

Lesson Plan: Overview of Environment in Halacha

Developed by Atara Weisberger

Ask groups to split into groups of 2 or 3 people depending on the size of the classes. Ask each group to put themselves in the position of decision maker (after all, it is election day in the U.S.) You are presented with one of the following environmental issues and you are being asked to come up with a *Jewish response* to the problem. You can decide whether or not the response is based on hashgoffa, halacha, or a combination thereof. You should also indicate – to the best of your ability – the cause of the particular environmental issue.

School #1: The last popular park area in your community was just bought by developers to build a large condo complex with strip mall.

School #2: You just found out that several parents in your community have been stricken by the same kind of cancer. There are rumors about a polluting factory nearby being the cause.

School #3: Several Maccabean athletes fell into the Yarkon river and died.

School #4: The beach that you go to in the summer was just closed because of pollution concerns.

School #5: You are moving to a smaller house and can't take a lot of things with you. What will you do with the items you can't take with you?

1. Creation as Tov (first 5 days) and Tov Me'od (sixth day after creation of Man)

- a. Look at text in Bereishis on Tov (days 1-5) and Tov Me'od (Day 6)
- b. The total is greater than the sum of its parts.
- c. Man needs to be in the picture to make it very good – to give purpose to creation. Creation was only complete with Man in the picture.
- d. Talk about things in nature as entities that are just as they should be. (This is Tov) Man, by contrast, can be either good or bad; it's our choice – Hashem seems to see potential as something "tov me'od."

Question: Where else do we see in Jewish life the recognition of "completion of creation" as "goodness". A: Shabbos. Bris. (Noach was born with Bris and considered "Complete").

2. To Whom does the Earth belong?

- a. **Quote Tehillim (Chof Daled: Alef) "The Earth is G-d's and the Fullness Thereof" – L'Hashem ha'aretz oomloah**
- b. **Vayikra perek chof hey passuk chof gimel: "Ki Li Ha Aretz"**
- c. **Perek Shira**
- d. **Parable of the Artisan (Bava Kamma 9.3)**

3. Master or Caretaker?

Q: Now that we know who the owner of the world is, how do we as people fit in with this complete and whole creation? What is our relationship with the natural world and the role of “Adam” as expressed in Bereishis? How do we apply this relationship to our responsibilities when it comes to being environmentally responsible?

The Torah gives us several indications of how this relationship should look.

Q: What is the first commandment that Hashem gives to Adam?

A: Bereishis 1:28: And G-d blessed them and G-d said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and **Subdue** it, and have **dominion over** the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the Earth.”

Q: What does “subdue” and “have dominion over” mean? Is it carte blanche to do as we see fit, no matter the outcome?

These pesukim have been condemned by some critics of Judeo-Christian beliefs as the possible source of environmental callousness. Is this what Hashem intended by this directive? Do we have Carte Blanche to do as we please with Creation? Does this seem to be in the spirit of halacha in general?

Rashi on Bereishis 1:26 on V’Yirdu (Connects to our point earlier about “Tov Me’od” possibly relating to Man as being able to rise to his potential or fall short)
On “V’Yirdu” : It can mean “they will rule” and “they will go down”. If man is found worthy, he rules over beasts, but if not, he is subservient to them.

And the L-rd took (vayanichehu) the man and put him into the Garden of Eden, to Work it (L’ovdah) and to protect it (I’Shomrah).

Now we have another directive – to work it and protect it.

Q: What might these mean?

Rav Soloveitchik in “Lonely Man of Faith”: As we know, there are two creation stories of Adam. In the first, there is the man who works the earth and uses it for his physical needs. Man, the farmer, for example, who tills the earth or created the plow or created antibiotics, etc, is the man who needs to subdue the Earth. Rav Soloveitchik sees this physical subduing of the Earth as a very holy endeavor. This subduing of the physical world is a way of bettering man in a G-d given way that we were supposed to better ourselves physically. The second story reflects a more spiritual side of man – one who contemplates why G-d made the Earth that we had to plow it. He is the man who looks at the universe and at all the science we have learned and thinks “What an amazing being could have created all these things”! This second man needs to understand the greater reason for Creation and the greater reason for the physical kivshua, conquest. It is also in the second story where man goes around and names all the animals – he established a relationship with the earth. Rav Soloveichik sees both as necessary and balancing one another. If we only had a relationship with the earth, we would forget that we can and

should use and develop it. The world was created for our use. However G-d created man and said, “You have to conquer – but you have to temper that, you have to work it and guard it.”

3. Looking at Bal Tashchit

Ok, so now we are getting a clearer picture of our relationship to the natural world. Let's go deeper into some specific halachot in the Torah that relate directly to our discussion.

Look at the Passuk from **Parshas Shoftim (perek chof, passuk yud alef)**: “When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; is, then, the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?”

Q: When you have studied this passuk in school, what have you learned about it? How far does this prohibition extend, if at all, past cutting down fruit trees in a time of war?

Lets see what our sources say about this halacha.

Rambam in Hilchos Melachim:

(See BT source #1 on sheet)

Is this new information for anyone?

BT source #2 on sheet

(The following are not on the source sheet)

Rambam further says: Applies not only during war, but everyday because if one can't destroy trees during war when necessary, of course not in times of peace.

Netziv: Man is part of the nature cycle and should be careful of any unnecessary destruction. This mitzvah comes to remind man he is part of nature, similar to a tree, and must guard natural resources (Gemara says you should pray for a sick tree.)

Rav Hirsch (Philosophy of Jewish Law and Observances): B.T. is not just physically destroying but also trying to attain an aim by using more valuable things when it is possible to use fewer, less valuable resources.

Rav Hirsch also says: Hashem tells us “Don't destroy anything. When you use resources unwisely, you commit murder against my property. Don't forget I lent this world to you.”

Ok. Lets move from sources into application for today. **Given what we have discussed thus far, how in line with these particular halachot are we – the observant Jewish community – living today?**

Modern stats:

1. More than half of the world's major rivers are seriously depleted and polluted.
2. Nearly 1.8 million people die worldwide each year due to urban pollution.
3. 90% of all large ocean fish have been removed from global seas.
4. Arctic air temperatures increased by about 5 degrees Celcius during the 20th century – ten times faster than the global mean surface temperature. In the Russian arctic, buildings are collapsing because permafrost under their foundations has melted.
5. One week's edition of the Sunday New York Times uses 500,000 trees. We cut down trees at the rate of 1 every 9 seconds or 400 trees per hour.
6. Every three months we throw away enough aluminum to replace all commercial planes in the U.S.
7. We make enough Styrofoam cups to circle the earth every day.

Doing our part helps to offset some scary statistics. We'll get to positive actions at the end, b'ez'H'.

4. Q: Please partner with the person next to you. Try to come up with at least one other "environmental halachah". Can you think of others?

Shiloach hakan – taking the mother bird and her chick in the same day.

Ramban – don't uproot a species, killing mother and baby in same day is akin to exterminating a species.

Sefer HaChinuch- To instill in us a quality of compassion and to reflect upon Hashgachas Hashem – watches over us and never allows total destruction of a species.

Migrash – For aesthetic purposes.

Pe'ah and Leket – The earth belongs to G-d so we have to use it as he sees fit.

Shmittah – a test of faith and a rest for the land.

Talmud Eruvin 44 – A city w/o greenery isn't suitable residence for a Torah scholar. In *Kiddushin 12* it says it forbidden to live in a city w/o greenery.

Tzaar ba'alei Chaim –

Kelayim – not mixing species

5. Connection, Relationship, and Responsibility

Q: With all these sources, how is it that we are so far away from a balance between use and responsibility?

Lack of Connection leads to Lack of Caring which Leads to Imbalance in Relationship

- a. Halachos of Eretz Yisroel
- b. Shema
- c. Avos and connection
- d. Tehillim

- e. **How do we reconnect?**
 - a. Get out there!
 - b. Get Educated! Subscribe to Canfei Nesharim's website/newsletter.
 - c. Individual action:
 - i. Walk/bike more – drive less
 - ii. Turn off water when brushing teeth
 - iii. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle
 - iv. Only leave lights on in rooms that you are using at the time
 - v. Buy recycled products. Complete the cycle!