

Arthur Rovine

SHABBAT SHALOM!!

1. The beautiful melody played by Anita and Lisa – there is more than one melody of course – is a key to etz chaim for me. No matter what you're thinking of with this prayer, there's always more than one melody, image, meaning, understanding. I love the minor key music as I love minor key music generally. It was the first thing that attracted me as a young boy. It still does.

2. Then came the powerful words of the rabbi as the Torah went back into the ark – “it is a good doctrine I have given you. Do not forsake it.” What did that mean? What is doctrine? I know more now than I did then, though I'm still not certain. But there were many questions – what is a tree of life? What does it mean to hold fast to it? It's paths are paths of pleasantness and its ways are ways of peace. I've always felt I knew what those phrases meant. Except for tree of life and holding fast to it.

3. The Tree of life is found first in Genesis; And it is placed in the center of the Garden of Eden. There are other trees, as the Tree of Knowledge. But the Tree of Life was in the center. To me, that is meaningful. And the other phrases come from Proverbs.

4. I had my own uncertainties – was it a tree of life for me? Did I hold fast to it? My learned friends, including Rabbi Koster, all said yes. One said, “Arthur, just read the next line in the Siddur – its paths are paths of pleasantness and its ways are ways of peace. That's a description of you, Arthur. Of course it's a tree of life for you.” He was being kind. But if that's true for me personally, it's true for everyone in this temple – it's about all of us.

5. What is the meaning of tree of life for me personally? For me, it's the values we hold dear. A meaningful life, meaning a life based on truth, justice, virtue, morality, and peace – above all peace. We pray for peace – for us, for all of Israel and Jerusalem, and the Rabbi has added for all of humankind. I'm very happy she has done that.

6. I learned fairly early that the concept of a Tree of Life has been used in biology, religion, philosophy, and mythology. A tree of life is a common motif in various world theologies, mythologies, and philosophies. It alludes to the interconnection of all life on our planet and serves as a metaphor for common descent in the evolutionary sense. It is a universal metaphor. As such, it's in our art and architecture, music, fiction, video games, film anime.

7. And then I think of the images – many, many images. As one illustration, in a city called Amsterdam from whence our rabbi Chava Koster comes, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, there is a Jewish Historical Museum – I bet our rabbi knows every inch of it. And in that museum are three Tree of Life windows, with a different image of the Tree of Life on each window. Different images. Different views; different interpretations.

8. And then there is another Chava – Chava Rosenfarb, who died exactly 4 years ago. She was from Lodz, Poland, and was a Holocaust survivor, including Auschwitz, Susel, and Bergen-Belsen, and then moved to Canada after the war. She wrote in Yiddish, and her greatest work, by general consensus, and translated from Yiddish to English, is entitled in English *The Tree of Life*.

9. The Tree of Life is a classic descriptive term for the central mystical symbol used in the Kabbalah of esoteric Judaism, also known as the 10 Sefirot. Its diagrammatic representation, arranged in 3 columns/pillars, derives from esoteric sources and may not be known to the earliest Jewish tradition. But the tree, visually or conceptually, represents as a series of divine emanations of God's creation, the nature of revealed divinity, the human soul, and the spiritual path of ascent by man. In this way, Kabbalists developed the symbol into a full model of reality, using the tree to depict a map of Creation. In the Jewish Kabbalist view, both of the two trees in the Biblical Garden of Eden, the Tree of knowledge of good and evil and the Tree of Life were alternative perspectives of the Sefirot.

10. There are references to tree of life or them that hold fast to it all over our literature and scholarly writings. It's in Plato's *Commonwealth*, Shakespeare, and Darwin.

11. Plato - "We shall pass safely over the river of Forgetfulness and our soul will not be defiled if we hold fast ever to the heavenly way and follow after justice and virtue always considering that the soul is immortal and able to endure every sort of good and every sort of evil." We have endured both of those.

12. Shakespeare – there are learned works that demonstrate or try to demonstrate WS's knowledge of the Kabbalah.

13. Darwin - In his great work *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin placed the tree of life in a biological and evolutionary context. He drew, actually drew, a phylogenetic tree of life. Darwin wrote as follows:

From the first growth of the tree, many a limb and branch has decayed and dropped off; and these fallen branches of various sizes may represent those whole orders, families, and genera which have now no living representatives, and which are known to us only in a fossil state. As we here and there see a thin, straggling branch springing from a fork low down in a tree, and which by some chance has been favored and is still alive on its summit, so we occasionally see an animal like the Platypus or South American lungfish, which in some small degree connects by its affinities two large branches of life, and which has apparently been saved from fatal competition by having inhabited a protected station. As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications. This is in the Cambridge Univ. in England.

14. So is it good to have so many meanings? I think it is. Once a question has a very clear answer, unless it's a very abstract answer, it's no longer a question. I like having questions that we can think about it, debate, discuss.

15. The tree of life is of course important to other religions as well, not just ours. Many Christians view the cross as the tree of life. Pope Benedict XVI said that "the Cross is the true tree of life." Saint Bonaventure taught that the medicinal fruit of the Tree of Life is Christ himself. Saint Albert the Great taught that the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ, is the Fruit of the Tree of Life.

16. In MOMA, there is currently a beautiful exhibit of paper cutouts by Henri Matisse. In one of the many rooms devoted to his work of this kind, there are many pieces devoted to the chapel of the Rosary in Vence, in southern France, where Matisse lived. In the chapel are several cutouts that at this point in his life and art, resembled paintings. They were all related to Catholic rites. One was the Stained Glass Window, called the Tree of Life. In Eastern Christianity, the Tree of Life is the love of God.

17. In Islam, the Tree of Immortality is the tree of life motif as it appears in the Koran. It is also alluded to in hadiths and tafsir, the sayings and actions of the teachers and scholars of the Koran. Unlike the biblical account, the Koran mentions only one tree in Eden, also called the tree of immortality, which Allah specifically forbade to Adam and Eve. Satan, disguised as a serpent, repeatedly told Adam to eat from the tree, and eventually both Adam and Eve did so, thus disobeying Allah. According to the Ahmadiyya movement, the Koranic reference to the tree is symbolic; eating of the forbidden tree signifies that Adam disobeyed God.

18. A Protestant pastor in the Pentecostal Church wrote that in Genesis the intent of God was that man (Adam & Eve) would live forever by partaking of the fruits of the tree of life, but this would only happen if they remained in innocence and obedience to God. Immortality was the key. But then came Revelations – the Tree of Life in heaven being fed by streams of water flowing from God's throne. The fruit is wholesome. The main difference with this Tree of Life in heaven is that it is in a perfect paradise – in this paradise there is no serpent, no devil, no evil. The Garden of Eden had each of those. The Tree of Life in heaven did not.

19. As I thought about this view, I could not help but reflect on Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*. Stoppard was born in 1937 Tom Rauschler, Jewish, in Prague. But the Germans occupied Prague, and the Rauschler family moved to Singapore, then run by the UK. The Japanese then occupied Singapore, and the family moved to India. But Tom's father stayed behind to fight the Japanese in Singapore. He was killed, and Mrs. Rauschler married in India a British army officer named Stoppard. After the war he brought the family to London, and young Tom grew up there. He became a brilliant playwright, and one of his very best of his plays is called "The Coast of Utopia." *The Edge of Nowhere*. Utopia, from the ancient Greek, means no place, nowhere. In our Eden, there is a serpent, a devil, evil, and we accept that. Contrary to Revelations, there is no perfect place.

20. I leave you with the words once again of the Rabbi as the Torah is returned to the ark. I have told you what I believe is the meaning of the Tree of Life - the Jewish values we hold

dear. A meaningful life, truth, justice, virtue, morality, and peace – above all peace. It is a good doctrine I have given you. Do not forsake it. Personally I know I'm holding fast to it, and therefore it's a Tree of Life for me, when I feel the rush of emotion from this prayer, sometimes to the point of tears. When I feel the emotion and I feel the tears, then I know. I know for me personally, it's a Tree of Life.

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