

Roots of Resilience

By Rochel Holzkenner

In 1981, nine-year-old Jimmy Beveridge and his three brothers went hiking in the Palomar Mountains of California, while their folks stayed back at the camping site to prepare lunch. Jimmy separated from his brothers, and got lost. Four hundred searchers joined to search for Jimmy, and he was found after four days. The end was devastating. He had died of hypothermia.

In his memory, some members of the search team developed an educational program designed to teach children to stay safe in the wilderness. They publicized a simple lifesaving principle: if you are lost, stay put and hug a tree until help arrives.

There is something very grounding about trees. They are solid, stationary and easy to hug. And, with roots knotted firmly in the soil and a dense net of branches that dance at its head, a tree can help anchor a lost and disoriented person in a very unique way.

The Torah tells us ([Deuteronomy 20:19](#)), “For man is a tree of the field.”

The [Torah](#) calls man “a tree of the field” as if to say: if you want to know something about yourself, look at the tree. We share an identity of sorts. In fact, according to Kabbalah, a tree is like a mirror that reflects my best self.

When interpreting the passage above, our sages are replete with thought-provoking insights about the lessons learned from a tree. For one, a tree needs to be attached to its life source, the soil, in order to grow. Animals, too, depend on the soil for sustenance, yet they don't need to be glued to the earth in order to survive. But the tree is stationary, constantly soaking up the earth's water and vital nutrients.

In the human tree, roots represent our faith. The trunk, branches and leaves symbolize our intellectual and emotional faculties. Finally, the fruit of the tree is our ability to create new life, and to affect others.

One of most admirable traits of the tree is its resilience. Like all perennial plants, they thrive through all four seasons. Many trees can withstand windstorms traveling at speeds of sixty miles per hour or more. And a tree can live to be over two thousand years old!

Resilience is a nice trait. It's one that I constantly struggle to hone. But there are so many ups and downs in life that my boat of serenity seems like it's always being rocked. There are always several things I'm worried about at any given point in time. (Does that come with being a Jewish mother?) Yesterday, someone sent me an insulting e-mail and almost ruined my afternoon. I recited to myself, “Be resilient, be a tree.”

The key to the tree's strength is its thick roots, and the root of the soul is faith in G-d. The Hebrew word for faith is *emunah*. *Emunah* shares the same etymology as the Hebrew word *omen*, a skilled worker. Faith, like any

good skill, needs to be cultivated and honed. And a psyche that is sated with faith in G-d is like a tree that is continually attached to its source of life. It is resilient and durable, and can withstand the winds of life with grace.

So, perhaps there is another dimension to the hug-a-tree principle. It's too easy to get lost and distracted in the dense forest called life. Instead, I can get acquainted with the lessons of a tree, the ability to stay centered. If I'm aware that G-d runs the world and He loves me, my boat is not that easy to rock.

Based on a talk by the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 24, p. 115).

By Rochel Holzkenner

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