GOD, MAN AND TREES OF EDEN: READINGS OF *PESHAT* AND *DERASH*

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INTRODUCTION

In his book *Genesis 1-11 Tales of the Earliest World*, Edwin Good points out the etiological motif of the Garden of Eden story. Following the macro-perspective of the first chapter of Genesis, in which mankind is but a component in the grand scheme of creation, chapters 2 and 3 focus on mankind's world, insofar as it discloses particulars of human nature and destiny. The Eden narrative offers a natural history of humankind's psyche vis a vis not only the origins of its sexual awareness but also of sexual politics, pangs of guilt and of childbirth, agrarianism, and ultimately human death. These accounts, explicit in the *peshat*, are introduced in a narrative particularly prone to midrashic readings that probe further into these and other facets of the human character.

Paul Morris discusses the Eden story as a seminal narrative of Western thought, listing thinkers from Milton to Fromm who have conceptualized, formatted and refined perspectives of our primary relationships "between man and woman, humanity and deity and man and nature" through it, presenting what may be viewed as Western culture's modern midrash of the narrative.[1] The overwhelming majority of these readings, as rabbinic midrash, address interpersonal relations and humankind's relation to God. Conceptualization of man's relation to nature has occupied a secondary role, only infrequently going beyond the concise description of humankind's mandate *to till and to tend* the garden (Gen. 2:15). Considering the centrality of trees as agents in the narrative and their pivotal role in man's destiny, it is surprising how little has been drawn from it regarding man's relation to nature in general and to trees in particular. In the following pages, I explore undercurrents of the Eden story that highlight the evolution of an interrelationship between God and Mankind, sub currents that play out through the trees of the Garden.

The assumption that the Bible takes a stance on mankind's relation to trees requires buttressing. The scriptures are replete with tree imagery, most famously in the first Psalm's depiction of the righteous as *a tree planted beside*

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streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades and whatever it produces thrives (Ps. 1:3). Somewhat less familiar is Job's woeful contrast: *There is hope for a tree; if it is cut down it will renew itself; its shoots will not cease. If its roots are old in the earth, and its stump dies in the ground, at the scent of water it will bud and produce branches like a sapling. But mortals languish and die; man expires; where is he? The waters of the sea fail, and the river dries up and is parched. So man lies down never to rise...* (Job 14:7-12). To these we may add Jotham's parable (Judg. 9:8-15), Isaiah's assertion: …*the days of my people are as the days of the tree* (Isa. 65:22), and Amos's visionary proclamation: …*I will plant them upon their soil nevermore to be uprooted from the soil I have given them* (Amos 9:15). In and of themselves, these flowery images indicate little beyond the fact that biblical society was familiar with trees and, as such, trees were a ready and convenient metaphor for man.[2]

A more explicit biblical disposition surfaces from two legal passages. The underlying principle for the prohibition for cutting down fruit trees for the purpose of besieging a city asserted in Deuteronomy 20:19: *ki ha-adam etz ha-sadeh…*, read either as a rhetorical question (according to Rashi*):* … are *trees of the field human…?* or according to Ibn Ezra as a metaphor : … *for man* is *a tree of the field…* that implies an essential relation between man and tree.[3] In the following chapter this juxtaposition of man and tree is eerily echoed in the instruction to cut the lifeless body of a man down from a tree before sunset, lest it defile the land (Deut. 21:22-23). The mirror imaging in these commandments is apparent as both are embedded in the context of death – the first to war and the second to capital punishment; but their respective trajectories are diametrically opposed. The fruit-bearing tree preserved on the battlefield for the sake of its future, life-sustaining produce being a tree of life. Conversely, the setting sun in the background of the corpse being cut down from a tree illustrates the termination of human life. The corpse is hanging on the tree in order to impress an admonitory image in the minds of all passersby who see it, while likely *ki ha-adam etz ha-sadeh…* or Job's lament resonates in their ears throughout the fleeting moments of this staged contrast. This is the tree of death. Evidently, Deuteronomy revisits an indigenous kinship between man and trees. To explore the inner workings of this

relationship we turn back to their respective creation narratives in Genesis 1 and the Eden story.[4]

In the overarching hierarchical scheme of creation in Genesis 1, trees appear on the third day as the pinnacle of the botanic sphere (1:11-12), three days prior to humans – the apex of animate creations. At the end of this chapter humans are distinguished by their designated diet: whereas animals and birds are allotted green leafy vegetation, humans are allotted plants along with their seeds and the fruit of all trees as well (Gen. 1:29-30). This intrinsic suitability of trees to humans is a harbinger of a more intimate and complex relationship in the Garden of Eden story, where in verses 7-9 not only are their creations recorded one after the other, but they are molded and sprouted as well respectively from the same soil as well. Six rather repetitive verses in Genesis 2 describe God's fashioning of man, of trees and their anticipated relationship. In verse 7, God fashions man from the earth. In verse 8, God plants a garden and places man in it. Though trees are not mentioned explicitly, they are implied in word *va-yita*, a verb that exclusively describes the planting of trees, so we envision man at this early point in the story, transplanted into a garden of trees. Verse 9 illustrates this habitat in greater detail: *… every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.* After a brief interlude describing the rivers of Eden, verses 15-16 inform us of man's symbiotic relation to the trees of the garden: they provide his food and sustenance. He in turn, secures their maintenance and upkeep by tilling and tending to the garden. Finally, verse 17 prohibits man from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, and proclaims the dire consequence of disobedience – death.

For obvious reasons, this tree, along with the tree of life, has drawn almost all of the exegetical and midrashic attention. It is essential though to consider these trees within the context of the chapter as a whole. First, we should note the significance of the trees' and of man's, being situated in a garden. The popular image of this garden is of a raw, natural rainforest-like setting, but the text explicitly indicates a planted garden. Two features distinguish a garden from a rainforest: It is a human environment in that it is essentially unnatural and man-made; as such it is controlled and structured. For the most part, the Garden of Eden fits this definition. Though he did not plan or plant

the garden, it is a habitat intended for man. As its designated steward, he tends to the garden, yet its structure – namely the two trees at its center – is his constant reminder of another's ultimate authority and ownership. As such, the intended role of the Tree of Knowledge is pedagogical.

EDEN: A GARDEN OF CREATIVE TRIALS AND ERRORS

Another observation that Edwin Good calls to our attention is the contrast between the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and that of the Garden of Eden. Chapter 1 depicts a seemingly perfect world in which all components are declared into being and pronounced good. At the chapter's end both creation and creator appear immaculate. In chapters 2 and 3, however, we encounter a more proactive and involved creator. Fourteen Hebrew verbs relate God's molding of man and animals from the earth, planting a garden, placing man in it, fashioning woman from man's body, walking through the garden and banishing man and woman from it. In contrast to the rhythmic refrain of perfection and goodness of chapter 1, God's second utterance in chapter 2 is *it is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a fitting helper* (Gen. 2:18). Not only is God's initial creation inadequate, but His first attempt to complete it by prescribing man with animals is unsuccessful. For his part, man is more than a prime creation with dominion over all living things; by naming the animals and Eve in the garden that God planted, he fulfills his role as God's creative partner. Man's poetic naming of woman… *this one at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman for from man she was taken* (Gen. 2:24), as the end of the verse confirms, is a sympathetic assertion of his own identity as well as hers. The stated likeness of himself in this novel creation is the bonding factor in their relationship, and the resemblance shadows his own creation "in the image and likeness of God" in Genesis 1:27 that too embodies the bond between the created and its creator. Evidently, Genesis 2 is a story of trial and error of a more God-like man and his more man-like Creator as each embarks upon an exploration of boundaries - his own as well as the other's.

As the story unfolds, we discover that even after the fashioning of a complementary and fairer sex, the human experiment is incomplete. It is left to man and woman to determine their ultimate human design through their own doing. The distinctly human senses of shame, guilt, responsibility and crea-

tivity, each instrumental in mankind's interaction with the rest of creation and its development, are born through human interaction with the Tree of Knowledge. This fatal human choice befits these chapters' general motif of the human inclination towards its own enterprise over God's. The Garden of Eden narrative is bracketed by references to man's tilling the soil to eat the fruit of his own labor, as opposed to that of God's planting. Chapter 2 opens with describing an incomplete world: … *and there was no man to till the soil* (Gen. 2:5) and chapter 3 concludes: *So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden to till the soil from which he was taken* (Gen. 3:23). As mentioned, man's choice mate is one that stems from his person, as opposed to God's earthen proposals from the animal world. This is further supported by the presentation later in the chapter of the fig leaves that man and woman sewed to cover their nakedness in contrast to the leather garments which God fashions and clothes them in at the story's end.

A close reading of the *peshat* suggests that man's preference of his own choices and creations over God's, if not a major theme of this story, is an intriguing and consistent undercurrent that plays out through man's relation to the trees of the garden. Man's cognizance of God's presence in the Garden was twofold: the prohibited fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was a reminder of God's dominion, and, man's fruit diet, requiring no human preparation, like the manna the Israelites ate in the desert, was a constant reminder of God's providence. In the aftermath of their transgression, man and woman turn to the trees of the garden to shelter themselves: *Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths. They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of the day; and man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden* (Gen. 3:7-8). M.D. Cassutto inferred from this the inescapability of the sinners from their crime. Flee, hide or masquerade as they may, their misdeed inevitably envelopes them.

Though the *peshat* of verse 8 is undoubtedly as the JPS translation has rendered it, the trees in it are written in singular: *be-tokh etz ha-gan*, "in the tree of garden."[5] Capitalizing on this single form, Isaac Abravanel insists that the sinners hid within the only tree that is central and essential in the story. In so doing, he explains God's curious query: '*Where are you?*' not as an informa-

tive question but the opening to his direct rebuke in verse 11. Whether hidden in or behind *the* Tree or various others, we may assume from the text's mention of the garden trees at all in verse 8 that, though unmentioned later in the consequences of man's sin, humankind's relation to them too was affected. We hear no insightful, definitive '*…bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, we shall be called…*' statement, reminiscent of man's previous preference of his materials. The reason for this is clear: their deed integrated shame as a crucial human characteristic and the shamed person is left at an overwhelming loss for words. However, their innovative use of fig leaves as well as their instinctive sheltering within or among Eden's tree(s) speaks volumes regarding their newly found kinship, less obvious albeit no less novel than woman's creation. Having ingested the fruit, internalized knowledge and reflected upon their inevitable shame, they turn to the tree(s) to fashion clothing – as it were "skin of their skin." Unawares, this transforms the trees of the garden into a human utility of a different nature than their creator's original pedagogical agenda. Initially intended to be a reminder of man's awareness of his creator, trees now address immediate human needs.[6] We will discuss ramifications of this newfound kinship further, but it is clear that the main point of the narrative is mankind's relation to God. In their exile, humankind will have to labor physically to provide food and spiritually to sustain this relationship.

COMMANDMENTS, HUMAN CREATIONS AND NATURE

Was man's preference of his own designs improper or out of place? Man's preference of his own creations over God's is perhaps most famously recorded in *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Tazria* 7), validated by the 2nd century tannaitic authority, Rabbi Akiva:

> The evil Tornus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva: "Whose deeds are finer? Those of the Holy One, blessed be He, or those of flesh and blood?" He answered, "Of flesh and blood are finer." Tornus Rufus said, "But can a human being make Heaven and Earth and the like?" Rabbi Akiva responded, "Do not give me an illustration of something that is higher than the creatures and over which we have no control, but give an example of something that pertains to human beings." He said, "Why do you circumcise yourselves?" Rabbi Akiva answered, "I knew you would ask me about this particular thing, there-

> fore I prefaced my words by telling you that the deeds of flesh and blood are finer than those of the Holy One, blessed be He." They brought before him raw grain and baked loaves, and Rabbi Akiva said: "These are the works of God and these are the works of flesh and blood, are not the latter finer?" They brought before him stalks of flax and fine garments from Beth She'an and he said: "These are the works of God and these are the works of flesh and blood, are not the latter finer?" Tornus Rufus said to him, "If He wished males to be circumcised, why do they not come from the womb that way?" . . . Rabbi Akiva replied: "As for your argument, why males are not born circumcised, the answer is that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave commandments to Israel for no other reason than to refine them by means of their observance, as David said: . . . *the word of the Lord is pure*… (Ps. 18:31)."

The author of this midrash has Tornus Rufus mask one inquiry in another. In a similar vein, Rabbi Akiva's reply is both straightforward and rich in undercurrents. Tornus Rufus' hidden agenda is to question circumcision, which, according to Roman sensibilities cast a blemish on a perfectly designed human body. In his justification of circumcision, Rabbi Akiva validates what we have identified as Adam's attitude regarding human concerns – man's works are indeed more humanly suited than those of God. The items with which Rabbi Akiva establishes this claim are noteworthy. He did not present symbols of great civilizations as elaborate palaces or intricate musical instruments, but loaves of bread and articles of clothing (sewn from a plant product), both of which are basic human necessities, and became so by man's own doing in the aftermath of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Equally noteworthy is that the agenda behind Tornus Rufus' question hearkens back to the birth of man as well. He asks: "If God wished males to be circumcised, why do they not come from the womb that way?" Though he could have, the author of the midrash does not have Rabbi Akiva respond with a rabbinic tradition that Adam, along with his son Seth, and later descendants Noah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Job all came into this world circumcised, implying that circumcision was God's original blueprint for man.[7] Instead he presents circumcision within a framework of commandments given to Israel by God for the purpose of their self-refinement. We have attributed the purpose of

God's first commandment to man to divine pedagogy. Though the text offers no hint regarding Adam's perception of his sole commandment, in our depiction of his inclinations Adam more likely perceived his singular prohibition as a personal constraint and limitation of his and Eve's potential Garden experience than as a means to their self-refinement.[8]

ORLAH: AN EVOLUTION OF EDEN'S FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Another intriguing link between circumcision and forbidden fruit may shed light on the difference between Adam's perception of divine commandment and that of Rabbi Akiva's. Circumcision is introduced in Genesis 17 as God's covenant with Abraham, marked by the removal of the foreskin, which in Hebrew is termed "the flesh of *orlah*". The only other commandment that claims this Hebrew word, in the Bible as well as in rabbinic literature, pertains to fruit trees. In Leviticus 19:23-25 we read:

> *When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden* [*'arelim*] *for you, not to be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit shall be set aside for jubilation before the Lord; and only in the fifth year may you use its fruit – that its yield to you may be increased: I the Lord am your God.*

Scripture offers no rationale for leaving the first three years' produce on the tree but Nahmanides states that it is in order for man to acknowledge God as the ultimate owner of the fruit of his labor.[9] As such, *'orlah* represents man's agricultural endeavor as a joint enterprise with God. Despite their common term, the commandments of circumcision and *'orlah* are rarely juxtaposed. The Bible does not specify instructions as detailed for the former as it does for the latter. Its particular anatomic location on the male body is referred to obscurely as *the flesh of* 'orlah.[10] The Talmudic scholars inquired in TB *Shabbat* 108a:

…How do we know that circumcision must be performed in that [particular] place? — *His 'orlah* is stated here (Gen. 17:14), and *its 'orlah* is stated elsewhere (Lev. 19:23): just as there something that produces fruit [is implied], here too something [the organ] that produces fruit [is meant].

Though the question is a primarily a practical one, their focus being on fruit and foreskin, inevitably the Talmud likens man to tree as well. Man and tree

appear to reflect each other in reverse fashion: While man's '*orlah* is to be proactively cut off, the tree's is to remain untouched by man and left in its natural state. Each of these commandments expresses man's acknowledgement of his partnered reality with God.[11]

In conclusion, it appears that the trial and error relationship between God and Man in the Garden of Eden, or more precisely the God – Tree – Man triad, continued to evolve in the aftermath of Adam and Eve's sin and banishment from the Garden of Eden. The sign of God's covenant with man, a symbol of the latter's partnered reality and ultimate dependence on God, relocated from an agent of the Tree of Knowledge to an internal awareness – a knowledgeable Mankind. Moreover, the fruit tree, as God's choice pedagogical agent, was not forsaken. It resumed its role as a symbol of God's joint endeavor with man, throughout the first four years of the tree's life. For all intents and purposes, the commandment of '*orlah* appears to have replaced the forbidden fruit of Eden. In keeping with Rabbi Akiva's philosophy and in contradistinction to its Edenic precursor, it is applied only to trees planted by human hands and the prohibition is curbed to the initial four years' produce. As such, it is embraced more willingly by man, as a means for his self-refinement.[12] These modifications may indicate a learning curve of God's too. In keeping with the associating and involved God of the Garden narrative, the commandment of '*orlah* symbolizes not only mankind's acknowledgement and awareness of its Creator, but also as a means for man to implement his innate sense of creativity and self-fulfillment, both on himself as a human civilization, and on the world for which he is charged with maintaining and developing.

NOTES

1. Morris, *A Walk in the Garden – Biblical Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, (Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 21.

2. Leopold, "The Forestry of the Prophets", *The Forester* 18 (1920), 412-419 reprinted in *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*, (Lexington Books 2001), 105-111.

3. Rashi and Ibn Ezra are medieval representatives of these exegetical traditions stretching from antiquity to the modern era. Rashi adopted the reading of Targum Onkelos, The Septuagint and *R. Yishmael's Mekhilta* which was assumed by the RSV and JPS translations. Ibn Ezra adopted *Sifrei*'s reading, which was later defended by Nahmanides and assumed by the King James translation.

4. For a full discussion of these contrasts see my article “He is like a tree planted besides streams of water….” Biblical Reflections of Trees and Men, *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 43:2, April 2015.

5. See Radak and M.D. Cassuto loc. cit. This reading stems from the Hebrew phrase *be-tokh etz ha-gan*, literally within the tree of the garden.

6. See S.R. Hirsch’s commentary on Eve’s naming of Cain (Gen. 4:1-2) which coincides with the mistaken mindset of solely human ownership of its creativity. Here, once the divine commandment was transgressed, the tree violated, man and woman treat the tree as entirely their own to satisfy their personal and immediate needs.

7. *Tanhuma*, Noah, 5.

8. This is the impression we get from Rabbi Yehoshua of Siknin’s depiction of the serpent’s argumentation in *Genesis Rabbah* 19:4: “He [the serpent] began speaking slander of his Creator saying ‘of this tree did He eat and then create the world; hence He orders you not to eat from it, so you will not create other worlds, for every person hates his fellow craftsmen.’” See also J.B. Soloveitchik’s elaborate discussion of Adam and Eve’s evolving perspective in *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (Ktav, 2005), 95-105.

9. Nahmanides, Lev. 19:23.

10. Genesis 17:11,14, Leviticus 12:3.

11. For a full discussion of this comparison see my article “He is like a tree planted besides streams of water….” Biblical Reflections of Trees and Men, *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 43:2, April 2015

12. Leviticus Rabbah 25:2.