



What Happened to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad?¹

An excerpt from Rabbi Dan Ornstein's upcoming book.

From the beginning, we and the trees have been an uneasy, restless family, all of us born in different eras, yet all of us born from the same soil of the earth.

*God formed the Earth-Person (Adam)
from the loose dirt of the earth (Adamah),
blowing into his nostrils the breath of life:
the Earth-Person became a living being.
God planted a garden in Eden, in the east,
and placed there the Earth-Person who had been fashioned.
And from the earth God caused to grow 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 Bad. (Genesis 2:7-8)*

The ground was our womb from which we both emerged and the place to which we would both return at death, but beyond this we seemed to have nothing in common. Maybe we earth people were destined to exercise unconditional mastery, our intellects soaring, it seemed, far above the massive crowns of the tallest trees?

*God settled the Earth-Person in the garden of Eden,
to work it and protect it. (Genesis 2:15)*

But let's look again at the story of our first extended family.
Distinct from all of Eden's trees and from humans were:

*...the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden...
and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.*

In the middle of the garden stood the Tree of (eternal) Life.
Perhaps in the middle of the garden, or perhaps elsewhere,
stood the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. From the very
beginning, apart from and among all the other trees, these two
stood out with extraordinary powers that we lacked: immortality
and "the knowledge of good and bad", everything "from A-Z". At
least these two trees were our equals, maybe our superiors:

*... the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden...
and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.*

Where exactly in the Garden of Eden was the Tree of
Knowledge? Had the Hebrew Bible wanted to be clear that it too
was in the middle of the Garden, it would have written:

*With the Tree of Life
and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad
in the middle of the garden.*

Separating the clause about the Tree of Knowledge from
this central locale excites deep curiosity. Was the Tree in the
middle of the Garden, singled out like the Tree of Life? Or was it
elsewhere? Everywhere? Everywhere that the other trees were?

The Bible further invites us to embrace this mystery when it
makes not only the Tree's locale, but also its identity, ambiguous.
God tells the first humans:

*"Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat;
but as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad,
you must not eat of it;
for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." (Genesis 2:16-17)*

How strange that God forbade eating from the Tree of
Knowledge and not from the Tree of Life, but at least God was
clear that this was the Tree God meant. Yet as the story moves
forward, even this becomes murky.

The serpent shrewdly approaches the First Woman (the Earth-
Person's partner, "Eve") to tempt her into eating from God's
forbidden Tree. She answers the serpent:

*"We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the Garden.
It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden
that God said:
'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'"
(Genesis 3:2-3)*

Her ambiguous words press the issue: which tree in the middle
of the Garden? The Tree of Life? The Tree of Knowledge? The
former is the only tree mentioned explicitly as having been placed
in the middle. The latter is the only tree mentioned explicitly
whose fruit is forbidden to eat. What is going on here?

More of this later. First, we witness the first woman's dangerous
adventure. Knowing that she lacks what "The Tree" possesses,
the First Woman gives into her temptations...or perhaps, she
forcefully moves her life forward:

*When the woman saw
that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes,
and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom,
she took of its fruit and ate.
She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)*

These words echo the earlier description of the Tree of
Knowledge; yet they also repeat with some variation the words
about all the trees of the Garden that God planted, as if no
difference exists between them and the two trees at the Garden's
center:

*And from the earth God caused to grow every tree
that was pleasing to the sight and good for food...
(Genesis 2:9)*

1. Recall that this introduction is contemporary midrash, in this case, my imaginative Jewish backstory that seeks to better understand the narratives of the Jewish Bible by "filling in the gaps" of the biblical text. It follows ancient forms of Jewish religious interpretation that I will discuss more in the chapters that follow. The italicized text is taken directly from the creation stories of the book of Genesis, chapters 2-3. The quotation about the Tree of Life is taken from the biblical book of Proverbs, 3:18. None of my interpretive expansions below is literally in the Bible. It is based upon my close, creative reading of Scripture that connects the Bible's original legendary source of wisdom, the Tree of Knowledge, to every tree on our planet.

2. BT Sanhedrin 38b

3. Edward Connery Lathem, ed. *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1969), p. 222

We leave the woman for a moment to wonder if perhaps the Tree of Knowledge was both apart from and a part of the rest of the Garden's trees: first among equals, but an intimate member of Eden's Arboretum nonetheless.

Now, back to her. For all its obscurity, the biblical text seems to suggest that the woman is standing in front of the Tree of Knowledge. She could chop It down, cut up Its limbs, burn It in a fireplace, turn It into logs, planks, chips, sawdust. The Tree would still have as much, if not more, power than her, for it possesses what she lacks: wisdom, potential limitless knowledge. She knows this, so she calculates the benefit from her actions against the repercussions of violating God's command. First Woman and her kind come from the same place as the Tree and its kind, the soil. When she and her husband, the Earth-Person, ingest its fruit and the wisdom it offers, they become, as it were, one with the Tree, distinct from all other life forms, and perilously like God. In heaven, a wary and threatened Creator decrees the first humans' exile:

*Then the eyes of both of them
were opened...
And God said, "Now that the Earth-
People have become like any of us,
knowing good and bad,
what if they should stretch out a hand
and take also from the Tree of Life and eat,
and live forever!" (Genesis 3:7, 22)*

An ancient Jewish story² teaches that the length of time from which our First Parents were created until God expelled them from Eden was no more than half a day. A bitter irony; all that arboreal wisdom in their bellies, blood and brains, with no place to use it except out in ruthless reality, beyond the walls of paradise, where mortality rules. Robert Frost captured brilliantly the tragedy of this primordial ordeal:

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.*

*Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.³*

Eden sank to grief as our First Parents were packed up and expelled, never to savor the possibility of eternal life, as God told them on the day of the expulsion:

*For dust you are
And to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:19)*



From the moment they left, Eden became eerily quieter and noisier. The earth people were gone, so the other living things reclaimed the spaces and the voices they had relinquished when the humans sprung up from the ground. Was that the moment when God took the Tree of Life, that ominous source of human "immortality impending", chopped it down and used it to make the scrolls on which the eternal words of scripture would be written?

It is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it... (Proverbs 3:18)

Would immortality become something to achieve with words, even as we would continue to be mortal like wood?

Equally important, what was the fate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad? Strange indeed that we can't seem to locate exactly where it was before "Eden sank to grief." After our first parents leave, the Bible says nothing more about it. Where did it go? Looking back at the ambiguities and mysteries with which the Bible tantalizes and tortures us, perhaps we can catch a fleeting glimmer of an answer. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad never went *anywhere* because it went *everywhere*.

Science teaches us that trees spread their seeds with the help of the wind that blows them and with the help of animals that eat and excrete them in forest corners near and far. Science also teaches us that in healthy forests there are mother trees, massive old growth wonders that coordinate nourishment and communication among entire groves of mixed tree species. Their

functions have rightly been compared to those of animals' central nervous systems, the seats of animal intelligence and wisdom. Finally, science teaches us that trees survive changes in the environment by ever-so-gradually migrating to more hospitable climes as those seeds come to rest, take root and grow in those places.

Science and biblical myth are not the same. The stories of the trees of Eden have no *scientific* validity; yet their metaphors and poetry provide us with deeper spiritual insight into the magnificent wisdom of the trees that scientific research corroborates. Thus, let's imagine another part of the Eden story: let's imagine our mythic ancestors as that wind, but more, as the animals. Once they ate from the Tree's wisdom fruit, it became part of them, and like anything eaten, it would be expelled from them: the Tree and its wisdom digested and put back into the soil, well beyond the mythic Eden, in and throughout the planet we know. Let's also consider that the Bible was ambiguous about the exact location of the Tree of Knowledge in Eden (in the center or everywhere?) because (contrary to the traditional explanation that eating Its fruit was a rebellion against God), it was in fact part of God's blessed survival strategy for us. The Tree might survive in Eden, but it would not thrive in that Fantasy Forest that provided no outlet for its many gifts and secrets to be revealed. Already in the Garden, the Tree of Knowledge was "on the move", preparing for its slow migration into reality, a Tree apart from and among all the other trees. Consuming Its fruit, our First Parents could no longer remain entirely of the earth, one with Nature's soil from which we and the trees were born: A part of and apart from Nature, no longer citizens of Eden's Fantasy Forest – they left and took Knowledge with them into the world as we know it. Finding homes in the earth, the descendants of the Tree of Knowledge grew into more than eighty thousand species of trees, all different, all the same, rooted in the original Trees of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad especially. They include Mother trees that hold in their mycorrhiza, (intertwined roots and fungi), trunks, branches and leaves unparalleled wisdom with which they "parent" widespread communities of diverse trees: so that they can live, so that we can all live. They include individual seedlings and saplings masterfully defying gravity to draw water up into their chlorophyll-washed green leaves that, with the sun's brilliant light, brilliantly produce their own food to eat and oxygen for the rest of us to breathe.

Reading Eden's tree story this way, I think about these things even more:

Every tree on the planet is the distant offspring of the Tree of Knowledge, a founding Parent of Eden's Grove.

Every tree among the three trillion worldwide you and I encounter possesses, as it were, the tiniest bit of wisdom and generosity of the original Tree. Each one provides oxygen, food, shade, medicine, animals' homes, a place of peace, inspiration and revival for us, a place of respite.

Everywhere any tree weaves its own food from sunlight, cooperates with other trees through its roots and fungi, figures out how to live longer than a thousand years, the Tree of knowledge is giving us a taste of the insights we have yet to consume.

Every time we, our first parents' descendants, encounter and learn from a tree, we are back in Eden and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad - everything from A to Z- is with us.

More and more, I can see each tree with its rooted feet, its trunk torso, its branches and branchlets spreading out in fractal glory like the fingers of my hand, its leaves nourishing me with oxygen while my alveoli nourish it with carbon dioxide. I recognize that evolutionarily we are so different, but we are almost reflections of each other at the same time. As I wrote above, from the beginning, we and the trees have been an uneasy, restless family, all of us born in different eras, yet all of us born from the same soil of the earth. Our older cousins preceded us by three hundred million years. We their younger kin have at times treated them with grace and wisdom, at too many other times with abuse.

I hear each tree call to me with ancestral words, Tzei u-l'mad, "No talking about us without us. Get up, go outside to learn, talk with us and learn." I leave the sterile comfort of indoor space, walk outside to speak with and learn from each of them. Each one stands, like me, crowns to roots, head to feet, waiting to be heard, demanding to hear from me. We are more alike than I have admitted. I hear those same human ancestors of mine call to me again:

A human is a tree of the field.

A tree of the field is human. (Based upon Deuteronomy 20:19)



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