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Shevat: Turning the World into the Garden of Eden

The main date that we denote in the month of Shevat is the 15th of Shevat, *Tu BeShevat*, the New Year of Trees. The Torah has a unique approach to trees. The main concern for the plant-life of our world is expressed in the prohibition to cut down fruit trees (as in the verse, “For man is like a tree of the field”¹). The *tzaddik* is compared to a fruit-bearing tree and the Torah itself is called “the tree of life.” When we wish to describe the Garden of Eden, we depict a wondrous garden of trees. Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. But in the month of Shevat, the month of the trees (according to another opinion, the New Year for Trees is on the 1st day of Shevat), we can contemplate on how to transform our world once again into the Garden of Eden.

“I Have Come to My Garden”

How do we return to that lost past, that blissful Garden of Eden from which humanity was expelled? How do we get there? It may not seem realistic to try. The Garden of Eden also refers to the future, the place where the souls of the righteous receive their heavenly reward for their good deeds in this world. But that Garden of Eden is quite different. First, because it is a place for souls, not a place where people in physical bodies live the lives that we know. Second, because it is a final destination for bestowal of reward, while the original Garden of Eden was a place for developing life, of mission, destiny and progress. After all, man was placed in the Garden of Eden in order to “work it and safeguard it.”² The Torah is predicated on rectification and progress, not on sweet illusions of the past. Thus, our goal is not return to the Garden of Eden, but rather, to turn *our* world into the Garden of Eden. The expulsion from the Garden of Eden was not only a punishment. It was also as an act of propulsion to a mission of rectification.

Man, who sullied the ideal reality of the Garden of Eden, was not discharged from the Garden of Eden so that he would lose it forever. On the contrary, he now has a mission: to bear the message that is the Garden of Eden wherever he goes—even as he descends to the very lowest spiritual places, which are more befitting his state after having been expelled from the Garden of Eden.³ The *midrash* explains that the words “I have come to my garden” in the Song of Songs refer to the original Garden of Eden, which still exists in potential even in our lower world. With our hard work, we can turn it back into the Garden of Eden that it once was.

The Tree of Life, representing eternal life, stands in the heart of the Garden of Eden. It is written that after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the “turning, flaming

¹. Deuteronomy 20:19.

² Genesis 2:15.

³. Song of Songs 5:1.

sword"⁴ was stationed at the entrance to the Garden in order to safeguard the way to the Tree of Life. But even if there is no way for us to return to the Tree of Life, we can still pull its branches into our world. How?

There are two things that are called "The Tree of Life": The Torah ("It is a Tree of Life is for those who hold on to it"⁵) and *tzaddikim*, pious individuals ("the fruit of the pious is a tree of life"⁶). The Torah provides us with the guidance of the Garden of Eden for our lives, and the *tzaddikim* are in effect those individuals who still "remember" the Garden of Eden—they live it and make it tangible for the rest of us. The simple meaning of the name of this month, Shevat, is a branch. During the month of Shevat, we must turn into branches that are connected to the Tree of Life – to the Torah and the *tzaddikim* – and pull them into our ever-so-human world.

Refine Reality

What is the longed-for Garden of Eden? In Hebrew, "Eden" means 'refined' or 'gentle.' The Garden of Eden is the place where the qualities of refinement and gentleness are expressed. Chassidut explains that the purpose of Torah study and service of God is to refine our character traits. To understand this more in depth, we will employ the basic Kabbalistic model of the structure of the worlds:

The upper world, *Atzilut* (Emanation), is where only the presence of God is felt, with no other, separate consciousness possible. Below *Atzilut* are three worlds in which consciousness experiences itself and reality as separated from God, to different degrees. These are the worlds of Creation, Formation, and Action. The world of Emanation is the world of refinement, in which there is no harsh reality or ego and all individual details are perceived as gentle outlines within the Divine light. As we descend into the lower worlds, reality becomes more tangible, harsh and egotistic. Relentless and determined, it battles for its existence. Our world, the world of Action is so coarse that it sometimes seems like a jungle in which only the strong and violent can survive. As such, turning the world into the Garden of Eden is actually the challenge of turning the lower worlds into a garden in which the refinement of the world of Emanation manifests.

Melodies, Hues, Gentility

Every person is a miniature world, and thus, we can describe this entire process as it occurs within the soul. The source of our souls is in the world of Emanation, a world of deep, inner refinement. The soul has three garments, which enable it to express itself in reality. Thus, the three garments, thought, speech and action parallel the worlds of Creation, Formation and Action, respectively. As long as the soul's garments are not refined, the soul's inner gentility is concealed and does not manifest in reality. When we refine our thoughts, speech and action, we turn ourselves and our surroundings into a Garden of Eden.

⁴ Genesis 3:24

⁵ Proverbs 3:18.

⁶ Proverbs 11:30.

The word 'garden' hints to those things that we must refine in order to turn the world into the Garden of Eden. We turn our thought into the Garden of Eden by means of gentle melodies. Chassidut explains that music is the "quill of the soul." Prior to thoughts defined by words, the most subtle rustling of the soul can be expressed as music. Loud, coarse music that addicts us to raw experiences and high-intensity excitement drowns out the soul's gentle voice. For the soul to be able to resonate, it has to become accustomed to refined melodies, which blend the complex array of human emotions—from joy, hope and confidence to longing for the concealed root of the soul. Refined melodies cause the garment of thought, which might seem innate and unchangeable, to 'recreate' from its unconscious source, in an exquisitely refined and precise manner.

The world of Formation is made up of forms and images. These impact our speech—the soul's garment that parallels Formation—as the syntax (form) of language and with the figures of speech, etc. that we use. In order to redraw our speech into the Garden of Eden, we must become accustomed to painting gentle hues. Speech creates reality and the more refined our speech, the more pleasant the reality that is painted. A person's hue can be discerned by his manner of speech. The more that the hues of his voice are refined, the more precise are the hues of his personality, and the better he blends in with the hues of the people in his surroundings.

We can transform the garment of action (parallel to the world of Action) into the Garden of Eden when we adopt refined mannerisms. "Every Jew is the son of kings" and we must embrace royal behavior. The core expression of royal gentility is the ability to control, beginning with self-control. We must refine our reactions and precisely control our actions so that we do not blindly follow our innate animal instincts.

Adino Ha'etzni

We may wish to claim that with all due respect to the wonders of refinement, the reality of our world is that the most fit and strong survive, rule and triumph. As long as the world has not yet been transformed into the Garden of Eden, how can we teach those who strive for good to refine themselves, abandoning the world to the bestiality of those who prefer evil?

The sages teach that King David, who represents the royal gentility that can rectify reality, was also known as, *Adino Ha'etzni*⁷ which means, "gentle tree-like," referring to his two contradictory character traits: "When he would be sitting and studying Torah he would make himself as gentle (*Adino*) as a worm (such as a silkworm) and when he would go out to war, he would harden himself like a tree (*Ha'etzni*)."⁸ The trees of the Garden of Eden are imbued with inner hardness and strength. A true Jewish leader knows that sometimes he must adopt a "tree-like" tough stance in the face of the jungle creatures who oppose the refinement of the world. Only by doing so,

⁷ Samuel II 23:8.

⁸ *Moed Katan* 16b.



will his refined inner world, cultivated in his hall of study, turn the wild jungle into a blissful Garden of Eden.