



A Garden of Possibility • Parshat Bereishit

The joy of starting the Torah cycle again is twinned with the sense of new interpretive possibilities that once again unfold. We may have read the first chapter of Genesis dozens, if not hundreds of times, but we bring a new self to it this week, a self that is a year older and made wiser through new experiences and insights.

We'll begin where our most foundational story began: in a garden. Why a garden? Everything about a garden thrums with new growth and possibility. Remember those little seeds in cups we planted as young schoolchildren? Remember the excitement of watching the first green sprout appear from the soil? In a garden, we cultivate that delight again and again.

Richard Powers in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Overstory*, writes, "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived." The book of Genesis opens with the verdancy of a tree-filled world. We humans only arrive later. On the third day, God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so." The text continues as speech brings forth action followed by evaluation: "The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good" (Gen. 1:11-12). Seeds speak to the generational continuity of creation; every living thing in this special garden can replicate itself.

Humans, new scientific research tells us, are similar to the trees that preceded them in creation. Humans were not only in the Garden, we were *of* the Garden. Formed from the dust, our namesake - Adam - signifies the loamy earth - the *adama* - that produced us. In Genesis 2, the Garden is described as a bare landscape in desperate need of a human/Divine partnership: "when no shrub (*si'akh*) of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the soil" (Gen. 2:5). Later, in Deuteronomy 20:19, humans are compared to trees; this prompted the midrashic comment: "This teaches that human life comes only from the tree" (*Sifrei* 203).

The Spanish medieval exegete Nahmanides observes that although vegetation was created in Genesis 1, its continued growth relies upon God's rain and the human gardener described in Genesis 2. God created a water supply and a person to tend and steward nature: "but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth. The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:6-7). This image is both primal and poetic.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, the twelfth century Spanish poet and commentator, defines the *si'akh* of Genesis 2:5 - typically translated as shrub - as a fruit-bearing tree. He then offers another definition for *si'akh*: conversation. This meaning is borne out by a quick study of the word's appearance

throughout *Tanakh*. *Si'akh* can also mean to sing (Judges 5:10), to speak (Job 12:8), to pray (Ps. 55:17), to meditate (Ps. 77:6), to praise (I Chronicles 16:9), and to complain (Job 7:11).

Is it possible that a word for many types of trees also signifies the varieties of speech? Yes. Speech, Ibn Ezra conjectures, is the fruit of our mouths. The similarity between humans and trees is not only in form, he writes, but in what we produce. Trees produce fruit. We produce words. Ibn Ezra then offers us a panoply of tree images we use to describe humans: limbs, trunks, roots, fruit, branches. Powers in *The Overstory* makes the comparison genetic, "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes..."

Ibn Ezra may have been on to something by alerting us to the linguistic "root" shared by trees and language. In 2015, Peter Wohlleben, a German forester who has devoted his life to the study of trees, published the bestselling book, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*. He challenges our common misconception of trees as loners that compete with other vegetation for water, sunlight, and nutrients. Mounting scientific evidence suggests that trees form alliances with other trees, even those not within the same species. They not only live cooperatively, they also communicate at the root level. Above ground, they use scent signals and pheromones to speak to each other. Through these complex, interconnected networks, trees send distress signals about drought, disease and insect attacks. Wohlleben calls it the "wood-wide web."

Powers, through one of his characters, described this majestic undergrowth in this way: "A forest knows things...There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware."

God's decision to create humans in this Garden may have been a way to communicate to Adam and Eve that they entered an interconnected natural world that predated them and required their leadership and tender care to bloom. The Garden was their classroom where they were to learn from trees how to nurture an interdependent universe that communicated under and above ground. By creating through the process of separation, God was showing Adam and Eve that on a cosmic level we are all profoundly connected. Trees were the best living example of this for the new couple. In *Studies in Spirituality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "If I were asked how to find God, I would say: Learn to listen. Listen to the song of the universe in the call of the birds, the rustle of trees..."

It's not hard to understand the implications of the tree/human comparison for leadership. "Root cause analysis" in leadership is the study of all that is unspoken underground that may shed light on organizational problems, prompting us to search for creative and lasting solutions. Examining underlying, causal issues can prevent problems from reemerging. More than that, taking the tree metaphor seriously in leadership implies alerting others to our inherent connectedness, especially when it is not obvious, especially in times of divisiveness. We lead when we select our words with intention and use them to create new possibilities. As the saying goes, what we pay attention to grows.

We are born "to work and to watch" this remarkable garden. The blessing of the very first psalm is also the blessing of what a great leader can do to protect and inspire us, "...like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives" (Ps. 1:3). Leaders help others flourish. John Gardner, in his book *On Leadership*, compares mentors to farmers. Every word we utter can be a seed to help someone else thrive. As we begin the Torah anew, we are challenged to think of how to tend to the world around us and within us. So, as we begin this sacred Torah cycle anew, who and what will you be growing this year?