

A Shoot From the Stem, a Branch From the Root

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Watching children plant and garden is a special joy. Children's ability to wonder at each stage of a plant's growth reminds us of what a truly remarkable process it is. From the breaking of a sprout through the soil, to its transformation into a recognizable food, it is a thrill to be a witness to the journey. One particularly powerful aspect of watching plants grow is observing things like how light affects their shape and direction or how color in root water will appear in the leaves. Plants allow us to clearly see the meeting of various elements that contribute to growth.

This Tu B'shvat, such an example could hardly be more appropriate. As we begin to rebound and regrow from the devastations of last year, we recall the words of Isaiah the prophet in response to devastation of his own time. Seeing only stems and roots remaining, he declares, full of hope, "a shoot will sprout from the stem...a branch from the roots" (11:1). We all have a role to play in this regrowth and we will all need to work together to strengthen one another's roots, offer one another light, and sup-

port the flourishing of one another's branches. In this spirit, we offer this collection of *divrei Torah*, which grew out of the teaching and learning principles of the [Pedagogy of Partnership](#) (PoP),¹ powered by the Hadar Institute. PoP works to support educators in bringing Torah to the next generation.

In particular, the pieces in this collection explore the following "stances" or attitudes towards learning found in PoP's approach:

- We all have something to learn and something to teach.
- The text (which can be a literal text, an image, or even something like the environment) has something to teach us, and we may need to listen to it carefully in order to learn.
- When we learn in relationship with Torah and other people, we can open ourselves to the possibility of experiencing a sense of *kedusha* (sacredness, spirituality).

The first piece, "The Original World Wide Web," brings us into the experience of reciting blessings

on food and how that act brings us into a relationship with what we consume and the environment it comes from. The next two contributions, "A Tree of Ages" and "Trees that Transgress," present us with what we have to learn from moments when trees defy the categories in which we often operate. In "Igniting the Flame of Torah" and "Trees of Life," we are immersed into the well-known metaphor for the Torah, "the Tree of Life," and discover brand new insight when we consider it as a model of the "what" and "how" of encountering others in study. Finally, we follow the educational journey of the Biblical characters Judah, Joseph, and Tamar in "Character Development & Personal Growth through Encounter."

It is our hope that this collection helps inspire all of us as we move forward in the work ahead of restoration and re-growth. Though the task is a tall one, we are surrounded by everyone and everything we need to ensure that the "shoot will grow from the stem...a branch from the root."

Rabbi Devin Maimon Villarreal,
Dr. Orit Kent, and
Allison Cook

¹ Pedagogy of Partnership is a comprehensive Jewish educational model that supports educators to bring Torah to the next generation. Rooted in Jewish values and practices, PoP enables learners of all ages to develop the habits of wonder, empathy, and responsibility toward others and Torah. PoP conducts professional development workshops, coaching, a fellowship program for a growing network of schools, and provides ready-to-use materials for educators, leaders and families. In this time of physical distance, the PoP approach restores relationship building to its central place in education and promotes connectivity. PoP is powered by the Hadar Institute.

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The Original World Wide Web



Stu Jacobs

I absolutely love food. Eating, cooking, hosting, and catering have been passions of mine for as long as I can remember. Yet recently I've come to wonder, is food the thing I am in love with or, maybe, is it the experience of eating towards which I've always been drawn? Maybe food itself plays a supporting role to the enjoyment that can be had in taking the time to nourish and refresh my body and soul. To illustrate, for those who have a ritual of drinking coffee each day, take a moment to reflect on your coffee ritual and try to decipher whether that anticipation you get when your designated time of coffee consumption approaches is due to the coffee itself or to the experience that surrounds the drinking of the coffee. While the coffee may be rich, warm, and flavorful, maybe that's not actually why you anxiously await it. Maybe it is the solitary alone-time that accompanies

the coffee drinking. Maybe it is the chance to catch up with a friend or colleague (these days, likely over Zoom) while enjoying your coffee. Maybe it is the bit of reading or reflecting you are able to do while sipping from your mug.

The coffee itself may be the vehicle through which we connect to ourselves, our community, or the vast world we inhabit. Jewish practice, for millennia, has been exhorting us to take a moment to recognize the connectedness inherent in each and every opportunity we have to gain nourishment through the ritual of reciting *berakhot*, blessings, prior to the food that we eat or beverages we drink. For instance, before drinking coffee we recite the *berakhah* referred to as *she-hakol*:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָ בְּדַבְּרָךְ

Blessed are You, A-donai, our God, Sovereign of the universe, by Whose word all (*she-hakol*) has come into being.

Due to the brevity of the *berakhah* we recite prior to eating as contrasted with the lengthier versions we recite at the conclusion of eating, we can often miss the beauty of what Judaism is asking us to do every time we eat. If you ask most people, and I've asked many of my students, what the purpose of these pre-eating *berakhot* is, the answer is almost always gratitude. While a sense of gratitude and appreciation is certainly a component, I would argue that the recitation of this *berakhah* is demanding us to mindfully tap into the connectedness of ourselves to the world around us.

Let's break down the process of making the pre-consuming *berakhah* down a bit. In order to recite the proper *berakhah*, we have to



identify the food or drink we are about to partake of and consider the connection between that food and its original source. In the case of coffee, we bring to mind that coffee beans come from trees. That might indicate making the blessing said on fruit, but we also must recall that it has been through a roasting and brewing process resulting in the drink in my hand, which would indicate that we in fact recite the *berakhah she-hakol*. Once aware of the appropriate *berakhah*, we recite it, a one-liner that incorporates the original source of the food or drink together with praise for God, the Ultimate Source.

Through identifying the source of the food in general, we are forced to recognize it has a rich backstory to it. This backstory includes all of the human beings who contributed to getting that food, in its current state, into my hand. This backstory also includes all of the environmental conditions that had to align for the components of that food to grow just right to be worthy of my selecting it to eat. This backstory includes, ultimately, the original creation of the world. In a mindful moment, the very mundane act of eating can awaken us to the interconnectedness of everything.

To put this into PoP lexicon, when we are about to eat, there are three points of a triangle¹--myself, the food I am about to eat, and the environment that sustains human existence. The *berakhah* prior to eating can be an effective method of connecting those three points of the triangle. When I recite the *berakhah*, I not only take

a moment to fully appreciate the backstory of the food I am about to eat, I am also awakened to the food's, and my own, connection to all that surrounds and supports my existence.

And that brings us to Tu B'shvat, a holiday that calls our attention to yet another cycle of growth that is just beginning. It truly all begins anew right here, right now. In a way, each time we take a moment to figure out if the food we're about to eat originally came directly from the ground or from fruit of a tree, we find ourselves back at Tu B'shvat. And, especially nowadays, when Tu B'shvat has become a call for each of us to reflect on the interconnectedness between our actions as human beings and the natural environment that supports us, we carry a responsibility to consider and act in ways that reflect our partnership with the environment that sustains all of us. That way, during the next mindful moment we take reciting a *berakhah* prior to eating, we can add ourselves to the rich backstory that contributed to that food finding its way into our hands.

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¹ A foundational PoP concept is the "partnership triangle", an image of a triangle connecting three equal partners in text study: two human peers and a text. Here we see how the triangle paradigm can also help us picture the partnership relationship between ourselves, food and the environment.



A Tree of Ages



Sharon Freundel

T*u B'shvat higi'a, hag la'ilanot* – Tu B'shvat is coming, the holiday for trees" sing so many school children around this time of year. Since Tu B'shvat is the Rosh Hashanah of trees, why does it occur in the dead of winter?

Rashi, (11th century Franco-Germany) in the Babylonian Talmud on Rosh Hashanah 14a, explains that at this point in the year, the ground has become saturated with the rains of the rainy season causing the sap to start rising in the trees, which will enable the fruit to begin to form in buds. We are celebrating new beginnings in trees.

רש"י על תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה
יד. ד"ה הואיל

הואיל ויצאו רוב גשמי שנה - שכבר
עבר רוב ימות הגשמים שהוא זמן
רביעה ועלה השרף באילנות ונמצאו
הפירות חונטין מעתה

Rashi on Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 14a s.v. "since..."

"Since most of the year's rain has gone out" - The majority of rainy days, the autumn rainfall, has passed and the sap has risen into the trees and the fruits begin ripening from this point on

Growing into maturity as a tree takes time. On Tu B'shvat, we celebrate the onset of new growth rather than its termination. The culmination of a tree's maturity is marked in Jewish tradition through the laws of *orlah* and *neta revai*. *Orlah* tells us that for the first three years of a fruit-bearing tree's life, we do not eat of the fruit. *Neta revai* says during the fourth year we bring the fruit to Jerusalem, following which we may freely eat of the fruit that the tree produces.

Regarding *orlah*, the Babylonian Talmud in Sotah 43b presents the following discussion: what

if a branch, younger than three years old, is grafted onto an older tree? Is the fruit from that branch subject to *orlah* and *neta revai* or not? The argument for maintaining *orlah* is that the fruit is emanating from a young branch. The argument against it is that the branch is receiving sustenance from the older tree, maintaining its very existence from that older tree, so the fruit is not subject to *orlah* or *neta revai* and can be considered "old fruit." The latter opinion is the conclusion of the Rabbis.

תלמוד בבלי סוטה מג:

והאמר רבי אבהו ילדה שסיבכה
בזקינה בטלה ילדה בזקינה ואין בה דין
ערלה

Talmud Bavli Sota 43b

And Rabbi Abbahu said: With regard to a young tree that was entangled, i.e., grafted, with an old tree, the young one is negated by the old one,



and the law of *orla* does not apply to it.

The idea expressed by Rashi of celebrating the onset of trees blooming, and the Talmudic discussion about *orlah* and young branches on old trees can also be viewed as metaphors for those involved in *havruta* (partner) study.

Firstly, we know that *havruta* learning is all about relationships. It's about building a connection between two humans together with the Torah text as a third partner for engagement in learning. In Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP) terms, this relationship is expressed in the idea of a relational triangle. At the very outset, teachers need to guide students in what a true *havruta* relationship entails and direct them in how to build those connections. On Tu B'shvat, we celebrate the onset of growth, given that *hazal*, the Talmudic rabbis, knew--just as we know--that anything worth having cannot be gained instantaneously, but will require slow and steady progress after the onset of growth. We celebrate beginnings while at the same time knowing that we have a ways to go to reach the culmination of maturity, in the case of *havruta*, the maturation of a deep, three-way, reciprocal relationship.

Further, PoP's approach to learning is built upon several fundamental "stance statements," or attitudes toward learning that inform PoP learning practices. The first of these is "I have something to learn, and I have something to teach." A younger learner can draw sustenance from an older learner, just as a newly growing grafted branch is fed by the mature tree. An older learner can draw life from a younger learner, just as a mature tree can once again bear fruit if a newly fruit-bearing branch is grafted onto it. Each partner

in the veteran/newcomer tree experience draws benefits from the other. Pedagogy of Partnership also believes that "I can learn from my peers—not exclusively from a teacher or expert."

This image of the old/new tree and *havruta* learning resonated strongly with me, given that I am of the "boomer" generation. We often speak of inter-denominational study, of inter-gender study, and of interfaith study; we hear less about inter-generational study. Because of the life experience I have under my belt, I do have something to teach. Given that someone younger than I has lived a different life, having grown up post-9/11, having been born into the information age, I most certainly can learn from them. And, when two people are in a *havruta* relationship, they are no longer "teachers," "experts," or "pupils," they are peers. It does not matter how old the human partners in *havruta* are; after all, look at how old some of our text partners are, dating back 3300 years or more.

We have a great deal to learn from nature. Our friends, the trees, and specifically the young/old grafted tree, can teach us lessons about learning with and from each other, no matter who we are.

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Trees that Transgress



Rabbi Avi Killip

Trees don't follow human rules. The rabbis of the Talmud, in Bava Batra pages 26 and 27, struggle to reconcile a society and a religion organized around property ownership with the reality of trees:

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא כו:

אמר עולא אילן הסמוך למצר בתוך שש עשרה אמה גזלן הוא ואין מביאין ממנו בכורים

Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 26b

Ulla said: A tree that is within sixteen cubits of a boundary is a *gazlan/robber* and one does not bring *bikkurim/first fruits* from it.

Rashi explains that a tree planted so close to the property line is considered a thief because it draws nourishment from the neighbor's land. On the surface, the tree sits on one side of a border, but under the ground, the roots stretch

far and wide, drinking water from the neighbor's soil.

The tree refuses to observe the human boundary. The Gemara calls this an act of theft. The stolen water taints the fruit, which was grown as the result of a crime. The first fruits of this tree, which would otherwise have been offered as a mandatory sacrifice called *bikkurim*, become invalid for use in service of God.¹ God is not interested in a gift of stolen property. The language of "*gazlan/robber*" is usually reserved for a violent crime, not a petty act of taking. There is nothing more natural than trees drinking water through their roots, and yet the introduction of borders appears to weaponize the natural world.

¹ See Tosafot for a debate between Rabbenu Hananel and Rashi as to whether it is forbidden to bring *bikkurim* from this tree, or it is simply not required.

However, a closer analysis of Ulla's law reveals an acknowledgment that the human boundary is surface-level only, meaningful only to us, the people. This is reflected in Rashi's comment that one is merely exempt from bringing *bikkurim* from these "robber" trees, not forbidden, as would be the case if their fruit were genuinely stolen. Additionally, other commentators explain that the implication of Rashi's interpretation is that Ulla's calling a tree a *gazlan/robber* when it draws from another's property can only be applied to the single instance of *bikkurim* and not categorically². For the tree, all land and all water are the same. Trees remind us that we are all interconnected. As much as we may attempt to create clear borders and boundaries, we cannot ignore the ways in which our

² See Hiddushei HaRashba *ad loc.*



personal nourishment is always dependent on feeding off the soil of our neighbors. To imagine our complete independence means we are ignoring the roots under the ground, ignoring the natural world that sustains us.

Perhaps more than anywhere, this interdependence is true in learning. We structure formal education with categories—Math, Art, Torah. We attempt to impose order as a way to divide and cover the many things we hope students will learn and absorb. But all of this categorizing is above the surface. When we dig down, even a little bit below the ground, we understand that learning is entirely interconnected. Like the trees whose roots stretch far and wide in search of water, our minds are always drinking up knowledge and ideas from every direction, from different content and from different people. We use what we learned in math class to wonder about the Parsha. That story from the Parsha influences how we relate to our family. Our family changes the way we understand everything about the world. For learning, like for trees, there are no real boundaries.

We may play all we want with the boundaries above ground, working to make very clear distinctions and borders, but the trees will forever remind us, with outstretched roots and branches, that our boundaries separate only superficially. Trees show us that we can never know exactly what nourishment led to our fruit.

Trees don't share our new-year and they don't observe our boundaries. This year, on Tu B'shvat, the new year for the trees, let the trees remind us that much nourishment comes through crossing divides, reaching out and interdependence, and that the interconnected nature of learning will allow us to

bring forth fruits that might otherwise be lost.

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Igniting the Flame of Torah



Dr. Melissa Ser

The Torah service has a peculiar arc to it: we begin with a communal recitation of שמע ישראל, “Listen, Israel,” as we remove the Torah scroll from the ark, and following the community’s reading of the weekly Torah portion, we conclude with עץ חיים היא, “It is a tree of life.” Of all the texts that could be chosen to bracket this part of the service, why these? And what is the relationship between these two texts? There is a clue in Taanit 17a, where Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak explains:

תלמוד בבלי מס' תענית יז.

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק למה נמשלו דברי תורה כעץ שנאמר (משלי ג, יח) עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה לומר לך מה עץ קטן מדליק את הגדול אף תלמידי חכמים קטנים מחדדים את הגדולים

Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 17a

Why are Torah matters likened to a tree, as it is stated: “It is a

tree of life to them who lay hold upon it” (Proverbs 3:18)? This verse comes to tell you that just as a small piece of wood can ignite a large piece, so too, minor Torah scholars can sharpen great Torah scholars and enable them to advance in their studies.

There is a relationship between the branches of the tree, just as between two scholars who are exploring a text together. A minor Torah scholar can ask a burning question that leads a great Torah scholar to clarify her ideas and sharpen her understanding of a text. It is their proximity—their relationship—that allows one branch’s flame to ignite the other. A strong branch can be ignited and burn alone, but it requires additional fuel to grow larger and stronger.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the episode of the burning bush in

Exodus in which God and Moshe model this very idea. Until Moshe enters into a relationship with the voice speaking from the flames, it is just another shrub in the wilderness. Moshe, though, is astounded by this bush that burns but is not consumed by its fire, and wonders why the bush does not burn up: מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה (Shemot 3:3). It is only at this point of wonderment that God invites Moshe into the relationship. Moshe’s response of הֲנִי (ibid. 3:4) demonstrates that he is not only physically present, but also prepared to engage in the conversation and begin learning how to lead this people. Physical and spiritual proximity now allow Moshe and God’s presence to mutually ignite one another.

The conversation, the mutual ignition, begins here and culminates at Sinai, where the mountain is alight with flames but, once again, not consumed by them. The



entire Jewish people now enter into the proximity that Moshe did before them. And amid the fire and thunder and lightning and smoke, the people heard

שמע ישראל יי אלהינו יי אחד

Listen, Israel, A-donai is our God, A-donai is One," the Shema. These words are, therefore, an expression of the relationship between God, the Jewish people, and the Torah that was forged at Sinai, and thus become the ideal words to introduce the communal reading of the Torah. After all, it is through the reading of the Torah that we seek to inhabit the same proximity of relationship that our ancestors did before us, and Moshe before them.

However, it is not just the original context of the words that make them an ideal introduction, it is their content as well. What do the six words of the Shema mean? While the most common translation of them is "Listen, Israel, A-donai is our God, A-donai is One," the rabbis wonder about this particular word, שמע, "Listen." This is traditionally understood as an obligation to recite the Shema, but is the obligation to simply say its words, or to hear them—and what is hearing? The answer:

שמע—בכל לשון שאתה שומע

(Brachot 15a) means the Shema can be recited in any language in which the listener is fluent. Thus, the command to "hear" is meant in the sense of being able to be a partner in the same conversation our ancestors were party to at Sinai, even if we need a different language in order to do that.

How do we put this all together? The small branch ignites the larger one; the student sharpens the teacher. The small burning bush is the start of the preeminent *havruta*, *learning partnership*—

God articulates and Moshe listens, challenges, supports, and asks for clarification. God learns from Moshe as well, implementing a process for repentance at Moshe's request (Shemot 34:9-10). From the first conversation in the wilderness of Midian to the fiery summit at Sinai, Moshe's relationship with God ignites the community's relationship with God, and the conversation they began is perpetuated each time we take the Torah out to be read.

When we replicate that moment at Sinai in removing the Torah from the ark, we open with the words spoken out of the fire at Sinai, "Listen, Israel." When we gather to read Torah, we acknowledge the importance of hearing and attuned listening, as the Torah needs us to do these things in order to really hear it and understand it. And when we close, it is with a subtle reminder from our sages that the smallest branch can ignite a larger one as we seek the meaning of the Torah together, and that the Torah, our Tree of Life, is ever-present, למחזיקים בה, for those who grasp onto it.

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The Trees of Life



Rabbi Ravid Tilles

Most people who are familiar with traditional liturgy have memorized Proverbs 3:18—even if they don't know it. The words of this verse are chanted whenever the Torah scroll is returned to the ark. The verse is:

עץ-חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותמכיה
מאשר

She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever grasps on to her is happy.

The “she” in this passage is understood by many of our commentators as wisdom or, more tangibly, the Torah. The p'shat, the plain meaning of the text (if you can call it that) seems to be saying that Torah or wisdom is a Tree of Life. Over time, the Jewish people have grasped (pun intended) onto this metaphor—the Torah as a Tree of Life—and expressed it in several significant ways. The handles of the Torah scrolls are called *atzei*

hayyim (trees of life), many Torah covers and arks use tree imagery, and, as mentioned before, we sing about the Tree of Life, every time that we return the scrolls to the ark. In all of these ways, the symbolism of the Torah as a tree is very prominent in our tradition and it all sparks from this verse in chapter 3 of Proverbs.

The book of Proverbs uses the imagery of a Tree of Life for lesser-known metaphors as well. It turns out that “Torah” is only one of four ideals that the Tree of Life metaphor represents. In Proverbs 11:30, 13:12 and 15:4, the Tree of Life is likened to “the fruit of righteousness,” “desire fulfilled,” and a “gentle tongue,” respectively. So the natural question is, what do these three metaphors have in common with wisdom and Torah? And further, how do these metaphors provide insight into the process of teaching and learning?

משלי י"א:

פְּרִי-צְדִיק עֵץ חַיִּים וְלֶקַח נַפְשׁוֹת הַכֹּהֵם

Proverbs 11:30

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; A wise person captivates people.

משלי י"ג:

תּוֹחֵלֶת מְמַשְׁכָּה מִחֵלֶה-לֵב וְעֵץ חַיִּים תִּצְאֶנָּה בָּאֵה:

Proverbs 13:12

Hope deferred sickens the heart, But desire realized is a tree of life.

משלי ט"ו:

מְרַפָּא לְשׁוֹן עֵץ חַיִּים וְסֹלֶף יֵבֶה נְעָרָה בְּרוּחַ

Proverbs 15:4

A healing tongue is a tree of life, But a devious one makes for a broken spirit.

Wisdom and righteousness are often linked to one another because each is meant to lead to the other in a cycle of positivity. Thus, as we consider the possible



commonalities between the various Trees of Life, “fruit of righteousness” and “gentle tongue” feel obviously connected to wisdom. Just as the seeds of the fruits grow the trees that grow the fruit, Torah and righteousness are in a similar cycle. A “gentle tongue” also seems to fit nicely because both wisdom and righteousness are often brought into this world through words. Thus, the Trees of Torah and righteousness rely on a gentle tongue to bring them to fruition.

But what about “desire fulfilled”? Why does getting what you want merit the likeness to a Tree of Life? Rashi explains that the “desire fulfilled” does not refer to our desires but to God’s. And, therefore, when we bring Torah and righteousness into the world with a gentle tongue, we are most fulfilling God’s desire for us.

רש"י על משלי יג:ב ד"ה ועץ חיים...

ועץ חיים תאווה באה. מסורס הוא כלומר תאווה באה הרי הוא כעץ חיים תוחלת שהחיל הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל וצפה שישובו והם לא שבו סוף באה להם למחלת לב וכשתאווה באה שהם עושין רצונו עץ חיים היא להם:

Rashi on Proverbs 13:12 s.v. but a tree of life...

but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life lit. but a tree of life is a desire fulfilled. This is inverted; i.e., a desire fulfilled is like a tree of life. The hope that the Holy blessed One had hoped for Israel and looked forward for them to repent—brought them ultimately to heartsickness when they did not repent. And when God’s desire is fulfilled—that they comply with God’s will—it is a tree of life to them.

Based on this understanding of the four uses of the term “Tree of Life” in Proverbs, I believe that it is not an overstatement to suggest

that the work we do as educators, particularly as PoP educators, is a powerful fulfillment of God’s desire for wisdom, righteousness, and a “gentle tongue.” In the multiple senses we explored, we are growing Trees of Life with every student that we educate. PoP strategies teach our students to engage in Torah learning with a “gentle tongue,” understanding the power of words in bringing righteousness and wisdom to life. The PoP speech prompts, active listening training, and the general havruta stance are the embodiments of our commitment to these ideals.¹ As PoP educators, we know that these “gentle tongue” techniques help our students build supportive learning relationships and, in that way, the Tree of a gentle tongue lays the seeds of righteousness and wisdom.

The PoP philosophy has helped me, as an educator, to zoom out and remember the holiness of the work that we are doing. That text, relationships and the act of study itself, can transcend a given lesson or idea—helping students develop their hearts and minds. The PoP philosophy keeps my eyes on the forest AND the trees. Despite being in the midst of the grind—worrying about lesson plans, attendance, grades, and the various other things that fill up most of our brain space as teachers, it is important to remember that we are doing God’s work and living out God’s desire for a forest full of Trees of Life.

¹ “Speech prompts” are particular phrases such as “Are you saying X?” or “Is there a different way of understanding this text?” that students learn to use in the PoP framework. These prompts support “stances” (attitudes) toward learning that students also learn about such as “everyone has something to teach and something to learn”

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Character Development and Personal Growth Through Encounter



**Menachem (Manny)
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Two of the Jewish canon's most venerated heroes are brothers of divergent paths. Dominating the last third of Genesis in dramatic fashion, Joseph and Judah, half-brothers, respectively fall from grace and subsequently ascend to glory. Here, we examine their inextricable links as brothers and leaders traversing character development and growth.

Chapter 37 offers a peek into brotherly rivalry with adolescent Joseph, the object of his father's affection. This nepotism, coupled with Joseph's behavior, incite violent envy and impending conspiratorial fratricide. After failed tactical protestations from Reuben, Judah convinces his brothers to merely sell Joseph instead of kill him. The midrash criticizes Judah's failed leadership, positing that had he advocated saving Joseph altogether, his brothers would have

followed.¹ This moral failure sets in motion a precipitous decline in Judah's ethical choices ahead, as the next chapter highlights Judah's descent: "And Judah went down from his brothers,"² signaling a corresponding spiritual descent.³

Chapter 39 opens with a corollary descent: "Joseph was taken down to Egypt" leading to dramatic volatility including servitude, prison, and eventual ascent as viceroy of Egypt.⁴ Joseph's newfound authority coupled with fame across the lands sets a family reunion in motion. Back in the land of Canaan, Jacob sends his sons to procure food rations in Egypt but keeps the youngest brother, Benjamin at home, fearing he may suffer a fate like that of Joseph,

whom he believed was eaten by a wild animal. Joseph, unrecognizable to his brothers, accuses them of spying, places Shimon in prison, and will only heed their claims of innocence if they present Benjamin. After returning home without Shimon and Reuben's unsuccessful attempts to compel Jacob to allow Benjamin to journey with them to Egypt, Judah steps forward and assures his father that he, Judah, will be responsible for Benjamin. Jacob consents. The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin, who is accused of stealing Joseph's goblet. Now Judah is ready to ascend, "Then Judah went up to [Joseph]," beseeching: "Please let your servant [Judah] remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy [Benjamin], and let the boy go back with his brothers."

Judah's selflessness on behalf of Benjamin and Jacob demon-

1 Shemot Rabbah; Torah Sheleimah; Tanhuma Yashan Vayeshev 8.

2 *Ibid* 38:1.

3 Tanhuma Yashan Vayeshev 12.

4 *ibid* 39:1.



strates his growth. Filled with emotion upon observing Judah's actions, Joseph reveals that he is in fact their younger brother whom they had sold years earlier.⁵ This encounter, between Judah and Joseph, represents actualization in their respective character developments: Judah as courageous leader who takes responsibility when the moment calls; Joseph as ruler whose power does not distort his compassion, but amplifies it.

How does Judah suddenly advocate on behalf of his brother and father? Let us examine Judah's earlier descent in Chapter 38: Selfishly, Judah mandates his daughter-in-law, Tamar, "remain a widow in her father's house."⁶ When Tamar attempts to gain his attention on the road, Judah confuses her for a harlot (and not his daughter-in-law)—a perception of which she does not disabuse him—and he impregnates her. Learning Tamar is then with child, Judah sentences her to death. Surreptitiously, she presents him the seal, cord, and staff he had given her as collateral for payment when he believed she was a harlot, and communicates that they belong to the child's father. Judah recognizes them as his own, offering, "She is more in the right than I." Judah was humbled and understood his actions.⁷ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers: "With great ingenuity and boldness, Tamar has broken through the bind in which Judah had placed her." He continues "But no less significantly, she spared Judah shame. By sending him a coded message—the pledge—she has ensured that he will know that he himself is the father of the child, but that no one else will."⁸ As she breaks the bind he created for her,

5 *Ibid* 45:1-2.

6 *Ibid* 38:12.

7 *Ibid* 38: 25-26.

8 *Covenant & Conversation*.

she also helps him break his own developmental bind.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky's educational theory offers insight that may inform the interplay of Judah, Joseph, and Tamar. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development posits that when learners are involved in social dialogue with a "more knowledgeable other," they develop the ability to solve problems independently and complete tasks without help.⁹ Judith Antonelli points out that the Zohar explicitly identifies Tamar as acting "from a deeper knowledge."¹⁰ Thus, Tamar humbly serves as the *more knowledgeable other*, positioning Judah's advanced development, along with Joseph's. Together, they form a *havruta* of sorts; learning, advancing, and growing. In the words of Rabbi Sacks, "We are changed, not by what we receive, but by what we do."¹¹ In eschatological terms, Judah and Joseph are now fit for their respective destinies. Tamar's courage positions Judah's self-development. When faced with a similar leadership challenge as in Chapter 39, Judah now rises.

The Mishnah in Avot teaches that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah used to compare one whose wisdom exceeds their deeds to a tree with numerous branches and few roots; when the wind comes, it gets uprooted and overturned. But one whose deeds exceed their wisdom is compared to a tree with few branches but many roots; all the winds in the world cannot move it

9 Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. In this work he uses the phrase "more capable peers", however "more knowledgeable other" has become a standard expression of this idea in secondary literature on Vygotsky.

10 Judith Antonelli, *In the Image of God: A Feminist's Commentary on the Torah*.

11 *To Heal a Fractured World*.

out of place.¹² Rav Ben Tzion Firrer analyzes the Mishnah's dichotomy as an educational paradigm. Successful education requires work and preparation, positioning deep roots and sustainable growth.¹³ The culmination of Judah and Joseph's encounter, reflecting their growth as leaders, was seeded early thanks to their *havruta* partner, Tamar, whose courage, creativity, and humility model the power such a partner can have and in the words of Antonelli, indeed, a "model for all humanity."¹⁴

12 Avot 3:17.

13 R. Ben Tzion Firrer.

14 *Ibid*, Antonelli.

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