

## Nature in the Parasha

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### Parashat Vayera – Avraham's Hospitality Tree

Avraham is the second person in the Torah that planted in the Land. Noach, the first man who planted, is criticized for planting a vineyard and getting drunk before planting anything sustainable for people (Rashi, *Bereishit* 9:20). Ultimately, Noach's planting caused disgrace to himself and a curse to his son. Avraham's orchard, on the other hand, became a blessing for all. Planting needs to be thought out carefully, what to plant, where and when and for whom makes a great difference in the outcome of the fruits. Planting can also be understood figuratively. For example, we can plant ideas in people's mind. A plant starts out small, sometimes even as a tiny seed. With the right conditions and with proper nurturing it may grow into a beautiful fruit-bearing tree. Avraham is a role model for how to plant in an altruistic way on all levels, both literally and figuratively. His purpose for planting was to share his blessings with others and teach the world about the Creator. Planting trees both literally and symbolically represents thinking ahead of how to benefit others, as it takes several years until the trees bear fruit. The fruit trees teach us to share and become kinder to others, for a healthy tree usually gives much more fruit than one person can eat. I'm very blessed to tend an orchard of about 36 trees together with my husband. We planted these trees about 18 years ago as tiny saplings, and for the last ten years or so, we have been enjoying the fruits of our hard labor. The harvest season keeps me very busy distributing the best of our fruits to Rabbis, teachers, poor and old people.

### An Orchard or an Inn?

וַיֵּטַע אַבְרָהָם בְּבְאֵר שֵׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם בְּנֵי הַשָּׁם אֵל עוֹלָם (בראשית כא:לג)

"And Avraham planted an אֵשֶׁל/*eshel* – tamarisk in Be'er Sheva, and invoked there in the Name of the Eternal, the everlasting G-d" (*Bereishit* 21:33).

What is the אֵשֶׁל/*eshel* that Avraham planted? There are different opinions in the Talmud whether Avraham planted literally or figuratively. As Rashi explains, Rav and Shemuel, two sages of the Talmud, differ in their interpretation of this term. One says that the *eshel* is an orchard. Avraham planted this orchard in order to have fruits to give to his many guests. The other says that *eshel* refers to an inn for lodging which provided all sorts of fruits to nourish the guests. Avraham, therefore, "planted" a hospitality tent in order to nurture needy human beings. Rashi explains that the Hebrew term for "planting" is also used within biblical literature in reference to tents. He cites the following example, "He will plant the tents of his palace" (*Daniel* 11:45). Through this *eshel*, Avraham provided free food to all travelers. What difference does it make whether Avraham planted an orchard or established an inn? How does each view emphasize a different aspect of Avraham's personality and mission?

As typical of the Maharal, he reconciles the different views in the Talmud and answers our questions above as follows: According to the view that Avraham planted an orchard, it means that it

is fitting for Avraham to plant an orchard, since Avraham himself is like an orchard. Just as an orchard is full of trees and plants, likewise Avraham is the first plant, since G-d created the entire world for Avraham's sake, as it states, (*Bereishit* 2:4), **בְּהִבְרָאם**/*behibaram* – when He created them. If you unscramble the letters of this word you get **בְּאַבְרָהָם**/*beAvraham* – for the sake of Avraham. The first 2000 years of the world were desolate, without any true reality, until the 2000 years of Torah began with Avraham's discovery of Hashem. In this way, Avraham was the first plant that G-d planted in His world. Avraham is compared to a blessed plant through which everyone benefited. Therefore, it is fitting that his actions would reflect his essence by planting an orchard. We can also explain the view that Avraham built an inn based on this principle. It was fitting for Avraham to establish an inn, since Avraham himself was like an inn, in which all the travelers would enter and gather. This is why Avraham was called "a father of many nations." As the father of both the Jewish, Arab, Asian and Roman people, he is the gatherer of the majority of the nations in the world. Thus, Avraham established an inn, reflecting his essence of uniting and gathering everyone, because he includes them all (Maharal, *Chidushei Agadot* 2:43, *Tractate Sotah*).

### Rectifying the Sin of the First Man

Avraham's planting in the Land is compared to the very first planting in the world when Hashem originally planted the Garden of Eden. The same form of the word **וַיִּטַע**/*vayita* – he planted is used in both instances. Compare the following two Torah verses:

**וַיִּטַע הָאֱלֹהִים גֶּן בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁם אֶת הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר: (ספר בראשית ב:ח)**

"The Eternal G-d planted a Garden in Eden in the very beginning, and He placed there the human being which He had formed" (*Bereishit* 2:8).

**וַיִּטַע אֲשֶׁל בְּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם הָאֱלֹהִים אֵל עוֹלָם: (ספר בראשית כא:לג)**

"Avraham planted an **אֲשֶׁל**/*eshel* – tamarisk in Be'er Sheva, and invoked there in the Name of the Eternal, the everlasting G-d" (*Bereishit* 21:33).

When Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem expelled them from Eden, as they were no longer worthy of living in in the Garden. Since then, humanity yearns to return to our lost Paradise. The Zohar explains that through Avraham's planting he rectified Adam and Chava's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge and brought us closer to the Garden of Eden.

HE PLANTED AN ORCHARD IN BE'ER SHEVA –The cuttings, which Adam the first man cut, Avraham rectified. This is in Be'er Sheva, which is the *Malchut*. (Kingdom) (*Zohar Chadash*, (*Margaliot*), p. 60a).

What does it mean that Adam cut cuttings? Perhaps it means that when Adam and Chava ate from the Tree they introduced evil in to the world, which is the illusion of the existence of something separate from Hashem. Thus, they caused a split between the spiritual and physical realms. People erroneously believe that Avraham was the first monotheist. This is not true as many great people before him knew about the oneness of G-d. A few examples are Adam, Noach, Shem and Ever.

Avraham, however, brought a new kind of G-d-consciousness to the world. He realized that the belief in One G-d must be actualized into physical action. Through the power of Avraham's nurturing example, he conveyed the message to the world that we have both the capacity and the responsibility to emulate the ways of the Hashem within the physical reality. When Avraham planted an orchard, he unified and integrated the spiritual with the physical to the very bone of his being. He also "invoked the name of Hashem" – penetrating the illusion that there exist anything separate from G-d. This fits in with Rashi's commentary that Avraham taught people about Hashem through giving them food. He connected the food – the most physical, with Hashem – the most spiritual. Therefore, he merited to be the forefather of the Jewish people whose spiritual essence has become ingrained within our physical genetics, and therefore passed down from generation to generation.

### The Orchard and Grace After Meals

Rav Yosef HaKohen z"l reveals how Avraham became inspired to plant his *eshel* based on the following Midrashic dialogue between Avraham and his ancestor, Shem, the son of Noach, who was also known as Malki-Tzedek (Rashi, *Bereishit* 14:18).

Avraham asked Malki-Tzedek, who was in the ark during the great flood, "By what merit were you able to leave the ark?" Malki-Tzedek responded, "Through the merit of acts of *tzedakah* (charity) that we performed in the ark." Avraham then asked, "To whom did you give *tzedakah*? There were no poor people in the ark; there was only you and your family." Malki-Tzedek replied, "All night, we were busy feeding the livestock, wild creatures, and birds; in fact, we were too busy to sleep!" Avraham said to himself, "If they were able to leave the ark because of the *tzedakah* which they gave to animals, then how much more would I accomplish if I performed acts of *tzedakah* for human beings who are created in the Divine image!" He then opened an inn for travelers, and provided them with free food and drink, as well as escort (*Yalkut Shimoni* on *Tehillim* 37). Through the *eshel* that Avraham planted the name of Hashem was proclaimed "G-d of the entire universe." For after the guests had eaten and drunk Avraham said to them, "Bless Him of whose possessions you have eaten! Do you think that you have eaten of what is mine? You have eaten of that which belongs to Him Who spoke and the Universe came into existence (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 10a), (Rashi, *Bereishit* 21:33). When people refused to thank Hashem, Avraham would make them pay. It was either 'pay' or 'pray.' This way he brought numerous people to recognize Hashem and taught them how to thank Him for their sustenance. Many years ago, I learned that Avraham would teach his guests to thank Hashem through the words that later became the first paragraph of Grace after Meals, invented by Avraham. I have searched long hours for a source for this, to no avail; if any of you can help me I will be very grateful.

### Revealing the Eternal Hidden G-d of the World

וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהִים/Vayikra sham b'shem Hashem E-I Olam – He called there in the name of Hashem the G-d of the *Olam* – (world/hidden/forever), (*Bereishit* 21:33).

The word עולם/*olam* has several meanings. It can mean both 'world' and 'hidden,' since G-d is hidden in His world. Next to this *eshel*, Avraham proclaimed the name of G-d and revealed the aspect of G-d hidden beyond the surface of what can be experienced. Since the future is hidden from us, the same word also means future – eternity לעולם/*'olam* – forever (Hirsch). Moreover, a tree also alludes the notion of future, since it takes time for it to grow and bear fruits. Even before Yitzchak, Avraham's choicest fruit, was born, Avraham publicized the existence of G-d, His individual providence and unity. However, without a future continuation, all of Avraham's teachings would have been forgotten, as the midrash states, that all the souls that they had made in Charan reverted back to their old ways. However, when Yitzchak, his spiritual heir was born, Avraham's teachings got an everlasting continuation in the world (*Meshech Chachma, Bereishit, 21:33*).

### Planting and Proclaiming Hashem in the World

Avraham wanted to plant trees and orchards to make use of the water from the well he had dug there – in order that he, together with the guests who came to his house, could benefit from the fruits. What is the connection between planting an orchard and calling out G-d's name? Through gardening and planting our G-d-consciousness is expanded. "Since the effort of the righteous in planting is a preparation for intellectual (and spiritual) actions. Therefore, it is written immediately afterwards AND HE CALLED THERE IN THE NAME OF G-D" (*Rabeinu Bachaya, Bereishit 22:33*). Calling in the name of G-d can also refer to prayer (*Targum Unkelus, Ramban*). Gardening prompts us to pray by making us aware of how each plant needs Hashem's blessing to survive and grow. The אֶשֶׁל /*eshel* is possible the name of a tree called in English Tamarisk. This tree is a wonderful cooling shade tree in the desert because it exudes tiny salt crystals. During the night water vapor adheres to these crystals and condenses into droplets. Under the warming sun the water evaporates and provides a cooler shade than regular trees (Nogah Hareuveni, *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage* p. 24).

### Inheriting the Garden of Eden

By unscrambling the letters of the word אֶשֶׁל/*eshel* you can get the word, שאל/*sha'al* – ask, for Avraham would tell all his guests, "Ask anything you would like," and he would give them whatever they requested. אֶשֶׁל/*eshel* is also an acronym for אכילה/*achila* – eating, שתייה/*shetiyah* – drinking, לוייה/*levia* – escorting, or לינה/*lodging*. Through the planting of the *eshel* which symbolizes the three mitzvot of welcoming guests – the ultimate emulation and expression of G-d's character of *chesed* (kindness), we may walk in Avraham's footsteps. Thus, revealing and expressing the name of Hashem within the physical world. This way, we too, can rectify "the cuttings of Adam" – the selfish grabbing of the first human beings, which consequently caused their expulsion from the Garden. It states twice in the Torah "he planted." 1. "Hashem planted a Garden eastward in Eden," 2. "Avraham planted an *eshel*..." This is to teach you that whoever performs the mitzvah of welcoming guests will inherit the Garden of Eden (*Rabbeinu Bachaya*).