

The Mystery of Trees

Prayer of the *P'ri Eitz Hadar*, the first Haggadah published for Tu Bish'vat seder of fruit that celebrates the New Year of the trees, 17th cent.

Creation is unified as a holy Temple

O God, who makes, forms, creates, and emanates the highest worlds! "You made all with wisdom" (Ps. 104:24), higher above and lower below, "to join the tent [together] to become one" *l'chaber et ha'obel libyot ehad* (Exod. 36:18).

The trees unify Creation and are the teachers of humanity

And You made trees and grasses bloom from the ground in the shape and pattern of what is above, to make known to the children of Adam wisdom and discernment through them, to reach what is hidden.

And this day (the full moon of Sh'vat, the New Year for the Trees) is the beginning of Your work to renew and ripen the fruit trees, to bring forth the fruit of "the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden"

A prayer for the fertility of the trees and for blessing

May it be Your will that our eating and blessing and meditating on these fruits will strengthen the flow of love and blessing over the trees, to make them grow and bloom, for good life, for blessing and for peace. And may the might and majesty of the blessings for eating the fruits "become lights" (Gen. 1:15) in the wellspring of blessings of the Righteous One, life of the worlds.

Our offered blessings can restore beauty and repair Creation, and the Cosmic Tree of Life

"And may the rainbow appear" (Gen. 9:14), joyful and beautified with his colors; And from there the flow of desire and mercy will flow over us, for pardon and forgiving our sins and errors. May the Whole return to his original strength!

And may all the sparks of divine energy, whether scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the sin of the first human against the fruit of the tree, be returned and included in the majestic might of the Tree of Life.

The Forest Prays (Ps. 96:11-12)

The skies will rejoice, and the land sing forth; the sea and what fills him will shout out! The field will exult and all in him; then all the trees of the forest will sing out!

Yism'chu hashamayim, v'tagayl ha'arets, yiram hayam um'lo'o'Ya`aloꝝ sadai v'kebol asher bo az y'ran'nu kol `atsay ya`ar!

Trees Have Standing

When you siege against a city many days...you will not destroy her tree, to chop an ax blade against him, for from him you will eat, and him you will not cut off. For is the tree of the field a person, to come before you in the siege?

The Trees Speak

“*Kol si'ach basadeb* And all growth/*siach* שִׂיחַ of the field” (Gen. 2:5)—All the trees are as it were conversing/*m'sichin* מְשִׁיחִין these with those, and with the creatures/*hab'riyot* הַבְּרִיּוֹת. And all the conversations of the creatures are about nothing except the land. (*Genesis Rabbah*, 4-5th cent., 13:1)

The Waters Respond

If different trees' roots reach different depths, then how are they all watered equally? The upper abyss calls to the lower and says: Rise up and I will come down; and the lower abyss says: Come down and I will rise up. (*Exodus Rabbah*, 10th cent., 5:9)

The Burning Bush

“What [value] did the Holy One see in talking with Moshe from a bush? Couldn't the One have spoken from a carob or sycamore tree?...[It is] only to teach you that there is no place empty, without Shekhinah / *eyn makom panui b'lo shekhinah*, even a bush.” (*Exodus Rabbah* 2:5)

Creation is a Playful Garden

Why does the first word of the Torah (*b'reishit*, “in beginning”, which starts the story of Creation) begin with a *Beit* ב? Since I (*Beit*) will begin the word “blessing/*b'rakbah*”. *Beit* is blessed, because it is the fullness...and from the fullness the first plan/tree is planted...A parable: It's like a king that wanted to build his palace in solid rocks. He cut forms and carved rock, and a spring came out for him, great water, living water. The king said, “Since I have flowing water I will plant a garden and I will play in/with it, I and all the world.” (*Bahir*, the oldest work of “Tree of Life” Kabbalah, 11th cent., secs.3, 5-6)

The Lovely Garden, and the Power of Humanity

In the time that the Holy One created the first human, He took him and brought him around to all the trees of *Gan Eden* and said to him, “See my works, how lovely and praiseworthy they are, and all that I created, for your sake I created it. Put your mind [to this] / *Tein da`ateikh* that you don't ruin or destroy my world / *`olami*, for if you ruin there is no one who will repair after you.” (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* on Ec 7:13)

A Hymn to the Universe as God's Form

From [the Holy One's] form/*to'ar* the constellations are shimmering, and God's form projects the exalted ones... And all the trees will rejoice in the word, and the plants will exult in His rejoicing, and the One's words shall drop as perfumes, flowing forth flames of fire, giving joy to those who search them, and quiet to those who fulfill them. (*Heykhalot Rabbati*, 3rd cent., 24:3)

A Plea for the Trees and the Earth

Save flesh and spirit-wind/*ru'ach* and breath-soul/*n'shamah*! Save sinew and bone and skin-covering/*gormah*! Save likeness and image and weave! Save majesty, “compared to empty breath [Ps 144:4]”; and likened/silenced (mortal) as the beasts! (after Ps 49:21). Save brilliance and form and stature! Please save, renew the face of the ground! Save the planting of trees where desolate/breathing/*n'shamah* (depending on whether one understands the root to be *Sh M M* or *N Sh M*)...Save undergrowth to strengthen her... flowers to uphold her! Saves the one who drinks (i.e., the Earth) — Exalt her!...Save what is suspended upon nothingness/*b'limah*! Please save!

(from the *Hoshana Rabbah* prayers at the end of the Sukkot harvest festival)

The Cosmic Tree

Kabbalah teaches that the universe exists as the Cosmic image of a human being (called Adam Kadmon אדם קדמון). The universe is also the image of a tree, with roots in the emanation of divine blessing in God, the trunk as the manifestation of creation out of nothingness, branches as the unfolding and weaving of diversity in creation, leaves as the transformations of each life, and fruit as the souls of all living things, especially human beings. This means that universe and the tree are images of God. Also, like the Cosmic Tree, trees tie together heaven and earth (humans do as well), while fruit trees in particular give of themselves freely. These are all reasons why fruit trees, like humans, are seen as an image of God.

God Speaks

“I am the One that planted this tree, all the world to delight in him; and I hammered out all/*kol* with him, and I called his name ‘the all/*hakol*’, for all depends on him, and all comes out from him.”

What Makes the Tree Grow – Human Righteousness

And what would the tree be that you spoke of? He said to him: [It is] the powers/*kochot* of the Holy One, this on back of this, and they resemble/*domin* a tree, in that this tree, by means of the waters, brings out fruit. Even so the Holy One by means of the waters increases the powers of the tree. And what are these waters of the Holy One? They are wisdom, and they are the souls/*n'shamot* of the righteous that grow from the spring...And by what means does he grow? By means of Israel, [for] when they are righteous and good, Shekhinah rests among them, and through their deeds she rests in the bosom of the Holy One, and makes them fruitful... (*Bahir*, secs.22, 119)

The Trees Teach Mysteries

R' Y'hudah said: Why is it written, “God/*Elohim* made this one corresponding to this one”? (Eccl 7:14) Just like the pattern of the firmament, the Holy One made [everything] in the earth, and all of it alludes to what is above...All the plants in the earth, each one is a singular mystery, like the pattern [of the *Sefirot*] above. (*Zohar*, 13th cent. 2:15b-16a)

The Righteous Person Studies the Divine Will in Creation

[I]n every thing there is the will of the blessed name: so it is in the whole of Creation / *ke'lal hab'riyah*...and so in the details of Creation / *p'ratey hab'riyah*, in each and every individual thing...and the righteous person searches out and seeks continually, to attain and to know the will of *Hashem* in every thing...So it is with all the creatures in the world, silent/*domem* (mineral), growing/*tsomei'ach* (vegetable), living/moving/*chai* (animal), speaking/*m'daber* (human)—for in all of them there are a great many differences without number, between each one and its companion. And so it is with every single individual within itself, between each and every limb/organ, and so on—with the plants and trees and the rest of the particulars of Creation. (Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, 18th cent., *Liqutey Moharan* 1:17)

The Greatest Manifestation of Love Comes from the Soil

[T]he existence and essence of the light of *Eyn Sof* is in no way bounded by place and encompasses all worlds equally, and [so it says] “I fill the heavens and the earth [Je 23:24]” with one equal measure, and “There is no place empty of Him” even in this material earth. But this is in the dimension of surrounding and encompassing / *makif v'sovev*...and not extension and enclathing the life-force / *hitpashhut v'hitlabshut hachiyut*, which gives [the creatures and worlds] life and brings them into being...[which] shows her power and ability in the element of the physical earth/*afar* in an immense revelation, in more enormous strength than elements transcending her, even the hosts of heaven. For they do not have in their power and ability constantly to bring forth something from nothing / *yesh mei'ayin*, like the element of earth, [which] constantly makes grow something from nothing—these are the plants and trees—...from the growing/vegetative power it possesses, which is no-thing/*ayin* and spiritual...This is the constant and everlasting effect, throughout the earth, of the command “Let the earth/*arets* grow forth [Gn 1:11]”...For during the seven days of the beginning there shone in this world a radiance from the light of the *Eyn Sof* in pure kindness / *Chesed chinam*...to make plants and trees and fruits grow from nothing to something, constantly, sufficient from year to year, which is from the source/essence of the dimension of *Eyn Sof*...[By means of these] the living (animal) is nurtured and lives by the growing (plant), and the speaking (human) receives his vitality from both, even wisdom and knowledge... (Shneur Zalman of Liady, 18th cent., *Tanya, Igeret Haqodesh* 20)

GAIA

1. Maimonides emphasizes the idea that the universe is an organic whole: “Know that this whole of being is one individual and nothing else”. The whole of Creation is “a single being which has the same status as Zayid or Omar”, in other words, a person, endowed with a heart and a soul... The unity of Creation... is also the way to know God’s unity: “For this way of representing the matter to oneself is most necessary... for the demonstration that the deity is one... By means of this representation it will also be made clear that the One has created one being.” (Ch.10, 268-9)

2. There are a number of ecological issues that Judaism has a deeply grounded response to. One Biblical concept that every Bible reader and every Jewish denomination can affirm without controversy is the idea that Creation, in its totality, is inherently good. The idea is embedded in the Creation narrative: “Elohim saw all that He made, and here/behold: it is very good” [Gn 1:31]. Maimonides explains that the phrase “very good” intimates the intrinsic value and purpose of all of Creation, which is independent of humanity:

[A]ll the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else... If you consider the Torah, the notion that we have in view will become manifest... For with reference to none of the things created is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other things. He only says that He brought every part of the world into existence and that it conformed to its purpose. This is the meaning of the saying: “And God saw that it [is] good.” About the whole, it says: “And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it [is] very good.” (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:13)

Maimonides’ articulation of this idea was foundational for Jewish thought, as well as for Christian thought. Aquinas was heavily dependent on Maimonides when he wrote that the highest good among created things “is the good of the order of the whole universe”,

[For it is said:] “God saw all the things He had made, and they were very good,” while He simply said of the individual works, that “they were good” [...] Thus, among created things, what God cares for most is the order of creation. (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 3:64)

Maimonides is one of the earliest and most cogent thinkers to place tremendous value on what we would define as biodiversity. He explains that “the entire purpose [of creation] consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible”. (3:25) As discussed already, this diversity is good in itself, and each unique species is also good in itself, existing not for the sake of humanity, and not even only for its own sake, but for the sake of its participation in the whole of Creation. Even the highest revelation God gave to Moshe, the revelation of “all My goodness” [Ex. 33:19], was a revelation about the diversity of Creation. (1:54) For Maimonides, understanding the diversity of Creation meant understanding the relationships between all the creatures, which went hand in hand with understanding God. (Introduction, 15–16, 20)

3. Maimonides wrote that apprehending God subsumes apprehending God’s “providence over His creations, in their coming into being and in their being guided”. (3:54) He also wrote that a person’s “ultimate perfection... would consist in his knowing everything concerning all the beings that it is within the capacity of a person to know”. (3:27) Maimonides equates this kind of knowledge specifically with knowing God’s goodness:

When [Moshe] asked for knowledge of the attributes... he was told: I will make all My goodness / *kol tuvi* pass before you [Ex 33:19] . . . “All My goodness” – alludes to the display to him of all existing things (creatures) of which it is said: “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it [is] very good.” By their display, I mean that he will apprehend their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He governs them in general and in detail. (1:54)

Maimonides explains that concrete knowledge of the world is intimately intertwined with being able to know God’s existence:

I have already let you know that there exists nothing except God, may He be exalted, and this existent world and that there is no possible inference proving His existence, may He be exalted, except those deriving from this existent taken as a whole and from its details. Accordingly it is an absolute obligation to consider this existent world as it is and to derive premises from what is perceived of its nature. (1:71)

For Maimonides, the world is more than just a backdrop that inspires humans to praise God. His emphasis on knowledge of the physical world became a... foundation of science. (Ch.1, 71-2)