. I knew the name Tortuguita – may their memory be for a blessing. I had studied pictures of their smiling face. And like the rest of the world, I sorrowfully knew their tragic fate. I knew that domestic terrorism charges had been levied against forest protectors who had been arrested in previous police raids. And so I was

aware that just by being present amongst these particular trees – which are slated for destruction so that one of the largest militarized police training facilities in the country can be built in a predominantly Black neighborhood, against the will of the people, on top of one of the country’s largest urban forests, which is both an invaluable ecological refuge and resource – I was taking a risk.

But I also knew that previous Weeks of Action had not seen police raids. That there was safety in numbers. And if there was going to be police presence, I figured it would at least come later in the week and not at the beginning.

But none of that was true.

When I first arrived at Weelaunee People’s Park – the name of the parking lot at the entrance to the forest – the place was buzzing. It was just after noon on Sunday, the Week of Action’s second day. The sun was shining. The gravel lot was full of cars and people. There were friendly greeters welcoming me and the dozens of other people arriving for the first time, offering us informational packets, words of orientation, and helpful tips. There were makeshift memorials and hand painted signs. Port-a-potties with foot pump sinks and a lost-and-found area. Up and down the main path into the forest, people were strolling, congregating, and generally enjoying themselves. Some newcomers had large backpacks slung over their shoulders like me, while others, who had already set up their camps, were dressed casually. It was clear this was a well loved and well traveled place.

Over the course of the next several hours, I would get to know, however briefly, the forest and the culture within it. I set up camp next to someone I had only just met and we got the last of the home cooked food – a delicious vegetable curry – that was available for all to enjoy. Getting up from the fallen tree that we sat on to eat, we washed our own dishes in the three-bin system that had been set up. We wandered the woods and

the modernization of the country changed peasants’ relationship to land and the form that these struggles took.

Under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico underwent massive economic restructuring, favoring foreign investment and land reform that served the interests of large estates and private ownership. Land that was held collectively during pre-colonization and early colonization was parceled, then sold or transferred to private owners. Hundreds of thousands of peasants were dispossessed of their land and subsequently their means of subsistence. The economic policies of the Porfiriato and the centralized political apparatus that enforced them contributed to major technical developments in extractive sectors such as mining, industrial agriculture, and railroad infrastructure. This process created widespread wealth inequality and the political crisis that resulted in the Mexican Revolution.

The speaker moved into a discussion of chinampa, a method of farming common among indigenous communities in Mexico that uses hyper fertile parcels of mud along waterways to grow crops. The presenter spent 9 months living on the periphery of Mexico City with the Organización Popular Francisco Villa de Izquierda Independiente, or simply, the “Panchos,” where he learned about these practices. He walked the crowd through the Panchos’ organizational framework. Since their founding in 1989, the Panchos have elaborated a communal form of life focused on the emancipation of everyday life.

The Panchos take over vast swaths of vacant land and organize themselves to address their needs directly, without state mediation and with minimal reliance on the capitalist economy. The presenter closed with a discussion of consumer cooperatives in Mexico City, the possibilities they can offer to an autonomous vision of life, and their reproducibility in the United States.

example of the local, open-air market system in Mexico City, which is decentralized and informal, to create a shared sense of what greater food autonomy could look like in the U.S. He contrasted the markets of Mexico City, and their relative autonomy, with the high degree of centralization and consolidation characteristic of food systems in the U.S.

Bridging urban food autonomy in Mexico to a long tradition of Mexican and indigenous social movements, the speaker asked the crowd if anyone knew any figures from Mexican revolutionary history. The crowd shouted “the Zapatistas!” and “Flores Magon!” The talk proceeded with a brief history of land and subsistence struggles in Mexico and the ways in which



*Food Autonomy Festival participants hosted workshops in the “Living Room” of the Weelaunee Forest, where many also camped alongside attendees of the fifth Week of Action to Stop Cop City.*

admired the beauty. Took in with reverence all the care and concern and moral conviction that the ground and its trails had soaked up over the last year and the many millennia before that, from the Muscogee people who originally inhabited the land, to the enslaved people who had been held on the land when it was a plantation, to the incarcerated people who were forced to work this land when it was the Old Atlanta Prison Farm throughout much of the last century. Over my shoulder I overheard the introduction to an ecological forest and tree tour that was being offered and nearly cried when the leader reminded the group that the physical trunks and branches and roots of the trees that surrounded us were literally made of the carbon exhaled from the mouths of all the humans and more than human life that had ever spent time in that forest. This is where, one night later, I would be celebrating Purim.

Meandering up the winding hill some time later, I made my way to an open field, the site of the South River Music Festival, one of the draws of the first weekend of the Week of Action. Two days of local acts playing in front of an eager crowd of concertgoers. Opposite the stage, at the far end of the field, was a large bouncy house. Lining one side of the field’s perimeter were refreshment booths and on the other, information booths. In between was a mix of short grass and dirt, with a few hundred people atop it, all dancing or sitting on picnic blankets or playing soccer or frisbee or cuddling their dogs. This is where, just a few hours later, I would come face to face with dozens of cops pointing massive guns at me and the people I was standing with.

## *They’re Coming This Way*

Around dinner time, back at my campsite, someone hurried by me and whispered in a hushed voice:

“Did you hear?”

“Did I hear what?”

“Cops are in the forest. They’re coming this way.”

That was very unfortunate, I thought. I didn’t want to panic, as I didn’t know if the warning was true. And even if it was, I wasn’t exactly sure what to do next. I knew the prevailing wisdom was to stay together in large groups. And not knowing the land intimately, I didn’t think running through the woods in the dark on my own would be my best option. So I finished my dinner and packed up all my belongings into my backpack, save for my tent, which I left staked in the ground. By that time, it was clear that cops were on their way. I could see spotlights in the distance. Helicopters hovered loudly overhead. I turned to the new friend whose tent was next to mine, and we made our way together back up the hill to the music festival, where at least a hundred people were still gathered, listening to music that was still being played over the speakers, except now perhaps with a deepened sense of purpose.

Over the next couple of hours, police vehicles with flashing green lights made their way to the far edge of the field. They would remain there for a couple of minutes. The crowd would take a deep breath. The music wouldn’t stop. And then the lights and the vehicles on which they were mounted would drive away to the cheers of the crowd. After maybe four or five rounds of this, word spread throughout the crowd that if and when the police came with intent to arrest, that we would link arms and shout, “Let us go! Let us go!” There were elders and children in the crowd. Nobody there was seeking out arrest. What we wanted was to be let go.

When the cops eventually arrived, they arrived with force. Dozens of police officers in SWAT gear with military grade weapons and armored vehicles at their rear. They tore down the bounce house. They assembled in



*Organizers and attendees of the Weelaunee Food Autonomy Festival brought hundreds of saplings to plant in the forest and distribute throughout the city and beyond.*

## *No Cop City Anywhere, Food Autonomy Everywhere*

By Sunday evening, participants could be found eating Jamaican curry together in the lawn of the Weelaunee Forest parking lot while listening to a talk on urban food autonomy in Mexico. The presentor drew on the



dug small holes for the trees' roots and then nestled hundreds of saplings into the soil.

Foraging and mycology tours gave attendees a better sense of the ecology of the forest, from the mycelia that sprawl under the forest floor to the edible fruits and leaves that grow in shrubs and trees. At night, attendees could be found sitting around bonfires alongside forest defenders. The festival followed a loose schedule of practical workshops in the morning and afternoon, with more conceptual and historical discussions in the evening.

On Sunday, March 11th, dozens of people gathered around a table in the "Living Room," an area of the forest near the bike path's 12-mile marker that is known as a casual gathering space, for a tree grafting workshop. The Weelaunee Forest has an abundance of Bradford pear trees, native to East Asia and introduced in the U.S. in the early 20th century. Bradford pears thrive in many soil conditions and are well adapted to harsh droughts. Because of their tenacity and rapid growth, they tend to disrupt local ecosystems.

"Sticks," the organizer of the grafting workshop, explained the circulatory function of trees, the tools used for grafting, and the whip-and-tongue grafting process as they stitched together two pieces of privet as a demonstration. Edible pear tree scions were handed out as the group marched deep into the forest to graft the scions onto Bradford pear trees. As people practiced grafting, some trying their hand at it for the first time, Sticks walked around and observed the participants' methods, ensuring good cambium contact, proper cuts, and adequate sealing measures.

If the grafting is successful, hundreds of yoinashi, shinseiki, moonglow, and ayers pears will hang from the branches of the forest's Bradford pear trees in the years to come.

"It's like creating chimera," one attendee noted.

a line – or maybe multiple lines – facing a crowd of peaceful music listeners, shields drawn against us, lights trained on us making it hard to see, guns aimed at us. We were not armed. Rather, we were standing arm in arm, as we had planned, simply asking to be let go.

After an odd negotiation – where five random representatives from the group of concert goers were asked to approach the police to discuss the situation – we were told that we could walk to our cars and go home or be charged with domestic terrorism. I hadn't driven there, but I was lucky enough to find someone who had two extra spaces in their car and quickly jumped to secure me and my buddy a seat. The police promised we would not be arrested and, leaving as soon as we could, we were not.

Other forest protectors weren't so lucky. 35 were detained that night, including two legal observers. 23 were arrested and charged with domestic terrorism. Reports also say that police tased concert-goers and tackled people to the ground. One cop reportedly kept a concert-goer in a chokehold while the person being detained shouted that they could not breathe. Another eyewitness reported that a police officer threatened to kill a forest protector with lethal force. It was reported that tear gas and pepper balls were used on people during arrests.

Thankfully I got out ok and made it safely to a friend's house to stay the night. The image of the cops lined up with guns pointed at me and the rest of the people there also stayed with me through the night.

## *Magic in that Forest*

At sundown on Monday night, the Jewish holiday of Purim began. At its core, Purim is a story about standing up to state power and repression. It's a story about the underdog, in this case, the Jewish people, overcoming

long odds and turning violent and regressive power structures that seek to destroy the Jews on their head. Specifically, Purim re-tells the story of Esther in ancient Persia, who, along with her uncle Mordechai, upend a sinister plot by the political and military elite to carry out a genocide on the Jewish people. In the end, Esther and Mordechai help ensure the plot is foiled, the Jews get to defend themselves, they survive, and the primary villain is slain. Since ancient times, Jews celebrate this holiday with bombastic revelry and great joy.

Leading up to the holiday, a group of Jewish forest protectors had been planning to host a communal celebration in the forest. I was excited to be part of that group. All day Monday, we debated whether to go ahead with the gathering in the forest or, given what had happened the night before, to host it in a less risky location. Did people want to open themselves up to the possibility of being arrested with charges of domestic terrorism – or worse? Or would they rather have it in a safer location?

While there certainly was a desire for as many people as possible to comfortably participate, the overriding goal seemed to be to specifically celebrate the holiday in the forest. The forest, after all, is viewed by protectors as public land and land that should be accessible to all. Gathering for sacred ceremony, joyous celebration, and communal observance of a significant religious holiday is exactly what the forest should be used for. And doing so, despite the state's attempts to block the community from utilizing the land, is an important form of normalizing Weelaunee Forest as being for the people. Purim was going to happen in the forest.

A friend dropped me off at dusk so that I could attend. As we pulled into Weelaunee People's Park, I could feel my body start to tense. When we parked, I had the proverbial pit in my stomach. Equal parts excitement, conviction, and fear. The parking lot was far more sparse that night than it had been the day before. Instead of close to a hundred or more people

weekend. The Week of Action thus created a space in which the festival — complete with workshops, skillshares, and theoretical discussions — could take place with broad and vibrant participation.



*A banner for the Weelaunee Food Autonomy Festival hangs from a pavilion that forest defenders built in the parking lot of Weelaunee People's Park. It is accompanied by another banner that declares "We are not in the least afraid of ruins," a quote from Buenaventura Durruti.*

## Creating Chimera

On the first day of the Food Autonomy Festival, festival organizers and participants hiked into a relatively sparse area of the forest where conditions are suitable for planting fig, persimmon, and pawpaw saplings. They collectively

# **WE ARE NOT IN THE LEAST AFRAID OF RUINS**

## *Food Autonomy in the Weelaunee Forest*

On Friday March 10th, the first annual Weelaunee Food Autonomy Festival began in the Weelaunee (South River) Forest. The festival was a practical experiment in food production and distribution outside of, and against, the forms of state and market control that dominate industrial agriculture. Attendees came from all over the continent for the four-day event, including small farmers from northern Mexico who utilize indigenous water management practices as well as university professors from the Midwest.

The Food Autonomy Festival partially coincided with the fifth Week of Action to Stop Cop City and Defend the Atlanta Forest. Hundreds of people camped in the Weelaunee Forest despite the intensification of police violence and repression during the South River Music Festival the previous

milling around – as had been the scene the previous day – that night there were maybe twelve total. Some of the welcome and informational tent structures had been taken down. Some didn't look quite as sturdy anymore. The parking lot as a whole looked like a place that had taken a beating.

Despite this, and despite what had happened the night before, there were still people there to greet us. Still warm smiles. Still people arriving to set up camp. Still an air of hopefulness. In fact, as I was waiting around for a small group to gather for Purim, so that we could walk into the woods together, a parent came towards us telling us that they had been there with their two kids the night before. When the cops came, the kids had to leave their bikes behind as the family left the forest. The parent asked the people around me where they might look for those discarded bikes. Someone immediately replied that they thought they knew where they were and no more than two minutes later, the parent was walking back to their car with a smile on their face, carrying two small, brightly colored, well-loved bikes.

From a few different directions over a handful of minutes, people dressed in costume – fabulous, colorful, and playful, as is the custom on Purim – came striding towards where I was standing. Before long we were maybe ten or so people, all there for Purim. Another 30 or so were already back in the woods when we arrived at the designated spot and another 10 or 20 would trickle in over the next hour or two. Before long, we were maybe 60 people sitting around a campfire in the woods, celebrating Purim, sharing food and wine and laughs.

We told the Purim story – which is a primary commandment we fulfill on the holiday – in an unorthodox, crowd-sourced kind of way. Instead of reading the book of Esther verbatim, whoever felt called contributed elements of the story that they remembered. Befitting Purim's essence, there was space for great farce and hilarity, hyperbole and hysterics. A telling of the Purim story as rich and true to character as any I've heard before.

Woven into the re-telling, we talked about how the Purim story related to the story of Cop City and compared the key characters in both. There was also thoughtful conversation and reflection, considering the shadow sides of the Purim story and of our own collective aspirations for liberation.

As the story-telling part of the night came to an end, someone next to me reflected aloud, “Wow. I didn’t even know just how badly I needed this tonight.” There were many nods of agreement and affirmation around the circle, including from me. There was something about that evening, around that campfire, listening and contributing to the Purim story, that just felt so right. So freeing. So true. It was remarkable and affirming to be part of a group celebrating, sanctifying, and honoring the joy and hope that comes from telling a story of the possibility of a new paradigm, a new way of relating, and a new future, while living out that very story.

A clergy friend from Atlanta later explained to me that “there is magic in that forest” and I was most certainly feeling it that night.

## *Such A Time As This*

Back in that parking lot a few hours earlier, just before the parent came asking about the bikes, it suddenly occurred to me – through my eager, earnest, and anxious nerves – that showing up for the Purim celebration at the Weelaunee Forest on the heels of the police raid the night before was precisely the point of the Purim story.

I was not, of course, facing genocide, like the protagonists of the story. And I am certainly no hero or singularly important figure in the story of the forest protectors. But like Mordechai and Esther in the ancient story – and in my own tiny little way as it pertains to the Weelaunee Forest – I was standing up for what I believe to be morally right. I was challenging –

through simply celebrating my religious tradition in a beautiful forest with others – the apparatus of the state. I was seeking to help overturn the power structures that allow the state to act with immense and unceasing violence on every level of society with near total impunity, while those who protest that violence are the ones labeled violent. I, like Mordechai, was unwilling to bow before the symbols of military hubris, callousness, and evil. And I, like Esther, was trying to make the very most of my moment, allowing myself to believe that perhaps I – and we – were born for such a time as this.

I have never celebrated a holiday as appropriately as I did that night.

As I rode in a friend’s car to the airport a few hours later – my tent now back in my possession, after retrieving it from the Purim celebration – I was brought to tears, so deeply inspired by all of the people who have been engaged in this struggle for so long. All of the people who have shown up over and over again to make known their desire for a world where trees are valued more than violence, human life more than state power. People putting their lives on the line – literally – to stand up for what they believe in. And most immediately, in the aftermath of Sunday night’s events, the people who showed up the very next day. The people who never left Sunday night. Who cooked meals on Monday. Who greeted us on Monday night. Who remained and remain committed to the cause and, even after knowing the lengths to which the state will go to suppress and scare off forest protectors, and the charges that they’ll bring, came back to protect the forest again. The tears that I cried were tears of gratitude and awe at that fierce and loyal and loving commitment, and a sense of humility to have taken part in that, even in such a small way.

