

**I Talk to the Trees:
Interbeing and the Tree of Life
A Sermon for Kol Nidrei 5780
Rabbi Caryn Broitman**

The last few summers, when my daughter Galya, has come home from college, the first thing she does is plant a big vegetable and herb garden with berry bushes as well. By mid-August, however, when she needs to leave for school, she reluctantly takes a leap of faith and turns over the care of the plants and bushes to me. A year ago last summer, after having given me detailed instructions for their care, she left me with three words—“talk to them.”

Now, I’m not foolish enough to think that only humans can talk. Yet I had never been in conversation with plants before and wasn’t sure what to say. Our encounters were brief and a little awkward. But a year later, this past July, when I was home recovering from a concussion, I spent a lot of time in the garden with the flowers, the bushes and the trees. And in time I did begin in a silent and meditative way, to “talk” to them. And in their own way, they started to talk back.

Last year, as part of a New York Times Magazine soundscape called “Listen to the World”¹ in which one could

listen to sounds around the world through the magazine's accompanying digital recordings, I listened to the sounds of an aspen grove in Utah called the Pando Clone. The grove covers 107 acres and is estimated to include 47,000 trees. When a breeze comes, you could hear a shimmering of tens of thousands of trees that sound like a gentle rainstorm. Yet the most remarkable thing about the Pando Clone is not its sounds. The most remarkable thing is that when we look at those 47,000 trees and think, "wow that's a lot of trees," we are fooled by an illusion—for we are actually looking at *one* tree.

Professor Karen Mock of Utah State University explains for the article. "What makes Aspen especially interesting is that it has roots that spread out just underneath the surface of the soil and out of those roots can come brand new trees that look like different individuals but in fact they're genetically identical to the root from which it came. And so, if you're in the middle of that Pando Clone, then you really are hearing the sound of a single organism. . . all of those trees came from one seed that's about the size of a flea. It really forces us to think about what an individual really is. Because you look at an individual tree and you think you know what a tree is. You take the tree as an individual and think you know what an individual is. And then all of a sudden Aspen just

turns that on its head and suddenly you don't really know what an individual is any more."

What seems most real to us, the individuality and separateness of a thing or being—ends up being an illusion. The many are actually one. And if that is true of an aspen grove, that may very well be true of everything—and that is exactly Judaism teaches.

There is a way in which deep inside, we already know this. There is a Jewish myth about the angel of conception named Laila who teaches the soul in the womb all the mysteries of the universe. Then, as soon as the baby is born, Laila touches her above the upper lip, which becomes the philtrum, and the baby forgets everything she has learned.

If I had to speculate on what that fetus in the womb knew that it later "forgot," it would be something similar to the mystery of the aspen grove and the illusion of the individual. Perhaps the soul in the womb "knows" that she floats in water that is made of elements, that also make up the stars. Perhaps the soul "knows" that she can only eat and breath thanks to an umbilical cord that connects her to her mother, and by extension to her father and to her mother's mother and father and so on back across infinite space and time.

The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh compares the umbilical cord to the stem that links the leaf to a tree. Because we can see the stem, it is easy to see the connection between the leaf and the tree, just as it

is easy to see the connection between the fetus and the mother through the umbilical cord. “But on the day we were born,” Thich Nhat Hahn teaches, it was cut off, and we received the illusion that we became independent. That is not true,” he continues. “We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have many other mothers as well. The earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our Mother earth.... Do you see the link between you and me?” he continues. “If you are not there, I am not here. This is certain. If you do not see it yet, please look more deeply and I am sure you will.”²

So it is as soon as we are born, according to both the Jewish myth and the Zen master, that we “forget” our interconnection and become “individuals.” Western psychology teaches us about individuation and independence and uniqueness—all critical for the growth of a healthy human being, but at the same time, as with the aspen grove, all an illusion. You only have to go a little ways down beneath the surface of the grove to see the roots, and to know that we are all one—to know that *everything* is one.

Yet we human beings don’t always go beneath the surface to the roots. The Zohar, the foundational text of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, calls this world *Alma d’Shikra*, the world of illusion or lies. The goal of Jewish mysticism is to direct our attention beyond the surface illusions to the roots, to the underlying truth of oneness. In

doing so, the Zohar has taken in deeply the lessons of trees—so much so that it imagines God not as the proverbial “old man with a beard” (which is actually not a Jewish image, by the way) but as a tree with its roots in a completely unknowable realm emanating divine energy down through the trunk and branches, called the ten *sefirot*. As the energy continues to emanate through the lowest sefira, the Shechina, it creates our lower world by garbing itself in garments by and through which it reveals itself at the same time as it creates our world of differentiation. What we see as separate things are actually containers for the divine energy which is one. As Rabbi Arthur Green explains, “[T]he relationship between God and world in this sort of faith is essentially not that of Creator and Creation, indicating a true separation between God and the universe, but rather one of inner core and outward manifestations. The ‘lower’ world is in fact a ‘vessel’ or a ‘garment’ to contain that radiating energy. The divine Self emanates through the universe and is revealed, paradoxically, as it is ‘garbed’ in each of the many creatures that inhabit it.”³

In other words, what we see as “reality”, as separate things, is actually a garb that both contains and reveals the energy of the divine flow. Everything is God. Everything is connected. It is not that what we are seeing is not real—it is just not a separate reality. It is all one. In this system, Adam’s sin in eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, wasn’t primarily about disobeying.

The sin was in not recognizing that both trees in the Garden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, are really *one* tree. Adam's sin was treating the Tree of Knowledge as a separate tree. ⁴ He was guilty of holding on to the illusion of separation, and the consequence was that he and his descendants would have to live in the world of separation.

This idea of the illusion of separation and the interconnection of all things is called by Thich Nhat Hahn "interbeing." "If you are a poet," he writes, "you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. . . . If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we say the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. . . . Without non-paper elements, like mind, loggers, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it. "⁵

This idea of "interbeing" seems to me to be a fundamental truth of our existence, and one does not have to be a poet, a Jewish mystic or a Zen master to see its importance. I have heard it argued that religion enforces morality by positing a God who is other, who watches over and rewards and punishes. But one can argue just as well from Judaism that morality flows from the truth of

“interbeing” — that is-- not from a God that is other, but from a God that is within and through all of being.

Many of the moral crises facing us today are a result, similar to Adam’s sin in the Garden, of acting as if separation and individuation were the highest truth rather than “interbeing” and Oneness. Racism, cruelty to migrants and refugees, greed and corruption, exploitation of and cruelty to animals and to the earth, climate catastrophe are all linked in some way to our false beliefs that we alone, as individuals, as racial or ethnic groups, as religions or as a species, are separate and dominant.

How can our great spiritual traditions help us to correct our course and return us to an interconnected life informed by the deeper truth of Oneness? I think first by understanding that the choice before us is not between an idolatrous world of self and separation on the one hand, and continuous meditation or mysticism on the other. Rather, both the teachings of Judaism and Thich Nhat Hahn’s engaged Buddhism can teach a way to live in *this* world, as we must, while integrating the deeper truths of interconnectedness.

Judaism teaches that we must live our lives informed by two paradoxical spiritual realities at the same time. We must live with the reality of time and space and differentiation—call it Tree of Knowledge reality, or the human point of view. And we must also live informed by glimpses of the hidden and deeper reality of infinite

Oneness—call it the Tree of Life reality, or God’s point of view. We must walk, as Rabbi Green says, on a “tightrope so not to fall too far into only one.”⁶ And if we can walk with the truth of both realities, they can lift up and transform the other in our consciousness.

Rabbi Green teaches that this insight of the two realities of Oneness is contained with the Shema. The verse *Shema Yisrael...* expresses the upper unity, the one, unchanging and undifferentiated infinity. The verse that immediately follows, the *Baruch Shem Kevod*, expresses the “lower unity: the “oneness *in and through* the world.” He writes: “Each flower, each blade of grass, each human soul, is a new manifestation of divinity, a new unfolding of the cosmic One that ever reveals itself through its multicolored garments, ever taking on new and changing forms of life. In the very variety of life’s riches we discover the unity that flows through them all. . .”⁷

Judaism can help us to bring the infinity, the Oneness, to each part of the whole. As the psalmist says, God calls each star by name (Ps. 147). And midrash teaches that God assigns an angel to each blade of grass that watches it, taps it and says “grow grow.”⁸ Just as Judaism sees the infinity in each blade of grass, we must bring each blade of grass, each tree, each human being, to the Infinity—to the holiness which it reflects and is a part of. We are fundamentally a part of a whole, and the more separate we feel as individuals or as a

species, the more we live in illusion and risk doing harm to ourselves and other beings.

The illusion of disconnection is bad for our planet, bad for our ideals of justice, and bad for our individual wellbeing. Richard Powers, author of the eco-novel *The Overstory* where trees are main characters, and which won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction this past spring, suggests that our placing ourselves as separate and dominant has made the majority of us suffer from what psychologists call “species loneliness.” “Not loneliness for other human beings,” he explains. “We’re lonely because we’ve talked ourselves into believing we’re the only game in town. We’re the only interesting thing going on. And that’s why we look at Facebook 158 times a day. But that hunger for something that’s not us can’t be fed by us...”⁹

So talking to the trees and to the plants in the garden is not just for their sake—it is for ours. And that insight both reduces us to size and lifts us up to higher meaning.

Powers describes writing his book as a kind of a “religious conversion” that showed him his place in “a system of meaning that doesn’t begin and end with humans.”¹⁰ That is exactly what Judaism as a great spiritual tradition teaches. We are a part of a greater whole where all is one and all is God. This insight can put us in our place if we idolize our egos and role in creation. It can also lift us up to holiness as we feel the miraculousness of being interconnected to all,

as the divine presence runs through and between. Would that this insight can make it that much harder to injure another being, or make the air and water on which all beings depend second to the profits.

In this context, it doesn't at all feel awkward to talk to the plants and trees in the garden. It feels absolutely necessary. I find it also necessary to say, that as we face some of our greatest challenges in the history of human life on this planet in the form of climate disruption, the answers are not only in science, in politics, or in individual choices. We also need to see this as a spiritual crisis, and turn to our great spiritual traditions, which can both challenge and guide us.

As Hillel says, "if not now when." And the character Charlotte tells her husband in Richard Power's novel *The Overstory*...

"There's a Chinese saying. 'When is the best time to plant a tree? Twenty years ago.' "

The Chinese engineer smiles. "Good one."

" 'When is the next best time? Now.' "

"Ah! Okay!" The smile turns real. Until today, he has never planted anything. But Now, that next best of times, is long, and rewrites everything."¹¹

May we on this New Year, may we during this time of self-examination and reflection, rewrite ourselves into the book of

“Interbeing,” the book of Oneness and the Book of Life.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/21/magazine/voyages-travel-sounds-from-the-world.html>

² Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 117.

³ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 105.

⁴ Zohar, Translation and Annotation by Daniel C. Matt (Woodstock, VT: Skylights Paths Publishing, 2002), p. 18.

⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, pp. 95-96.

⁶ Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds, *A New Hasidism: Roots* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), p. 296.

⁷ Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson Inc., 1992), p. 7.

⁸ Bereishit Rabba 10:6.

⁹ <https://www.wbur.org/radioboston/2018/04/20/richard-powers-overstory>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/16/richard-powers-interview-overstory>

¹¹ Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2018).