

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Shoftim* – Does the Torah Permit Tree-Hugging?

#### Tree Worship or Tree Praise?

I must have been born a nature lover. Most of my childhood and early youth I lived near the famous Danish deer-park forest. We lived on “Along the Forest Fence Street” and the forest actually extended into our backyard where two awesome immense beech trees surrounded by natural grass, and flowers was a most welcome part of our garden. I loved to sit under these trees and meditate sensing their amazing energy. In this forest, there are huge beech trees almost a thousand years old I was told. It is not hard to understand why tree worship has been so popular for generations. Trees are great; they can be large and powerful, give shade, food, wood for furniture and clean the air by transforming carbon dioxide to vital oxygen. Aren't trees Divine? In myth and legends, trees appear as sources of life and wisdom, as ladders between worlds. With their roots buried deep in the earth, their trunks above ground, and their branches stretching toward the sky, trees served as symbolic, living links between this world and the beyond. During the iron age, Druidism were involved cultic practice in sacred groves, especially the oak. The term *druid* itself possibly derives from the Celtic word for oak. In the wake of the Celtic revival during the 18th and 19th centuries, Neo-Druidism was founded based on ideas about the ancient druids. Forests play a prominent role in many folktales and legends. In these dark, mysterious places, heroes can lose their way, face unexpected challenges, and stumble on hidden secrets. In Chassidic stories as well, forests and trees play a central role. The Ba'al Shem Tov used to go into certain forests to meditate, and Rabbi Nachman taught that the best place to do *hitbodedut* was in a field or forest, among the natural works of Hashem's creation. In this week's *parasha* we are commanded to treat trees with utmost respect, being prohibited from cutting down fruit trees even for the sake of winning a war because trees are similar to humans. “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down; for is the tree of the field human that it should be besieged by you?” (*Devarim* 20:19). Why is “the tree of the field” compared to a person? What is the resemblance between the loftiest creature and lowly vegetation?” Furthermore, what is the difference between tree worship of the nations and the Torah's reverence for trees?

#### Tree Huggers

As an avid environmentalist since childhood, I have often been called a ‘Tree Hugger.’ Now it has actually been scientifically proven that touching a tree can improve our health. Its different vibrational pattern affects various biological behaviors within our body. Matthew Silverstone in his book, “[Blinded By Science](#)” brings evidence confirming that trees have numerous healthful benefits on humans which includes alleviating depression, and headaches while strengthening concentration levels and working memory. The book cites a large variety of studies showcasing how children who regularly interact with plants and trees reap extreme psychological and physiological improvement in their overall health and well-being. One report even concluded the following: “safe, green spaces

may be effective in treating some forms of mental illnesses.” Imagine doctors prescribing, an hour a day in a forest, instead of various pharmaceutical drugs with numerous side effects. In Japan, people practice ‘forest bathing,’ where they spend quiet time absorbing the wisdom of ancient forests, taking long walks among the trees to stimulate their immune system. Taoism encourages meditation among trees, to release negative energy, and it is believed that the trees will absorb negative energies, replacing them with healthy ones. Trees are seen as a source of emotional and physical healing, as meditators, absorbing universal energies. [NatureAndHealth.com](http://NatureAndHealth.com). So what is the Torah view of trees, and tree huggers? Does the Torah agree that “Trees are the source of emotional and physical healing?”

### Distancing Trees from the Altar of Hashem

This week’s *parasha* includes two different references to trees. The first is the prohibition of planting trees on the Temple mount in proximity with the altar where we sacrifice to Hashem.

**ספר דברים פרק טז (כא)** לא תטע לך אֲשֵׁרָה כָּל עֵץ אֲצֵל מִזְבַּח הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ:

“You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree beside the altar of Hashem your G-d, which you shall make for yourself” (*Devarim* 16:21).

This prohibition simply comes to ensure that when we sacrifice to Hashem it shouldn’t look as if we are coming to worship the trees (*Chizkuni*). Throughout early Biblical history, the Israelites have not been immune to the Canaanite tree worship of the Asherah – the Amorite tree goddess. (*The Ancient Near East Volume 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 97). The main era of worshipping the Asherah spanned from 2000 BCE to 500 BCE (Michael Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Gods* (New York: Facts On File, 1993), p. 27). Ramban explains that planting trees by the altar was prohibited because it was the way of the idol-worshippers to plant trees at the entrances of their sanctuaries.

### Bribing the Judge and Trees by the Altar

The Talmud learns from the juxtaposition between the first Torah verse in our *parasha* charging Israel to appoint judges and the prohibition to plant an Asherah or any tree by the altar that appointing an unfit judge is compared to planting an Asherah (*Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah* 52a). *Meschech Chachma* explains the connection as follows: Just as a proper judge cannot be bribed to make an unfair judgment; likewise Hashem cannot be bribed by our sacrifices, as He doesn’t need anything in His perfection. This stands in contrast to idol-worship where it is believed that the various gods need the sacrifices for their sustenance, and as an exchange, the gods provide their worshippers with their various needs. Yet, receiving Hashem’s blessings is not contingent upon the sacrifices, which are for our sake rather than for His. This is alluded to in the end of our Torah verse “...the altar of Hashem your G-d, which you shall make for yourself.” Hashem doesn’t need nourishment as He is unchangeable. For this reason, the altar must be made of inanimate stones that do not grow and don’t need anything from people. This is unlike trees, which need water and compost in order to grow. The name אֲשֵׁרָה/*Asherah* stems from the word הִתְאַשֵׁר/*hitasher*, which denotes their ability to increase and grow. Therefore, in order that it shouldn’t look as if Hashem is nourished by our worship, the Torah prohibits planting trees by the altar.

## Walking on the Tightrope between Tree Worship and Veneration

In contrast to the prohibition of planting trees, this week's *parasha* furthermore includes a prohibition against cutting down fruit trees, in respect of the tree which is compared to a human being (*Devarim* 20:19). The special quality of trees is their attachment to the earth, the source from whence they derive their existence and nourishment. A person's emotional traits are likened to a tree that embodies growth and development. This is in contrast to Hashem who remains the same before and after creation. Judaism's respect for trees thus derives from its respect of people. Trees are compared to people but not to G-d. So where does this concept take us in terms of connecting with trees? Is a G-d fearing Jew permitted to be a Tree hugger? I believe the answer to this question is yes and no. Because trees are so powerful and the Hebrew word for tree – *ילן/ilan* is related to the word for G-d – *אל/El*, the Torah warns us against mistaking a tree for a deity. Therefore, we must distance trees as much as possible from our worship of Hashem to instill within us that no matter how powerful, majestic and healing, trees are not gods. Judaism does not believe that "Trees are the source of emotional and physical healing?" Only Hashem is the source of all healing. Trees may be a vehicle through which Hashem's healing energy manifest, but they are only the means rather than the source. This subtle difference cannot be emphasized enough. Judaism is not a pantheistic religion, which believes that G-d and nature is one. We do not believe that the tree, the flower or the mountain is G-d, but rather that they are all creations of G-d. "Hashem is the place of the world, but the world is not his place" (*Tikunei Zohar* 81:2). The world is part of G-d, but G-d cannot be contained within the world, not even within King Solomon's glorious Temple (*I Melachim* 8:27). This panentheistic view is the fine line that separates us from the pantheistic idol-worship. Trees can be beneficial for us in many ways just as there are people who help us to heal, develop and grow. Trees derive their amazing specialness from G-d just like people to whom they are compared. When we master walking on the tightrope of differentiating between the holiness of a tree and the holiness of Hashem then we may even be permitted to hug a tree, just as we would hug a friend.