



Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

Teachers' Guide

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Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

Rationale for Unit: There is a clear sense in our Jewish texts that environmental awareness is in fact as much a Jewish responsibility and commandment as so many other aspects of our lives. Yet, this may not be given enough expression in many of our schools and educational programs. It is the intent of these first lessons to begin this study at the same place that we begin so much of our text study and establishment of a blueprint for our lives as *Shomer Mitzvot* Jews, in the beginning chapters of the book of *Bereshit*.

- Suggestion to the Teacher: These lessons, which will take about three class sessions, can be used in the beginning of the year; preferably before the three learning units that are suggested in this program.

Big Ideas: *In this first unit*, we will present materials and lessons that will address several BIG IDEAS that will run through all of the units and their lessons.

These are:

1. Caring for the environment is a specific and important Jewish responsibility as indicated in our source texts (e.g. Torah, Talmud, etc.) and Halacha/instructed practices of our lives as Jews.
2. Awareness of and caring for the environment in a responsible manner reinforces our relationship to both the land that G-d created and the Creator of that land.
3. There are many precedents in our texts and history of awareness, need for, and practice of this responsibility.
4. Commitment to Environmental Sustainability is critical in insuring the safety and well being of future generations of mankind and the Jewish nation as part of that massive family.

Critical Themes: In exploring these BIG IDEAS, we will emphasize the following CRITICAL THEMES throughout these lessons as organizing principles:

Izzun/Balance – G-d created the world with an inherent balance and then gave us both the responsibility and instructions needed to maintain that balance. How do we mindfully and purposefully maintain this balance as a specific Jewish responsibility? While the world was originally created with this balance (see text lesson on **Bereshit/Noah**), it quickly fell into imbalance and disrepair due to the thinking and desires of human beings. How do we commit ourselves to and craft an ongoing program of maintaining this ***Izzun***, whereby we actively work to repair the world that

G-d has given us and work towards reclaiming the originally intended balance that G-d had ordained in a way that is true to and informed by Torah teachings and text?

Bal Tashchit/Not Wasting Resources – We must remember that we have an infinite amount of desires and possible uses for the products of our environment and earth but only a finite amount of resources and must use the land and its products appropriately and judiciously. This is a basic teaching in developing a Jewish approach to the environment.

Le'ovda U'Leshomra/Working and Caring for the land – We are instructed to work and guard/maintain the land, with the goal of protecting it and its balance. This is truly a challenge and specifically demands that we balance a sense of self-interest with an understanding of and commitment to the greater collective good while

purposely insuring the sustainability of our environment while still recognizing our need to use it. How do we do this?

Critical Questions: In exploring and developing these BIG IDEAS, we will continually ask the following CRITICAL QUESTIONS, while confronting the challenges they present along with our students:

1. What does it mean for us to care for the land and take responsibility for its welfare and health according to Jewish teachings?
2. How will observing these teachings and the practices they indicate lead to Environmental Sustainability for all of us as B'nai Adam - citizens of the world and as members of B'nai Yisrael – the Jewish people?
3. How can I come to accept the responsibility and commit myself to a series of ongoing practices in caring for the land that G-d has given us in a meaningful manner that is reflective of the Jewish teachings and dictates to which I hold myself accountable?

Learning Objectives: Our goals for the students who participate in these lessons are as follows:

1. Learn Torah-based texts that support and promote the Jewish responsibility to care for and nurture as well as interact meaningfully with the environment and its elements;
2. Identify Environmental Sustainability and its various components as a specific Halacha-ordained Jewish responsibility and connect this responsibility and its elements to Hagim and Jewish seasons, which provide opportunities for heightened awareness of this responsibility; and
3. Engage in related activities that illustrate how our actions and raised consciousness can contribute to Environmental Sustainability; and commit to an ongoing plan of action for continued engagement.

Unit One: Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

Lesson One: G-d's Original Intentions for the Land and Us

Estimated Time: Two class sessions, approximately 35 - 40 minutes each
Suggested for Upper Elementary and Middle School Grades

The Roots of our Connection to the Land

Trigger Activity: The teacher shows students a picture, puzzle or some visual aid of their choosing to begin the discussion of our connection to the environment. Either the Science teacher or the Jewish Studies teacher can do this. Suggestions include but are not limited to the following:

1. A series of photographs of various scenic sites that are beautiful as well as some that show waste and decay. Alternatively show a slide series of a beautiful scenic area and then imagine what it might look

texts and answer questions initially in their *chevrutot*, and then come back together and share and process their work with the entire group.

Let's consider the very beginning of the story of Creation of the World which is how our Torah begins:

[פרשת בראשית] א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ב וְהָאָרֶץ הַיְתֵיהָ תֵהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהיֵאֱוֹר וַיְהיֵאֱוֹר: ד וַיֹּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ: ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה וַיְהיֶה־עֶרֶב וַיְהיֶה־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד:

- In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the land. And the land was unformed and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep and a wind of G-d was over the water. G-d said, “There shall be light” and there was light. And G-d saw the light and that it was good and G-d separated the light from the darkness. G-d called the light day and the darkness, G-d called night; and it was evening and morning, one day/period of time.

Note that a bit later in this chapter, we read as follows in verses 26 – 29 of this first chapter of the Torah in looking at the story of the Creation of the world as we know it:

כו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדֹמוֹתֵינוּ וַיְיָרְדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: כז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכַבְשֶׁהָ וַרְדּוּ בְּדִגַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַי הָאָרֶץ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־עֵשֶׂב יָרֵעַ וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־כֹּפֵר־יֵעֵץ זָרַע זָרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ:

- And G-d said, “Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness; they shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth. And all the creeping things that crawl upon the earth.” And G-d created the human in G-d’s image, in the image of G-d was he created, male and female, G-d created them. And G-d blessed them and G-d said to then, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all living things that creep on the earth.” And G-d said, “Here I give you all of the seed bearing plants that are upon all of the earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit shall be for you as food.”

Further, in the following chapter of *Bereshit*, we read about how there was not a steward entrusted with the care of the land that G-d had created. G-d then creates the human being from the dust of the earth and places the human in the Garden of Eden that G-d had created. In Chapter Two, verse 15, we read:

טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ

- And G-d took the human and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Let us take note of words that are used to indicate how we should relate to the land.

1. Look at 1: 26 – 1:29. What words are used to indicate how the human being is to relate to the land?

2. Look at 2:15. What words are used to indicate how the human being is to relate to the land?

3. Do you see any conflict or inconsistency between these different directives?

4. Consider the following statement and react to it:

“...there is a *conflict built into the very essence of the human-Nature relationship. On the one hand, we are meant to utilize and exploit Nature.* Considered the pinnacle of Creation, the world was created for our use, to conquer and manipulate. *On the other, we are merely the custodians of a perfect, divinely created world.* Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden to nurture and protect it.”

Quoted from *Le’ovda U’leshomra: Judaism and the Environmental Ethic*, by Ilana Stein, in Compendium of Sources in Halacha and the Environment, Ora Sheinson and Shai Spetgang, editors, Jerusalem: Canfei Nesharim Publication, 2005.

- Can you find and identify a place for the different tasks and roles indicated in the texts above in this statement?

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- Do you see the balance – the *Izzun* between each of these different roles and how they can (and have to) be combined in our approach to the land?

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- G-d intended for us to be stewards and maintain and cultivate all aspects of G-d’s Creation, insuring that all that G-d created interacts in a reciprocal and healthy manner of sustainability. This was G-d’s *system of interdependence*. Look back at the texts from this lesson and consider where you see indications that this notion of us depending on all elements of our environment and the reciprocal dependence of these elements on us is expressed.

Suggested follow up activity: Go back with your class and look at Chapter One of Bereshit. Note how different elements are added as G-d moves along in G-d's creative activity and that at times along the way, G-d "pauses," so to speak, and we see G-d's stamp of approval in the refrain, ויהי טוב. Can we see this as "G-d's approval" of G-d's intended *system of interdependence*? Think of the final statement when this process is completed; what is G-d saying here about the totality of what G-d has created?

לא וירא אל-ם את-כל-אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד ויהי-ערב ויהי-בקר יום הששי:

- And G-d saw all that G-d created and behold it was very good and there was *erev* and there was *boker*, the sixth *yom*.

[Time Frame: Approximately 45 - 50 minutes, including movement between group work and whole class processing of various elements. If all elements are used, this may take two full lessons.]

Unit One: Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

Lesson Two: Something Went Very Wrong

Estimated Time: One and a half class sessions, approximately 55 minutes

Suggested for Upper Elementary and Middle School Grades

Let's think about this together: Focus on our interaction with the land continues throughout the Torah and the later classical texts that document our involvement with the land. These references are integral as we learn Halachot and teachings about every aspect of our lives. They teach us to have a conscious and reciprocal relationship with land; that is to be appropriate and careful stewards of this *system of interdependence*. *Does this in fact characterize how we utilize and think about our resources and our use of them?*

Consider the following statement,

“We have a finite amount of resources to serve an infinitely growing degree of desires and wants for their use.”

How does this statement “stand up” in terms of the texts we have just explored from our Torah in our last lesson, especially Bereshit 2:15?

טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ

What was גֶּן-עֵדֶן? How were the humans to originally live in it? Have we in fact continued to practice the prescribed actions of לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָה? Why or why not?

Think about it and get ready for action: With your *chevrutah*/learning partner, list ways in which you think we interact with our environment that do not successfully follow the practice and maintain the balance of לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָה. As you create your list, think of things that **you** do individually, **your family** does, and **our community** does in terms of using and interacting with our environment that may cause harm and hurt its balance. You might want to label your list accordingly:

1. p – personal use
2. f – family use
3. c – community use

Now, hold on to this list. We will be using it in future lessons as we think of ways in which we can use our resources and interact with our environment in more healthy and balanced ways.

[Time frame: 15 minutes]

Let's continue our study: So, let's think again about the way that G-d intended for us to live. Originally G-d set up our world and the perfect intended *system of interdependence*, in which human beings, animals and plants and the land that supports all of us was to exist in harmony and an ongoing state of sustainability. But, as we know, something went terribly wrong even in the very beginning with our first family. By the time of the generation of Noah, these problems reached irreparably problematic proportions.

Look at this text that appears in the second Parsha of our Torah, Parshat Noah.

ט אלה תולדת נח נח איש צדיק תמים הוה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֱתֵהָ אֱלֹהִים הַתְּהַלְלֵה־נֹחַ: י ויולד נח שלשה בָּנִים אֶת־שֵׁם אֶת־חָם וְאֶת־יָפֶת: יא ותשתת הארץ לפני ה' אֱלֹהִים ותמלא הארץ חָמָס: יב וירא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה נִשְׁחָתָה כִּי־הִשְׁחִית כָּל־בָּשָׂר אֶת־דְּרָכָו עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

- These are the generations of Noah; Noah was a righteous man, he was complete and perfect for his generation; Noah walked with G-d. Noah had three sons – Shem, Ham and Yefet. The earth became corrupt before G-d; the earth was filled with violence. G-d saw the earth and all of its corruption; because all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth.

What is so wrong by this point?

Who/what has been involved in causing what is wrong to happen?

Who/what is feeling the impact of what went wrong?

Let's think about this together: So, we as humans may have the best of intentions but unfortunately, we can *get in our own way* when our actions do not match our intentions. As Torah-observant Jews, we claim that the lessons and instruction we need are all found in our Torah and its supportive instructions as indicated in the

