
Midrash on the Eve of a Huppah

Shai Cherry

From every tree of the garden you may eat. (GENESIS 2:16)
And did I eat! Sometimes I gorged until I was sick to my stomach. Eventually, Havaleh clued me in to the source of my tummy aches. She is a miracle—so young, and yet so wise. I should take a little credit. I'm made from dirt. But she, at least, is made from a bit of me!

Total license. I could eat anything in the garden. I spent decades sampling how fruits tasted in particular sequences, in different combinations, mixed with vegetables. I tasted fruits by size, by color, by pH balance. But the garden wasn't just about eating.

I loved looking at the trees: the way the fruit swells, changes colors and hangs on the branches until the weight is literally unbearable. I would sometimes sit under a tree for days waiting for the fruit to fall into my hands. The smells were intoxicating, especially at twilight when the eyes go dim and the olfactories kick in to compensate.

Then there was the feel. Although I loved the smoothness, the bumps were better. I needed practice to handle the delicate ones, but they were worth the extra effort. The variety was staggering: spherical, cylindrical, elliptical. I had to learn geometry just to have lunch.

The fruit was delicious, though not all equally so. But the eating was just the final step in a long process, and I was attuned to process from very early on. There was the selection process that seemed simultaneously arbitrary and reciprocal. Then the retrieval process, which sometimes involved climbing up the tree, or a neighboring tree, which I thoroughly enjoy and sometimes do even when there's no fruit to be had. Once I secured the fruit, I sometimes needed to peel it. I became very adept at peeling. It's an art.

Life was good. And it continued to be good for thousands and thousands of years. And then one day I came across a tree whose fruit

I hadn't yet sampled. I'd seen this tree before, but never in quite this way. Maybe it was the angle of the sun, or the fluorescent flourish of the fruit or the ridgy texture of the bark, but I was strongly attracted to this tree. I reached for one of the lower branches, which bowed and strained to touch the ground. Unlike the other trees in the garden, this tree bore various kinds of fruit. I couldn't tell which was ripe because there weren't two fruits that looked enough alike to compare. They did have something in common, though. They all glowed, and depending on the shape and color, their auras shined and bled into one another. It was as unsettling as it was enchanting.

I had just decided which to pull off the branch (or had I decided?) when I heard that voice boom in my head again.

But from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you are not to eat.
(GENESIS 2:17)

Restriction. My world got very narrow all of a sudden, like tunnel vision, and all I could see was that fruit. I wondered if this is what it would feel like to wear a necktie.

Why hadn't I tried this tree before, before the boom? Where was I? What was I thinking? And why did it take me so long once I found the tree to actually reach for the fruit? These questions were academic now. I was banished from my center, exiled from my midst. The light at the end of my tunnel was eclipsed by the halting hand of God.

Life on the periphery was drab, the fruit insipid. All day I would circle the object of my desire, fruitlessly. I was obsessed and I knew it. Something had to give; the center couldn't hold.

It was at that moment that I first experienced what I now understand to be loneliness. I was surrounded by the same trees, plants, and shrubs that I had been before, but I stood in a different relationship to them now. It was this tree. It had somehow triggered the transformation from aloneness to loneliness, and I was ready, at that moment, to separate from the Tree of Life.

Desolation, depression, despair and I hadn't even gotten to the e's. (It helps to be flip now. It's a defense mechanism from re-experiencing the trauma of that isolating and clarifying moment.) The "e," of course, is for ecstasy, and then exile. But before that transition was to take place, I saw a very small, fuzzy, brown *thing* creeping in peristaltic motion toward me. It was small enough to pick up and place in the palm of my hand. I called it

caterpillar. Don't ask me why. We had an unfamiliar recognition. Then it defecated in my hand. I recognized that immediately.

This caterpillar was like me: we moved, we defecated, and we each had hair on our backs. (At the time, I couldn't have known what else we had in common.) But my loneliness stained the moment and I put the caterpillar down to rinse off my hand at the river. On the way, new creatures greeted me at every turn. The novelty was wondrous, the variety awesome. But I slumbered past them all, slouching toward the river. Blackbirds singing in the dead of night. Little lambs wandering in the Garden. Mandrills aping my love of swinging. Nothing held any appeal. I was surrounded. And alone.

The river teemed with new life, but even my reflection looked lonely and lacking. I dove into the river, leaving a part of me on the bank, hoping the current would take me far away from that tree. I swam underwater for days. Even now I don't know why I surfaced. Maybe it was the distance I'd traveled or maybe it was just the opposite. (Could it have been both? At some point, I realized I was swimming upstream.)

As I broke through the water's surface, I tossed my head back to get the wet curls out from in front of my eyes. The heavens appeared a blurry blue that led me straight into her eyes. While my vision was clearing, I made my way to the riverbank and saw the beginning of her form take shape. At first I expected something else. But she was utterly unprecedented. This one filled my gaps. *This one, at last.* (GENESIS 2:23)



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