



The Two Trees at Eden's Center
Tu B'Shvat, 5777 | 2017
 Sarah Yehudit Schneider

God made grow out of the ground every tree that is pleasant to look at and good to eat, [including] the Tree of Life in the *middle* of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil...God gave the man a commandment, saying, 'You may definitely eat from every tree of the garden. But from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, do not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you will definitely die.'...The woman replied to the serpent, 'We may eat from the fruit of the trees of the garden. But of the fruit of the tree that is in the *middle* of the garden, God said, 'Do not eat it, and do not [even] touch it, or else you will die.' The serpent said to the woman, 'You will certainly not die! Really, God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and desirable to the eyes, and that the tree was attractive as a means to gain intelligence. She took some of its fruit and ate [it]. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate [it]. The eyes of them both were opened... [Gen. 2:9, 16-17, 3:3-7]

On this New Year's Day of Fruit Trees it is fitting to celebrate the two stately trees that changed the course of history: The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge (that is also dubbed the Tree of Death since it did, allegedly, bring death into the world).¹

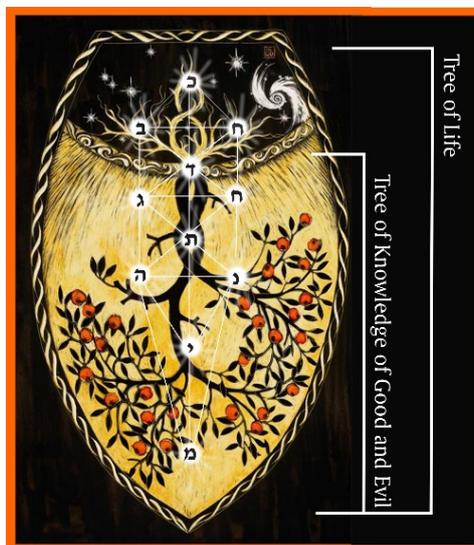
Most folks imagine them as two separate trees, each with their own roots, trunk, branches and fruit—one permitted, the other forbidden—yet this was apparently not the case. The Torah describes them—both of them—as rooted in the exact middle of the garden. The Rabbis note that it's impossible for two trees to occupy the same "center"...unless, they share the same roots...which would make them, at least partially, the same tree. And so, says Rabaynu Bachaya: These two trees really were (and are) the same tree, "one below and one above."²

Kabbala identifies the Tree of Life with the ten sefirot that together form an upside tree with roots above (*keter, chokma, bina, daat*) and fruits below (*malchut*). The Tree of Knowledge portion of that mystical tree extends from the ground to the fruits—encompassing the trunk, branches, leaves and fruit—in other words everything but its roots. In sefirotic terms, the Tree of Knowledge spans from *malchut* up to and including the lower half

of the sefira of *daat*. This portion of the sefirotic tree is called the *middot*, the emotional attributes, as opposed to the upper three sefirot which represent the *mochin*, or brains.

To eat from the Tree of Life is to stay present with the Presence, to bring the *devekut* of gratitude into every instant of enjoyment.

To eat from the Tree of Knowledge is to partake of life's pleasures without acknowledging the hidden source of that bounty—without using that moment of pleasure-taking as an opportunity to commune with the Primal Will to Good, the Source of those delights. When we take from the world without acknowledging the Holy *One*—without considering the heavenly roots of this worldly benefit—we eat from the Tree of Knowledge.



These two *trees*, then, are really just two *ways of enjoying* our harvest. Their fruits are the same, yet the consciousness that's held while eating them makes all the difference in the world.³

With this as our starting point, let's revisit the Genesis tale, but from an angle that's not oft explored. As history evolves and the moonlike Shekhina waxes in stature, she acquires a voice and shares her side of the story through the scholarship of those

This Tu B'Shvat teaching is dedicated to the complete and speedy soul healing of David ben Rachel. May he (and we) have a spiritual awakening that brings us into line with HaShem's highest, simplest and most joy-filled will for us.

who stand in her shoes and serve as her mouthpiece.⁴

The Torah tells us that:

...man is a tree of the field... [Deut. 20:19]

The human psyche mirrors these two archetypal trees: Our Divine Soul orients toward the Tree of Life while our earthy Vital (Animal) Soul resonates with the Tree of Knowledge.

The Divine Soul serves G-d through self-nullification. At any moment it is willing to die for truth—to sacrifice its will on the altar of Divine service.

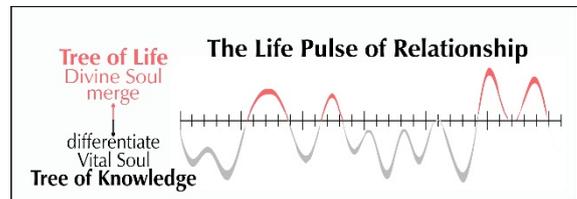
The Vital Soul has a more complicated mission. It's our survival instinct. Its job is to preserve life at all costs and that is its expertise. It heals wounds, knits bones, grows teeth, vomits poison, and on the psychological level it punishes insult, wins approval, pursues pleasure, etc. Since HaShem is called the "Life of all worlds,"—its preservation of life is equally a holy duty.

Clearly, these two souls have very different agendas. Yet both are critical to our *raison d'être*. HaShem, before creation, by definition, was lacking nothing except, in some mysterious sense, the experience of actualized relationship because there was no *other* with whom to relate.⁵ HaShem created creation, i.e. us, to enable all the myriad faceted possibilities of relationship, some of which have already happened and some of which, the more consummate levels of which, have yet to be realized.

Every relationship has a paradox at its core, for soulmates are both *one* and *two* at the same time. They are *one* because they are actually two halves of a single entity, a single Adam. The pleasure of their union (says kabbala) is the joy of becoming more whole.⁶ Uniting with their "other half" they become more fully and utterly themselves. And they are *two* because a relationship, by definition, is an association of two or more things. If these *two* would ever permanently merge there would be no more relationship and no more pleasure of reuniting.

The only way to cover both of these bases is to dance back and forth between them in a pulse of merging and differentiating. The Divine Soul presses for merger. "Eat from the Tree of Life," it

urges—dissolve into the One. The Vital Soul yanks us back to our senses (literally). It summons us to differentiate by asserting rather than sacrificing will. It eats from the Tree of Knowledge—rightly called the Tree of Willfulness (says R. Bachaya⁷) because it strengthens self and emboldens will.



Adam and Chava assessed the situation and chose life by (paradoxically) eating from the Tree of Knowledge (aka, the Tree of Death). They were the most enlightened beings that ever lived. How could they make such a huge (and seemingly obvious) mistake? R. Bachaya says they genuinely deemed the Tree of Knowledge as more essential than the Tree of Life and believed they were choosing the high road.

Kabbala explains that their test was very subtle. They were challenged to discern between good and very good. Bad was not even in the picture. Their question was: What's the priority of this moment—merging or differentiating? From the Vital Soul's perspective, the Tree of Life was really the Tree of Death. Its call for total surrender was a recipe for self-annihilation (or so it seemed). To merge now, before they had really lived, would be regression, not consummation.

The Tree of Knowledge appealed to the Vital Soul's survival instinct. It promised delectable sustenance, beauty (the ultimate of which is truth)⁸, and ever-expanding consciousness (the root of all pleasure according to kabbala)⁹. These were the tools they needed to fulfill their mission as cosmic *other*—to strengthen their selfhood so that even in merger they would not fully cease. From this perspective, the Tree of Knowledge was clearly the path of life.

On the other hand, HaShem commanded them NOT to eat from the Tree of Knowledge under penalty of death. Yet, says the Ari, for some mysterious reason HaShem also made it impossible for them to obey that command.¹⁰ Why? Perhaps because the relationship HaShem sought was not with a puppet but with a full-fledged *other*. HaShem gave Adam and Chava the opportunity to cut their

umbilical cord by issuing a command and secretly compelling them to disobey it. In that way Adam and Chava asserted their autonomy. They assessed the situation and chose to differentiate—for heaven’s sake—to enable God’s purpose to succeed. This was Chava’s initiative and she has been hounded for it through history, yet, in fact, she probably saved the day.

The ultimate fulfillment of relationship (says the Ari) is when *he* and *she* meet from the crown of their heads to the soles of their feet—when every point of *one* is met and matched by the *other*.¹¹ (This applies between individuals, within individuals, as well as between us and HaShem). When the masculine archetype preponderates, and is not tempered by a sufficient counterbalance of feminine sensibility (says the Leshem) then inertia rules.¹² *His* holy strivings (which start out good) will unfold indefinitely, beyond their point of diminishing returns, because *he* cannot bring himself to assert a boundary—to press the brakes and slow the pace—

when it comes to *avodat* HaShem. This is true even when a change of tack is crucial, for other Torah values are withering from neglect. When focus freezes on a single mitzvah we betray our Talmudic legacy and the complex weave of perspectives that is its hallmark. It is time for the emergency measures that were instituted, post-holocaust, to recover faith and rejuvenate scholarship, to be evaluated in this light. There comes a time when you must step back in order to take your next forward step.

Let us internalize the lessons (עצות) of those two cosmic trees (עצים) that occupied the garden’s center, shared the same roots, but tugged in opposite directions. Help us to find our own *center* that integrates the contrary pulls of our soul, possesses the wisdom of pace, and steers us toward redemption. “May the voice of the groom *and* the voice of the bride” both be welcomed and considered as we navigate through these confusing times.

Tu B'Shvat Sameach

¹ Zohar 3:157a.

² Rabaynu Bachya on the Torah, Gen. 2:9.

³ R. Tsadok HaKohen, Pri Tsadik, Gen. 8; Tu B'Shvat 2. See *Eating as Tikun* (1996) by Sarah Yehudit Schneider.

⁴ R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tefilat Lekho HaShana*, pp. 138-139; Sarah Schneider, *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine* (3rd edition, Still Small Voice Publishing).

⁵ MR Gen. 3:9.

⁶ R. Shalom Elyashuv (Leshem), *HaDrush Olam HaTohu* Sec. 1, p.149 left col; R.M.R Luria, *Bet Ganzai, Parshat Vayerah* p. תכא – תכב.

⁷ Rabaynu Bachya on the Torah, Gen. 2:9.

⁸ Beit yakov, hagada p.25 (יעבדך).

⁹ Leshem II pg. 71.

¹⁰ Ari, *Likutei Torah, Bereshit*, the passage that begins: והנחש היה ערום. Because tsaddikim are so committed to truth, when they speak words, believing them to be true, but in fact, they are not, HaShem providentially adapts reality to make their words true. How much more so for HaShem Himself. Thus, notes the Ari, HaShem said “On the day you eat from it, you will surely die.” He didn’t say, “if you eat from it” rather “on the day...” Ari explains that when HaShem spoke those words it was inevitable that the day would come, when those words would be proven true.

¹¹ Ari, *Eitz Chayim, Heichal Nukba, Shaar Miyut HaYareach*, Chapt. 1.

¹² Leshem, HDOH, *chelek 1, drush 1, siman 2,3*. **Inertia is the tendency of an object that is stationary to remain stationary, or when in motion to continue in motion indefinitely.**