



### Asher Manning Gush Chapter Director Tree Hugging – An Ancient problem

In our Parasha we come across a seemingly obscure Mitzvah: “Don’t plant a tree (Asherah) next to the Mizbe’ach”. Even without a Mizbe’ach, this Mitzvah contains a fundamental truth, that is especially relevant today.

In the ancient pagan world, trees were incredibly symbolic. As a predominantly agricultural society, every part of the tree had an important use in the day-to-day life of ancient civilization. Its fruit, refreshing and nourishing provided sustenance and vitamins and its wood and lumber served as the raw material for everything - from houses and ships to hand tools and utensils, not to mention fuel.

Indeed, the ‘tree’ as a religious focal point was a common staple of pagan belief, echoes

of which have survived today with the Christmas tree. But at its root, the tree as a symbol of nature goes a lot deeper. The Asherah tree was seen to represent the ‘Mother Goddess’, a feminine, motherly idealization of nature that can still be heard today in the concepts “Mother Nature” or “Mother Earth”.

This phraseology, describing nature as a sentient and sometimes vengeful being, can often be heard in the modern-day debates surrounding climate change and environmental action. The Torah warns us of this age-old misappropriation. The very first passuk in the Torah informs us of the hierarchy of creation – “In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth”. Nature is not divine. And we are not to treat it so, by worshiping it or trying to appease it. Indeed, mankind has an obligation to preserve nature and care for it – Hashem commanded Adam to work and preserve Gan Eden (“Leovdah uleshomrah”), but equally important is the placing of the “Tree of Life” into said garden, under man’s care. The Torah does not ignore the symbolism of the life-giving tree, rather it teaches us how to correctly relate to it in our world. For example, the environmental Mitzvah of Bal Tashchit specifically stems from guidelines against the misuse and exploitation of life-giving fruit trees. And yet, there must be a separation between worshiping G-d (the mizbe’ach) and the value of nature (the Asherah tree).



We want to thank

**Asher and Lia Manning**

for 3 incredible years of service and inspiration to the teens and families of Gush Etzion and wish them much Hatzlacha in their next stage.

Even today, we are in danger of the 'Asherah' fallacy, and the misconceptions regarding the correct relationship between the triad of G-d, man and nature.



## Talia Agatstein 11th Grade, Jerusalem Right to Left, Left to Right

In Parshat Shoftim, one of the things the Torah discusses is the בית דין and all the rules required when attending the court. One of the things we learn about in this topic is how the בית דין always knows best.

Rashi quotes: לֹא תִסּוּר בְּדַבָּר אֲשֶׁר יִגְדוּ לְךָ, "יִמִּין אוֹ שְׂמָאל", "You shall not deviate from the word that they (the judges of the Jewish courts) will tell you, right or left." Rashi goes on to quote the Sifri, "אֲפִילוּ אִם", "יאמרו לך על ימין שיהיה שמאל ועל שמאל שיהיה ימין", "You must obey the decision of the courts even if they are telling you that right is left and left is right." Essentially what Rashi is saying is you shouldn't deviate from what the בית דין says even if you think they are wrong. Such a beit din should be comprised of the truest tzaddikim and talmidei chachamim. The question that arises is why does Rashi use the terminology "right and left", and not something else?

In order to answer this question we need to look at other places in the Torah.

The Torah is written without vowels and in many places, when you are given the letters shin or sin the rabbis tell us whether the letter is to be read as a sin or shin. Sometimes, Chazal tell us to decipher the meaning using the other letter than what we originally thought. For example, in Psalms 50:23 you shouldn't read the word

'vesam' with a sin, as in "and he places", but instead you should read it 'vesham' with a shin: 'He who improves', this is a very common way of reading and understanding the Torah. We can learn from here that one can think that they understand something but in reality it means something completely different. So even if one thinks that the dot is on the left side of the shin or the right, we need to listen to our rabbis to tell us which way to go, shin or sin because they know best and even when one thinks he understand something completely he can still be wrong. So too when being judged and getting our verdict you must always follow what the rabbis tell you and not use your own sense of judgment because they know what's correct. Sometimes, our chachamim can show us how to view a situation with an entirely new perspective. So whether you're talking about a shofet in the בית דין or a true gadol hador when any of them tell us something, we should not deviate from their judgment. Shabbat Shalom. ■

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