

# Ancient Roots Israel:

The answer is in the root of the question

By Liam Forberg

**“HERBS ARE** the friend of the physician and the pride of cooks.”

That quotation is attributed to Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, the Lombards, and the Holy Roman Empire. While the quote itself was most likely not actually said by him, Charlemagne was the first leader in Medieval Europe to develop the growth of local herbs. And considering he’s lived to 66, quite a miraculous age to live to in that period, even taking in child mortality, it seems that using herbs as his treatment didn’t fail him too badly.

While the world has a widescale, yet close-knit community that finds a great sense of camaraderie in herbal medicine, a person abroad would be surprised to hear Israel’s herbal medicine scene is also thriving. The reason? There is virtually 0 material that is being spread, whether that be research or content, in English. That is, until a woman by the name of J. Rivkah Asoulin emerged.

Growing up in Ohio as a child actress, at 19, Asoulin was told by a doctor that she will not be able to have children and will need to go through a full hysterectomy by 25, due to a case of Endometriosis and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome. After many sterile attempts at different OB-GYNs, as well as multiple surgeries and copious amounts of pharmaceutical drugs, Asoulin turned to Chinese traditional medicine at the recommendation of an OB-GYN who surmised that Asoulin won’t find any answers in western medicine.

Soon enough, she began to delve deeper into herbal medicine, being able to quit the narcotics and getting healthier: “All those years, I had been suffering from chron-

ic illness, and all of a sudden I had found something that was working, so I started diving into it headfirst”, and lo and behold, nowadays Asoulin homeschools her seven children.

Asoulin’s first endeavor in health was forming Wise Women Fertility, giving lectures, writing a blog, seeing private clients using symptothermal fertility awareness. As she was researching herbal medicine in Israel, she realized there is hardly any content in English, and that for new immigrants, there is almost no access to any of this information. Not only that, but Asoulin also found out that herbal medicine experts in Israel aren’t involved in any communities abroad, and there is no recognition for herbal medicine in Israel, deeming it as “woo-woo, urban myths and diet fads,” despite the extensive research being done in Israel in that topic.

There is also a great amount of importance herbs hold in our history as a people, with the likes of revered figures such as Rambam practicing herbal treatments, or the survival of the Jews back in the brutal siege of Jerusalem being reliant on the foraging of wild Mallow (Hubeza).

Fascinatingly, the olden traditions are still being kept today, but not by who you’d expect. When Nissim Krispil, who wrote a 5 book encyclopedia about Israel’s wild plants, went to research Arab villages in Israel, he was told that the Arabic ancestors of those people learned the herbal ways of the Jews before the diaspora, and they are being preserved with even more knowledge by these villages nowadays.

Asoulin says Israel’s ecosystem allows for a massive variety of research in herbal



J. Rivkah Asoulin

medicine as well: “We’ve got the Negev, all the way up to the Hermon, there is a huge cross-section of biodiversity, there is so much happening.”

That is how the idea of Ancient Roots Israel came about. It originally started in 2020 as forming an annual, professional level conference in the lower Galilee. Then of course, COVID came about, right at the heels of the first conference, and Asoulin had to find a way to keep ARI going despite the inability to hold physical conferences. A website was created, and with it came the Virtual Plantwalk, a video series where Asoulin would focus on one plant at

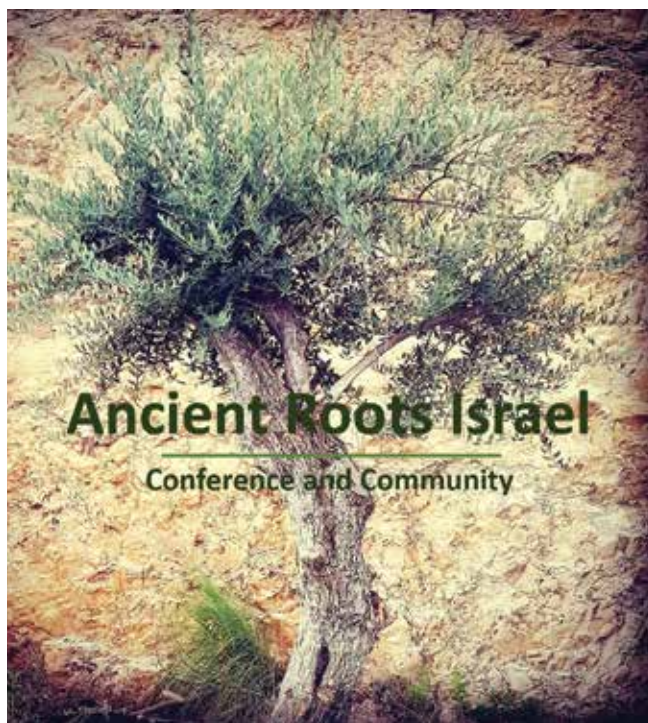
ARI



a time, describing its culinary or medicinal uses, identification or poisonous lookalikes (“It is a lot easier to kill yourself with pharmaceutical medicine than it is with herbs,” she tells me), and have a dialogue with the participants.

“After everything we’ve been through with COVID, there are two camps, one of them is like ‘COVID is a deadly illness, I don’t want to be near it, and any hospital or clinics exposes me to a deadly illness’, and the other camp, that are not into this COVID thing, they feel like they’re being medically coerced into taking a PCR test or wearing a mask to a doctor’s appointment,” Asoulin says. “Both sides could benefit from herbal medicine. If everyone knew some basic things about herbal medicine they could all try at home, from both camps, and they both understood that it worked and it was widely available, then families could start talking to each other again, maybe I’m idealistic, but families could be like ‘Oh you have a scratchy throat? Try this tea or this plant.’”

ARI is meant to be completely extraneous to politics, bringing people of all religions, genders and ideologies together with the commonality of wanting to be healthier with herbal medicine, “everything else doesn’t matter,” she says, as opposed to what happened with the ARI 2020 conference, where the BDS boycotted the conference, and forced multiple speakers coming from abroad to pull out, going as far as sending them death threats. Despite that, Asoulin is



The ARI Tree: A poster for the Ancient Roots Israel conference

a glass half full type of person, and tells me that the attack lead to pharmaceutical communities contacting them, showing support, and even attending the conference.

The ARI 2023 conference, held on January 22-24 at the Ana Poriya Resort in Tiberias (“We are the only kosher conference in the world and one of the only conferences that is not over a Shabbat,” making it possible for religious people to attend), according to Asoulin, is a “Choose-your-own-adventure” type of conference. It will have a few main lectures that everyone attends, by distinguished herbalists like Matthew Wood, who has treated countless patients and runs the Matthew Wood Institute of Herbalism, or Sara Chana Silverstein, a clinical herbalist with a #1 best seller book on Amazon about dealing with mental issues using herbs. The rest will be personal choice – with workshops such as veterinary medicine, crafting medicinal creams, and herbs for pregnancy

and post-partum lead by doula Gilla Weiss, and plantwalks, both for clinical and culinary uses, one of which will involve a foraging hike with Nissim Krispil, even learning how to cook with them in the field on the spot.

“We’re going into our ancient roots. There’s a lot of talk about being indigenous. We all have indigenous roots to somewhere. This is part of our herbal birthright. Our ability to nourish ourselves, eat well and care for ourselves with herbal medicine.”

The conference will have open Q&As throughout its entirety with all of the experts, and social evenings. It is directed towards creating and establishing an intimate community, one whose core values are leaning on one another to learn, and to open up about things like chronic illnesses. Asoulin tells me one of the women attending the conference has opened up about healing from cancer using herbal medicine.

“Herbal medicine is people’s medicine. We have a birthright to be able to heal ourselves with wholesome, pure medicine that grows from the earth and we want to return that birthright to the people, it used to be that everyone knew what to do with herbal medicine. While there’s great things about pharmaceutical medicine, the chain broke between herbal medicine and the people, we want to give that back.” ■

*You can check out more information on ARI and register to the conference at <https://www.ancientrootsisrael.com/>*