



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Tree-like

Love metaphors. An apt metaphor can help stimulate boundless creativity and can lead to a deeper and richer understanding of the concept being studied.

Take, for example, the metaphor of a tree as representing a human being. We find this metaphor in this week's Torah portion, *Shoftim*, in the following verse:

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it, to seize it; do not destroy its tree, by swinging an ax against it; for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; because man is a tree of the field, to come against you in a siege.” (*Deuteronomy 20:19*)

I am aware that there are alternative translations of the phrase under consideration, and that some render it as a question, “Is a tree of the field like a man?” But the literal meaning of the phrase is declarative. Man is like a tree of the field.

How? Let us count the ways.

For starters, King David himself in the very first chapter of *Psalms* compares the righteous person to a tree. “He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever he does prospers.” Of all the metaphors available to the psalmist to paint the picture of the good man, the tree is the one he finds most fitting.

The rabbis also use the metaphor of the tree to capture the essence of one aspect of humanity. Thus, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah would say, “He whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, to what can he be compared? To a tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few, so that any wind can come and uproot it and turn it over on its face... But he whose deeds exceed his wisdom, to what can he be compared? To a tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many, so that even if all the winds of the worlds beset him, they cannot move him from his place...” (*Avot 3:22*)

The righteous person is like a tree beside a stream. The ethical man of action who puts his wisdom into practice has deep roots which give him confidence and security.

There are so many other ways in which we resemble the tree. The tree regenerates, and the wind carries its seeds to great

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distances. So too, mankind is perpetuated over the generations, and sometimes our descendants take root in corners of the earth that are far removed from us.

When I close my eyes and try to imagine the tree, two different images compete for my mind's attention. One is the tree standing alone in the field, with long and drooping overhanging branches, providing shade for those who sit under it. So too, I can imagine human beings in my own life and in the history of humanity who stood apart and were misunderstood, yet provided physical or spiritual shelter to so many others.

The other image I have is of one tree, not alone, but together with many others constituting an impenetrable and mysterious forest. And so too, human beings band together into social groups which contain their own idiosyncrasies, which seem impenetrable to the outsider.

There is a lesson in the metaphor of the tree for that most important human process: education. This lesson is so well-expressed in the lines of the poet, Alexander Pope:

“Tis education forms the common mind:
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclin'd.”

Trees left to their own devices grow wildly. Proper cultivation can direct their growth positively and productively. So too, humans benefit from proper “bending.”

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discipline and training.

And then there is the sad, but ultimate, connection between the tree and the human being. Trees wither, and trees die. They are subject to the forces of nature: fire, wind, deterioration and decay. Yes, we know of trees that have endured for centuries, but even those lengthy life spans eventually come to an end.

I would like to end this brief contemplation of the many analogies between mankind and the trees with a passage from the ancient Greek poet, Aristophanes, which is so reminiscent of more than one passage in our High Holiday liturgy:

“Mankind, fleet of life, like tree leaves,
weak creatures of clay,
unsubstantial as shadows, wingless,
ephemeral, wretched, mortal and
dreamlike.”

But there is a happier connection between people and trees, and that is through the Torah, which is itself compared to a tree, the tree of life; “*eitz chaim hi*.”

Indeed, “Man is like the tree of the field,” withering or able to thrive, depending on one's own life circumstances. ■



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