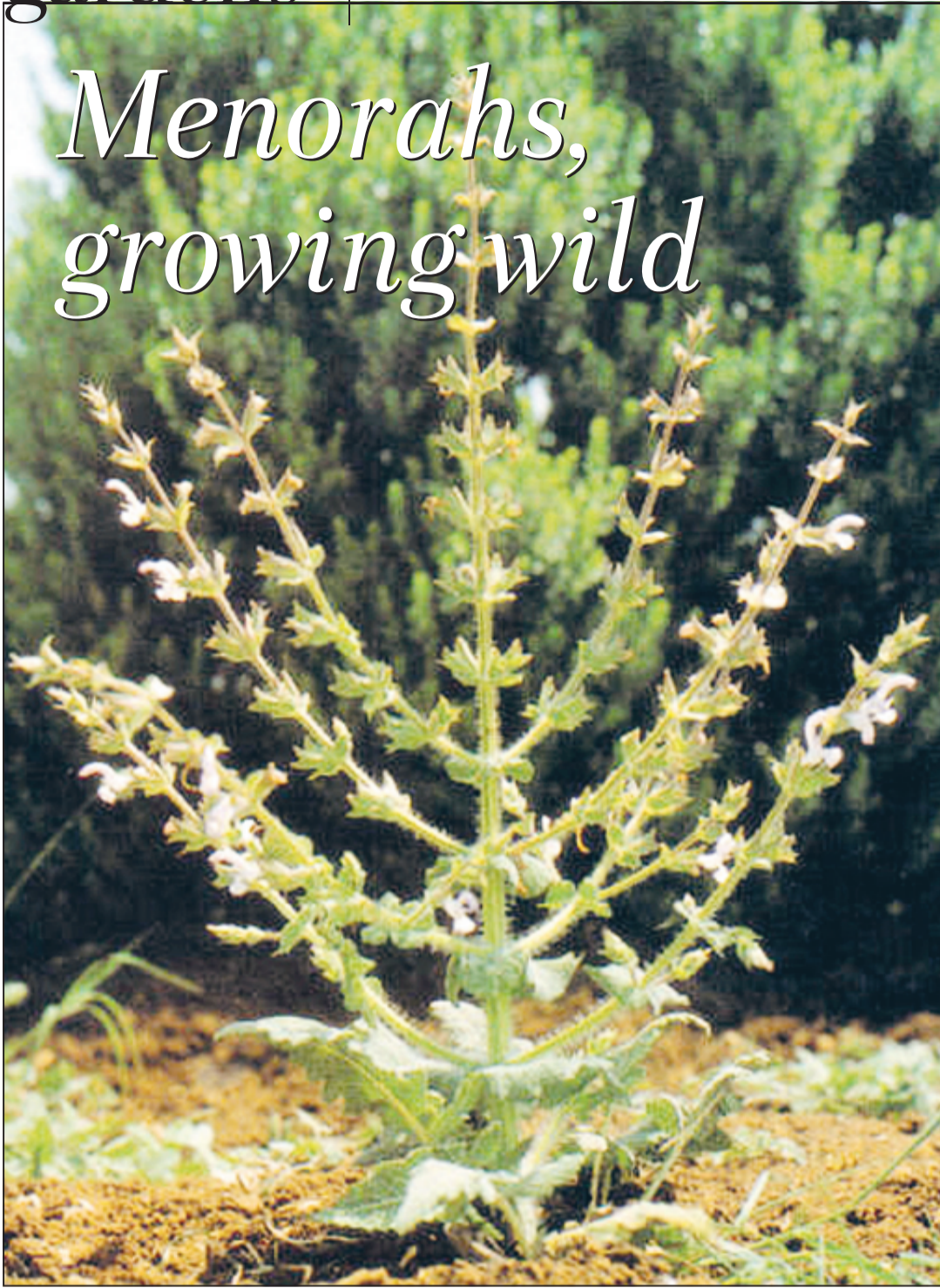


Menorahs, growing wild



NEOT KEDUMIM PHOTOS

"In Exodus all the terms used in the description of the menorah are botanical," says Aileen Novick.



**IRENE
VIRAG**

"You shall make a lampstand of pure gold . . . Six branches shall issue from its sides . . . On one branch there shall be . . . cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals . . . for all six branches."
— Exodus 25:31-33

In a conventional sense, neither my husband nor I is religious, but we both believe in the golden rule and growing things. We're both gardeners. I'm Protestant by birth, my husband is Jewish. And we both cling to the traditions of our childhoods.

At Christmas, we sing carols and decorate a tree, but we put a bow on the top, and a dreidel or two add to the ornaments. At Hanukkah, we say the prayers and take turns lighting the menorah and give each

other funny presents. I make Hanukkah bags for my grown stepchildren, and it is a family joke that everybody always gets dental floss and a toothbrush from Irene. It's true. What's wrong with dental hygiene?

Anyway, with my being related to Hanukkah through marriage and with my husband and I being practicing gardeners, I was beguiled by a passing mention in one of my horticulture books that menorahs may have been modeled on one of my favorite plants — the salvia. I love salvias and my husband. And the holidays are almost here. It was pure serendipity but I wanted to know more about the salvia-Hanukkah connection.

I Googled. I read. I researched. I got sidetracked by Leo Rosten's "The Joys of Yiddish," or at least by a brief addendum to his description of Hanukkah. "I have it on indisputable authority," he wrote, "that in Scarsdale during a school celebration of Christmas, one of the children sang

the carol as: 'God rest ye, Jerry Mandelbaum.'" Obviously, Jerry Mandelbaum had nothing to do with the affinity between salvias and menorahs but Aileen Novick of Jericho did. I found Aileen, a former national director of Hadassah, in a letter she wrote 10 years ago to The New York Times that commented on an article about salvias.

In the letter, Aileen told about the relationship between the flower and the candelabrum and said research to this end had been done by the late Professor Ephraim Hareuveni of Israel and his son, Nogah, who established what is now a 625-acre reserve called Neot Kedumim, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, where biblical flora and fauna flourish in their native habitats.

"In Exodus all the terms used in the description of the menorah are botanical," Aileen explained when I called her. "This gave impetus to the notion that maybe there was something growing at the time that provided inspiration for



Salvia Dominica, one of more than 40 varieties of salvia that flourish in Israel



Salvia hierosolymitana Boiss on a 625-acre reserve in Israel called Neot Kedumim

the menorah. Ephraim Hareuveni found the salvia growing wild on Mount Moriah, where Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed. He projected that this is what the biblical menorah was based on — the straight central stalk and branches on either side that curve up with a cup like a menorah. The resemblance is uncanny."

Mazel tov. I had found the right trail and it led straight to Neot Kedumim (n-k.org.il), where almond trees and olive groves abound and where cyclamens grow and several varieties of salvia bloom between March and May, between the holidays of Purim and Shavuot. It was around Shavuot that the holy Torah was given to the Jewish people as they journeyed to freedom.

But language barriers and telephone problems thwarted my quest. Finally, I was referred back to the United States — to Paula Tobenfeld of Potomac, Md., an East Rockaway native who is president of the American Friends of Neot Kedumim. She told me she is not much of a gardener but I think she is one in spirit.

More than 40 varieties of salvia grow in Israel and several thrive at the reserve. The ones that most resemble the menorah are *Salvia dominica*, *Salvia hierosolymitana* Boiss and *Salvia palaestina* Bentham. "If you see a picture of any of these three, you will be struck at how much it looks like a menorah. Each has a central stem and opposing side branches — some have three on each side, some four."

Hanukkah, "The Festival of Lights," marks the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem after Judah Maccabee and his brave guerrillas defeated the Syrian invaders. And the miracle of the oil in the lamp that was only supposed to last for a single day but instead gave light for eight days. That is why the Hanukkah menorah has eight branches. Actually, Paula explained, it is

called a Hanukkiah. "The Hanukkiah is a representation of a menorah."

In those days, the candleholders were filled with olive oil. Neot Kedumim is a themed preserve where a wedding trail in the dale of the Song of Songs is bordered with Hawthorne apples and pomegranates and tulips and narcissi. Where date palms rise in the Valley of Jericho and where salvia, the "moriah plant," grows on the Hill of the Menorah amid olive groves.

"When the wind blows in an olive grove, the silvery underside of the foliage flips over like in a wave," Paula said. "The effect is that of the trees giving off their own light. Now you have the fragrance of the salvia plant and the light of the olive tree. Whenever there is mention in the Torah of incense being burned in the Temple, there is also a mention of light. Light and fragrance, they are mentioned together in the Torah. These things don't escape our sages."

They don't. And when we light the menorah later this week and the candles flicker in their cups and blaze up like salvias bursting into bloom, I will think of the Moriah plants and the olive trees and the miracle of the light that lasted for eight days.

Write to Irene Virag at 1019 Fort Salonga Rd., Suite 10, #302, Northport, NY 11768 or email irenevirag@optonline.net. Visit her blog at www.irenevirag.com.