

## Arboreal Wisdom? Epistemology and Ecology in Judaic Sources

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### ABSTRACT

What can trees teach us? Some, like Socrates, insist that there is no wisdom among the trees. Others contend that though trees appear wise, their insights transcend human intelligence and striving to grasp them is epistemologically futile. And still others hold that trees have much to offer humans if only we would take the time and effort to encounter them fully, bodily even. This paper explores such positions as they are articulated in those Judaic sources that speak explicitly of trees and their different kinds of arboreal wisdom.

“You must forgive me, dear friend. I’m a lover of learning,  
and open country and trees won’t teach me anything,  
whereas men in the town do.”  
Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230d.

Were Judaism to follow Socrates’ lead, this essay would be short indeed. This is because Socrates was a quintessential urbanite, so convinced that wisdom resided only within the city gates amongst fellow humans. Whatever existed beyond those barriers could only be wild and barbarous, unworthy of study or deserving respect. Of this he was certain: knowledge generally and wisdom in particular have only human provenances.<sup>1</sup>

Socrates’ disdain of nature and of trees specifically was not unique, of course. Consider the antipathy articulated by Moses toward those who would seek inspiration and protection among human-made wood idols: “There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone, that cannot see or

hear or eat or smell.”<sup>2</sup> His warnings against the seductions of worshipping insensate things are echoed by both the prophet Habbakuk<sup>3</sup> and King David.<sup>4</sup> They also insist that obeisance to manufactured idols is nothing but a sham, a delusional practice the end of which is only woody woe.

Were such denigration of nature and trees the predominant attitude in Jewish sources, we would have merely mentioned such sources as proof positive that whatever knowledge and wisdom we humans possess or claim to possess derives from our own ingenuity and insight. Of course, such anthropocentrism does not preclude revelation being a possible source of wisdom and guidance. But this attitude certainly would refute *ab initio* any impulse to look admiringly at the natural world beyond the city gates for glimmers of fact, value, insight or even self-knowledge. It would paint the natural world in a single hue, an undifferentiated and boring wasteland except for its base utility to city life.

### ***JUDAIC NATURE OF NATURE & ARBOREAL DIFFERENCE***

Thankfully such hostility toward nature does not dominate in the Judaic textual tradition. As will be demonstrated here, ample material exists in classic Jewish sources that acknowledge that nature and trees in particular are not all alike, and that they offer a variety of goods, such as, for example, being a fiery site of divine revelation itself.

Consider the fact that the very story of creation narrates a nature into being that is comprised of ecological niches rich with their own flora and fauna. Kind upon animal kind fly and walk, swim and swarm, creep and crawl. According to the first version of creation, trees are also dissimilar: there are seed-bearing plants and fruit trees<sup>5</sup> that are for humans to eat, while all the other animals shall consume the other green plants.<sup>6</sup> Such plants are deemed divinely good.

The second version of creation similarly portrays the natural world as composed of different kinds of things. Here, God trots before the primordial human all kinds of animals in hopes that one might satisfy the human’s existential loneliness.<sup>7</sup> That this experiment fails is, of course, a wonderment on so many levels. But perhaps even more fascinating is that God plants a garden with a wide array of flora and places therein the human. Observe the diverse kinds of plants in this Edenic garden:

Adonai God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom [God] had formed. And from the ground Adonai God caused to grow every tree that was pleasant 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.<sup>8</sup>

There are trees that are aesthetically pleasing, there are trees that are nutritious, and there are at least two special trees—one called the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the other that ominously sits in the garden’s center. The primordial human is situated in this garden and tasked to till and tend it. Heaped atop this responsibility is restraint: the human may eat of every tree except for the peculiar tree of the knowledge of good and evil; consuming from that special specimen carries lethal consequences.<sup>9</sup> About the tree of life in the garden’s center more will be said later.

For now, alone, naked, with barely a trowel in hand, this primordial person is bidden to steward this divine and edible garden. More, this person must somehow discern which tree is which. Some trees appear to be appetizing (“pleasant to the sight”) yet their real nutritional value is negligible if not deleterious. Other trees that are nutritious (“good for food”) may not be as aesthetically pleasing yet knowing which they are is existentially advantageous. The tree of moral knowledge, by contrast, eludes discovery because it lacks any special markings. The human could only know which specific tree it is from some other source. That other source is, of course, our wily friend the *naḥash*,<sup>10</sup> who comes to guile the second human, the woman, into eating from that very tree. To her, that tree appears simultaneously as nutritious, beautiful, and a desirable source of wisdom.<sup>11</sup> No wonder she plucks its fruit, takes a bite and gives some to her partner. Theologically speaking, that bite forever changed human history. Indeed, it changed humanity itself.

After this incident the other special tree—the otherwise unidentified tree in the middle of the garden—becomes even more valued. But more valued by whom? Even though they know precisely where it is, the now morally knowledgeable humans do not rush to it much less eat from it. Indeed, they remain blissfully ignorant of that central tree’s powers. Had they known, perhaps they might have rushed over to eat from it so to counteract the lethal demise promised them for nibbling the other tree’s forbidden fruit. But they do not. These now morally wise people do not care about that tree because they do not know what it is physically or what it promises metaphysically, but God surely does. God knows it is the tree of immortal life, and fearful that the humans become no different from deities generally, God banishes them from the garden altogether so to protect the tree from any human encroachment.<sup>12</sup>

Thus far the bible identifies many kinds of trees. There are edible ones; attractive ones; a morally illuminating one; and one theoretically promising immortality. In brief, trees supply various and necessary goods. Just as some provide physical sustenance, others are sources of aesthetic preference, or morality, or the very idea of futurity itself. And since God calls trees good and plants them in the first place, it stands to reason trees enjoy divine endorsement.

Indeed, consider the one flaring beyond the verdant garden and well outside any city gate. This tree burns with a flame that consumes it not. Astonished, Moses stops to investigate this phenomenon. It is precisely his turn to study nature—particularly a weird tree—that stimulates God to make Godself known to Moses.<sup>13</sup> Intentional human observation not just of nature but of trees as such, is thus a prerequisite for divine revelation. So too is the preservation of distance. God forbids Moses to come closer. Sight—the sense by which Moses chooses to study and learn about this strange fiery arboreal phenomenon—and sound—the sense by which God chooses to communicate with him—are distal senses. Too much intimacy would compromise the communion God seeks. The pedagogy of place, the teaching this or perhaps any tree can provide, requires both immediacy—no sandals, please—and some mediation—attend, but do not touch. When Moses prostrates himself, it is not from fear of witnessing the physical phenomenon of the enflamed ashless tree. Strange nature does not scare. Rather, he hides his face so to blind himself from seeing the metaphysical face of God. What is radically unknowable terrifies more than the currently unknown.

This incident suggests that this tree—any tree, for that matter, since this enlightening one is unspecified—can serve as both a medium of revelation as well as part of its message. Wisdom, and divine wisdom at that, may be encountered by and in a tree. There's just one caveat, of course: trees are revelatory if and only if one pauses long enough to observe them.

Such an interpretation is not too distant from a Levinasian one.

The idea that the other is the enemy of the Same is an abuse of the notion; its alterity does not bring us to the play of the dialectic, but to an incessant questioning, without any ultimate instance, of the priority and tranquility of the Same, like an inextinguishable flame which burns yet consumes nothing. And the form of this flame, surely, is the prescription of the Jewish Revelation, with its unfulfillable obligation. An unfulfillable obligation, a burning which does not even leave any ash, since ash would be still, in some respect, a substance resting on itself. The 'less' is forever bursting open, unable to contain the 'more' that it contains, in the form of the 'the one for the other.'<sup>14</sup>

On his account, though this burning tree is ashless, its residue is prescription, specifically God's instruction—nay, command—to liberate the Israelites. The tree patiently bursts open, forever revealing the boundless 'more' of the command that resides in the natural boundedness of the tree. In this way this inextinguishable bush embodies the eternity of "the one for the other" – the insatiable burning of responsibility for and obedience to the other's commanding presence.

For Levinas as for Moses, one may never and can never fully know the mystery of an other—be it human, tree, or divine. This very limitation bespeaks the existence of the other's transcendence that is irreducible to any substance that could, like ash, fall back inert upon itself. This means that what we know we know is limited; we can be certain about many things but our certainty cannot be exhaustive. Thus for Moses and Levinas, we can know *that* we are commanded, obligated, encumbered by the other others whom we encounter. But we cannot know the full nature of those commands and obligations and encumbrances before or during those encounters. We may only glimpse the other's transcendence in their fiery existence before we fall before them in obeisance. It cannot be otherwise, for were we to fully and truly know these other others, they would be neither: they would be same; they would be us and we would be so self-consumed we would be inert, ash, dead to the world. Such a collapse into self cannot and should not be.

## **ARBOREAL WISDOM**

For now, it seems Socrates and those other tree disparagers give expression to the underlying question: what can nature—and trees—do for me? In their view, the value of nature and trees rests solely on their utility for furthering human interests. There is no mystery or metaphysical feature to

trees. Senseless and dumb, there is no reason to give trees much thought or attention. Such people do not see trees for what they are but for what they can become through human hands, such as idols or siegeworks.

The bible on the whole strongly disagrees. It wonders not what trees can do *for* me but what they can do *to* me. Consider that trees shape and nourish our corporeal existence no less than our aesthetic preferences, our ethical impulses, and even our glimmers of holiness. That one tree holds the secret to longevity—a secret that would radically alter our very essence to be sure—yet is eternally beyond our reach, perhaps human mortality is purposeful and we should be content with our lot. The difference between Socrates and the Bible could not be more different or radical: the burning question is not what humans can make from trees but how trees make us human.

There is yet more. As we shall now see, Judaism contends that trees are a prime source of ideas, of all-encompassing conversation, and of contemplation of my very being in existential, philosophical, as well as theological terms. Some sources go on to hold that humans would do well to emulate trees, for arboreal existence is in many ways divine.

For example, in this prophetic text Jotham rails against his brother Abimelech who arrogantly appointed himself king over Israel. He conveys to the Israelites the danger of such monarchical comeuppance through a parable. Here trees are no longer trees *per se* but illustrations of some idea, which, in this instance, is the idea of proper governance. Through Jotham's mouth, trees bespeak the radical notion that when populations allow a ruler to be appointed without divine imprimatur, good candidates will and should rightfully decline the opportunity. This means the people in the end will find themselves a shady and shaky leader whose thorns promise only a fiery demise for the population itself. In this parable certain trees—the olive, fig, and vine—stand for the virtues of humility, unselfishness, and restraint, while others like the jujube tree represent vices of egoism and excessive overconfidence.<sup>15</sup>

More than merely representing ideas, virtues and vices, trees also speak of them through arboreal language.

*All the trees (הַיֵּשׁ) of the field (Genesis 2:5). All the trees, as it were, conversed (מִיְהוָה) with each other; all the trees, as it were, conversed with mankind; all the trees were created for man's companionship [or benefit].<sup>16</sup>*

This special language—hinted at in biblical materials—becomes for the rabbis one of the many secrets of the natural world that can be learned. No less than Hillel, a great sage who lived in Jerusalem during King Herod's reign, took pains to study the natural world and its secret languages alongside human sources.<sup>17</sup>

If it is true that trees communicate in their own language, it must be possible then to converse with them. On this account we can learn a great deal from them and of them. This is no fanciful rabbinic worldview, mind you. Consider that Martin Buber—the great 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and

theologian—situates encountering a tree as the example par excellence of relation and dialogue, even of contemplation itself.

In one text Buber describes holding his walking stick against an oak tree's trunk. In that instance he felt "contact with being."<sup>18</sup> He was simultaneously here *and* there. Moreover, his stick was the medium through which conversation—the transportation of ideas—occurs: it is genuine speech. But speech is not just a thing of this world, a substance like dead ash. Genuine, living speech entails both the physical me here and the insubstantial me over there where you—tree or person—are. In genuine speech I am simultaneously natural and supernatural. At one and the same time, I am comprehensible because I am tangible here ("where I am, where ganglia and organ of speech") and I am incomprehensible because I must be received over there ("also there, where he is, something of me is delegated...pure vibration and incomprehensible"). Though any and every reception is only partial, genuine speech is transcendent insofar as it breaks me from my groundedness here and transplants me over there where I am received. Genuine speech encompasses being ("I encompass him to whom I turn").

Trees communicate and thus also spark contemplation. In his famous *I and Thou*, Buber describes the various ways we contemplate and especially the ways we increasingly abstract from the beings we encounter.<sup>19</sup> This process decreases our intellectual proximity to that which we contemplate, dissolving it and ourselves into a mutual exile. Such is the power of I-It contemplation, of keeping beings as objects. A wholly different kind of encounter is possible that draws self and other out of exile and into true relation. Like gravity, there comes a point where "the power of exclusiveness seizes" and two entities encounter bodily, intimately, requiring no forgetting. And here Buber introduces reciprocity. Reciprocity is neither equality nor equanimity, but a *quid pro quo*, an encounter between different selves in which differences matter yet paradoxically are immaterial to the intensity of the relation itself. How a tree encounters me—whether it contemplates me at all and if it does, whether it contemplates me as I do it—remains transcendent, beyond the limits of my experience and knowledge. So even as I set about embracing this tree I encounter in front of me and allow myself to be seized by its very being, I must also embrace the limits of this encounter, that is, the limits of my own transcendence. For at one and the same time as I encounter this tree I am here *and* there, transmitting language from here *and* being received over there. I am here receiving arboreal communication—such as it is—*and* yet I can never completely situate myself there in and as the tree itself for I am forever, eternally, just me. The transcendence of such I-Thou relations paradoxically reveals my own boundedness and limitations, the edges of my existence, the bark of my being.

Buber's student and colleague Franz Rosenzweig similarly points to trees to investigate philosophical contemplation.

For experience knows nothing of objects; it remembers, it lives, it hopes and fears. At best, the content of memory could be understood as an object; [but] then it would be precisely an understanding, and not the content itself. For [the content] is not remembered as my object. It is nothing but a prejudice of the last three hundred

years that, in all knowing, the “I” must be present; thus that I could not see a tree unless “I” saw it. In truth, my I is only present if it – is present; for instance, if I have to emphasize that I see the tree because someone else does not see it, then, certainly, the tree is in connection with me in my knowing. But in all other cases I know only of the tree and nothing else; and the usual philosophical assertion of the I’s omnipresence in all knowing distorts the content of this knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

He criticizes the presumption of Western philosophy that its thoughts are atemporal, outside of time, eternal—as if its thinkers had already consumed of the tree of immortality. This deceit is egotistical, to say the least. By contrast, he calls for a new thinking that is more humble and earthy.

Why is truth so woefully  
Removed? To the deepest ground banned?  
None understands at the right time! If we  
But understood at the right time, how near and broad  
The truth would be, how lovely and mild!<sup>21</sup>

Pointing to Goethe’s observation that truth and wisdom are unearthed only at the right time, Rosenzweig’s new thinking champions verbs more than nouns. Movement, not stasis, is the stuff of life and thus the stuff of philosophy. This new thinking concerns more the very act of speaking than it does with what is actually said. As such, it requires thinking for the other, a reaching out toward the other, a rupturing oneself so to relate. It is where beings interact—where verb-ing occurs—that temporality itself eternally unfolds. Relation is where immortality resides.

Trees are instructive not only about the limits of our purported philosophical wisdom but also about the nature of our nature. Take, for example, the theological conviction that God is radically singular. It stands to reason for the 9<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Saadia Gaon that all other entities—trees and humans alike—cannot be radically singular.

When the substances of all beings are analyzed, they are found to be endowed with the attributes of heat and cold and moisture and dryness. When the substance of the tree is examined, it is found to include, in addition to the aforementioned, branches and leaves and fruits, and all that is connected therewith. When the human body, again, is examined, it is found to be composed, besides the elements listed above, of flesh and bones and sinews and arteries and muscles and all that goes with them.<sup>22</sup>

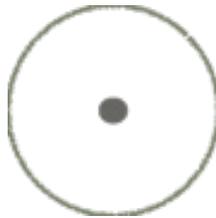
They—we—must be complex concoctions of multiple substances. Such discoveries about our physical existence sharpen our understandings of our metaphysical properties, and these discoveries emerge from our study of the natural world, especially of trees.

Even more profound, by appreciating how trees grow we can also come to know God. The renewal rabbi Zalman Shacter-Shalomi once observed that onions grow from the inside out while trees accrete age from the outside in.

I had often in my kitchen sliced an onion and seen how in the onion and other vegetables the rings evolve from the center of the onion: the newest ring is the nearest to the center. Not so in a tree. The tree grows from the growing edge, nearest the outside bark. The inner rings are from the youth of the tree and the outer ones are from the recent past. So every year a new ring begins at that growing edge. It is between the wood of last year's ring and the outer bark.<sup>23</sup>

Though he doesn't mention it, these are two forms of *tzimtzum*, the mystical notion of divine withdrawal that enables creation to occur in the first place. There is contraction *from a point*, as in trees growing outward, ever expanding into the world.

The Infinite contracted itself at its midpoint, in the exact center of its light, and after He contracted that light and withdrew away from that mid-point to the sides surrounding it, it left a vacant place - and empty space, and a void, like this:



That contraction was completely uniform around the midpoint, so that the void was uniformly circular on all sides. It was not shaped like a square with fixed corners, because the Infinite had contracted itself like a circle, uniformly from all sides.<sup>24</sup>

Here the past is kept locked within the ever accreting present, the future always awaiting beyond the bark's dark edges. The here and now forever contracts *away* from the tree's core, its origin and creation.

The other form of *tzimtzum* is constriction *into a point*, like onions ever expanding inward. This kind of *tzimtzum* pulses from within, pushing and stretching thin and ultimately bursting the past that used to be within. Try as they might, onions cannot crush themselves enough into a point, into the present, into here and now. Though true for onions, God is otherwise:

God said, "That which you are explaining [about the building of the Tabernacle] is only my own explaining: 20 side-boards in the north, 20 in the south, and 8 in the

west, and no more so I will come down and concentrate (תצמצא) my Shechinah inside measure for measure.”<sup>25</sup>

Just as we take both forms of plantlife seriously, so too should we consider both forms of *tzimtzum*. God both contracts the divine self to allow creation to come into being *and* God emanates from within the (relatively tiny) humanly constructed Tabernacle.

Just as trees teach us about God, they also teach us how to relate with God. As if with Socrates in mind, Jeremiah warns against trusting only humankind.

Thus said Adonai: “Accursed is the man who trusts in people and makes flesh his strength and turns his heart away from Adonai. He will be like a lone tree in the desert, and will not see when goodness comes; it dwells in parched lands in the wilderness, in a salty, uninhabited land. Blessed is the man who trusts in Adonai, then Adonai will be his security. He will be like a tree planted near water, which spreads out its roots along a brook and does not see when heat comes, whose foliage is ever fresh; it will not worry in a year of drought and will not stop producing fruit.”<sup>26</sup>

Those who do, suffer isolation in salty—and thus deadly—narcissism. Rather, those who trust God draw sustenance from elsewhere, outside themselves, and because of this they will exist forever fruitful, unperturbed even when climates change.

If only we planted ourselves firmly enough in God’s soil we would be just like trees, only inverted. In the view of Judah Lowe ben Bezalel, the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic of Prague, we humans are merely upside-down trees.

For, in truth, a man is called a tree of the field, as it is written, *Trees of the field are human* (Deuteronomy 20:19). It’s just that he is an upside-down tree, for the tree has its roots stuck below in the land, whereas man has his roots above, for the soul, which is his root, is from heaven. And the hands are the branches of the tree, the feet are the branches off the branches, his trunk is the center of the tree. And why is he an upside-down tree? Because the tree’s roots are below for the tree’s life is from the earth, while the life of a person’s soul is from heaven.<sup>27</sup>

Our roots entangled in heaven, our handy branches meddling in the mud of this world. Ironically, this echoes a different Platonic teaching that also discusses human nature in arboreal terms:

We declare that God has given to each of us, as his *daemon*, that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and which raises us—seeing that we are not an earthly but a heavenly plant up from earth towards our kindred in the heaven. And herein we speak most truly; for it is by suspending our head and root from that region whence

the substance of our soul first came that the Divine Power keeps upright our whole body.<sup>28</sup>

As if we are inverted trees, we solidify our roots the more we contend with holy or rational thought.

It is for perhaps this reason that being tree-like is desirable. Rabbi Nahman blesses his friend and colleague Rabbi Isaac thus: just as a tree whose fruit are sweet and offspring many, may your offspring be like you—endowed with the riches of the world, rooted in tradition, ever aiming toward understanding, illuminating and embodying God’s will.<sup>29</sup> That is, the idealized human is hardly different from a tree. To be human is to be arboreal.

### **ANTHROPOCENTRIC ABOREALISM?**

Even as we praise ourselves in and through trees, we must pause to wonder about this anthropocentric turn. Why and whence this impulse to compare humans to trees? Why should we aspire to be like trees? Why cannot we appreciate trees in and of themselves without this recursive and reflexive look upon ourselves? Is Socrates correct—that all knowledge necessarily reverts back to and upon the human condition? If this is the case, why distract ourselves with what grows beyond the city gates?

Perhaps a different perspective on these sources challenges the anthropocentric narrative I have just outlined. This other interpretation identifies at least three schools of thought weaving throughout the Judaic textual tradition that articulate distinct attitudes toward trees. The first group—including Genesis 3 and the tree of morality, *Masekhet Sofrim*’s Hillel learning the language of trees, the trees seeking rulers in Jeremiah, the talking trees in *Genesis Rabbah* 13.2, Jeremiah’s call to be tree-like, and the encounter in Buber’s *Meetings*—insist that we can and perhaps should know and experience what nature apparently hides, such as morality, immortality, proper governance, and certain virtues and the like. A second group holds that we cannot know such wisdom, for that would undermine the very nature of nature, insofar as that which is supernatural cannot reside in the natural lest it risk not being supernatural at all. This group would include Levinas, Buber’s *I and Thou*, Rosenzweig, Saadia Gaon, and Shachter-Shalomi. A third group, inclusive of *Genesis Rabbah* 15.6 and Genesis 3 about the tree of immortality, is more skeptical and ambivalent. Even if we could know what trees are and know, we should not. For this group, we should embrace the limits of our knowledge and of our being.

I am unwilling, at this stage, to claim that one is the dominant school of thought in Judaism and the others subordinate or countertraditions. Rather, I suggest that Judaism continues to wrestle with an ambivalence about the powers and limits of human knowledge. Indeed, all three schools of thought evidence an ongoing Judaic study of ecology in general and an appreciation of trees in particular.

Indeed, Judaism disagrees with Socrates’ call to close the city gates and presume that wisdom and flourishing are exclusively humanly derived. Rather, Judaism encourages us to break forth from

narcissistic civilization and encounter the natural world—especially as it is embodied in trees. For out there, in the embrace of those quietly communicating wise trees, we may encounter both revelation as well as ourselves.

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#### ENDNOTES

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1 See, for example, Michael Marder, “The Philosopher’s Plant 1.0: Plato’s Plane Tree.” *Project Syndicate*, November 26, 2012. [www.project-syndicate.org/print/plato-s-plane-tree](http://www.project-syndicate.org/print/plato-s-plane-tree).

2 Deuteronomy 4:28. All biblical translations taken from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999.

3 “Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman? Or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.” The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.” Habbakuk 2:18-20.

4 “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak; they have eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who fashion them, all who trust in them, shall become like them.” Psalms 135:15-17.

5 Genesis 1:11-12.

6 “God said, “See I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.” Genesis 1:29-30.

7 Genesis 2:18-20.

8 Genesis 2:8-9.

9 “Adonai God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And Adonai God commanded the man, saying, ‘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 2:15-17.

10 The *naḥash* is frequently translated as serpent or snake. What we now know as a serpent (a long, limbless creature that slithers in the dust and with whom humans have antipathy) becomes this identifiable creature only after and because of the curses meted out by God for the improper eating done by the human woman and man (Genesis 3:14-15). If these curses were to be existentially significant, the *naḥash* must *not* have been this kind of creature beforehand. The term *naḥash* thus captures the facts that this creature knew

divine knowledge (specifically about the tree of moral wisdom), knew human language, could converse with the humans which itself would not be unusual, and perhaps even had motivation to get the woman in trouble because the *nahash* itself wanted to be the fitting helpmeet but was, for one reason or another, not selected by the man.

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

12 “And Adonai God said, “Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!” So Adonai God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.” Genesis 3:22-24.

13 Exodus 3:1-6.

14 Emmanuel Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition.” In *The Levinas Reader*, 209. Edited by Sean Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

15 “All the inhabitants of Shechem and all of Bet-Millo gathered together, and they went and crowned Abimelech as king, by the Plain of the Monument, which was Shechem. They told Jotham, so he went and stood atop Mount Gerizzim and raised his voice and cried out; he said to them, “Listen to me, O inhabitants of Shechem, so that God may listen to you! The trees went to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us!’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I cause my richness to cease, whereby God and men honor themselves through me, and go to wave over the trees?’ Then the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You go and reign over us!’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I cause my sweetness and my goodly produce to cease, and go to wave over the trees?’ Then the trees said to the grapevine, ‘You go and reign over us!’ But the grapevine said to them, ‘Shall I give up my vintage that gladdens God and men, and go to wave over the trees?’ Then all the trees went to the jujube and said, ‘You go and reign over us!’ The jujube said to the trees, ‘If with honesty do you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, then may a flame come forth from the jujube and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’” Judges 9:6-15.

16 Genesis Rabbah 13.2, end.

17 “It is said of Hillel, that he did not omit to study any of the words of the sages, even all the languages, even the speech of the mountains, hills and valleys, the speech of trees and herbs, the speech of wild beasts and cattle, the speech of melody and of parable. Why did he study all of these? Because it is stated, *God was pleased, for God’s righteousness sake, to make the teaching great and glorious* (Isaiah 42:21).” Maskehet Ketanot, *Sofrim*, 16.7.

18 “After a descent during which I had to utilize without a halt the late light of a dying day, I stood on the edge of a meadow, now sure of the safe way, and let the twilight come down upon me. Not needing a support and

yet willing to afford my lingering a fixed point, I pressed my walking stick against a trunk of an oak tree. Then I felt in twofold fashion my contact with being: here, where I held the stick, and there, where it touched the bark. Apparently only where I was, I nonetheless found myself there too where I found the tree.

“At that time dialogue appeared to me. For the speech of man is like that stick wherever it is genuine speech, and that means: truly directed address. Here, where I am, where ganglia and organs of speech help me to form and to send forth the word, here I “mean” him to whom I send it, I intend him, this one unexchangeable man. But also there, where he is, something of me is delegated, something that is not at all substantial in nature like that being here, rather pure vibration and incomprehensible; that remains there, with him, the man meant by me, and takes part in the receiving of my word. I encompass him to whom I turn.” Found in Buber’s *Meetings*, “The Walking Stick and the Tree,” 41-42.

19 “I contemplate a tree.

I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground. I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air - and the growing itself in its darkness. I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life. I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law - those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate. I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it. Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me. This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused. Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars - all this in its entirety. The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it - only differently.

One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity.

Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.” Found in Buber’s *I and Thou*, 57-59.

20 Franz Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking.” In *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 120-121. Translated by Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan.

21 In “The New Thinking”, p 122.

22 “Inasmuch as the Creator of the universe, exalted and magnified be He, is essentially one, it follows by

logical necessity that His creatures be composed of many elements....

[T]he thing that generally gives the appearance of constituting a unity, whatever sort of unit it be, is singular only in number. Upon careful consideration, however, it is found to be of a multiple nature. To reduce this generalization to simpler terms, when the substances of all beings are analyzed, they are found to be endowed with the attributes of heat and cold and moisture and dryness. When the substance of the tree is examined, it is found to include, in addition to the aforementioned, branches and leaves and fruits, and all that is connected therewith. When the human body, again, is examined, it is found to be composed, besides the elements listed above, of flesh and bones and sinews and arteries and muscles and all that goes with them. This is a matter about which no doubt can be entertained and the reality of which is not to be denied." Gaon, Saadia. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise X. Translated by Samuel Rosenblatt. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1948.

23 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, "The Rings of Growth," In *Trees, Earth, and Torah*, 285.

24 Chayim Vital, *Etz Chayim*, 11-14.

25 Exodus Rabbah 35:1.

26 Jeremiah 17:5-8.

27 *Netsah Yisrael*, p 47, section 7; found in *Trees, Earth, and Torah*, p 298.

28 *Timaeus*, 90a-b. See discussion in Marder (2012).

29 "When they were about to part, [R. Nahman] said: Pray Master, bless me. [R. Isaac] replied: Let me tell you a parable — To what may this be compared? To a man who was journeying in the desert; he was hungry, weary and thirsty and he lighted upon a tree the fruits of which were sweet, its shade pleasant, and a stream of water flowing beneath it; he ate of its fruits, drank of the water, and rested under its shade. When he was about to continue his journey, he said: Tree, O Tree, with what shall I bless thee? Shall I say to thee, 'May thy fruits be sweet'? They are sweet already; that thy shade be pleasant? It is already pleasant; that a stream of water may flow beneath thee? Lo, a stream of water flows already beneath thee; therefore [I say], 'May it be [God's] will that all the shoots taken from thee be like unto thee.' So also with you. With what shall I bless you? With [the knowledge of the Torah?] You already possess [knowledge of the Torah]. With riches? You have riches already. With children? You have children already. Hence [I say], 'May it be [God's] will that your offspring be like unto you.'" BT *Ta'anit* 5b-6a.