To Speak for the Trees…

by

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*I am the Lorax, I speak for the trees …*

- Dr. Seuss

The Lorax

The noted children’s author, Dr. Seuss, understood well the importance of trees. Without them, the landscape would be ever less joyful, the paths we walk would be ever so much bleaker, and, ultimately, the lives we lead would be unsustainable.

Can you imagine a landscape without trees! Can you imagine a world without the fruits of trees! No shade from the hot, summer sun? No cleansing of the air through the process of photosynthesis. No apples, no peaches, no oranges!

Keeping trees healthy is both a selfish and selfless act. As R’ Edward Davis shared on Rabbanan.org, his teacher, Rav Gustman, tended a small garden outside his office at the Netzach Yisrael Yeshiva in Jerusalem each and every day. Even though his students were in the Beit Midrash studying, Rav Gustman, the Rosh Yeshiva, would be outside tending his garden! While his students presumed his behavior was a demonstration of *chibat ha-aretz*, his love for Eretz Yisrael, it was actually an act of *hakarat hatov*. Years before, prior to the war, his rebbe, Rav Chaim Ozer, had shown him which vegetation was edible – a lesson that had saved his life when the Nazis invaded Vilna and he escaped into the forest!

The world God created serves us, particularly when we serve it.

We should *all* speak for the trees.

Dr. Seuss understood this. How much more so should we Jews! More than the importance of trees in the world to our physical existence, the *image* of the tree teaches us lessons about our spiritual existence. Indeed, in *parashat Shoftim*, the Torah states, “Man is a tree of the field.” And, of course, the Torah itself is a “tree of life…”

Trees are – and represent – such a central reality in the world that throughout the Torah “trees” are referred to in the singular, *etz*. When trees were created on the third day, God ordered the earth to send forth vegetation and *etz pri oseh pri emtno* – fruit tree forming fruit for its species. The tree was singularly created and, as Rashi explains, the taste of the tree and the taste of its fruit were to be one – *sheyehe ta’am ha’etz keta’am hapri*.

Just as the tree is singular, so too the man.

Both are sources of blessing and potential benefit to society. Both created singular. Both are too often violently cut down. God who created the singular, ideal tree – giving it and its fruit the same taste – created the singular and ideal Adam. God created Adam in His image, He created Adam and then Eve, both singular, both ideal. He gave them a soul. The ideal man and woman were placed in the ideal place, *Gan Eden*. One man. One woman. Once place. Just as God is One, so too was Adam one.

God is One. Adam is one. And the Torah is one. Of these, both Adam and the Torah are likened to the tree. Man is like the tree of the field. The Torah is a tree of life to those who hold her fast.

Tree. Adam. Torah. Each are one. Each is defined by brilliant singularity. To this list, we add the Jew. In the Talmud, Rabbi Shimeon ben Yochai makes a statement that some have suggested to be prejudicial. He says, “You, the Jews, are referred to as Adam, not so the nations of the world.”

This distinction seems to denigrate the nations of the world. But the distinction is apt. As Rabbi Bezalel Zev Shafran, *z” l,* my grandfather, the foremost Halachic authority of Rumania and author of *Responsa R’Baz, explained*, “One of the most basic differences between the Jewish nation and the nations of the world is the value and worth Jews place upon the life of an individual human being. We recognize this clearly in the Torah's exempting of the individual soldier from military duty; the individual soldier who was just married, the individual soldier who recently built a new home, the individual soldier who recently planted a vineyard—they are excused from military service in spite of the fact that the national and collective welfare is at stake. The individual Adam's feelings, sensitivities, and concerns supersede even the national concern. Therefore, Rabbi Shimeon ben Yochai said, “*Atem kruin adam*” – only among Jews is the individual life's concerns of such paramount importance; *vein umot ha'olam kruin adam*—no such value and principle exists amongst the nations of the world. My late uncle offered a footnote to my grandfather's explanation when he observed that all Hebrew words denoting man – *ish*, *enosh, gever* – areused both in the singular and plural forms, with the exception of “Adam”, which can be stated only in the singular. For among all nations and religions of the world, a national of any country can belong to any religion—a French Protestant or a Lebanese Moslem—with the ex­ception of the Jewish nation and religion. The Jewish nation and the Jewish religion are one and the same. Therefore, *atem kruin adam* – youJews are Adam – there is no plural for you.

The Jew is singular.

Adam, the Jew, is singular as is the tree. It is particularly appropriate that we also consider the connection between the Jew and the tree on the New Year for the Trees, the 15th of Shevat. We can draw a number of lessons from our affinity to the tree. Certainly, we gain insights into the “human tree”, as reported on Chabad.org and based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (provided courtesy of MeaninguflLife.com)

The tree is made up of roots, which anchor it to the ground and provide it with nourishment, the trunk, branches and leaves, which make up its body, and the fruit, which contains the seeds by which the tree reproduces.

Like the tree, Adam’s spiritual life is made up of roots, a body and fruit. The Rebbe taught that our roots represent faith, our source of nurture and perseverance. The trunk, branches and leaves are the body of our spiritual lives – our intellectual, emotional and practical achievements. The fruit is our power of spiritual continuance – our ability to plant a seed in a fellow human being and see it bear fruit.

Perhaps the comparison of Adam to the tree is most apt when we see the tree not just as an analogy to the individual himself but as an analogy to the individual and his family. Each of us, in our roots and trunk, form the foundation for the many limbs and fruits that extend outward. As Rashi noted, the taste of the tree and the taste of its fruit were to be one. Our families, our children, are recognizable as ours. But… But the tree only appears uniform at first glance and perhaps from a distance. As we approach the tree and look closely at it, we see that its fruit, clearly related, each have distinct properties – different sizes and hues, and indeed, slightly different tastes and sweetnesses. So too, the tree’s leaves. A cursory glance has each leaf like every other. But on closer examination, we see that each leaf is as distinguishable from the other as one snowflake from another. Related, yes. Familial, absolutely. But unique and special each.

Perhaps in this is the greatest lesson of the tree – not only is the tree singular but its fruit and limbs are singular and unique as well. In the same way, each child is singular and unique and *must be* respected and loved as such. For no more would we want every fruit to conform to the other, to be exactly the same size and have exactly the same shape than to have every child be the same.

The singularity of each tree is to be celebrated.

So too, the singularity of each of God’s children, and each one of our own!