

Eitz Chaim - Wisdom, Nourishment, and Connection

Source Sheet by Rachel Davidson

Opening Questions: What do you think of when you hear Tree of Life? Where does this fit into our liturgy? What is the Tree of Life associated with in Judaism?

In this session we'll first look at a few representative texts from the Tanach, and then at the how the classical rabbis interpreted the concept of the Tree of Life. We'll focus the most on the commentary around Proverbs 3:18, which features prominently in our liturgy. For the tanach texts, make sure to read sources 4, 5, and 6.

Genesis 2:9

(9) And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing 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.

בראשית ב':ט'

(ט) וַיִּצְמַח ה' אֱלֹקִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה
כָּל־עֵץ נֹחַמֵד לְמַרְאֵה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל
וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הַגֶּן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת
טוֹב וְרַע:

Proverbs 3:13-18

(13) Happy is the man who finds wisdom, The man who attains understanding. (14) Her value in trade is better than silver, Her yield, greater than gold. (15) She is more precious than rubies; All

משלי ג':י"ג-י"ח

(יג) אֲשֶׁר־י אָדָם מָצָא חֵכְמָה וְאָדָם
יִפְקֶי תְבוּנָה: (יד) כִּי טוֹב סְחָרָהּ
מִסְחָר־כֶּסֶף וְיִמְחָרוּץ תְּבוּאָתָהּ: (טו)
יִקְרָהּ הִיא מִפְנִיִּים [מִפְּנִינִים] וְכָל־
חֶפְצֵיהָ לֹא יִשְׁוּוּ־בָהּ: (טז) אַרְבֵּי

of your goods cannot equal her.
 (16) In her right hand is length of days, In her left, riches and honor. (17) Her ways are pleasant ways, And all her paths, peaceful.
 (18) **She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, And whoever holds on to her is happy.**

ימים בְּיָמֶיהָ בְּשִׂמְאוֹלָהּ עֵשֶׂר
 וְכָבוֹד: (יז) דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרִכֵּי-נֹעַם וְכָל-
 נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שָׁלוֹם: (יח) עֵץ-חַיִּים
 הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתֹמְכֶיהָ מְאַשֶּׁר:
 (פ)

Proverbs 13:12-14

משלי י"ג: י"ב-י"ד

(12) Hope deferred sickens the heart, But desire realized is a tree of life. (13) He who disdains a precept will be injured thereby; He who respects a command will be rewarded. (14) The instruction of a wise man is a fountain of life, Enabling one to avoid deadly snares.

(יב) תִּוְחַלֶּת מִמְשָׁכָה מַחֲלֵה-לֵב
 וְעֵץ חַיִּים תִּתְּנֶנָּה בָּאָה: (יג) בָּז
 לְדָבָר יִחַבֵּל לוֹ וַיִּרְא מְצוּהָ הוּא
 יִשְׁלָם: (יד) תּוֹרַת חָכָם מְקוֹר חַיִּים
 לְסוֹר מִמְקַשֵּׁי מוֹת:

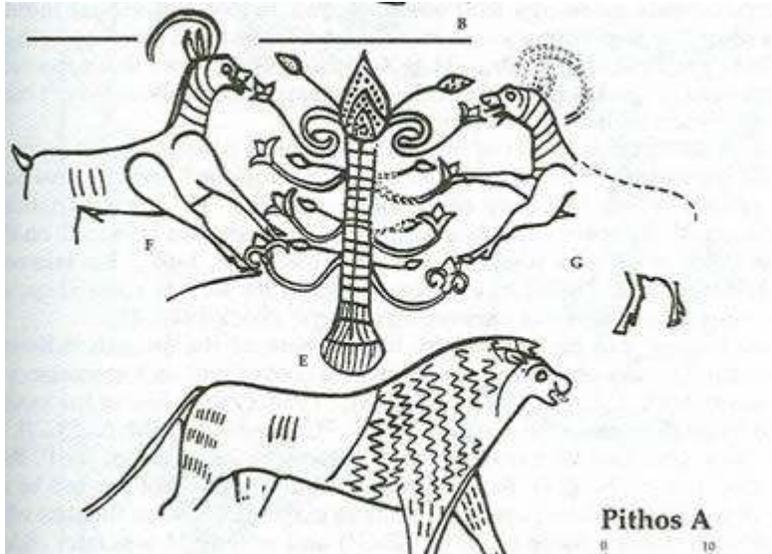
Proverbs 15:4-5

משלי ט"ו: ד'-ה'

(4) A healing tongue is a tree of life, But a devious one makes for a broken spirit. (5) A fool spurns the discipline of his father, But one who heeds reproof becomes clever.

(ד) מְרַפֵּא לְשׁוֹן עֵץ חַיִּים וְסִלָּה בָּהּ
 נְשָׁבַר בְּרוּיֹת: (ה) אֲוִיל יִנְאֵץ מוֹסֵר
 אָבִיו וְשֹׁמֵר תּוֹכַחַת יֵעָרֵם:

How do the authors of the Tanach seem to view the Tree of Life? What does she provide people? What things are characterized as a Tree of Life? What things in your own life act as a nourishing tree of life?



This is an image from an ancient Israelite archaeological site, where there are inscriptions about Asherah, a goddess who is associated with trees. Here (and in other places), the tree is literally giving life by feeding the animals.

We'll now move on to texts from the rabbinic period (written roughly between 200 CE - 600 CE). If you're running low on time, make sure to read sources 11 and 13.

Pirkei Avot 6:7

משנה אבות ו'ז'

Great is Torah for it gives life to those that practice it, in this world, and in the world to come, As it is said: “For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh” (Proverbs 4:22), And it says: “It will be a cure for your navel and marrow for your bones” (ibid. 3:8) And it says: **“She is a tree of life to**

גְּדוּלָהּ תוֹרָה שֶׁהִיא נוֹתֶנֶת חַיִּים
 לְעֹשֶׂיהָ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וּבְעוֹלָם הַבָּא,
 שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (משלי ד) כִּי חַיִּים הֵם
 לְמַצְאֵיהֶם וְלִכְל בְּשָׂרוֹ מְרַפָּא.
 וְאוֹמֵר (שם ג) רַפְאוֹת תְּהִי לְשִׁרְךָ
 וְשִׁקוּי לְעֲצָמוֹתֶיךָ. וְאוֹמֵר (שם ג)
 עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ
 וְתִמְכֶיךָ מְאֹשֶׁר. וְאוֹמֵר (שם א) כִּי

those that grasp her, and whoever holds onto her is happy” (ibid. 3:18), And it says: “For they are a graceful wreath upon your head, a necklace about your throat” (ibid. 1:9), And it says: “She will adorn your head with a graceful wreath; crown you with a glorious diadem” (ibid. 4:9) And it says: “In her right hand is length of days, in her left riches and honor” (ibid. 3:1, And it says: “For they will bestow on you length of days, years of life and peace” (ibid. 3:2).

לְוַיִּתְּ חַן הֵם לְרֵאשִׁיף וְעֲנָקִים
 לְגִרְגָּרֹתֶיהָ. וְאוֹמֵר (שם ד) תִּתֵּן
 לְרֵאשִׁיף לְוַיִּתְּ חַן עֲטָרַת תְּפָאֶרֶת
 תְּמַגֵּנָה. וְאוֹמֵר (שם ט) כִּי בִי יִרְבּוּ
 יָמֶיהָ וַיּוֹסִיפוּ לָהּ שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים.
 וְאוֹמֵר (שם ג) אֶרֶב יָמִים בְּיָמֶינָהּ
 בְּשִׂמְאוּלָהּ עֶשֶׂר וְכְבוֹד. וְאוֹמֵר
 (שם) כִּי אֶרֶב יָמִים וּשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים
 וְשָׁלוֹם יוֹסִיפוּ לָהּ. וְאוֹמֵר (שם)
 דְּרָכֶיהָ דָּרְכֵי נְעִם וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ
 שָׁלוֹם:

Arakhin 15b:16

Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina says: What is the remedy for those who speak malicious speech? If he is a Torah scholar, let him study Torah, as it is stated: “A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but its perverseness is a broken spirit” (Proverbs 15:4). And the word “tongue” means nothing other than malicious speech, as it is stated: “Their tongue is a sharpened arrow; it speaks deceit” (Jeremiah 9:7). **And the word “tree” means nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: “It is a tree of life to**

ערכין ט"ו ב:ט"ז

אמר רבי חמא בר' חנינא מה
 תקנתו של מספרי לשון הרע אם
 תלמיד חכם הוא יעסוק בתורה
 שנא' (משלי טו, ד) מרפא לשון
 עץ חיים ואין לשון אלא לשון הרע
 שנאמר חץ שחוט לשונם ואין עץ
 אלא תורה שנאמר (משלי ג, יח)
 עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ואם
 עם הארץ הוא ישפיל דעתו
 שנאמר (משלי טו, ד) וסלף בה
 שבר רוח

them that lay hold of it” (Proverbs 3:18). And if he is an ignoramus, let him humble his mind, as it is stated: “Its perverseness is a broken spirit” (Proverbs 15:4). In other words, one who perverts his tongue with malicious speech should remedy his behavior by cultivating a broken and humble spirit.

Berakhot 32b:9

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Anyone who prolongs his prayer and expects it to be answered, will ultimately come to heartache, as it will not be answered. As it is stated: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12). And what is the remedy for one afflicted with that illness? He should engage in Torah study, as it is stated: **“But desire fulfilled is the tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12),** and tree of life is nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: **“It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and those who support it are joyous” (Proverbs 3:18).** This is not difficult. This, Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba’s statement that one will suffer heartache refers to one who prolongs his prayer and

ברכות ל"ב ב:ט'

איני?! וְהָאָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַּר אֲבָא
אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: כָּל הַמְאָרִיד
בְּתַפִּילָתוֹ וּמַעֲיִין בָּהּ — סוֹף בָּא
לְיָדַי כְּאֵב לֵב, שְׁנֵאמַר: “תּוֹחֶלֶת
מִמְשָׁכָה מַחֲלָה לֵב”. מֵאִי תִקְנִיתִיהּ
— יַעֲסוֹק בַּתּוֹרָה, שְׁנֵאמַר: “וַיַּעַז
חַיִּים תֵּאֱוֶה בָאֵה”, וְאִין עַז חַיִּים
אֲלֵא תּוֹרָה, שְׁנֵאמַר: “עַז חַיִּים הִיא
לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ”. לָא קִשְׂיָא, הָא
דְּמְאָרִיד וּמַעֲיִין בָּהּ. הָא דְּמְאָרִיד
וְלֵא מַעֲיִין בָּהּ

expects it to be answered; that, Rabbi Ḥanin's statement that one who prolongs his prayer is praiseworthy refers to one who prolongs his prayer and does not expect it to be answered.

Taanit 7a:12

Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak said: 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. And this is what Rabbi Ḥanina said: I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan 34:11

Ten entities are considered truly “alive.” 1. The Holy Blessed One, as it says (Jeremiah 10:10), “The Eternal is truly God; He is a living God.” 2. The Torah is called a

תענית ז' א:י"ב

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 והיינו דאמר ר' חנינא
הרבה למדתי מרבותי ומחבירי
יותר מרבותי ומתלמידי יותר
מכולן

אבות דרבי נתן ל"ד:י"א

עשרה נקראו חיים. הקב"ה
(ירמיהו י"י) וה' אלקים אמת הוא
אלקים חיים. תורה נקראת חיים
שנא' (משלי ג':י"ח) עץ חיים היא

Living Torah, as it says (Proverbs 3:18), “It is a Tree of Life for those who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy.” 3. Israel are called Alive, as it says (Deuteronomy 4:41), “And you, who cling to the Eternal your God, you are all alive today.” **4. A righteous person is called Life, as it says (Proverbs 11:30), “The fruit of the righteous is the Tree of Life.”** 5. The Garden of Eden is called Living, ([as it says (Psalms 116:9), “I will walk before the Eternal in the land of the living.”] **6. One of the trees in the Garden was called the Tree of Life,]) as it says (Genesis 2:9), “and the Tree of Life in the midst of the Garden.** 7. The Land of Israel is called the Land of the Living, as it says (Ezekiel 26:20), “I will place radiance in the land of the living.” (Jerusalem is called Living, as it says [Psalms 116:9]), “I will walk before the Eternal in the land of the living.”) 8. Acts of kindness are called Life, as it says (Psalms 63:4), “For Your kindness is better than life; my lips will praise You.” 9. A wise person is called Life, as it says (Proverbs 13:14), “The Torah of the wise is the source of life.” 10. Water is called Living, as it says

למחזיקים בה ותומכיה מאושר.
ישראל נקראו חיים שנא' (דברים
ד':ד') ואתם הדבקים בה' אלקיכם
חיים כולכם היום. צדיק נקרא
חיים שנא' (משלי י"א:ל') פרי
צדיק עץ חיים. גן עדן נקרא חיים
[שנא' (תהילים קט"ז:ט') אתהלך
לפני ה' בארצות החיים. עץ נקרא
חיים] (שנא' (בראשית ב':ט') ועץ
החיים בתוך הגן. ארץ ישראל
נקראת חיים שנא' (יחזקאל
כ"ו:כ') ונתתי צבי בארץ חיים.
(ירושלים נקראת חיים שנא'
(תהילים קט"ז:ט') אתהלך לפני ה'
בארצות החיים). גמילות חסדים
נקרא חיים שנא' (תהילים ס"ג:ד')
כי טוב חסדך מחיים שפתי
ישבחונך. חכם נקרא חיים שנא'
(משלי י"ג:י"ד) תורת חכם מקור
חיים. מים נקרא חיים שנא'
(זכריה י"ד:ח') ביום ההוא יצאו
מים חיים מירושלים:

(Zechariah 14:8), “On that day, living waters will come forth from Jerusalem.”

How do the rabbis above interpret the tanach texts about the Tree of Life? What do they associate the Tree of Life with? How might this be different from the biblical authors?

The New Yorker, *The Intelligent Plant*, Michael Pollen (December 23 & 30 2013) "The most bracing part of Mancuso’s talk on bioinspiration came when he discussed underground plant networks. Citing the research of Suzanne Simard, a forest ecologist at the University of British Columbia, and her colleagues, **Mancuso showed a slide depicting how trees in a forest organize themselves into far-flung networks, using the underground web of mycorrhizal fungi which connects their roots to exchange information and even goods. This “wood-wide web,” as the title of one paper put it, allows scores of trees in a forest to convey warnings of insect attacks, and also to deliver carbon, nitrogen, and water to trees in need.** When I reached Simard by phone, she described how she and her colleagues track the flow of nutrients and chemical signals through this invisible underground network. They injected fir trees with radioactive carbon isotopes, then followed the spread of the isotopes through the forest community using a variety of sensing methods, including a Geiger counter. Within a few days, stores of radioactive carbon had been routed from tree to tree. Every tree in a plot thirty metres square was connected to the network; the oldest trees functioned as hubs, some with as many as forty-seven connections. The diagram of the forest network resembled an airline route map. **The pattern of nutrient traffic showed how “mother trees” were using the network to nourish shaded seedlings, including their offspring—which the trees can apparently recognize as kin—until they’re tall enough to reach the light. And, in a striking example of interspecies coöperation, Simard found that fir trees were using the fungal web to trade nutrients with paper-bark birch trees over the course of the season. The evergreen species will**

tide over the deciduous one when it has sugars to spare, and then call in the debt later in the season. For the forest community, the value of this coöperative underground economy appears to be better over-all health, more total photosynthesis, and greater resilience in the face of disturbance. In his talk, Mancuso juxtaposed a slide of the nodes and links in one of these subterranean forest networks with a diagram of the Internet, and suggested that in some respects the former was superior. “Plants are able to create scalable networks of self-maintaining, self-operating, and self-repairing units,” he said. “Plants.”

Are there ways we can take inspiration from these texts about the Tree of Life, and the real trees in our own lives? How might this change what you think about when you sing Eitz Chaim in shul? What do you hope to learn from Trees of Life in your own life?

Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Rachel Davidson