

# CHAPTER 6, MISHNA 7(B): TORAH AND THE TREE OF LIFE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

***Great is Torah, for it gives life to its doers in this world and in the next world, as it is written: 'For they [the teachings of the Torah] give life to those who find them and healing to all flesh' (Proverbs 4:22). It also says: 'Healing will it be for your flesh and marrow for your bones' (ibid., 3:8). It also says: 'It is a tree of life to those who take hold of it, and those who support it are fortunate' (3:18). And it says: 'They are a graceful garland for your head and necklaces for your throat' (1:9). And it says: 'It will give your head a graceful garland; it will provide you a crown of glory' (4:9). And it says: 'For in me [the Torah] will you lengthen days, and years of life will be added to you' (9:11). And it says: 'Length of days in its right hand; in its left are wealth and honor' (3:16). And it is written: 'For length of days, years of life, and peace will they [the Torah's teachings] increase for you' (3:2).***

Last week we began to discuss the many poetic verses quoted by our mishna. As we explained, our mishna speaks in such glowing terms about the "doers" of Torah rather than its studiers. We "do" Torah when we not only study, but practice, apply to ourselves, and become a reflection of that which we have studied. And for such a person, Scripture is full of praises. As the verses in our mishna attest, the Torah is to him an ornament, decorating both his head and throat. It is also a tree of life showering him with unlimited blessings.

Last week we discussed the significance of the Torah studier's head and throat -- why these organs are singled out in particular. We now come to a more famous metaphor for the Torah: "It is a tree of life to all who take hold of it." What is the symbolism of a tree?

Almost from the start, a tree conjures up a sense of vitality. A tree is alive, it grows, it is a part of nature, it provides shelter, and it bears fruit. It is both living and brings life to its surroundings. Likewise, we must do no more than take hold of the Torah's tree of wisdom ("to all who take hold of it"). Once we grasp its life-giving wisdom, it will grow of its own accord -- carrying us along with it. We can almost be passive about our Torah study; spiritual growth will come regardless.

In this vein the Talmud tells us: "One should even study Torah and perform mitzvos (good deeds) not for the sake of Heaven, for from this he will come to [perform them] for the sake of Heaven" (Pesachim 50b). Study Torah for whatever reason -- excepting, of course, for no other reason than to mock (although that too has been known to backfire). Once you've gotten that taste of the Torah, it will work its magic on you. One cannot see truth -- he cannot see G-d -- and remain the same individual. The Torah is life and gives life to all who come in contact with it. And having tasted true life, one will never again be satisfied with an ersatz imitation.

All this is certainly true, yet there is a much deeper and more intriguing insight here as well. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch makes a fascinating observation. There was one earlier, more literal, Tree of Life mentioned in the Torah: the famous Tree of Life of the Garden of Eden. As Genesis (2:9) describes, there were two trees in the center of the Garden -- the Trees of Life and of Knowledge. We hear very little of the Tree of Life. The Tree of Knowledge, conversely, is very much the focus of the story. Adam and Eve are commanded not to partake of it, "for on the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (2:17). As we know, however, Adam and Eve do just that, upon the Serpent's seduction, and man becomes forever cursed. He would be finite. His body would ultimately succumb to death. Conversely, childbirth -- the creation of life -- would now be an unbearably painful process. We almost have to die ourselves in order to create new life. And man's fleeting stay in this world would be filled with pain, sweat, suffering, and sorrow. (Sums it all up pretty well, sad to say...)

This tragic and foreshadowing episode of man's first day on earth ends with a curious detail. G-d, after punishing Adam, directs Himself towards the heavenly angels and says: "Behold, man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil. And now, he might send forth his hand, take also from the Tree of Life, eat, and live forever" (3:22). As a result G-d banishes man from the Garden of Eden, never again to return until the final redemption at the End of Days.

The full significance of this story is of course far beyond what we will address today. (We had a lengthier discussion not too far back. See our three-part series on Chapter 6, Mishna 5, entitled "The Primordial Sin." (Go to [the archives](#) and follow the links). Yet this one detail demands our attention. What is the relationship between the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life? And what is the Torah's relationship -- perhaps in a more permissible manner? -- to the primordial Tree of Life? (If anything, we would expect the Torah to be likened to a tree of knowledge rather than a tree of life.)

Let us begin with the other famous (or infamous) tree of Genesis, the Tree of Knowledge. Clearly, man (I use this term to refer to Adam and Eve as a single entity) was intelligent before he ate of the Tree of Knowledge. He had already conversed with G-d and named the animals (2:16-20). The Tree of Knowledge is referred to more precisely as the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (v. 9). What man lacked was the intimate knowledge of and desire for evil. (Again, we discussed this in much greater detail in the past.) He had no inherent desire to sin, only to do that which was naturally and logically correct -- to serve G-d, his Creator, and to perfect himself and the world. The desire for evil was embodied in a foreign entity -- the Serpent -- whose mission was to tempt man to sin. Man himself -- in both body and spirit -- was perfect.

Once man tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, however, he was no longer whole. The evil inclination had entered his very being. He "knew" what evil was alright -- and he wanted it bad. Man was now a confused mixture of good and evil, neither side easily gaining paramouncy. Man would now have to struggle to conquer his passions and redirect himself heavenwards. And as great as man's spirit might strive to be, his body would never be fully free of its earthiness, the mark of the Serpent. It was now fated that only through death -- through the decay and destruction of our

bodies -- and the ultimate rebirth of the Resurrection -- would man again attain both spiritual and bodily perfection.

For this reason, once man failed in his initial challenge, G-d had to bar him from the path to the Tree of Life. Now, in our imperfect state, we would have to first die in order to attain perfection. This is true partly because of the reason above: Man was now physically imperfect. His body was too coarse, too finite and vulgar to achieve perfection on its own. His spirit would never grow strong enough to entirely subdue and sublimate his body -- not until the body's decay and ultimate future resurrection. (Some of the ideas above are based on The Way of G-d by R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto.)

But there is a practical side to this as well. Man would never again really strive for perfection for perfection's sake -- not without the fear of death hanging over him. Only because of the ever-present knowledge that we will ultimately die and come face to face with our Creator are we forced to live with a sense of finiteness and accountability. We know we must make something of ourselves, and we have limited time to do so. G-d, of course, does not make this sensation too overbearing; in a way we all feel we'll live forever. Yet, death is a reality we never fully free ourselves of. And our lives are fundamentally altered -- for the better -- because of the realization that one day we will die.

However, the existence of the Torah, G-d's great gift to Israel, alters this reality ever so slightly. Without the Torah man is finite and imperfect -- and must be kept from the Tree of Life. However, notes R. Hirsch, the Torah is not only a Tree of Knowledge. It is a Tree of Life as well. This means that the Torah combines both life-giving qualities. It not only provides us with spiritual wisdom, but allows to us to sense physical eternity as well. Why? Because when we study Torah we not only absorb knowledge; we begin to appreciate it as well. We admire the Torah's wisdom; through it life makes sense and all things physical and spiritual function in harmony. And we begin to **want** to follow G-d's ways. We no longer have to force our bodies -- our unwilling, lethargic physical selves -- to behave. We appreciate the beauty of the Torah's way, and our bodies become sublimated. And as that occurs, they attain the permanence and eternity of our souls.

Of course, we can never attain true physical perfection in this world. Even the greatest scholar among us dies: his soul must part from his body for at least a time. But Torah study provides us with a true sense of the infinite -- a taste of the eternal life of the World to Come while he is yet in this world. And his body is no longer the same. There have been many recorded cases of corpses of righteous Jews being exhumed and found to be whole. (I admit, I haven't witnessed any of these cases myself -- and even had I been present, I doubt I'd remember a thing.) The forces of death and decay held no sway over such great Jews. They did have to die to be sure -- that is the fate of humankind -- but their bodies were unaffected by death. They were to simply wait in their wholeness, purity and serenity to rise again -- already perfected -- at the Resurrection.

This returns us to our original discussion on our mishna (primarily of last week). Our mishna, as we

noted, is discussing the "doers" of Torah rather than its studiers. One who "does" Torah is one who not only studies, but applies to himself and develops an appreciation for the Torah's wisdom. And he is the person for whom the Torah becomes a Tree of Life. He has sublimated his body as well as his soul, and so the Torah affords him a sense of the infinite -- the Tree of Life in store for the righteous in the World to Come. Likewise, he receives the many other blessings enumerated in our mishna. Once he is physically sacred, the many material blessings promised in the Torah are showered upon him. There are no contradictions within him, no dark and evil corners not suited for blessing. His physical has been sanctified, and all levels of his reality are in harmony. And so too, the heavens and the earth all join to shower him with the blessings of an infinite Creator.

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