What comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “The Joshua Tree”?

I’m just back from a week at Joshua Tree National Park. I was enormously fortunate to attend a fabulous Jewish Wilderness Spirituality program of Torah Trek, the brainchild of Rabbi Mike Comins. Comins’ book, A Wild Faith, is the fundamental starting point for examining the connection between religion and wilderness. If you are interested at all in the relationship between nature and spirituality, Torah Trek does it better than anyone. Highly recommended!

One strange thing jumped out at me, though, when looking at the National Park Service materials. For the last year, the Park has celebrated its 75th anniversary: President Franklin Roosevelt created the Joshua Tree National Monument in 1936, and thanks to the efforts of Senator Dianne Feinstein, it became a full-fledged national park under the California Desert Protection Act of 1994. So of course the Park Service, and the Joshua Tree National Park Association, produced some excellent short histories of the park and the natural history of desert wildlife.

But one thing was missing from ***every single document***: U2, the band that brought The Joshua Tree to national consciousness. Not in the history of the park. Not in the descriptions of the park. Nowhere in any of the materials. There was even a guitar raffle — and nothing about the Irish rockers.

It’s hard to argue that the band’s album meant nothing to the status of the area. *The Joshua Tree* came out in 1987, stayed for nine weeks at #1 and for 35 weeks in the Billboard Top 10. It eventually went triple-platinum, and U2 appeared on the cover of Time magazine — only the fourth band ever to do so. Preservationists had fought for decades to upgrade the Monument to a National Park, to no avail. Seven years after U2, it happened.

So what gives? How could the National Park Service write a history of a park and ignore the most important cultural event in the park’s history?

I have no idea. But it should be mentioned that although U2’s members have been quite philanthropic, and Bono has done terrific work on international poverty and global debt relief, it seems as if they have had little use for the park or the area since the album came out. As far as I know, the band members have never returned, or even mentioned the place. The Joshua Tree was never really a living thing in the album: it was just a metaphor for spiritual desolation — a metaphor that

distorts the vibrancy of the real California desert.

This past week, Rabbi Comins taught us something that will always stay with me: *give back to nature what you take from it*. It provides us with sustenance, and we have no right not to repay it. U2's members, for all their good work (and better music), may have forgotten this (and in the case of guitarist The Edge, may be guilty of despoiling other natural wonders). If Joshua Tree really is God's Country, then The Holy One does not figure to be pleased.

[youtube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZgUsniGOpA]