

# Becoming Trees of Life

Rabbi Dusty Klass, in co-creation with Rabbi Leah Citrin  
Special thanks to Rabbi Susan Landau, Rabbi Jay Asher LeVine, and Tim Klass

What do you want to be when you grow up?

We ask kids this question all the time.

Our kids want to be police officers and mail people and doctors - really, anything with a cool uniform.

They want to be soccer star princesses and dinosaur pickup truck transformers, because they can imagine themselves becoming a prehistoric reptilian vehicle.

As adults, we don't ask ourselves or each other this question nearly as often. There is an invisible line demarcating "grown up," as if there is a point after which we cease to grow.

We go to school, we learn skills, we become professionals. Ladders unfold before our eyes, opportunities to assume more responsibility, to make more money, to gain more power, to shape the corner of our own little parts of the world. We check the "grown up" boxes: find a partner, build credit, buy property, make a family. Each person's ladder looks different, but it's still a ladder.

We look down from the tops of these ladders  
and we are high off of the ground,  
and that is a good thing,  
right?  
We are supposed to climb,  
right?  
That's growth,  
right?

I wonder.

I wonder what we see when we look down.  
Perhaps if we squint,  
we can make out a purple blur  
as a fast-moving, tutu-wearing soccer star princess  
dribbles past us down the field.

I don't have to describe all that this year has been -  
we have been living it together-apart for quite some time now.

And yet, it is important to acknowledge the pandemic  
paired with the bubbling up of centuries of racial trauma,  
and exacerbated by the current political climate.

We are experiencing ongoing uncertainty in ways new  
and newly exhausting.  
We are confronting mortality  
and all that it means to be faced with the mortality of those we love -  
and of ourselves.  
We are living through immense loss  
and grieving without easy access to our tried and true  
means of mourning.

We cling to our ladders,  
as they sway precariously  
or topple to the ground.  
And after the crash,  
if we manage to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off,  
that ladder looms before us again.

We may choose a different ladder,  
or rest on the rung on which we find ourselves,  
but the image of the ladder remains.  
Something awaits - contentment, perhaps?  
Peace? Happiness?  
...Retirement?

We tell ourselves that if only we were stronger,  
if only circumstances would shift in our favor,  
if only we keep climbing,  
someday we will arrive.

The Torah offers an image of a ladder -  
Jacob sleeps and sees a vision of angels ascending and descending a  
ladder between our world and the Divine.  
But our text and traditions speak far more consistently of a different  
metaphor for life.

We first meet the Tree of Life in Genesis, the very text we will read from tomorrow morning:

“and out of the ground God grew every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food;  
the tree of life also in the midst of the garden...”<sup>1</sup>

Later, we learn in the Book of Proverbs,  
“*Eitz Chayim hi l'machazikim ba v'tom-che-ha meushar* -  
She (Torah) is a tree of life to those who hold fast to her  
and all of her supporters are happy.”<sup>2</sup>

As we prepare to pass Torah down to b'nei mitzvah students,  
we speak to them of  
the “Capital T Torah,” the scroll from which they chant -  
the story we have been given of the origin of our people.  
*Eitz chayim hi* - She is a Tree of Life.

But each of us also contain within ourselves a “little t torah,”  
those personal stories and lessons passed down to us  
and combined with our own lived experiences,  
that shape who we are and who we might become.

*Atzei chayim, kulanu* - Trees of Life, each of us.

As we enter 5781,  
Let us discard the ladders we have built for ourselves  
and instead embrace our inner Trees of Life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:9

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 3:18

Ladders help us access something out of reach,  
but they can only be used linearly, to ascend or descend.  
Trees, on the other hand, are multidimensional -  
simultaneously reaching up and growing down.  
We too benefit from simultaneous grounding and growth.

A ladder is only as useful as its height enables:  
If what you need is beyond its reach,  
you are out of luck.  
Trees, on the other hand, are expansive and creative.  
Trees grow in all directions, and when faced with obstacles,  
they simply redirect –  
they grow over and around,  
or even burst through the obstruction itself.  
Trees have developed ways to withstand  
and even sometimes benefit from  
the very fires that concern us so deeply.

If you have stood at the foot of a giant redwood tree,  
awed by the majesty and grandeur of her canopy,  
her height, her circumference, her root system,  
you have seen the expansive, creative power of trees.

Each of us, too, can harness the expansive internal power  
that allows us to tap into our innate creativity.

Standing proud at 5 feet and 3 inches,  
I have a stepladder in my kitchen.  
but sometimes even with the ladder, I cannot reach –  
or I cannot maneuver the ladder close enough to what I need.  
Sometimes, I have to make like a tree and get creative.  
Sometimes, I have to climb onto the counter itself.  
I wonder – how else might we step down off of our ladders and find  
our inner trees?

Perhaps we can begin by redefining the question we ask our youth, so that when we ask what they want to be when they grow up, we are not secretly asking what they want to “do” when they grow up.

Let’s not teach them to build ladders.

Instead, let us ask them, and ourselves how we want to show up in the world, and allow our answers to capture the multidimensionality and creativity of a tree.

Then we can teach them to grow up to be swift and strategic like soccer players, compassionate and thoughtful like princesses, adaptable like transformers, and fierce like dinosaurs.

And perhaps we can commit to reconnecting with the wonder and amazement of childhood, so that we too can envision ourselves as dinosaur princesses when we need to tap into our own fierce compassion.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught:  
“The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding  
that life without wonder is not worth living.”

One of his best known contributions to Jewish philosophy  
is the concept of radical amazement.

Heschel wrote:

“Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes  
nothing for granted.

Everything is phenomenal;

everything is incredible; never treat life casually.

To be spiritual is to be amazed.”<sup>3</sup>

Each day that we commit to waking up ready to be amazed,  
we unlock our creative potential,  
and give ourselves the ability to tap into our inner creativity.

It is that inner creativity that allows us to redirect around the  
obstacles we will surely continue to face throughout our lives.

In Glennon Doyle’s book “Untamed,”  
she writes about what experiencing deep pain has taught her.

She says: “I can use pain to become.

I am here to keep becoming truer,

more beautiful versions of myself again and again, forever.

To be alive is to be in a perpetual state of revolution.

Whether I like it or not, pain is the fuel of revolution....

I will continue to become only if I resist extinguishing myself a  
million times a day.

If I can sit in the fire of my own feelings, I will keep becoming.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*

<sup>4</sup> Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (page 51)

In this particular moment, Doyle's words seem more important than ever:  
"To be alive is to be in a perpetual state of revolution."

We are always growing, always becoming – and growth and becoming requires revolution; to grow and become is to recognize the obstacles in our way and do something with them.

This year feels, in many ways, like one obstacle after another.

We have heard seven "nos" to each "yes", we have cancelled and postponed and rescheduled. We have redefined - and then redefined again our understanding and experience of community.

And over and over again, these obstacles have fueled revolution.

Like the roots of a tree bursting through cracks in the sidewalk, like branches wrapping over and around fences and poles, like the ancient west coast redwoods whose outer layers have become so fire resistant that even these most recent fires have not destroyed them, we too have transformed.

We have become zoom masters, learning and mastering all sorts of new technology. We have become event planners, creating staycations and lifecycle moments in backyards and cul de sacs and living rooms. We have become math tutors and history professors and teaching assistants, printing worksheets and revisiting long division.



And we have become more deeply aware  
(or perhaps simply reminded) of our privileges and biases –  
and many have newly committed  
to engaging in the important work  
of transforming our systems toward true justice for all.  
As Doyle notes,  
all of this becoming began with pain;

Our new technology usage offers a partial antidote  
to the pain of missing each other.  
Our creative out-of-the-box wedding and b'nei mitzvah and  
staycation planning  
stems from the pain and loss experienced  
as we cancelled and rescheduled original plans.

And commitment and recommitment to racial justice work rose  
from the tragic deaths of beautiful, unique, important human beings.

We will continue to come up against obstacles.  
We will continue to experience pain.  
We will continue to face disaster.  
This is one of the only certainties of life.

But if we commit to becoming,  
if we remember we are still growing,  
and if we work to remain flexible and get creative,  
those challenges that seem to threaten our growth  
can instead propel us toward it.

So, how do you want to show up in the world this year?  
And where might you seek sparks of creativity?  
And how might you find a little beautiful amazement every single  
day?

As we enter 5781,  
May we have compassion for the complicated, paradoxical, precious  
people we are.  
May we come down from our ladders  
and embrace our inner trees of life.  
May we keep growing and learning and flourishing,  
forever unfolding.<sup>5</sup>

Shana Tova.

---

<sup>5</sup> Closing prayer adapted from Naomi Levy (Einstein and the Rabbi, page 32)