



What Do the Trees of Knowledge and the Trees of Life Represent in the Human Psyche?

The Tree of Life – Healing Before the Wound

A known principle in the Torah is “Hashem creates the healing before the wound.” Now that our world needs so much healing, it is encouraging to know that the healing is already here. We just need to search and discover this healing to pull it out of its concealment. Believing that Hashem creates the healing before the wound, teaches us that the creation of any wound, illness or pain only comes upon us for the sake of our finding its hidden healing, by mending our ways. I believe that the root of every ailment and its healing is found in the creation story, described in *Parashat Bereishit*. The Tree of Knowledge is the root of all wounds and illness, be it physical or mental, whereas the Tree of Life is the root of all healing. It's just not so simple to identify these trees today. They are not necessarily physical trees, rather, they represent abstract concepts. Before eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the first humans were like the angels, desiring only to do good. Evil was separate from the human psyche, and it was not in human nature to desire it. Since Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil before Shabbat, when human nature had not yet been established, they caused the possibility of evil to become entrenched within the very nature of humanity for all future time. Since then, good and evil became interspersed within every person, and this turned the human heart into a heart of stone. The Tree of Life has the ability to grant us eternal life, by restoring the heart to become a heart of flesh (Based on Rav Tzaddok of Lubin, *Likutei Amerim* 10). Whereas, a heart of stone is cold and dead, the healing of the Tree of Life opens our heart to become warm, alive and vibrant. This explains why, “there is nothing more whole than a broken heart.” This is because it prompts us to break the stone heart-walls that surround our hearts and prevent us from being in touch with our feelings. All the wounds and uncertainty of the current pandemic, that break our hearts big time, simultaneously bring ultimate healing by transforming our heart of stone to once again become a feeling heart. During this process, we are developing our sensitivity to be in touch with not only our own, but also the feelings of others. Opening our heart is the beginning of healing.

In the Middle of the Garden – Reaching the Middle Ground

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וַיֵּצֵא ה' אֱלֹהִים מִן הָאֲדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נֹחֵם לִמְרֹאָה וְטוֹב לִמְאֹכֵל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן הַדֹּעַת טוֹב וְרָע:
 “Hashem, G-d caused to sprout from the ground every tree pleasant to see and good to eat, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil” (*Bereishit* 2:9).

The commentaries are puzzled about the description of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge as being located “in the midst of the garden.” They give various answers as to how two trees could both be in the middle point of the garden. Perhaps, they were both planted inside a circle, in the middle of the garden, making a broad middle. Another possibility, is that both trees were truly in the middle point of the garden, with the Tree of Knowledge surrounding the Tree of Life, in such a way that it was impossible to reach the Tree of Life, until after having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, thus paving an access way to the Tree of Life (*HaTur HaAruch*). What difference does it make which trees were in the middle of the garden, that the Torah should emphasize it? Also, when the woman answered the snake, she didn't even mention the name of

the tree, but only its location: "But of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, G-d said, 'You shall not eat of it, and you shall not touch it, lest you die'" (*Bereishit* 3:3). Radak explains that G-d had made the Tree of Life grow in the center of the garden, to protect it. Something to be cared for is placed in the center, where it is surrounded, i.e. protected, from all sides equally. Our most precious organs – the heart and lungs – are surrounded by all manner of protective bone, flesh, and other tissue. These all act like a wall protecting the inner organs from injury. The notion that the Tree of Life is in the middle of the garden may also allude to the fact that the middle, balanced way is the optimal way of life, as Rambam teaches in his *Shemone Perakim*. For both mental and physical health, it is important to stay away from being extreme, even from being overly righteous. Anyone who is too extreme in any way, must turn to the other extreme, in order to reach the middle ground.

Conscious Choice in the Centralities of Our Lives

All the trees in the Garden of Eden were divine evergreens with perpetual fruits, yet the trees in the midst of the garden were the most spiritual and holy. Had Adam and Eve eaten from the Tree of Life first, they would have become immortal, since their body and soul would have become unified never to separate again. Subsequently, eating from the Tree of Knowledge would have brought us to the greatest perfection, enabling us to consciously choose good, without being tempted by evil. Yet, eating from the Tree of Knowledge, first, caused mortality, as the evil of the Tree of Knowledge attached itself to our body, before it had been refined by the Tree of life (*Chatam Sofer, Bereishit* 2:9). I take from this, that we must put effort into choosing the priorities that occupy the center of our lives. For example, when deciding where to live, we must choose the Tree of Life – the place where we can grow most in Torah – over the Tree of Knowledge – comfort and income. The Tree of Life is the Torah (*Mishlei* 3:18), which instructs us how to live a wholesome life and attain eternal life. This is also alluded to by the fact that the word עץ/etz – 'tree' is related to the word עצה/etzah – 'advice' (*Haketav v'Hakebalah* ibid.)

Do we 'Eat to live' or 'Live to Eat'

"Since eating is central to Judaism, the trees "in the midst of the garden" may relate to our way of eating. Rebbe Nachman of Breslev identifies the desire for food and drink as the central desire of human beings, from which all other desires emanate (*Likutei Moharan* I, 62:5). Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen teaches that the Tree of Life represents holy eating, whereas, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represents lustful eating (Pri Tzadik, *Bereishit* 8). Humanity's first sin was not the eating of forbidden fruit, but rather the way they ate it. The Tree of Knowledge... was not a tree or a food or a thing at all. Rather, it was a way of eating. Whenever a person grabs self-conscious pleasure from the world, at that moment, he falls from G-d consciousness... Whenever we eat without proper kavanna (intention), we repeat this original sin (Sarah Yehudit Schneider, *Eating as Tikun*). Rambam speaks at length about how eating influences our health. Most important for conserving our health is to avoid emotional eating, as Rambam teaches, "A person should never eat unless he is hungry, nor drink unless thirsty..." (*Hilchot De'ot* 4:1). "It is well known that intemperance in eating, drinking, and sexuality, that people mostly indulge in are the very things that counteract the ultimate perfection of humanity" (Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed* Part 3, Chapter 33). The current rise in awareness of healthy, mindful eating is a vital part of healing our lives. Choosing to 'eat to live' rather than 'live to eat,' transforms the Tree of Knowledge into the Tree of Life and leads us back to the Garden.

Unifying the Human Duality Tree

The notion that the trees in the middle of the garden represented two different ways rather than two separate trees, is supported by classical commentaries: Just as we can describe a person as wise and also righteous, it is possible that the terms Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge referred

to only one tree. This is also understood from the woman's answer, "But of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden." She did not specify the actual tree, since it was clear that there was only one tree in the midst of the garden (*HaTur HaAroch, Bereishit 2:9*). Perhaps, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life refer to different aspects of the human being, as it states, "a person is a tree of the field" (*Devarim 20:20*). When I was a little girl, my mother used to say, "There is the 'good Hanne' and the 'naughty Hanne. Let us ask the 'good Hanne to come back!'" When we are full of doubts and misgivings, we reflect the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – our naughty, disobedient self. Yet, through steadfast emunah and attaching ourselves to the Torah, we return to become our best and highest self, as it states, "She is a tree of life to those who support her, and whoever holds on to her is happy" (*Mishlei 3:18*). Choosing to be happy, by looking for the good within these challenging times, is the key to our ultimate healing. In the end of days, we will grow out of our naughty, dissatisfied, complaining streak and return to be the 'good me and you,' thereby eliminating ailments and aging. Then, the Tree of Knowledge within will become eternally transformed to the Tree of life, and we will be worthy of returning to the Garden and living forever. As it states, "He has nullified death forever, and Hashem G-d shall wipe the tears off every face... (*Yesha'yahu 25:8*).