

Parshat Kedoshim: Teaching Torah: Planting Seeds and Rooting for Our Children Rabbanit Atara Lindenbaum Class of 2022

Child rearing, like gardening, breaks the illusion of control we have in this world. A farmer can tend to his fields, carefully watering and nurturing the soil as needed, but larger forces of nature will ultimately determine the farm's bounty. Similarly, parents can follow careful and prescribed methods of education, but a child will make independent decisions as an adult. The inability to dictate exactly how children will decide does not exempt a parent from investing carefully in a child's early years of education. A parent's dedication to Torah education, coupled with the acknowledgement that the long-term effects of this education is beyond his or her reach, is itself a demonstration of deep faith and courage.

A midrashic tradition on the mitzvah of *Orlah* explores this connection between planting trees and teaching progeny. The mitzvah of *Orlah* demands that the planter in Israel¹ recognize his or her partnership with God; despite the human initiative and care essential to the planting of a tree, the tree will only yield fruit available for general consumption in its fifth year of existence.

When you come to (the Land of Israel) and plant trees that grow food, for three years the fruit of the trees is designated as *orlah* - forbidden fruit. A tree's status as *orlah* is temporary, and its fruit, as it matures, takes on different stages. In its fourth year, the fruit is no longer *orlah*, not completely forbidden, but is *kadosh*- and can only be eaten in Jerusalem in service of God. By the fifth year, the fruit of the tree is free to be eaten as regular produce, no strings or rules attached. (Vayikra 19:23-25)

“וכי תבאו אל הארץ ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל וערלתם ערלתו את פרוי שלש שנים יהיה לכם ערלים לא יאכלו ובשנה הרביעית יהיה כל פרוי קדש הלולים ליקנא. ובשנה החמישית תאכלו את פרוי להוסיף לכם תבואתו אני יקנא אלקיכם” (ויקרא יט:כג-כה)

The laws of *orlah*, according to the midrash, can be decoded as instructions on how to properly educate a child in Torah study:

The *orlah* tree, says the midrash, can be compared to an infant. A young tree, up until its third year, is called an *orlah*, which translates as “blocked.” So too, a child is “blocked” until the age of three from communicating, since typically, children do not develop proper language until around the age of three.

“ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל וערלתם (את) ערלתו את פרוי: (ויקרא יט כג), מדבר בתינוק, שלש שנים יהיה לכם ערלים, שאין יכול לא להשיח ולא לדבר”

The fourth year of a child's life is the first year where he or she can use language to express him or herself, and like the fourth year of a tree, this first year of dialogue between parent and child is *kadosh* and should consist primarily of Torah topics. Just like in a tree's fifth year, the farmer can begin to benefit from the tree's produce without limits, so too, at age five, the midrash instructs that a parent should begin to teach the child to read from the Torah, and eventually from the Mishnah, the Oral Law.

“ובשנה הרביעית יהיה כל פרוי [קודש], שאביו מקדישו לתורה, הלולים לה', משעה שמהלל להקב"ה, ובשנה החמישית תאכלו את פרוי, משעה שהוא מתחיל לקרות בתורה, להוסיף לכם תבואתו, מכאן שנו רבותינו בן חמש שנים למקרא, בן עשר למשנה”

(Midrash Tanchuma Parshat Kedoshim)

(מדרש תנחומא פרשת קדושים)

The focus of this midrash is on the parent, and how the parent should invest and then benefit from the opportunity to teach Torah to his or her child. The effects on the actual child, the midrash admits, are amorphous. In fact, while this comparison of *orlah* to educating children appears in various collections of midrashim, in every version, the midrash concludes by hedging its bets on these very carefully educated children. The midrash predicts: “**אדם מלמד**”

¹ According to Rabbinic Law, the laws of *Orlah* pertains to fruit trees planted outside of Israel as well.

”את בנו תורה ומשכחה” - a parent will instruct his or her child, but in the end, the child will forget the Torah that was taught.^{2 3}

This midrash on *Orlah* uses the dictum of "כי אדם עץ השדה" – *a person is like a tree* - to liken the child to a sapling. The fruit of the tree in the midrash is parallel to the ability of a child to communicate in Torah knowledge. This reading, of fruit from a tree as דעת, (knowledge), builds on the story of Adam and Chava in *Gan Eden*, who ate the forbidden fruit from the עץ הדעת, the Tree of Knowledge.

A midrash in *Vayikrah Rabbah* (Parshat Kedoshim 25) highlights this connection to *Gan Eden* and understands the mitzvah of *Orlah* as a way that Bnei Yisrael correct the behavior of the initial sin of Adam and Chavah:

“Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazi taught: Who will wipe the dust from Adam HaRishon’s eyes, [to see that although] you couldn’t obey your commandment for one moment, your sons wait for the Orlah for three years.”

”דרש רבי יהודה בן פזי מי יגלה עפר מעיניך אדם הראשון שלא יכולת לעמוד על צוויך שעה אחת והרי בניך ממתנין לערלה ג' שנים”

Adam is being criticized here for his inability to refrain from eating forbidden fruit. Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner claims that Adam and Eve’s sin was primarily one of impatience, of eating the fruit before the time was right. Rabbi Leiner writes in the *Mei HaShiloach* that this midrash indicates that had Adam and Chava waited, the Tree of Knowledge would have become permitted. The knowledge in the Tree was *Kadosh*, and, like the *Orlah*, was only forbidden temporarily.

Together, these midrashim offer a radical and progressive view of Torah education and knowledge. The transmission of Torah to children is intrinsically valuable, and its holiness and worth is independent of the child’s future actions. The tree reaches its pinnacle of *kedushah* in year four, and from then on, its status is just of a regular tree. So too, the Talmud relates that children learning is far superior to adults learning, since adults, unlike children, are tainted by sin.

Reish Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda Nesia: The world only exists because of the breath, (i.e., reciting Torah,) of schoolchildren. Rav Pappa said to Abaye: My Torah study and yours, what is its status? He said to him: The breath of adults, which is tainted by sin, is not similar to the breath of children, which is not tainted by sin. (Shabbat 119b)

”אמר ריש לקיש משום רבי יהודה נשיאה אין העולם מתקיים אלא בשביל הבל תינוקות של בית רבן. אמר ליה רב פפא לאבוי דידי ודיך מאי? אמר ליה אינו דומה הבל שיש בו חטא להבל שאין בו חטא”
 (תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קט עמוד ב)

When parents transmit religious values and wisdom to their children, they do not have the knowledge of what the children will choose to do once released from their parents’ domain. The desire to know what will work in terms of transmitting values to the next generation is only human. Perhaps the knowledge of the effects of education is like the knowledge of the עץ הדעת - something human beings must desire to know, but also realize is well beyond their reach.



Atara Lindenbaum, comes to Maharat after completing a Masters in Urban Planning and Policy from Hunter College. Throughout Atara’s time at Hunter, she researched and wrote about religious issues in urban areas, such as eruv and issues of school funding. Atara worked as a planning consultant to various towns throughout the Hudson Valley. She has studied at the Matan Program for Advanced Bible Studies and at the Melton School in Hebrew University. Atara discovered her love of teaching at the Matan Bat Mitzvah Program, Maimonides School in Brookline, MA and Beren Academy in Houston, TX. Atara graduated from Stern College with a BA in History, after learning at both Migdal Oz and Midreshet Lindenbaum. Atara currently lives in Tel Aviv with her husband and three daughters.

² ילקוט שמעוני תורה פרשת קדושים

³ מדרש תנחומא פרשת קדושים יד