LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Bereishit

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This month's Lehrhaus Over Shabbat is dedicated in loving memory of Mrs. Livia Turkel, Chaya Sara bas Eliyahu, on the occasion of her sixth yahrzeit. A woman who cherished tefillah and Torah learning, she dedicated her life to Jewish education. Sponsored by Brenda and Elihu Turkel and family.

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The Seventh Day: Sabbath and Surrender in Somatic Group Work

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I sat with my therapist recently and spoke about going to synagogue.

"I've started saying a prayer on Saturday before going to *Shul*," I began, "for God to help me be with myself.

"This feels especially important on Shabbat," I tell him, "which is supposed to be a day of stillness. Shabbat is about being."

"Perhaps this is how you can lead," he responded. "To bring yourself in your community. To lead in being."

In my first session with Shawn, a secular Jew, he surprised me with a Jewish reference when explaining his therapeutic practice. He asked if I was familiar with the phrase, *"Yashar koach*." I was; it is a Hebrew colloquialism that means "good work." Translated literally, he contended, the words mean *yashar*, straight, and *koach*, strength. Focussed energy. What would happen, he asked, if all the energy I exerted in holding myself back was actually channelled – into strength?

I started thinking about the connections between

time and work, Sabbath and strength. A.J. Heschel's iconic text *The Sabbath* has a lot to offer when making these connections.

Heschel sets up his book by stating what Shabbat is not: finite. "Reality to us is thinghood, consisting of substances that occupy space; even God is conceived by most of us as a thing." [1] But the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, when God "rested,"[2] is not about conquering things in space, as we do on the first six days. It is about surrendering to time, which is infinite, divine. Time is transient, every hour individual, every minute irreplicable, as different as one human being from another. Ethan Dor Shav calls this transience "*hevel,*" fleeting, like vapor[3]; Peggy Phelan calls it performance, live, irreproducible and disappearing[4]; Victor Turner calls it liminality[5]; and Heidegger calls it *dasein*, being there.[6]

Dor Shav expresses how, on the seventh day, God "rested the world":

> After six days of executing a master design, on the seventh day He left the created universe to its own devices. Like kneading dough and then "resting" it on the table to conclude its creation, or "resting" a cake hot out of the oven.[7]

The Sabbath, he posits, is about *letting go*; we can make a choice to *be*, to see ourselves as we are, as "very good."[8] Heschel makes the same assertion, characterizing Shabbat as "a day in which we… reclaim our authentic state… in which we are what we are, regardless of whether we are learned or not, of whether our career is a success or a failure; it is a day of independence."[9]

The goal of spirituality is not to amass a wealth of information, according to Heschel, but to "face sacred moments."[10] "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays," he articulates, in the way that one might rest to become more productive.

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[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 5.

[2] Exodus 20:11

[3] Ethan Dor Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2018): 217.

[4] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

[5] D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 158.

[6] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 59.

[7] Ethan Dor Shav, personal correspondence, July 2026.

[8] Exodus 31:17

[9] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath, 30.*

[10] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 6.

"The weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but a climax of living." [11] Productivity is integral to our human experience, but we must not forget it is the means and not the end. Creation serves the Godly purpose of being and there-ness that we humans experience one seventh of: the fraction of other-worldliness we merit to receive in this lifetime. And, for Heschel, it is *poesis*, world making – an essential 'bringing forth.' It is the difference between living fully and not, being asleep and being awake.

I learned what it means to "face sacred moments" during two intensive three-day workshops I participated in last summer, appropriately over Shabbat, which followed a twelve-week process group I completed earlier that year, run by a somatic therapy institute that involves individual and group therapy. In one workshop, someone disclosed their darkest secret. "I'm a pervert," they revealed, and claimed that if we really knew them we could never love them. I learned it again when a woman in her seventies broke down and said she was afraid to die having never lived. And when a man in his thirties admitted that he slept in the same bed as his mother late into adulthood and hasn't been able to relinquish that shame.

On the eve of the seventh day, God saw "it was good."[12] Profoundly, in that workshop, it was. To witness in real time the excruciating vulnerability of facing the darkest place inside, the full force of God's creation - our humanity - and its capacity to move me, was sacred.

There are striking ontological connections between Shabbat, "a dimension in which the human is at home with the divine," [13] and the radical, painfully vulnerable expressions of somatic 'group work,' two seemingly opposing forces. Even their language appears contradictory; Sabbath suggests respite, and somatic connotes exertion. My experience of this work has been wild, vigorous, even violent – but at its core it seems to be about being with oneself and seeing that 'it is good,' not from judgment but from deep understanding.

Somatic group work is also about surrender – to how we have been hurt, how we have hurt others, what we feel, where and how we are willing or unwilling to change, and that to change or not change is a choice. It is about surrendering to the truth of what we want and how willing we are to get it. By switching off the noise in the mind and the stories we tell (recognizing them as stories), we can exist in the quiet reality of the body and feeling. Heschel describes Shabbat as silence: "How else to express glory in the presence of eternity, if not by the silence of abstaining from

[11] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 14.

[12] Genesis 1:31

[13] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 16.

nois[e]." [14] In some ways I have learned more about what Shabbat *represents* in Judaism by doing this work than I have at any synagogue or Shabbat table.

As an autoethnographer and performance researcher, I am also struck by the performativity and theatricality of somatic practice. My workshop experience began with an orientation of the equipment in the space: a large foam cube, a bat (used to hit the cube), mattresses, rollers, punching pads and gloves, and pillows. I learned that these are tools to help participants move the energy in the body. As one facilitator puts it, the "trauma, abuse… the thing that someone said last week that hurt our feelings – it's in our bodies." The physical act of hitting a block, punching a pillow, thrusting a mattress, wrestling, grappling, holding, being held – it's so primal. Through skillful facilitation, words and voice are incorporated into these highly theatrical improvisations, so powerful and energetically charged that they feel scripted at times. In such moments of supreme vulnerability, the participant experiences themselves in all their feeling, and in that place, may choose to change.

In one somatic workshop, I learned that we enter the world as infants completely at one with our need and essence; we are pure life force. We then come into contact with environmental limitations: family, culture, religion, society. At this point, there is a kind of protest – the energy wants to come out, but our parents or primary caregivers can't/won't receive it, for a multitude of reasons (fatigue, financial constraints, emotional limitations, or their own trauma), and we feel pain, terror, and rage. We begin to register that our energy is not welcome, and, since we rely on our parents for our basic needs, we adapt to stay in connection with them. This takes on the form of a mask, a distorted version of ourselves, which we come to identify with; we think we are the mask. The 'life-force energy' we had when we were children is locked up and stored in the body. We learn to keep it that way to shield ourselves from the pain of rejection, but this 'protection' keeps us separate from the world.

In somatic group work, through role play, physical movement, and what is called 'process work,' the goal is to gain consciousness around our defense, our separateness, and how we actually derive pleasure from it, because it is familiar and because on some level we believe we still need it to survive. When we're not invited to a party, we delude ourselves into thinking that we didn't want to go in the first place. Or, when the party host invites us over another time, we take immense pleasure in saying no. "I'll never be his friend again," I say. "I'll make him pay for what he's done." What we don't realize is the massive price in making the choice to separate out and not bring our true selves into connection. The revenge often costs us our lives.

The word *kiddush* refers to the blessing recited over wine on Shabbat. It means separation,

[14] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 15.

derived from the Hebrew word *kadesh*, to make holy or set apart. This appears to contradict what was just said; to set oneself apart detracts from the soul, it does not make it holy. But it's a paradox: to separate is disconnection but to *know my separateness* is the ultimate connection: it is to reveal myself to others. In somatic workshops, the goal is to ask: how do I separate myself out of my marriage, my friendships, my career, my dreams, through judgment, blame, or fear; how do I play a role in my disconnection? It is the difference between saying, "I really want to hurt you right now" and actually hurting someone; the former actually brings me *into* connection because I've chosen to let someone in. I once had a facilitator say to me, "You're so afraid of being rejected, but you also want it so badly. Because it means that someone has actually seen you." According to Dor Shav, Shabbat is about letting go: to 'let go and let God,'[15] to trust someone enough to know you, and more, to trust *yourself* enough to know you. And to accept yourself wholly.

On my very first day of group therapy, I learned about trust. There was an initial 'check-in,' where everyone shared what brought them to the workshop, and then we moved on. But a participant interrupted and turned to face me. He was 'holding back,' he revealed, and had something to say. In my earnestness, I assumed it would be complimentary. I didn't yet know that this work encourages participants to 'come clean' about their feelings, even (and especially) their judgments. "I don't feel you," he stated, looking into my eyes. "And I don't trust you." His honesty knocked the wind out of me; it snapped me in half. To my surprise, I burst into tears. I was a leaking wound. At the end of the session I approached the instructor and told her I would not be returning. She asked me why.

"Because of what happened," I answered, dumbly. "It shattered me."

"When someone rejects you, do you want it to shatter you?" she challenged.

No, I answered, to which she responded, "Then you need to come back. I can help you."

This was my crash course in somatic group work, a truly fascinating world. Imagine walking into a room and telling your unfiltered truth about everyone in it. "I like you, I don't like you. I'm afraid of you, I'm attracted to you. You disgust me, you intrigue me." The ethos is radical honesty: no masks. I noticed early on that group members would 'interrupt' each other with their personal feelings and triggers. This interrupting really threw me at first – I judged people for it. Then I realized it was leadership. They were owning their feeling. I want touch; I want attention. I'm jealous; I'm

[15] Alcoholics Anonymous (1964) notes the utility of the phrase "let go and let God" in navigating third-step surrenders. It has become an informal recovery slogan.

disgusted. I *need*. When in truth, the energy in the room explodes like popcorn and something very dynamic happens: it becomes alive.

An integral part of somatic group work is calling people out (and being called out) on what you see and feel in the room. One person will admit they're feeling something (bored, frustrated, exhausted, envious), and this will ignite more honesty; often others are feeling the same thing. We are taught to reject our intuitive reactions and to override our judgments because they aren't 'nice'; but it turns out, when followed, they reveal a powerful truth that is rarely offered up in the real world. The point is not to determine what is 'correct,' but rather, to use the energetic field to better understand oneself and others. It could be group-think, but what I experienced was an energetic power of the collective: a frighteningly accurate barometer of the pulse in the room.

In one instance, I was at the centre of a process when a participant shot up like a popcorn kernel and slammed his notebook against the wall. "You're so angry!" he exploded. "Why won't you express it?" The group was unanimous in their agreement; apparently everyone could feel my anger but me. "I don't feel that," I upheld, and believed I was telling the truth. Then I deflected: "I feel sadness, pain, grief…." This further enraged the group. A facilitator asked me, "Do you see how, by withholding your anger, you're holding everybody here hostage?"

"I don't want to do that," I said.

"But you are," she countered. "You're denying your anger and in doing so keeping everyone stuck. You have a lot of power here. It's why you've been alone for so long and it's why you're so sad."

I started to crack. "Can you help me?" I asked.

"Yeah," she answered, and handed me the bat.

I hit the block.

"Say, 'I won't let you see me,'" she said.

"I won't let you see me." I hit.

"I won't *ever* let you see me," she prompted. "I won't ever show myself to you."

"I won't ever," I repeated, and started to cry. "I won't ever show myself to you."

"I hate," she fed me.

"I *hate*." Hit.

"I hate you for protecting everyone but me. You said you would but you forgot about me. You forgot me and I'll never let you see me. You forgot

me and I'll make you pay for it forever. FOREVER." I screamed.

There is a moment in a somatic workshop when something happens – a divine spark. What Heschel might call "the wisdom of the body,"[16] a place where the "soul sense[s] the spirit," [17] a piece of the infinite. When God revealed himself to Elijah in Prophets, when he was alone in a cave and thought he was going to die, it was not by mighty wind or earthquake, but in a "still, small voice."[18] Many of us live our lives without knowing how to truly feel, without judgment. "Where can the likeness of God be found?"[19] Heschel asks. The seventh day is a day of feeling, of experience, of letting go, of loving ourselves. Just for one day, exactly as we are. Dor Shav says that, on Shabbat, we:

> consciously decide to see it all as 'very good'… in full knowledge that our perspective will soon revert [back]… [And] in exchange, God embraces us as well, just the way we are. That's His side of the bargain. [F]or one day we are blessed with unconditional acceptance; God's own 'letting go' of us, His seeing our being as very good.[20]

Shabbat, for many, involves restriction: 39 categories of creative prohibition. But what is it? No two people have the same answer. Lighting candles while praying for love. Walking without a destination. Nourishment, contemplation, showing up unannounced. In my house growing up, it was puppet shows and backgammon and baseball in the middle of the street. Imagination, openness. Oneness.

When the sun sets late into the evening, and the guests at my Shabbat table are deep in conversation, and the minutes ebb away slowly, imperceptibly, like a flower growing, time stops and souls suspend in a kind of ephemerality that can only be shaped by the human spirit. There is nowhere to go, nothing to do; there is only being.

Heidegger calls the paradox of existence Being, which involves but is not limited to *dasein*, being there. For Heidegger, Being is relation, not a thing that exists in space. It is the 'thing' (or no-thing) that renders possible all things or being there(s). It is the container and yet it defies all containment. Being is not subject to *dasein* in any way, and yet it is disclosed through a definite situation of there-

[16] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 21.

[17] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 17.

[18] I Kings 19:12

[19] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 16.

[20] Ethan Dor Shav, personal correspondence, July 2026.

ness. It is the occurrence of no-thing and the occurrence of all things, of all there-ness.

It is not God, it is not Sabbath, and yet it is both.

It is the Godly consciousness of there-ness within and above and between all things, including ourselves and our thinking. It is to ask questions we don't already have the answers to. To fathom the unfathomable, to push questioning to the very end. To understand things we can barely grasp because we have forgotten how to ask about them.

That humanity was created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in God's image, means that we have a shard of Him, of Being, in us. We can connect to Being through Shabbat and our feeling; we can lead in Being.

The seventh day is the final day, the 'extra' day, for us and for God. It is a day outside of (and paradoxically within) finite space. It is a day of choice, of risk, of making new choices, of doubt, of recognizing that all beliefs are doubt*able*, and of opening our beliefs to ongoing doubt. Of using our tradition and our history to understand that we have a lot of choices, that we are finite and also changeable. Of progress, which is only possible when we become conscious of our humanness, our Godliness, our changeability. And of surrender: of letting go of who we think we should be in order to be who we are.

What Happened to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad?

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From the beginning, we and the trees have been an uneasy, restless family, all of us born in different eras, yet fashioned from the same soil of the earth.

God formed the earth-person (Adam)
from the dust of the earth (adamah),
blowing into his nostrils the breath of life:
the earth-person became a living being.

God planted a garden in Eden, in the east,
and placed there the earth-person who had been fashioned.
And from the earth 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. (Genesis 2:7-8)[1]

The ground is our womb from which we both emerged and the place to which we will both return at death, but beyond this we appear to have nothing in common. Perhaps we earth-people were destined to exercise mastery, our intellects and powers soaring, it seems, far above the massive crowns of the tallest trees:

[1] Biblical translations in this essay are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1999), with some significant modifications.

God settled the earth-person in the garden of Eden,
to work it and protect it. (Genesis 2:15)
But let's look again at the story of our extended first family. Distinct from all of Eden's trees and from humans are:
…the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden…
and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.

In the middle of the garden stands the Tree of (Eternal) Life. Perhaps in the middle of the garden, or perhaps elsewhere, stands the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. From the very beginning, apart from and a part of all the other trees, these two stand out with extraordinary powers that we lack: providing to those who eat their fruits immortality and "the knowledge of good and bad," the Torah's way of saying, "everything from A-Z." It appears that these two trees are our equals, maybe our superiors:

… the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden…
and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.

Yet, where exactly is the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden? Had the Torah wanted to be clear that it, too, is *in the middle of the Garden*, it would have written:

With the Tree of Life
and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad
in the middle of the garden.

Separating the clause about the Tree of Knowledge from this central locale excites great curiosity. Is the Tree in the middle of the Garden, singled out like the Tree of Life? Or is it elsewhere? Everywhere? Everywhere that the other trees are?

The Torah complicates this mystery when it makes not only the Tree's locale, but also its identity, ambiguous. God tells Adam and Eve, our First Parents:

Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat;
but as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you must not eat of it;
for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die. (Genesis 2:16-17)

How strange that God forbids eating from the Tree of Knowledge and not from the Tree of Life, but at least God is clear that this is the Tree God means. Yet, as the story moves forward, even this becomes murky. The serpent shrewdly approaches Eve, First Woman, to tempt her into eating from God's forbidden tree. She answers the serpent:

We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the Garden.
It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden that God said:
'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'' (Genesis 3:2-3)

Her ambiguous words beg the questions: *Which* tree in the middle of the Garden? The Tree of Life? The Tree of Knowledge? The former is the only tree mentioned explicitly as having been placed in

the middle. The latter is the only tree mentioned explicitly whose fruit is forbidden to eat. What is happening in this passage?

More of this later. First, we witness the First Woman's dangerous adventure. Knowing that she lacks what "the Tree" possesses, she gives into her temptations…or, perhaps, she forcefully moves her life forward:

When the woman saw
that the Tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes,
and that the Tree was desirable as a source of wisdom,
she took of its fruit and ate.
She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)

These words describe her perception of the Tree of Knowledge; yet they also echo with some variation the earlier words about *all* the trees of the Garden that God planted, as if no difference exists between them and the Tree of Knowledge:

And from the earth God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food… (Genesis 2:9)

We leave the First Woman for a moment to wonder if perhaps the Tree of Knowledge is both *apart from and a part of* the rest of the Garden's trees: first among equals, but an intimate member of Eden's Arboretum, nonetheless.

Now, back to her. For all its obscurity, the Torah suggests that the woman is standing in front of the Tree of Knowledge. She could chop It down, cut up

Its limbs, burn It in a fireplace, turn It into logs, planks, chips, sawdust. The Tree would still have as much, if not more, power than her, for It possesses what she lacks: potential limitless knowledge. She knows this, so she calculates the benefit from her actions against the repercussions from violating God's command. The First Woman comes from the same place as the Tree: the soil. When she and the First Man, (we met him as the earth-person) ingest its fruit and the knowledge it offers, they become, as it were, one with the Tree, distinct from all other life forms, and perilously like God. In heaven, a wary and threatened Creator decrees the first humans' exile:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened…
And God said, "Now that the earth-people have become like any of us,
knowing good and bad,
what if they should stretch out a hand
and take also from the Tree of Life and eat,
and live forever!" (Genesis 3:7, 22)

An ancient *aggadah*[2] (rabbinic legend) teaches that the length of time from which our First Parents were created until God expelled them from Eden was no more than half a day. It is

[2] *Sanhedrin* 38b.

bitterly ironic that all of that arboreal wisdom sits in their bellies, blood and brains, with no place to use it except out in ruthless reality, beyond the walls of Paradise, where mortality rules and they will die. Robert Frost captures brilliantly this primordial tragedy:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.[3]

Eden sinks to grief as our First Parents are packed up and expelled, never to savor the possibility of eternal life, as God tells them on the day of the expulsion:

For dust you are,
and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:19)

From the moment they leave, Eden becomes eerily quieter *and* noisier. With the earth-people gone, the other living things reclaim the spaces and the voices they had relinquished when the humans sprung up from the ground. Is this the moment when God takes the Tree of Life, the source of human "immortality impending," chops It down and uses It to make the scrolls on which the eternal words of scripture would be written?

It is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it… (Proverbs 3:18)

Will immortality become something to achieve with words, even as we continue to be mortal like wood?

Equally important, what is the fate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad? Strange indeed that we can't seem to locate exactly where it was before "Eden sank to grief." After our First Parents leave, the Torah says nothing more about it. Where has It gone? Looking back at the ambiguities and mysteries with which the Torah tantalizes and tortures us, perhaps we can catch a fleeting glimmer of an answer. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad hasn't gone *anywhere* because It has gone *everywhere*.

Science teaches us that trees spread their seeds with the help of the wind that blows them and with the help of animals that eat and excrete them in forest corners near and far. Science also teaches us that in healthy forests there are Mother trees, massive old growth wonders that coordinate nourishment and communication among entire groves of mixed tree species.[4] Their functions have been compared to those of animals' (far more rapid) central nervous systems, the seats of animal intelligence and wisdom. Finally, science teaches

[3] Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1969), 222.

[4] See Suzanne Simard, *Finding The Mother Tree: Discovering The Wisdom Of The Forest* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022).

us that trees survive changes in the environment by ever-so-gradually migrating to more hospitable climes as those seeds come to rest, take root and grow in those places.

Science and biblical narrative are not the same. The stories of the trees of Eden have no *scientific* validity; yet their metaphors and poetry provide us with deeper spiritual insight into the magnificent, God-given wisdom of the trees that scientific research highlights. So, let's imagine another part of the Eden story, our Biblical ancestors, the earth-people, as the wind, but more, as the animals. Once they eat from the Tree's wisdom fruit, it becomes part of them, and, like anything eaten, it is expelled from them: the Tree and its wisdom digested and put back into the soil, well beyond the mythic Eden, distributed throughout the planet we know.

Let's also consider the following. The Torah is clear that eating from the Tree of Knowledge is forbidden to the First People. Yet, perhaps the Torah is ambiguous about the exact location of the Tree of Knowledge in Eden (in the center or everywhere?) because eating from its fruit is also part of God's survival strategy for the Tree and for us. The Tree might survive in Eden, but it could not thrive in that Fantasy Forest that provides no outlet for its many gifts and secrets to be revealed. Already in the Garden, the Tree of Knowledge is "on the move," preparing for its slow migration into reality, a Tree apart from, *and* a part of, all the other trees. Consuming Its fruit, our First Parents can no longer remain entirely of the earth, one with Nature's soil from which we and the trees were born. A part of *and* apart from Nature, no longer citizens of Eden's Fantasy Forest, they leave and take Knowledge with them into the world as we know it. Along with them, as they too find

homes on the earth, the descendants of the Tree of Knowledge grow into more than eighty thousand species of trees, all different, all the same, rooted in the original Trees of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad especially. They include Mother trees that hold in their mycorrhiza (intertwined roots and fungi), trunks, branches, and leaves, unparalleled wisdom with which they "parent" widespread communities of diverse trees: so that they can live, so that we can all live. They include individual saplings and full-grown trees masterfully defying gravity to draw water up into their chlorophyll-washed leaves; with the sun's brilliant light, they produce food for them to eat along with oxygen for the rest of us to breathe.

Reading Eden's tree story this way, I think about these things:

Every tree on the planet is the distant offspring of the Tree of Knowledge, the founding Parent of Eden's Grove.

Every tree among the three trillion worldwide you and I encounter possesses the tiniest bit of wisdom and generosity of the original Tree. Each one provides oxygen, food, shade, medicine, animals' homes, a place of peace, inspiration, and

revival for us, a place of respite.

Everywhere any tree creates its own food from sunlight, cooperates with other trees through its roots and fungi, figures out how to live longer than all animals, the Tree of Knowledge is giving us a taste of the insights we have yet to consume.

Every time we, our First Parents' descendants, encounter and learn from a tree, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad – everything from A to Z – is with us.

Increasingly, I can see each tree with its rooted feet, its trunk torso, its branches and branchlets spreading out in fractal glory like the fingers of my hand, its leaves nourishing me with oxygen while my lungs and blood nourish it with carbon dioxide. I recognize that, evolutionarily, we are completely different, but we are each other's family at the same time. From the beginning, we and the trees have been an uneasy, restless family, all of us born in different eras, yet fashioned from the same soil of the earth. Our older family preceded us by nearly four hundred million years. We, their younger kin, have at times treated them with grace and wisdom, at too many other times with abuse.

I imagine each tree, as it were, calling out with the ancestral words, *Tzei u-lemad, "No talking about us without us. Get up, go outside to listen to us, to talk with us, to learn."* I leave the sterile comfort of indoor space, walk outside to speak with and learn from each of them. Each one stands, like me, crown to roots, head to feet, waiting to be heard, demanding to hear from me. We are more alike than I have admitted. I listen to my human ancestors call out the Torah's words:

A human is a tree of the field!
A tree of the field is human! (Deuteronomy 20:19)[5]

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[5] These are two hyper-literal translations of Deuteronomy's Hebrew rendering, *ki ha-adam eitz ha-sadeh*, which is commonly translated in its immediate context as a rhetorical question: "Is a tree of the field human?" This hyper-literal reading can be found in sources as diverse as *Taanit* 7a, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 21:1, implicitly in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 34:4, and the Torah commentary of Rabbi Menahem Recanati on Deuteronomy 20:17. J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Ha-Midrashim*, records this interpretation of our verse in his version of "Midrash Tehiyyat Ha-Meitim, She'eilot Rabbi Eliezer al Ha-Tehiyyah," #13. See Eisenstein's note there for earlier midrashic versions of this passage.