

A Garden of Possibility • Parshat Bereishit

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

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

Richard Powers in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Overstory*, writes, "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived." The book of Genesis opens with the verdancy of a tree-filled world. We humans only arrive later. On the third day, God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth

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

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

Ibn Ezra may have been on to something by alerting us to the linguistic “root” shared by trees and language. In 2015, Peter Wohlleben, a German forester who has devoted his life to the study of trees, published the bestselling book,

The Hidden Life of Trees. He challenges our common misconception of trees as loners that compete with other vegetation for water, sunlight, and nutrients. Mounting scientific evidence suggests that trees form alliances with other trees, even those not within the same species. They not only live cooperatively, they also communicate at the root level. Above ground, they use scent signals and pheromones to speak to each other. Through these complex, interconnected networks, trees send distress signals about drought, disease and insect attacks. Wohlleben calls it the “wood-wide web.”

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

God’s decision to create humans in this Garden may have been a way to communicate to Adam and Eve that they entered an interconnected natural world that predated them and required their leadership and tender care to bloom. The Garden was their classroom where they were to learn from trees how to nurture an interdependent universe that communicated under and above ground. By creating through the process of separation, God was showing Adam and Eve that on a cosmic level we are all profoundly connected. Trees were the best living example of this for the new couple. In