Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum — Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations”
We Salute

The Matanel Foundation

For their generous support of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s Talmud project and all of his worldwide efforts.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

We are pleased and honored to acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, in its critical partnership in the Global Day of Jewish Learning in memory of Ralph Goldman and in its help in advancing Jewish learning worldwide.

Genesis Philanthropy Group

Growing engagement of RSJ communities has been made possible with the generous support of Genesis Philanthropy Group. Genesis Philanthropy Group is committed to supporting and launching projects, programming and institutions that are focused on ensuring that Jewish culture, heritages, and values are preserved in Russian-speaking Jewish communities across the globe.
We dedicate the Global Day of Jewish Learning to the memory of Ralph I Goldman, z”l.

There was only one title that Ralph Goldman claimed for himself: “civil servant of the Jewish people”. During his 100 years of life, Ralph both served and led the Jewish people, most notably at the helm of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. More than almost anyone, he helped steer the course of 20th century Jewry.

Ralph worked under Teddy Kollek (later the legendary Mayor of united Jerusalem) as a purveyor of ships, arms and goods during the War of Independence. He then served David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, in securing American support for the newly-created Jewish State.

In later years, Ralph raised the funds to establish Israel’s high school system and its community centers. He promoted Israeli artists, writers and musicians. His wisdom and foresight — and his many communal connections — were key in establishing the Israel Museum. As the leader of the Joint, he created channels for Soviet Jews to emigrate and helped to lead the exodus of Ethiopian Jewry. Under Ralph’s aegis, the Joint expanded its work in Israel, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Ralph adored the Jewish people — and profoundly loved its heritage. Steeped in the Bible, he would quote its verses in conversation. He opened cultural centers in the former Soviet Union. At a critical moment for the monumental endeavor of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud — when a funding shortage threatened the entire enterprise — Ralph understood the enormous importance of this asset of Jewish culture and persuaded the JDC’s leadership to step in and make it accessible to every Jew.

We will always miss — we can never replace — Ralph’s shock of white hair, his dapper bow ties and his huge, huge grin. But as we name the Global Day of Jewish Learning in his memory, we are inspired by his life and lifted by his legacy.
“Grandchildren are the crown of their elders, and the glory of children is their parents.”

– Proverbs 17:6

In honor of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren: their lives burnish the glory of those who perished in the Shoah.

For my parents, Benjamin and Charlotte Gottesfeld z”l, these children are the greatest reward...

- Chana Hanina
- Galia Hanina
- Sarah Rose Warren Siebold and Mike Siebold
- Joseph Nathan Warren

**Children of Shira and Steve Stein**
- Simcha Meir
- Tamara Yocheved
- Elyahu Aryeh
- Eitan Yosef
- Rayna
- Talia

**Children of Aliza and Zev Ganz**
- Shmuel Yoel
- Atara Rina
- Daniel Yomtov
- Yosef
- Rachel

**Children of Tamar and Josh Heller**
- Joseph Noah
- Yakira Eliyana
- Gavriella Talia
- Yehuda Meir
- Sarah Avigayil

**Children of Laura and Adam Hanina**
- Samuel Azriel
- Charlotte Eliora
- Lucy Yael

And in tribute to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, whose work has opened the doors of Jewish learning to our generation and those to come.

– Fanya Gottesfeld Heller
Preface

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz has laid down a challenge to Jews everywhere: “To take a step ahead in Jewish learning and commitment.”

The Global Day of Jewish Learning is the collective response — a most successful one — with some 500 communities in 43 countries participating in 2015.

Initiated in 2010 to celebrate the completion of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s monumental translation and commentary on the Talmud, the Global Day has become an internationally recognized annual event. As the study of Torah is one of the few things that the entirety of our people can share, the Global Day is a day for all Jews to celebrate and cherish.

The Global Day is the work of many hands, internationally and in communities large and small. We appreciate the work being done on the ground to organize events in synagogues, JCCs, Hillels, Federations, and other community organizations all around the world. The success of the Global Day is due to all of your collective efforts. Thank you.

The Aleph Society, which spearheads the Global Day of Jewish Learning, is an affiliate of the Shefa Institute, which promotes the work of Rabbi Steinsaltz. We are grateful to Rabbi Menachem Even-Israel for his guidance and creativity.

Several agencies and individuals were instrumental in the planning and outreach for the Global Day. Our deepest thanks go to our key international partner, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and to our organizing partners, the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. We are excited to again have JAFI’s Partnership2Gether join us as a community partner. We are grateful to our 20+ supporting partners, including the rabbinic bodies of all the denominations, for promoting the Global Day to their constituencies. This is truly a collaborative effort.

We greatly appreciate our special partnership with PJ Library and its work to prepare this year’s family engagement ideas for learning about our world and nature.

Thank you to Danny Drachsler, Devorah Katz, Garth Silberstein and Sara Wolkenfeld for contributing units to this curriculum. Thank you to ELI Talks and Rabbi Lawrence Troster for their partnership on the unit “Green Torah Wisdom.” We appreciate Devorah Katz for serving as Senior Educator and Danny Drachsler for his role as Educational Advisor. A special thank you to Lily Meyer for wearing many hats to support all our work. We also appreciate the assistance of Abigail Adler, Yakov Ellenbogen, and Howard Hirt.

We wish you a wonderful day of learning on Sunday, November 20th and hope that the study of Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations” — exploring our world and nature — will offer us new insights into Jewish texts and our own lives.

Margy-Ruth Davis, Karen Sponder and Macha Fogel
The Aleph Society
Curriculum 2016 —
Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations”

Overview........................................................................... vi–x

FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS

1. Green Torah Wisdom
Living modern life in balance with nature is a challenge, but Judaism offers solutions that may surprise you. What does it mean to be a Jewish environmentalist? (Includes ELI Talk video)

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 1
- Sourcesheet for Participants ........................................... 7

2. Healing: A Natural Practice?
This session navigates the tension in Jewish sources between God as granter of life and healing, and the practice of medicine by humans. Is it “unnatural” to interfere and make changes in the natural world?

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 10
- Sourcesheet for Participants ......................................... 17

3. Planting for the Future
Planting is at the core of gardening and farming. It is also a fundamental metaphor for long-term planning and investment. We will examine the significance of planting within Jewish life.

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 20
- Sourcesheet for Participants ........................................... 25

4. Ruler, Steward, Servant: Humanity’s Relationship with Nature
Was the world created for our sake? Are we masters over the animals and plants, or are we their guardians? We’ll consider the relationship between humanity and nature through a close reading of the Creation story.

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 27
- Sourcesheet for Participants ........................................... 33

5. Shmita: A Cycle of Rest, Release and Ownership
Shmita is a year of rest and release for the land. It can also be meaningful today as a marker of cycles, a time for personal renewal, and as a reminder of our responsibilities to others and the world around us.

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 35
- Sourcesheet for Participants ........................................... 42

6. A Time for Rain
The Jewish prayer for rain asks for rain that is for blessing and not for curse. Rain can be a blessing but it can also cause destruction. Explore the complex relationship humans have with rain, and how Jewish texts can help us connect to rain and the environment.

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 46
- Sourcesheet for Participants ........................................... 53

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS

Loving the Trees (Elementary School)
It is important to care for trees, by planting new ones and tending old ones. How can we learn from trees? Explore stories from Jewish texts that teach us how to love trees.

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 57
- Sourcesheet for Students ................................................. 62

The Power of Planting: Appreciating Seeds and Saplings (Middle School)
Planting signifies new beginnings — when the world was created, when the nation moved into its homeland, and when children are born. We’ll discover more about planting and our impact on the future.

- Facilitator’s Guide .......................................................... 64
- Sourcesheet for Students ................................................. 69

FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD:

PJ LIBRARY PROGRAMMING UNITS

Family Engagement Ideas for Learning about Our World and Nature ................................................................. 71
Do Not Destroy (Bal Tashchit): The Importance of Conserving and Protecting Nature .............................................. 72
Kindness to Animals (Tza’ar Ba’alei Chayim) ....................... 75
Appreciating the Wonders of Nature (Le’He’arich et Pelei HaTeva) ................................................................. 78

Supplemental Reading and Discussion Questions — Chapter on “Nature” — from Simple Words .......... 81
The Aleph Society’s Mission & Ventures

The Aleph Society was founded in 1990 to further Rabbi Steinsaltz’s mission to “Let My People Know”. The Rabbi’s network of publishing ventures, scholarly work and schools spans the globe. After completing a 45-volume Hebrew translation and commentary on the Talmud, he oversees translations of this masterwork into English, French, Russian, Italian and Spanish. He has written more than sixty other books that have been translated into a dozen languages. Thousands of students in Israel — from kindergarten to those in post-army advanced studies — have studied in institutions under his aegis. All of the Rabbi’s affiliate organizations are under the umbrella of the Shefa Institute; its website, www.hashefa.com, offers a wealth of digital classes and lectures by the Rabbi and his colleagues.

The American-based Aleph Society sponsors informal education programs that reach a world-wide audience. The Global Day of Jewish Learning, now in its seventh year, is celebrated in over 500 communities, from Singapore to San Francisco and from Dallas to Djerba. Many, many thousands of Jews join together to study the same foundational texts, inspired to “take a step ahead” as Rabbi Steinsaltz has challenged us. A variety of materials are available at new.steinsaltz.org, including essays, videos and information about Rabbi Steinsaltz’s work.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz is internationally regarded as one of the leading scholars and rabbis both of this century, and of the last. As described in Newsweek, “Jewish lore is filled with tales of formidable rabbis. Probably none living today can compare in genius and influence to Adin Steinsaltz, whose extraordinary gifts as scholar, teacher, scientist, writer, mystic and social critic have attracted disciples from all factions of Israeli society.”

Born in 1937 to a secular family, Rabbi Steinsaltz has authored more than 60 books and hundreds of articles on Jewish mysticism, religious thought, sociology, biography, and philosophy. The best known of these is his interpretation of the Talmud, the seminal work of Jewish culture. His *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* is considered a modern classic of Jewish mysticism.

He is the first person since the medieval sage Rashi to have completed a full translation of and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud. This historic achievement was commemorated in 2010 by the inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning, which has since become an annual international event in over 40 countries.

Some 25 volumes of the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, an English edition of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud, have been published to date and the debut volumes garnered a 2012 National Jewish Book Award.

Other honors include Israel's inaugural Israeli Presidential Award of Distinction, the Israel Prize and the French Order of Arts and Literature. Renowned as an original and open-minded thinker, Rabbi Steinsaltz has lectured and taught in hundreds of communities around the world.
Introduction for Facilitators & Educators

The theme of Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations” offers important material for any Jew to explore. At the same time, we do not expect every Global Day participant to feel the same way about these ideas. Therefore, facilitators are challenged to approach the text with nuanced perspectives and to lead a pluralistic conversation, allowing participants to express their ideas. How can a facilitator manage this?

- Opening the text for conversation, rather than offering an authoritative interpretation
- Allowing for different ideas to co-exist in the classroom, including different understandings about this theme
- Encouraging all involved to keep an open mind and allow themselves to be challenged by the ideas in the room and on the page
- Encouraging participants to learn from each other

The facilitator will also benefit from:

- Asking questions of participants; opening up questions for conversation; after reading a text, asking participants for reactions and questions
- Stepping back and calling on participants, rather than continually offering ideas
- Allowing silence; letting people sit with ideas and mull over their thoughts
- Ensuring that those in the room know each other’s names and use them; attributing ideas to those who first raise them

Leading Global Day conversations requires a balance between facilitation and teaching. Those leading these conversations “facilitate” when they make room for participants to speak their minds and ensure that the conversation has order. Teaching is also necessary. Through the Global Day, we hope that participants develop a commitment to and interest in Jewish texts, as well as an understanding that such texts are relevant to us today. We hope that they see that Jewish text-based conversations can enrich community life, that any of us can access texts — that they are not so intimidating — and that Jewish study links each of us to the Jewish people as a whole. Facilitators are responsible for conveying these ideas to participants.

Facilitators can convey these ideas in a variety of ways:

- Facilitators can begin conversations by asking: Has anyone studied texts like this before? What is it like? What are our associations with Jewish text study? What would it mean to study more? Facilitators can also close conversations in this way, helping participants to debrief the experience and to validate each other's positive experiences or concerns.
- Particularly if the group has relatively little experience studying Jewish texts, the facilitator can say directly: Studying Jewish texts is not so scary!
- Facilitators should feel comfortable sharing their own experiences with text study.
- If the group includes community agency leaders, or individuals who are leaders in their own synagogues, the facilitator might lead a conversation about how each person might introduce more text study into their different organizations.

Facilitators should keep in mind these educational goals, asking participants questions and challenging them in ways that will help them think about these ideas. The hope is that these goals will be realized, and that the Talmud and Jewish texts will have gained thousands of students as a result of this great day.
Editor’s Note: Terminology and Translation

Throughout the curriculum we refer to God as “He.” We transliterate certain Hebrew words. Please feel free to adapt these and any other terminology to that which is most fitting for your community.

Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the Bible are from the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

Please note that in some excerpts from the Talmud, the word אלָקָנו appears in its original form.

The Sessions

To delve into the theme and to help participants see Jewish texts and narratives as relevant to their lives, the sessions address significant questions related to Under the Same Sky: “The earth is Full of your Creations”.

Each unit reviews primary ideas in different areas, and the units complement each other.

We have chosen texts that will challenge participants, raise key questions and help us to develop a richer understanding of our world and nature in different forms, in ways that were relevant to the rabbis and will be relevant to us today. Each class contains a variety of texts that shed light on the theme — including texts from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval and modern commentators.

Session format:

- Facilitators’ guides contain background information, texts, conversation questions and directions to help you structure and frame each class.
- Sourcesheets for the participants immediately follow the facilitator's guide in each unit.
- A breakdown of the sessions' timing is provided to facilitators. While we outline 60 minutes for the adult sessions with some units offering additional content/time, we expect the facilitator to abridge or lengthen these sessions based on time allotted and/or the participants’ interest.

As you put together your outline for the conversation that you will lead, keep in mind:

- Don’t feel compelled to use each text and activity. Rather, use what makes sense and feels natural to you.
- Connect one text to the other. Often, the hardest part of these conversations is making the links between texts. Before leading the conversation, create a mental outline of how one text leads to the next, and of the points you are trying to make in teaching and leading.
- Feel free to share some of your own ideas and personal stories. Bringing yourself into the conversation helps participants see you as a genuine role model.
- Don’t be afraid to share your own questions about the texts. By sharing our questions, we assure students that one can live a rich Jewish life even with — and maybe only with — questions.

These texts have been chosen for their relevance to human experience. In the end, the true purpose of the day is to increase participants’ familiarity with and appreciation for Jewish text study and what texts can teach us about our world and nature, as well as to foster connections with Jewish tradition and insights for our lives. Each text is rich with nuance, and a serious reckoning with the text will certainly yield new perspectives and meaning.
Beyond a text-by-text class discussion, here are some alternative formats you might consider:

- Have the students prepare together in chavruta pairs, discussing the texts with questions you provide. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to prepare the sources and then bring them back together to share their insights. Monitor their progress so you know how many sources they have covered. Often you will find that they say they didn’t have enough time to review all the sources (this is a good thing!).
- Divide the class into small groups and assign a source or two to each group. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to work together and then reconvene the entire class and ask each group to share their insights.
- Divide the class into small groups and have the entire class learn one or two sources (depending on the length) for five to seven minutes. Then bring them back for a debriefing which will also be five minutes at most. Do that for all the sources, leaving time for a 5 to 7 minute summary at the end.

Video Class

In addition to this curriculum, there will be a video class by Rabbi Steinsaltz that will be available for download/online viewing. The class will be approximately 10 minutes long. The video will address the theme and explore questions including:

- What is man’s duty in the world?
- Have you ever related to a certain animal? Which one? How?
- In what ways can we strive to achieve both harmony and disagreement, both control and liberation?

The videos will be available in the Toolbox section of the Global Day website.

**24x24**

24x24 is the Global Day’s live webcast of Jewish learning from around the world, using Google Hangouts On Air and YouTube. Learn from renowned Jewish educators, rabbis and artists, and ask questions in real time. Bring a speaker from around the world to your Global Day event.

Visit [www.theglobalday.org/24x24](http://www.theglobalday.org/24x24) to learn more.

Using the Curriculum for All Learning Levels

Beginning Adult Learners

- Study *Ruler, Steward, Servant: Humanity’s Relationship with Nature*, as this session is intended to be especially helpful for beginning learners.
- Base a session on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s chapter “Nature” from his book, *Simple Words*, which can be found in the Supplemental Reading section. You might want to split the paragraphs up among participants — give a few paragraphs to each participant. After they read and parse the paragraphs, go around the room and create a summary of the chapter from participants’ feedback. Discussion questions are included with the chapter.
- Close each session by asking participants about their experience of text study, debriefing and helping participants look forward to studying again.
Middle School Students
This unit includes activities to help these students explore planting. Middle school students vary by age and educational needs, so this unit will need to be tailored to best fit the group of participating students.

Elementary School Students
This unit includes activities to help students understand how and why to love trees. Elementary school students vary greatly by age and educational needs, so this unit will need to be tailored to best fit the group of participating students.

PJ Library
PJ Library provides family engagement ideas for learning about our world and nature. They invite you to select a theme, choose a book, craft meaningful discussion prompts, and mix and match activities to create a family program for all those living “under the same sky”.

Green Torah Wisdom

ELI Talk by Rabbi Lawrence Troster, adapted by Danny Drachsler and Karen Sponder

Facilitator’s note: This is a 75-minute session, or 60 minutes if you are not screening the video.

Introduction (3 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

Rabbi Lawrence Troster is the Rabbi at Kesher Israel in West Chester, PA and serves as Rabbi-in-Residence at the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona College. Today we are going to explore what Rabbi Troster calls “Green Torah Wisdom” — a path towards becoming a Jewish environmentalist.

We will start by screening an ELI Talk given by Rabbi Troster (www.elitalks.org), and then discuss the ideas he raises while delving into Jewish texts on this topic.

ELI talks are presentations on “inspired Jewish ideas”. The talks explore the central themes of Jewish literacy, religious engagement and identity, given in the context of each speaker’s own work, personal experiences, and Jewish or secular texts. The speakers’ passions result in engaging and inspired talks that teach something new or perhaps counterintuitive. You can view them at www.elitalks.org.

Part One: ELI Talk — “Green Torah Wisdom” (22 minutes)

As you watch this ELI Talk, keep these questions in mind:

1. What ideas presented in this video do you find the most inspiring? Why?
2. What concepts do you find the most challenging or surprising? Why?

Screen the video. (16 minutes)

Ask the participants to share their responses to the above two questions. (6 minutes)

Part Two: Scientific Knowledge and Spiritual Insight (20 minutes)

Rabbi Troster says he realized that, “Some of the greatest spiritual experiences I had ever had were in the natural world.” He mentions summer camp canoe trips that continue to inspire him.

Let’s go out into nature — right now — by reading one of the most beautiful poems about nature ever written: Psalm 104. As you read this Psalm, allow yourself to imagine the scenes it describes, and recall your experiences outside in nature.
Bless the LORD, O my soul; O LORD, my God, You are very great; You are clothed in glory and majesty,
2 wrapped in a robe of light; You spread the heavens like a tent cloth.
3 He sets the rafters of His lofts in the waters, makes the clouds His chariot, moves on the wings of the wind.
4 He makes the winds His messengers, fiery flames His servants.
5 He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter.
6 You made the deep cover it as a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.
7 They fled at Your blast, rushed away at the sound of Your thunder,
8 — mountains rising, valleys sinking — to the place You established for them.
9 You set the bounds they must not pass so that they never again cover the earth.
10 You make springs gush forth in torrents; they make their way between the hills,
11 giving drink to all the wild beasts; the wild asses slake their thirst.
12 The birds of the sky dwell beside them and sing among the foliage.
13 You water the mountain from Your lofts; the earth is sated from the fruit of Your work.
14 You make the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for man's labor that he may get food out of the earth -
15 wine that cheers the hearts of men oil that makes the face shine, and bread that sustains man's life.
16 The trees of the LORD drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, His own planting,
17 where birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the junipers.
18 The high mountains are for wild goats; the crags are a refuge for rock-badgers.
19 He made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows when to set.
20 You bring on darkness and it is night, when all the beasts of the forests stir.
21 The lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God.
22 When the sun rises, they come home and couch in their dens.
23 Man then goes to his work, to his labor until the evening.
24 How many are the things You have made, O LORD; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations.
Ask:

1. Have you had any outdoors/nature experiences, in summer camp or elsewhere, that continue to inspire you? Briefly describe the experience.

Ask participants to take one minute to write a summary of this Psalm for themselves. Then read Rabbi Steinsaltz’s summary — Text #2.

In Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz’s commentary on this Psalm, he offers the following summary. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Read Text #2 aloud.

Text #2: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Tehilim.

A hymn about Creation. A great song about the whole world, about the big and the small things in it — about the sky and the earth and the sea, about the ways of life of all the creations, and about the great cycle of life, which encompasses death as well as rebirth.

Maimonides (also known as Rambam) lived in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century; he was a physician and philosopher whose extensive works have been an essential influence within Judaism. Maimonides felt that the study of the natural world was a prerequisite to spiritual life. Within Text #3, Rambam references two other Psalms to illustrate this.

Text #3: Maimonides. Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madda, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:2. English translation by Isadore Twersky in A Maimonides Reader.

And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightaway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name; even as David said, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:3). And when he ponders these matters he will recoil frightened, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. And so David said “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers — what is man that You are mindful of him?” (Psalm 8:4–5).
Maimonides said that by studying nature we would learn, first of all, to create feelings of wonder and love in ourselves when we observe the wisdom of God’s creation. He said it would also inspire a sense of awe and humility, so that we would understand our place in creation and not be so arrogant about it.

**Part Three: Long-term Thinking** (10 minutes)

What we do to the environment today will affect future generations. Rabbi Troster describes sustainability as a moral idea, that we should “meet the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the needs of the future generation”.

The Talmud relates this story of Honi “The Circle Maker”, a Jewish scholar of the 1st century B.C.E.

**Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 23a.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.  

One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.

**Ask:**

1. Consider the man planting the carob tree. Is he “meeting the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the needs of the future generation”, what Rabbi Troster defines as sustainability? Why or why not? Is it sustainable to provide only for the future and not for the present?

2. The man planting the carob tree tells us that we are shaping the world we will bestow to our heirs. What are you doing now — what are you “planting” — that the next and future generations will inherit?

The fate in store for future generations hinges upon the actions we take today. But it is not necessary to look beyond the present to see that all humankind ultimately shares a common welfare.
Part Four: Everything is Interconnected (10 minutes)

Rabbi Troster shows us that everything is interconnected. This is more than a scientific fact or a spiritual philosophy; Rabbi Troster says it is a moral idea. What we buy, how it was made, where it came from, how the people who made it were treated, and the whole process’s impact on the environment are all morally interconnected.

In our tradition the idea of interconnectedness is shown in some of our most beautiful texts — found in the book of Psalms — what the rabbis in the Talmud called the “Seder Bereishit” (the Order of Creation).

Ask:

1. Thinking back to the Psalm which opened this discussion, which images in this Psalm evoke a feeling of interconnectedness for you?

Text #5 is from Leviticus Rabbah, a collection of sermons on the themes of Leviticus. It describes the moral importance of our connection to the world around us.


Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, it is to be compared to people who are traveling in a boat. And one of them took a drill and began to drill underneath him. His companions said, “What are you doing?” and he said, “What do you care? Am I not drilling under myself? It’s my seat…” And his companions said, “But you will flood the boat for us all.”

Ask:

1. Is the boat in this Midrash a good analogy for situations in the real world? Why or why not?
2. Have you witnessed people who act like the man in the boat who drilled underneath himself? What did those people do? How did you, or your group or community, respond?

Conclusion (10 minutes)

We live and act within a world created by the Divine, a world in which the fate of all life is bound up together across time as well as through space — we are in the boat together. How can we come to terms with the responsibility we bear for this world? Rabbi Steinsaltz proposes we imagine ourselves as partners with the Divine.
Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Eyes to Earth, Heart to Heaven”. 
17 September 2014.

The Talmud (Yevamot 105b) records a discussion regarding whether one who prays should focus his attention on earth or Heaven... The Talmud’s conclusion is that we turn our eyes to earth but our hearts to Heaven. Our eyes focus on earth, so that we see and deal with the world’s problems and pains. At the same time, however, we turn our hearts to Heaven, not for practical reasons but for our own betterment. God surely could have made a perfect, static world, but He did not. He created a dynamic world with lacunae of all kinds, lacunae that facilitate movement and change. God then entrusted this world to Man, a completely improbable being whose Divine soul rests in the body of a gorilla. He created Man with both the capacity for greatness and the susceptibility to sin. Then He made him a partner, albeit a very junior partner, in Creation. From that moment it became our responsibility to finish His work, to observe every aspect of our world, to take responsibility for its problems and, most of all, to care about one another.

Ask:

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz speaks of “lacunae” (holes, gaps, voids) in the world, making “movement and change” possible. In terms of the natural world — the “environment” — what do you consider to be some of the greatest opportunities for movement and change?
2. What would it look like to “take responsibility” for those problems, as Rabbi Steinsaltz suggests we do, so that we can have a more positive effect on the world 70 years from now and beyond?

“Dealing with the world’s problems and pains” means addressing the challenges that confront all people — creating a secure place to live, building loving and supportive relationships with those around us, and caring for those less fortunate. These challenges have basic needs at their root, needs for food, clothing and shelter, which we depend on the natural world to provide.

Today we have gained some initial “Green Torah Wisdom”, as we have seen how the combination of Jewish texts and modern science offers guidance for living a sustainable and just life — one in balance with the natural world.
Bless the LORD, O my soul; O LORD, my God, You are very great; You are clothed in glory and majesty,
wrapped in a robe of light; You spread the heavens like a tent cloth.

He sets the rafters of His lofts in the waters, makes the clouds His chariot, moves on the wings of the wind.

He makes the winds His messengers, fiery flames His servants.

He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter.

You made the deep cover it as a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

They fled at Your blast, rushed away at the sound of Your thunder, — mountains rising, valleys sinking — to the place You established for them.

You set the bounds they must not pass so that they never again cover the earth.

You make springs gush forth in torrents; they make their way between the hills,
giving drink to all the wild beasts; the wild asses slake their thirst.

The birds of the sky dwell beside them and sing among the foliage.

You water the mountain from Your lofts; the earth is sated from the fruit of Your work.

You make the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for man's labor that he may get food out of the earth —

wine that cheers the hearts of men oil that makes the face shine, and bread that sustains man's life.

The trees of the LORD drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, His own planting,
where birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the junipers.

The high mountains are for wild goats; the crags are a refuge for rock-badgers.

He made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows when to set.

You bring on darkness and it is night, when all the beasts of the forests stir.

When the sun rises, they come home and couch in their dens.

Man then goes to his work, to his labor until the evening.

How many are the things You have made, O LORD; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations.
Text #2: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Tehilim.

A hymn about Creation. A great song about the whole world, about the big and the small things in it — about the sky and the earth and the sea, about the ways of life of all the creations, and about the great cycle of life, which encompasses death as well as rebirth.

Text #3: Maimonides. Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madda, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:2. English translation by Isadore Twersky in A Maimonides Reader.

And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightaway love Him, praise Him, glory Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name; even as David said, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:3). And when he ponders these matters he will recoil frightened, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. And so David said “When I consider Your heavens, the sky and the earth and the sea, about the ways of life of all the creations, and about the great cycle of life, which encompasses death as well as rebirth.” (Psalm 8:4–5).

Part Three: Long-term Thinking


One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.
Part Four: Everything is Interconnected


Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, it is to be compared to people who are traveling in a boat. And one of them took a drill and began to drill underneath him. His companions said, “What are you doing?” and he said, “What do you care? Am I not drilling under myself? It’s my seat…” And his companions said, “But you will flood the boat for us all.”

Conclusion


The Talmud (*Yevamot* 105b) records a discussion regarding whether one who prays should focus his attention on earth or Heaven...The Talmud’s conclusion is that we turn our eyes to earth but our hearts to Heaven. Our eyes focus on earth, so that we see and deal with the world’s problems and pains. At the same time, however, we turn our hearts to Heaven, not for practical reasons but for our own betterment. God surely could have made a perfect, static world, but He did not. He created a dynamic world with lacunae of all kinds, lacunae that facilitate movement and change. God then entrusted this world to Man, a completely improbable being whose Divine soul rests in the body of a gorilla. He created Man with both the capacity for greatness and the susceptibility to sin. Then He made him a partner, albeit a very junior partner, in Creation. From that moment it became our responsibility to finish His work, to observe every aspect of our world, to take responsibility for its problems and, most of all, to care about one another.
Written by: Sara Wolkenfeld

Facilitator's note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or a 90-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 60-minute class, omit Part Two. For a 90-minute class, include Part Two and allow more time for discussion.

Introduction (2 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

This unit explores traditional Jewish sources that show how humans are inclined to make changes to the natural world, particularly when things seem to be going wrong. These texts navigate the tension between the idea of an all-powerful God who grants life and healing on the one hand, and the practice of medicine by humans on the other. Is it “unnatural” to interfere and make changes in the “natural” world? Is healing a human endeavor, or is it divine? Together, we will study the sources that express this tension, and explore how we might make space for the divine within our own lives, even as we embrace our understanding of modern medicine.

Part One: Intervening in Nature (10 minutes)

Our first text comes at the end of the story of the exodus from Egypt, immediately following the crossing of the Red Sea.


Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. 24 And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” 25 So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test. 26 He said, “If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer.”
Healing: A Natural Practice?

Ask:

1. How did the bitter (poisonous) waters of Marah become drinkable? Was that an act of God or an act of Man?
2. What does it mean to say that God is a healer? How does God (or Moses) “heal” in this story? Does the image resonate with you?
3. Does verse 26 change the way you see the role of modern doctors? Do you think being a doctor is an imitation of God — “imitatio dei” — and is that a positive or negative thing?

The core of this story is about intervening to improve upon nature. God gives Moses the power to “heal” the water so that it is potable. This is clearly a positive change, and speaks to the reality that we often find ways to change nature in order to meet the survival needs of human beings.

In light of this story, let’s focus on the idea that God is a healer. There are nuances in this text that allow it to be read in multiple ways. The emphasis on listening to God in the first part of verse 26 might imply causation, and that it is God’s Torah/teaching that is somehow a healing force in our lives. If this is the case, then this verse is about spiritual healing, rather than the physical healing which is the purview of the medical profession. However, the reference to the diseases placed on Egypt may imply that this verse speaks about physical illness and physical healing. Perhaps it sets God up as a model to emulate, much as we are instructed to emulate God’s ways of kindness and mercy. Or perhaps this is an exclusive role, and by implication no human can be a true “healer” if God occupies this role.

Part Two: The Problematic Role of the Doctor (20 minutes)

As we have seen in Exodus, the role of healers has always been unclear. Are they doing what God commands or are they going against the way God created the world? Let’s look at the specific role of doctors: physicians who use knowledge and skill not only to heal but to prevent sickness and diagnose problems.

Ask:

1. The Hebrew word rofeh (רוֹפֵא) can be translated as healer or doctor. What is the difference to you between a healer and a doctor?

Let’s read a text from the Talmud about doctors and a commentary by Rashi. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is the most important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.
Text #2: Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin 82a*. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

Abba Gurian of Tzadyan says in the name of Abba Gurya: A person may not teach his son the trades of a donkey driver, a camel driver, a pot maker, a sailor, a shepherd, or a store-keeper. The reason for all these is the same, as their trades are the trades of robbers; all of these professions involve a measure of dishonesty and are likely to lead to robbery. Rabbi Yehuda says in Abba Gurya’s name: Most donkey drivers are wicked, since they engage in deceit, and most camel drivers, who traverse dangerous places such as deserts, are of fit character, as they pray to God to protect them on their journeys. Most sailors are pious, since the great danger of the seas instills in them the fear of Heaven. The best of doctors is to Gehenna, and even the fittest of butchers is a partner of Amalek.

Ask:

1. Do you find the statement that “the best of doctors is (go) to Gehenna (hell)” to be surprising? Why or why not?
2. What do you think could motivate such a statement?
3. Think about the stereotypes that you have heard about doctors. Do you think of doctors as people who are changing nature when they have no business doing so, or do you consider doctors to be helpers? What are the implications about medicine and doctors raised by the text?

Text #3: Rashi. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin 82a*.

“ע"ר"י על קידושין פ'ב א: טוב שברופאים לגיהנם — אינו ירא מן החולי ומאכלו מאכל בריאים ואינו משבר לבו למקום ופעמיםgowest נור אכלות. "The best of doctors is to Gehenna [hell]": For the doctor does not fear sickness and feeds the patient medicines rather than instructing him to repent [lit. break his heart to God]. And sometimes he kills people. And sometimes he has the ability to heal a poor person but does not.

Ask:

1. Rashi offers a few explanations for why the best doctors go to “hell”. Which do you find the most compelling?
2. How does this compare with modern stereotypes about doctors?
3. Medicine is a way for humans to combat sickness or pain, which are part of the world as created by God. Do you think Rashi’s distaste for doctors comes from his mistrust of doctors’ abilities to heal every time, from a belief that doctors are meddling in God’s affairs, or from some other source?
Rashi mentions two kinds of problems with doctors. One seems to be a problem of the doctor’s lack of spirituality; doctors are arrogant and don’t fear mortality the way others might, and they focus on the physical rather than encouraging the patient to examine his or her whole life. The other type of problem is more pragmatic: doctors sometimes make mistakes and do more harm than good, and doctors often provide their services only to those who can pay. Clearly there is a tension between the power to do good, and the moral and ethical challenges that are inherent within the role of the doctor.

Part Three: Permission to Heal (15 minutes)


18 When men quarrel and one strikes the other with stone or fist, and he does not die but has to take to his bed — 19 if he then gets up and walks outdoors upon his staff, the assailant shall go unpunished, except that he must pay for his idleness and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed.

Ask:

1. How do you understand verse 19 and the instruction to “cause him to be thoroughly healed”?
2. Does it relate to the practice of medicine? Who is supposed to cause whom to be healed, and how?

Texts #5 and #6 will offer interpretations of this verse.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 85a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

As it is taught in a baraita that the school of Rabbi Yishmael says: When the verse states: “And shall cause him to be thoroughly healed [verappo yerappe] (Exodus 21:19), it is derived from here that permission is granted to a doctor to heal, and it is not considered to be an intervention counter to the will of God.

Text #6: Rashi. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 85a.

Permission has been given to doctors to heal — and we do not say: God gives life, and God will heal.
Ask:

1. Based on Text #1 (Exodus 15:22–26), would you think that doctors have permission to heal? Why or why not?
2. According to Rashi, why was this permission necessary? What misconception was being dispelled?

The house of Rabbi Yishmael teaches that in this verse (Exodus 21:19), God explicitly gave doctors permission to heal people. According to Rashi, had the verse not provided this permission, Judaism’s approach to the practice of medicine would have been very different. One might have assumed that a religion that believes in an omnipotent Creator, who gives life to all living things, would espouse prayer and repentance as the path to physical health. These texts imply that humans have a role to play, and permission to intervene by treating a disease or injury.

Part Four: Partners in Healing (25 minutes)

Ask participants to read Texts #7 and #8 and answer the questions in chavruta. Chavruta is partnered learning.

Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.

Let’s look more closely at the role of human healers. Text #7 is from Midrash Temurah, a late midrashic collection dealing with the changes (temurot) in the world and in the life of man. This story invokes two famous rabbis from the time period of the Mishnah. Text #8 is from The Strife of the Spirit by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.


There is a story about Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva, who were walking on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and there was another person with them. A sick person approached them, and said: My rabbis, tell me how I may be healed! They said to him: Do such and such, and you will be healed. The person replied: And who afflicted me? They replied: The Holy Blessed One. The person said: And you inserted yourself into a matter that is not your affair! God afflicted me and you are healing me?! Are you not violating God’s will? They said to the person: What is your profession? The person replied: I work the land, and behold the sickle is in my hand. They asked: Who created the vineyard? The person replied: The Holy Blessed One.
They said: And you inserted yourself into a matter that is not your affair?! God created, and you cut God’s fruit from it?

The person replied: Do you not see the sickle in my hand? If I did not go out and plow it, and cover it, and fertilize it and weed it, not a single thing would grow! They responded: Fool! Have you never heard that which is written (Psalm 103:15), “A person’s days are like grass...” Just as a tree, if one does not weed and fertilize and plow, it does not grow, and if it grows and isn't watered and fertilized it will not live and it will die — so too the body! The fertilizer is the drug, and types of medicine, and the worker of the land is the doctor.

**Ask:**

1. What is the “patient” concerned about in this story? Why do you think he sought the advice of rabbis and not a doctor?
2. What does the response of the rabbis teach us about their approach to the practice of medicine?
3. In the metaphor of a doctor as a “farmer” who tends the “field” of human health, what other parallels can we draw? Are rabbis “farmers” of the soul, or is each of us individually responsible for our own “garden”?

Notice that there is a disconnect between the question and the answer received. Based on the ensuing conversation, it seems that the questioner was looking for a spiritual answer because he believed that God caused the affliction. This would explain why he asked the rabbis for help to begin with, rather than approach a doctor.

The human relationship with the natural world is often expressed in terms of trees and planting. We often think of farmers as those who care for the land, but we don’t usually think of doctors as farmers tending the “land” of human health. This metaphor of our bodies as a land that needs tending gives further credence to a doctor’s positive role in the world. While land that grows wild can flourish untended by man, to bear more fruit and be more bountiful it must be cultivated. Likewise, the human body will do as it is built to do, but with tending, such as “intervention” by doctors and an active interest in health, the body can live longer and be more productive.

**Text #8: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Religion and Mystical Powers.” The Strife of the Spirit.**

Once, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa went to study Torah with Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakka. Rabbi Yochanan’s son fell ill and Rabbi Chanina asked for mercy for him, and he lived. Rabbi Yochanan said, “If Yochanan had beaten his head and held his legs all day long, he would not have been noticed.” His wife then asked him, “And is Chanina greater than you?” To this he replied, “No, except that he is like a slave before the King and I am like a prince before the King” (Berakhot 34b). From this it can be seen that in the encounter between the two types — Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakka, the great sage, the superior personality, and Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, gifted with the supernatural faculty for healing and for other extraordinary things — Rabbi Yochanan is by no means able to do what Rabbi Chanina does so easily. This does not mean that Rabbi Chanina is greater than Rabbi Yochanan; he is merely gifted with a certain talent or capacity to make contact with God, which makes it possible for him to perform these miracles. It does not make him “a prince before the King”; he remains “a slave before the King” (which may even be the nature of his extraordinary power). In other words, there is an evaluation here of the essence of the mysterious power to exceed the limits of nature. Admitting that it is truly a marvelous power, it is not considered one that necessarily makes the bearer of it superior to ordinary mortals.
Ask:

1. What do you think it means that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa is described as “a slave before the King”? What characteristics or practices might someone possess to be described this way?
2. What do you think it means to say that someone who heals “exceeds the limits of nature”? Is this a positive characteristic?
3. How is this model of a healer/doctor different from the model presented in the previous source?

Reconvene the group.

In Midrash Temurah, doctors were presented as partners with the Divine, taking care of nature and bringing it to its fullest potential. In this description, the healer is someone who is “a slave to the King,” perhaps possessing great humility, perhaps in all ways someone who is meticulous about serving God, or perhaps a mere shadow of the King, the ultimate Healer. While this is different from the doctor-farmer analogy presented in the previous source, in both cases doctors are in relationship with the Divine and are clearly seen as causing powerful changes in the course of nature, changes that require skill and effort. Rabbi Steinsaltz describes the healers/doctors as “exceeding the limits of nature,” which is a strong phrase — one that almost pits the doctor against the forces of nature.

Ask:

1. How do you relate to these two models — of doctor as farmer or healer/doctor as slave to the King?
2. Does one resonate more? Why?

Conclusion (3 minutes)

We began with Exodus, which presented healing as a way of intervening in nature. In that story, God is the healer and healing is a model for the physical healing that doctors do. In Kiddushin and Rashi’s commentary on the text, problems emerged where the role — and value — of doctors were called into question. The Talmud, in Bava Kama and through Rashi, clarified the role of doctors by demonstrating the doctor’s “permission” to heal — Judaism endorses a medical system in which people turn to other people when they are ill, and do not simply trust that God will heal them. The final sources provide two very different models for understanding the way in which humans work in service of the preservation and improvement of human life, both in concert with and against the forces of nature, but in some way, imbued with Divine blessing.
Part One: Intervening in Nature


22 Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. 24 And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” 25 So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test. 26 He said, “If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer.”

Part Two: The Problematic Role of the Doctor

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 82a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Abba Guryan of Tsadyan⁸ says in the name of Abba Gurya: A person may not teach his son the trades of a donkey driver, a camel driver,⁹ a pot maker, a sailor, a shepherd, or a storekeeper. The reason for all these is the same, as their trades are the trades of robbers; all of these professions involve a measure of dishonesty and are likely to lead to robbery. Rabbi Yehuda says in Abba Gurya’s name: Most donkey drivers are wicked, since they engage in deceit, and most camel drivers, who traverse dangerous places such as deserts, are of fit character, as they pray to God to protect them on their journeys. Most sailors are pious, since the great danger of the seas instills in them the fear of Heaven. The best of doctors is to Gehenna,¹⁰ and even the fittest of butchers¹¹ is a partner of Amalek.
**Text #3: Rashi. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin* 82a.**

"The best of doctors is to Gehenna [hell]": For the doctor does not fear sickness and feeds the patient medicines rather than instructing him to repent [lit. break his heart to God]. And sometimes he kills people. And sometimes he has the ability to heal a poor person but does not.

**Part Three: Permission to Heal**

**Text #4: Exodus 21:18–19.** English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.*

18 When men quarrel and one strikes the other with stone or fist, and he does not die but has to take to his bed —

19 if he then gets up and walks outdoors upon his staff, the assailant shall go unpunished, except that he must pay for his idleness and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed.

**Text #5: Babylonian Talmud *Bava Kamma* 85a.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli.*

As it is taught in a *baraita* that the school of Rabbi Yishmael says: When the verse states: "And shall cause him to be thoroughly healed [verappo yerappe]" (Exodus 21:19), it is derived from here that permission is granted to a doctor to heal, and it is not considered to be an intervention counter to the will of God.

**Text #6: Rashi. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud *Bava Kamma* 85a.**

Permission has been given to doctors to heal — and we do not say: God gives life, and God will heal.
Part Four: Partners in Healing


There is a story about Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva, who were walking on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and there was another person with them. A sick person approached them, and said: My rabbis, tell me how I may be healed! They said to him: Do such and such, and you will be healed. The person replied: And who afflicted me? They replied: The Holy Blessed One. The person said: And you inserted yourself into a matter that is not your affair! God afflicted me and you are healing me?! Are you not violating God's will? They said to the person: What is your profession? The person replied: I work the land, and behold the sickle is in my hand. They asked: Who created the vineyard? The person replied: The Holy Blessed One.

They said: And you inserted yourself into a matter that is not your affair?! God created, and you cut God's fruit from it? The person replied: Do you not see the sickle in my hand? If I did not go out and plow it, and cover it, and fertilize it and weed it, not a single thing would grow!

They responded: Fool! Have you never heard that which is written (Psalms 103:15), “A person's days are like grass...” Just as a tree, if one does not weed and fertilize and plow, it does not grow, and if it grows and isn't watered and fertilized it will not live and it will die — so too the body! The fertilizer is the drug, and types of medicine, and the worker of the land is the doctor.


Once, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa went to study Torah with Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakka. Rabbi Yochanan’s son fell ill and Rabbi Chanina asked for mercy for him, and he lived. Rabbi Yochanan said, “If Yochanan had beaten his head and held his legs all day long, he would not have been noticed.” His wife then asked him, “And is Chanina greater than you?” To this he replied, “No, except that he is like a slave before the King and I am like a prince before the King” (Berakhot 34b). From this it can be seen that in the encounter between the two types — Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakka, the great sage, the superior personality, and Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, gifted with the supernatural faculty for healing and for other extraordinary things — Rabbi Yochanan is by no means able to do what Rabbi Chanina does so easily. This does not mean that Rabbi Chanina is greater than Rabbi Yochanan; he is merely gifted with a certain talent or capacity to make contact with God, which makes it possible for him to perform these miracles. It does not make him “a prince before the King”; he remains “a slave before the King” (which may even be the nature of his extraordinary power). In other words, there is an evaluation here of the essence of the mysterious power to exceed the limits of nature. Admitting that it is truly a marvelous power, it is not considered one that necessarily makes the bearer of it superior to ordinary mortals.
Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

The act of planting is at the core of gardening and farming, and serves as a universally understood metaphor for long-term planning and investment. In this session, we will look more closely at how planting holds a special significance in Jewish life, and find lessons in Jewish tradition that can apply to our lives today.

» Read aloud this traditional Welsh proverb:

A seed hidden in the heart of an apple is an orchard invisible.

» Ask:

1. What do you think this proverb means?
2. Think of a time in your life when this proverb could have applied to the situation. Describe that time.
3. The proverb lists three things: a seed; the heart of an apple; an orchard. Each of these is something unseen — hidden or invisible. What is the significance of this emphasis on the unseen?

As we study together today, keep in mind this proverb, seeds, and things that we cannot yet see.

Part One: The First Gardener (10 minutes)

After God separated the light from the darkness, made the heavens and earth, the sky and water, He created plants.

» Read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Genesis 1:11–12.

יִיָּא וַתּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׁא עֵשֶׂב מַזְרִיעַ זֶרַע, עֵץ פְּרִי עֹשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינוֹ, אֲשֶׁר זַרְעוֹ-בוֹ עַל-הָאָרֶץ; וַיְהִי-כֵן
יִב
11 And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good.
God has the power to create huge and fundamental things fully formed — like the heavens and the earth — yet He creates plants as sprouts that must grow into their final form.

Bringing plants into existence is the first act of creating life, and that process incorporates the concept of the seed. By creating plants with seeds inside of them, God anticipates the essential place that planting is to hold in the perpetuation of life. Indeed, planting is a top priority within the Jewish tradition.

Part Two: Plant First and Foremost (15 minutes)

Text #2 is from Leviticus Rabbah, a compilation of midrash on Leviticus.

Ask:

1. Why do you think the first action the Children of Israel are to take when they enter the Land of Israel is to plant? What might be the significance of the commentary emphasizing that planting be done “first and foremost”?

2. What do you think people today — most of whom are not farmers — should do as the first action they take when arriving in a new home or town?

The Bible states that when the Children of Israel first arrive in the Land of Israel they are commanded to put down roots first, to plant the seeds of the crops they will need to eat in the next season. They start with planting seeds and, with time and patience, harvest the growth from those plants.

In addition to securing physical livelihood, planting is an investment in a new home. Planting requires that you be there to tend the crops — to garden means to invest the time to be in that place.

We make land ours by planting and tending it, as we turn a house into a home by investing time and effort.
Text #3 is from Midrash Avot Derabbi Natan, a commentary on Ethics of our Fathers (Pirkei Avot) compiled in 700–900 CE.

Read Text #3 aloud.


If you had a sapling in your hand and were told that the Messiah had come, first plant the sapling [and then go out to greet the Messiah].

Ask:

1. Jews have been praying for the Messiah for thousands of years, yet this text says planting a sapling is more important than greeting the Messiah. How would you explain this?
2. In this text a person is in the middle of planting — the sapling is in hand. What does this Midrash teach us about finishing tasks?
3. Plants were the first living things created by God. The arrival of the Messiah would signal the end of history. What is the significance of juxtaposing these two extremes together in one Midrash?

One might think that the coming of the Messiah would be a legitimate occasion to “drop everything”, or that arriving in the Promised Land would call for thankful prayer as the first act. However, as these texts make clear, Jewish tradition values planting as a practical necessity to such an extent that it becomes the prescribed act of devotion. The Children of Israel are commanded to plant. In doing so they are accepting the responsibilities of their new home. The obligation to plant is binding even at the arrival of the Messiah.

Now let’s explore the more practical elements behind those priorities, and how planting is part of a long-term obligation.

Part Three: Planting for the Future (15 minutes)

Ask participants to read Texts #4 and #5 in chavruta. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.

Text #4 relates the story of Honi “The Circle Maker,” a Jewish scholar of the 1st century B.C.E.


One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.
Text #5 describes a tradition of planting a tree when a child is born.

**Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 57a.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

The Gemara explains that it was customary in Beitar that **when a boy was born they would plant a cedar** tree and when a **girl** was born they **would plant a cypress** [tornita]. And when they **would later marry** each other **they would cut** down these trees and **construct** a wedding **canopy** for them from their branches.

**In Chavruta, discuss:**

1. What common theme are both of these texts addressing? What is the main idea of each text?
2. Bring to mind the theme and main ideas you identified in the previous question. Considering that many of us today live in urban societies rather than agricultural ones — even in places where we don’t have our own gardens — how would you apply the same theme and main ideas to our modern lives?

**Bring the group together. Ask a few chavrutot to share their responses to the questions with the full group.**

The old man with the carob tree knows he will not eat fruit from that particular tree, but he plants it anyway, for his children. In Beitar, the branches of cedar trees and cypress trees that were planted for children would be used to make wedding canopies for them. In this light, the act of planting becomes a metaphor signifying long-term planning and commitment.

**Ask:**

1. Judaism emphasizes that individuals should care about future generations. Why do you think this is, and what does it mean to you?

**Conclusion (15 minutes)**

Text #6 is by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Text #7 is from *Midrash Tanchuma*, a compilation of legal and narrative midrash on the Torah named for Rabbi Tanchuma, the first person mentioned in the collection.

**Bring the group back together again. Ask one person from the group to read Texts #6 and #7 aloud.**

God sent Adam forth from the Garden to till the soil from which he had been taken, work that requires sorting out, sowing, plowing, and harvesting. In order to be able to live from the earth, man has to keep digging, weeding and drawing forth from the ground. The point is that the work of weeding out the harmful and proliferating the good can be done only in and with the earth itself. The war of man against thorns and thistles, insects and rodents, is an incessant struggle, and it is part of his work of Tikun, correcting the world.

Text #7: *Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Kedoshim, Chapter 8.*

Even if you find the land full of all good things, you should not say, “We will sit and not plant”; rather, be diligent in planting! As it says “you shall plant trees for food” (Leviticus 19:23). Just as you came and found trees planted by others, you must plant for your children; a person must not say, “I am old, how many years will I live? Why should I get up and exert myself for others? I’m going to die tomorrow.”

Ask:

1. In these texts, Rabbi Steinsaltz and *Midrash Tanchuma* mention cultivation of plants alongside individual responsibilities to others. What are those responsibilities?
2. Which points made by these texts do you particularly agree or disagree with? Why?

Think back to the proverb we read at the beginning: “A seed hidden in the heart of an apple is an orchard invisible.” We have learned how God chose to create plants as sprouts containing the seed for future generations within themselves. We found that planting is a cultural priority in the Jewish tradition and that planting is sacred. We’ve seen how planting is something we are obligated to do, both as a practical preparation for our needs and as an investment for the future. The seed — the source of so much potential — is hidden in the heart of an apple. That apple came from a tree planted by someone who lived before we did. Generation to generation, the potential for life and growth is passed down through the act of planting. In taking the time and effort to plant, tend and harvest, we allow ourselves to be “rooted” in what we do. We plant things for our children — to celebrate their birth and to provide for their futures. We understand that the “fruit” of our efforts may be something that we ourselves will not get to harvest.

Even when we think our gardens are full — that we find trees planted by others, or we have things provided for us so easily — we are still obligated to plant. Even when our own immediate needs are met, we must plan(t) for the needs of those who come after us. Planting is a way to give significance to our actions, and for our actions to make the world better.
Part One: The First Gardener

Text #1: Genesis 1:11–12.

11 And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good.

Part Two: Plant First and Foremost

Text #2: Leviticus Rabbah 25:3.

Therefore, when you are in the Land of Israel, occupy yourselves first and foremost with planting. Hence it is written, “When you come into the land, you shall plant trees for food”(Leviticus 19:23).


If you had a sapling in your hand and were told that the Messiah had come, first plant the sapling [and then go out to greet the Messiah].

Part Three: Planting for the Future


One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree.¹ Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.
The Gemara explains that it was customary in Beitar that when a boy was born they would plant a cedar tree and when a girl was born they would plant a cypress [torita]. And when they would later marry each other they would cut down these trees and construct a wedding canopy for them from their branches.

Conclusion

Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Banishment from Eden”, from In the Beginning.  

God sent Adam forth from the Garden to till the soil from which he had been taken, work that requires sorting out, sowing, plowing, and harvesting. In order to be able to live from the earth, man has to keep digging, weeding and drawing forth from the ground. The point is that the work of weeding out the harmful and proliferating the good can be done only in and with the earth itself. The war of man against thorns and thistles, insects and rodents, is an incessant struggle, and it is part of his work of Tikun, correcting the world.

Text #7: Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Kedoshim, Chapter 8.  

Even if you find the land full of all good things, you should not say, “We will sit and not plant”; rather, be diligent in planting! As it says “you shall plant trees for food” (Leviticus 19:23). Just as you came and found trees planted by others, you must plant for your children; a person must not say, “I am old, how many years will I live? Why should I get up and exert myself for others? I’m going to die tomorrow.”
Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

Introduce the session with this quote and ask participants the opening questions.

Ivan Turgenev, a 19th century Russian novelist, wrote in *Fathers and Sons*:

Nature is not a temple but a workshop, and the man the workman within it.

This is a provocative statement.

Ask:

1. What does this statement mean?
2. Do you agree or disagree with this? Why?

We humans have long struggled to understand our place within the diversity of life on earth. In the Bible, and in rabbinic literature as well, our ancestors have posed essential questions: Was the world created for our sake? Are we masters over the other animals and plants, or are we stewards of them? If we are masters, what does “mastery” look like? If we are stewards, what does stewardship mean? In sum, how should we conceive of the relationship between humanity and nature?

In this session we will examine texts that address these questions. We will consider how different responses to these questions might influence the way we choose to live, and we will discuss the implications of those choices for ourselves and for our world.

Part One: Biblical Sources (20 minutes)

Let’s begin our discussion by exploring foundational Biblical texts more deeply. The first two chapters of Genesis present different accounts of God’s creation of the world, and characterize the relationship between human and nonhuman life in seemingly very different ways.

Ask participants to read Texts #1 and #2 in *chavruta* and discuss the questions that follow. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.
The context of Text #1 is the seven days of Creation; this excerpt describes God’s acts on the sixth day.

**Text #1: Genesis 1:26–28.**

26 And God said, “Let us make man 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 creep on earth.” 27 And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

Text #2, from the next chapter in Genesis, narrates an alternative account of the creation of human beings.

**Text #2: Genesis 2:5–15.**

5 When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil... 7 the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. 8 The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed... 15 The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

**Questions for chavruta discussion:**

1. How would you characterize the relationship between humans and the plants and creatures of the earth as presented by each text?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of conceiving of mankind as the ruler of life on earth?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of conceiving of mankind as the one who tends the garden of life?

**Reconvene the group.**

Genesis 1 describes the creation of human beings with a divine mandate to “rule” and “master” the entirety of life on earth. In this conception, the relationship between humans and the plants and animals is akin to that between a monarch and his subjects.

Genesis 2 imagines God forming mankind from the “dust” of the earth itself. Appropriately, God charges man “to till and tend” the garden in which he lives. In this arrangement humans are resident gardeners, tasked with the care and cultivation of the other inhabitants of the garden.

**Invite participants to share their responses to chavruta discussion questions #2 and #3 with the full group.**

Facilitate a short discussion.
Part Two: Classical Rabbinic Commentary (18 minutes)

Let’s reflect on these texts further by considering some of Rashi’s comments — he addresses a specific issue in each text. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is the most important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

Commenting on Genesis 1:26, Rashi warns man that his “rule” over “every living thing” is not unqualified.


And rule the fish of the sea. This expression (וַיִּרְדֵּדוּ, i.e., “rule”) has [the meaning of] ruling (רְיָדָד) and descending (רְיָדָה). [If he is] meritorious, [then] he has dominion over the beasts and cattle. [If he is] not meritorious, [then] he becomes subjugated to them and the beast has dominion over him.

Ask:

1. Is Rashi’s explanation of the phrase “rule them” (וַיִּרְדֵּדוּ) satisfying to you? Why or why not?
2. In his comment, Rashi puts “ruling over” and being “subjugated to” the animals opposite each other. Are these the only possible options for the relationship between humans and animals, or can you articulate a more subtle description, perhaps one that takes into account both Genesis 1 and 2?

In Text #2, man’s purpose is explicit: “To till it [the garden of Eden] and tend it.” Thus he would seem to be a steward, managing God’s property for Him. A steward does not protect property for his own benefit; rather, he does it for the benefit of the property itself or for the benefit of the property owner. However, more than being merely the steward, man seems to be the central figure in this arrangement. After all, in Genesis 1 God created all the plants and animals first, and only created Man at the end, whereas in Genesis 2 God refrains from creating plant life (and animal life) until man has been created. How should we understand the relationship between human and nonhuman life as presented in Genesis 2?

Consider Rashi’s comment on Genesis 2:5, in which he proposes a solution to an apparent problem in the Biblical narrative: We learned in Genesis 1 that plant life was created on the third day of creation (1:11–12); how is it possible, then, for it to be stated in Genesis 2 that “no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted”? In his response to this question, Rashi addresses the relationship between human life and plant life.

Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 2:5. Translation by Rabbi Avrohom Davis in Metsudah Chumash/Rashi.
No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted. [And all vegetation] did not yet sprout. [The fact that] on the third day it is written [Genesis 1:11]: “Let the earth sprout forth” [should be interpreted:] they did not protrude but they remained at the surface of the ground until the sixth day [when man was created]. Why? Because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth. And what was the reason that He did not cause it to rain? Because “There was [yet] no man to work the soil”, and there was no one to appreciate the rain. When man appeared and recognized their need for the world he prayed for it and it descended and the trees and vegetation sprouted.

Ask:

1. Is Rashi saying that the plants were created for humanity’s sake, or vice versa? Find proof for your response in the text.
2. How would you characterize the interrelationship between plants, rain, man and God as expressed in Rashi’s description?

Rashi’s comment here (on Genesis 2:5) presents a nuanced dynamic between man and the other creations (specifically, in this case, plants and rain). In Rashi’s view God does not create the plants outright; rather, He creates them as sprouts, hidden under the soil, waiting for rain to make them grow and appear above the ground. It is only when man recognizes that the world needs the rain, and prays for it, that the rain falls.

“Need” (צורך) is a key word in Rashi’s comment. Consider the interdependent loop of need going on here. The plants need the rain to grow up out of the ground. God needs man to work the soil and appreciate the rain. Man needs the rain so plants can grow and he can eat them. According to Rashi, man’s prayers are necessary to trigger the water cycle. In this light, Genesis 2:5 seems to be a meditation on the interdependent web of life. God, humans, and the nonhuman creations each have their own role and their own needs, yet none of their needs alone is sufficient to get them what they want — the others’ needs are essential to the functioning of the system.

This idea, that human and nonhuman life are interdependent, is different than conceiving of man in black-or-white terms, as either “ruler” or “steward”. Thus far in our discussion of the relationship between man and the world, however, we have been discussing human and nonhuman life as if they were, in essence, two different things. Is it possible to consider them as still more subtly intertwined?

Part Three: A Modern Rabbinic Commentary (12 minutes)

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers us a more nuanced view of how different forms of life are interconnected. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.


Often, either for valid reasons or because we are arrogant and egocentric, we view ourselves as separate and distinct from the rest of creation. We speak about “humanity” and “nature” as if we exist in one way, and the rest of the world exists in a different way. This dichotomy between man and nature is neither simple nor accurate. Granted, nature without the presence of man would be very different; yet humanity, although unique and distinct, is still part of nature. Whether we define nature as the totality of existence, or as the set of laws that govern it — we are included in it...
In a way, all of this can be summarized by a very old legend. When God created man, God said (Genesis 1:26), “Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness.” Traditionally, it is understood that God was speaking to the angels. If so, the plan was not very successful; we are not like angels. According to another interpretation, God was speaking to the whole of creation, to all of nature. In that case, “Let us make man in our image” means, “Let each of you contribute something.” The fox and the dove, the tiger and the sheep, the spider and the bee each contributed a small part — as did the angels and the devils.

We humans contain all the parts. Some of us are foxier than others, or more sheepish than others, but altogether, we contain all the traits found in nature. In that way, we are the sum total of nature, containing the macrocosm in our own microcosm. Somehow, we have to learn from all our partners, and perhaps pray that the extra part — that “Divine spark” contributed by God — will help us make the right choices.

**Ask:**

1. In your own words, how would you summarize Rabbi Steinsaltz’s main idea?
2. What does Rabbi Steinsaltz mean when he says, “We have to learn from all our partners”? How do we do that?
3. How might people’s personal, social, and political actions change if we were to think of humanity as “the sum total of nature”?

**Conclusion (7 minutes)**

Valentin Rasputin was a Russian author (1937–2015) and this quote is from his work *Farwell to Matyora*.

**Read aloud this piece of literature.**

Does this land belong to you alone? We’re all here today and gone tomorrow. We’re like migratory birds. This land belongs to everyone — those who were here before us and those who will come after. We’re only on it for a tiny time... And what have you done with it? Your elders entrusted you with it so that you would spend your life on it and pass it on to the younger ones...

“Man is king of nature,” Andrei prompted.

“Yes, yes, king. Just reign a bit and you’ll be sorry.”

**Ask:**

1. In the view of this text, is humanity’s relationship to nature best described as master, steward or servant? Or does this text present an alternative characterization — if so, what is it?
2. With the perspective of which of the texts we’ve discussed is this text the closest? Why?
3. In your opinion, which approach — master, steward or servant — is the most useful? The most dangerous? The most inspiring? Why?

We have discussed different perceptions of the relationship between human and nonhuman. We have considered mankind as a ruler, gardener, and servant. We have viewed human and nonhuman life as interdependent, and in doing so, have included humanity in our understanding of nature as a whole.
Perhaps it is proper for humanity to dominate the plants and animals. Perhaps the role we are meant to play is that of steward, acting on behalf of, and advocating for, nonhuman life. Perhaps the only reason we are here at all is to serve the plants and animals, which are the true purpose of Creation. Perhaps the very distinction between humanity and nature is in fact an illusion, since humans are in and of nature.

However we view the relationship between human beings and the variety of nonhuman life on earth, it is certain that our fates are inextricably linked.
Part One: Biblical Sources


And God said, "Let us make man 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 creep on earth." 27 And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

Text #2: Genesis 2:5-15.

When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil... 7 the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. 8 The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed... 15 The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

Part Two: Classical Rabbinic Commentary


And rule the fish of the sea. This expression (וירדו, i.e., “rule”) has [the meaning of] ruling (יורד) and descending (ירדו). [If he is] meritorious, [then] he has dominion over the beasts and cattle. [If he is] not meritorious, [then] he becomes subjugated to them and the beast has dominion over him.
No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted. [And all vegetation] did not yet sprout. [The fact that] on the third day it is written [Genesis 1:11]: “Let the earth sprout forth” [should be interpreted:] they did not protrude but they remained at the surface of the ground until the sixth day [when man was created]. Why? Because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth. And what was the reason that He did not cause it to rain? Because “There was [yet] no man to work the soil,” and there was no one to appreciate the rain. When man appeared and recognized their need for the world he prayed for it and it descended and the trees and vegetation sprouted.

Part Three: A Modern Rabbinic Commentary


Often, either for valid reasons or because we are arrogant and egocentric, we view ourselves as separate and distinct from the rest of creation. We speak about “humanity” and “nature” as if we exist in one way, and the rest of the world exists in a different way. This dichotomy between man and nature is neither simple nor accurate. Granted, nature without the presence of man would be very different; yet humanity, although unique and distinct, is still part of nature. Whether we define nature as the totality of existence, or as the set of laws that govern it - we are included in it...

In a way, all of this can be summarized by a very old legend. When God created man, God said (Genesis 1:26), “Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness.” Traditionally, it is understood that God was speaking to the angels. If so, the plan was not very successful; we are not like angels. According to another interpretation, God was speaking to the whole of creation, to all of nature. In that case, “Let us make man in our image” means, “Let each of you contribute something.” The fox and the dove, the tiger and the sheep, the spider and the bee each contributed a small part - as did the angels and the devils.

We humans contain all the parts. Some of us are foxier than others, or more sheepish than others, but altogether, we contain all the traits found in nature. In that way, we are the sum total of nature, containing the macrocosm in our own microcosm. Somehow, we have to learn from all our partners, and perhaps pray that the extra part — that “Divine spark” contributed by God — will help us make the right choices.
Facilitator's note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or a 75-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 75-minute class, include the text and discussion framed with ** within the Conclusion.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

We are commanded to rest on Shabbat, the seventh day. More than merely a chance to rest, Shabbat offers an opportunity for reflection and renewal, and to reassess our relationship with the day-to-day. Shabbat establishes the end of one week and the beginning of the next, in a cycle by which we can measure the passage of time.

The Bible also contains a commandment to work the land for six years and let it rest for a seventh year — the Shmita year — forming another cycle of seven culminating in a period of deliberate rest. The Hebrew word Shmita (שומיטה) means “to let it drop” or “to release”. Shmita provides the opportunity to reassess our relationship with what we are “growing”; whether literally or figuratively, our work is “fruitful” because of the effort we put into it, and we “reap” the rewards of deeds we “sow”. Even in our modern, urban times, we still use agricultural terms of planting, tending and harvesting to describe our work. Shmita can hold meaning for us as a marker of cycles, as a time for personal renewal, and as a reminder that the world around us also needs rest.

Ask:

1. What is a cycle that is significant in your life? How do you mark it? How does it change your experience of the time before it and after it?

During the Shmita year the Torah prohibits various agricultural activities such as plowing, sowing and reaping. Produce does still grow during the Shmita year — fruit trees don’t simply stop bearing fruit when humans stop harvesting them, and there are “volunteer” crops that sprout on their own. Fruit, grains and other edibles that ripen in Shmita years are considered to have a kind of sanctity (kedushah) of their own, and the Bible places restrictions on how such produce can be used. One such instruction is that all produce that is ripe in the Shmita year should be declared ownerless (hefker), so that anyone may gather the produce from anyone else’s land. In addition, the Bible commands that we should forgive any outstanding debts that we are owed.

Facilitator’s Note: Shmita is an agricultural commandment to be fulfilled in the Land of Israel, with many specific legal considerations that we will not be discussing today. If you would like to further define Shmita please feel free to do so. For more information and excellent study materials on Shmita, explore Hazon’s Shmita Sourcebook at www.hazon.org.
We will now dig in to two Biblical texts that introduce the concept of Shmita.

☞ Ask participants to read Texts #1 and #2 in chavruta and consider the questions below the texts. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn.

Text #1: Exodus 23:1–12.

You must not carry false rumors; you shall not join hands with the mighty to do wrong — you shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute so as to pervert it in favor of the mighty — nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute. When you encounter your enemy’s ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him. When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him. You shall not subvert the rights of your needy in their disputes. Keep far from a false charge; do not bring death on those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer. Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the clear-sighted and upset the pleas of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. you shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed.

Text #2: Leviticus 25:1–2, 18–23.

And the Lord spoke to Moses in Mount Sinai, saying: The land, six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the land enjoy its sabbath, you and your servants shall dwell in its cities. The sixth year shall be a Jubilee for you, no one shall sell from you, nor shall you buy a tithe of your land. For in that year all the land is to be a Jubilee. Each man shall own the land of his own inheritance, and no man shall sell anything of the land of his own inheritance, for the land is to be a Jubilee; every man shall own the land of his own inheritance. The cities of Israel are to be open, and the dwellers of the cities shall own the land.

and the land shall be a jubilee for you. You shall dwell in your cities and own the land of your own inheritance. The land shall be a jubilee for you, because every man owns the land of his own inheritance; the land shall own itself.

The land shall be a jubilee for you. You shall own the land of your own inheritance, and the land shall own itself. This shall be the jubilee of Israel, when you shall not sow nor reap, when you shall not plant nor gather. So shall you observe the jubilee, the holy year, the land shall own itself. You shall dwell in your cities and own the land of your own inheritance. The land shall own itself in the jubilee year. This shall be the jubilee of Israel, when you shall not sow nor reap, when you shall not plant nor gather. So shall you observe the jubilee, the holy year, the land shall own itself. You shall dwell in your cities and own the land of your own inheritance. The land shall own itself in the jubilee year. This shall be the jubilee of Israel, when you shall not sow nor reap, when you shall not plant nor gather. So shall you observe the jubilee, the holy year, the land shall own itself. You shall dwell in your cities and own the land of your own inheritance. The land shall own itself in the jubilee year. This shall be the jubilee of Israel, when you shall not sow nor reap, when you shall not plant nor gather. So shall you observe the jubilee, the holy year, the land shall own itself. You shall dwell in your cities and own the land of your own inheritance. The land shall own itself in the jubilee year. This shall be the jubilee of Israel, when you shall not sow nor reap, when you shall not plant nor gather. So shall you observe the jubilee, the holy year, the land shall own itself. You shall dwell in your cities and own the land of your own inheritance. The land shall own itself in the jubilee year.
Shmita: A Cycle of Rest, Release and Ownership

1 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: 2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the LORD.

18 You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; 19 the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security. 20 And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” 21 I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. 22 When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating the old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in. 23 But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

Ask:

1. What do each of these Biblical passages imply about the purpose or function of Shmita? What other instructions immediately precede and follow Shmita?

2. Shmita was juxtaposed with instructions about Shabbat in Text #1, and Text #2 describes Shmita by saying, “The land shall observe a sabbath.” What do you think we can learn from this connection between Shmita and Shabbat?

3. In Text #1 (Exodus 23:11) the verb “let it rest” comes from the same root as Shmita, which means to let go or release. In Text #2 (Leviticus 25:2) we read that the land “will observe a sabbath”. The verb here, which comes from the same root as Shabbat, literally means to pause or cease activity. What might be the connection between letting go and ceasing activity? How might the two be different?

4. In Text #1 the commandment of Shmita immediately follows a reminder that we were once strangers in Egypt. Text #2 also describes us as strangers — “you are but strangers resident with Me [God]” — even when we are residing in our own land. How is the idea of being a stranger connected to observing Shmita?

Reconvene the group and ask each chavruta pair to share an insight.

There is a remarkable amount of emphasis on the connection between the social obligations we have towards the “stranger” and the commandment of Shmita. Those who do own land let the trees and the fields rest, and, as Text #2 spells out, they eat food that has been set aside in advance from the sixth year’s harvest. The farmers get to rest, the land gets to rest, and everyone has food to eat — even the “strangers”.

Part Two: “Let the Needy Eat of It”: With Ownership Comes Responsibility (15 minutes)

Let’s look more closely at what “ownerlessness” really means, and at the connection between ownership and obligations to those in need.

In Text #3 Maimonides writes about the legal concept of ownerlessness. The concept of ownerlessness (hefker) applies specifically to an object that has no owners. This is different from something that is public property, which belongs to the community and whose use is controlled by the collective. Something that is hefker can be acquired by anyone who comes along and finds it. Maimonides (also known as Rambam) lived in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century; he was a physician and philosopher whose extensive works have been an essential influence within Judaism.

מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה לְהַשְּׁמִיט כָּל מַה שֶּׁתּוֹצִיא הָאָרֶץ בַּשְּׁבִיעִית שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שמות כג-יא) “וְהַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּשְׁמְטֶנָּה וּנְטַשְׁתָּה”. וְכָל הנּוֹעֵל כַּרְמוֹ או שָׂדֵהוּ בַּשְּׁבִיעִית בִּטֵּל מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה. וְכֵן אִם אָסַף כָּל פֵּרוֹתָיו לְתוֹךְ בֵּיתוֹ. אֶלָּא יַפְקִיר הַכּל וְיַד הַכּל שָׁוִין בְּכָל מָקוֹם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שמות כג-יא) “וְאָכְלוּ אֶבְיֹנֵי עַמֶּךָ”. וְיֵשׁ לוֹ לְהָבִיא לְתוֹךְ בֵּיתוֹ מְעַט כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁמְּבִיאִין מִן הַהֶפְקֵר: …

It is a positive commandment to release everything that the land produces during the seventh year, as it is said, “But in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow” (Exodus 23:11). And anyone who locks up their vineyard or fences in their field during the seventh year is neglecting a positive commandment. And the same is true of one who gathered all their fruit into their house. Instead, one should declare it all ownerless and everyone should have equal access everywhere, as it says “Let the needy among your people eat of it” (Ibid). One may bring a little into one’s house the way one would bring from ownerless produce…

**Ask:**

1. Declaring produce ownerless is a positive action. Why might it be important to do this rather than simply refraining from harvesting in the normal way, and allowing others to come claim it?

2. Is there anything you regularly declare (e.g., an affiliation with a political party, or saying “I love you”)? How does the act of declaration influence your experience?

In Text #4 Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz describes the nature of the obligation to give to the needy. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Gemilut Hasadim”. A Dear Son to Me.

The Torah commands us to give tithes (10% of agricultural produce) to the poor twice every seven years (in the third and sixth year of every seven-year cycle). Nowadays, many people give 10% of all their earnings to *tzedaka* — a common practice that according to many opinions is a binding law. [Historically, the tithes] did not belong to the landowner; they were the property of the poor. The landowner only had the right to choose which poor he wanted to give it to…

The underlying idea is that giving to the poor, or helping the needy, is not something that the poor and needy need so much as something that must be done by those who have. Helping others is not seen as a social measure to prevent disasters in the community, but as an obligation imposed on each and every individual. The poor have the right to demand and receive. The giver, on the other hand, does not give because he is kindhearted, or because he’s under some kind of public pressure, but because it is his duty. A person must first give, and only then search for needy people to give to.
Ask:

1. What are some ways that the duty to declare produce ownerless could be fulfilled in today’s world — especially considering the fact that we do not all grow crops?

2. Rabbi Steinsaltz clearly states that tithing is not about showing kindness to poor people; it is about responsibility. How does thinking about tithing as an obligation affect your understanding of how to meet the needs of others? How is the obligation to tithe similar or dissimilar to the obligation to declare Shmita produce ownerless?

It seems that ownership — of land or of things — is actually a responsibility rather than a privilege. According to the Torah, those who have the means are obligated to help those who are in need. It is worth exploring how we can best fulfill that obligation in the modern world, where our connection to land is weaker, and what we “own” is increasingly portable or even nonmaterial.

Shmita reminds us we are “but strangers resident with Me [God]”. In this light, Shmita becomes a reflective time during which we remember what it is to endure without our “own” land. It puts us in the shoes of the poor, the homeless, and the ones in need. It reminds us that the more we think we own, the more obligated we are to help others. In addition, it offers us the opportunity to consider: If we are no longer owners, who is the real owner?

Part Three: Who is the Real Owner? (10 minutes)

The Babylonian Talmud, in Tractate Sanhedrin 39a (Text #5), comments on the Bible and provides us with a way to understand who really owns the land. In Text #6 Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon (b.1968), an author of halakhic works, faculty member of Yeshivat Har Etzion and the Community Rabbi of Alon Shvut South, Israel, offers an additional perspective on this issue.

Ask participants to read Texts #5 and #6 in chavruta and consider the questions below the texts.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 39a.

A certain disciple came and said [to Rabbi Abbahu]: “What is the reason for the Sabbatical year?”
He said to him...“The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: ‘Sow six [years], and the seventh [year] let it lie fallow, so that you know that the land is Mine.’”
Text #6: Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon. Shmita.

However, it is possible there that there is a single reason behind the sabbatical year: “For the land is Mine” (Leviticus 25:23). The land pertains to the Holy One, blessed be He, and the human being is not its owner. For this reason, other things were decreed: a person is supposed to demonstrate that he is not the owner, and therefore produce is made ownerless. Similarly, he also pauses his work that he shouldn’t feel that he [himself] generated the produce…

The sabbatical year teaches a person that in practice, every year, he is not the true owner. This is [also] the focus of the prohibition “Do not waste”: it is forbidden for you to waste because you are not the owner.

Ask:

1. How might observing the laws of Shmita transform your sense of ownership?
2. How might cultivating a sense that the land belongs to God, and that we are not the owners, relate to the reasons for Shmita described in Parts One and Two?
3. How do you treat items you borrow differently from items that you own? How might you act if you realized that you are not “the owner”?

Thinking of ourselves as a smaller part of something greater changes the way we treat the world. For example, by acknowledging that we are “strangers” residing in another’s land we might become more mindful, and use the world with greater care. If you borrow someone’s shirt, would you return it damaged and dirty? If you borrow someone’s money, would you return only part of it? As with things, the land — the earth and all its resources — is on loan to us. We are “strangers” resident here, and as individuals, we do not have the right to destroy what does not belong to us.

Conclusion (10 minutes or **25 minutes**)  

**Our final text comes from The Book of Education (Sefer HaChinukh), a systematic work that enumerates and expounds on all 613 commandments and first appeared in Spain during the 13th century. It offers an additional explanation for the purpose of Shmita.**
And therefore, He commanded (may He be blessed) that we render ownerless (hefker) all that the land produces during this year, besides resting on it, in order that a person should remember that the land which brings forth produce for him, each and every year, does not produce it through its own strength and virtue. Rather, there is a Lord above the land and above the landlord, and when He desires, He commands him to render them ownerless. There is another benefit found in the matter, to acquire the attribute of relinquishing, for there is none so generous as one who gives without hoping for a reward. And there is another benefit found in it, that a person should have increased trust in Hashem, may He be blessed, because everyone who finds it in his heart to give and to render ownerless forever all the growth of his land, and the inheritance of his fathers, all that grows in a single year, and experiences this together with his family all his days, neither excessive stinginess nor lack of faith will ever take hold of him.

Ask:

1. What is the purpose of Shmita according to the Book of Education? What does it cultivate within us?

The Book of Education proposes that Shmita serves to cultivate faith in God and a generous, non-possessive disposition. It reminds us that by fulfilling the commandment we are then blessed when we realize that we do not actually “own” anything. By trustingly, willingly, gladly becoming “strangers” again, we consequently become generous and full of faith.

We have reflected upon the importance of Shmita as part of a larger cycle of responsibility to the land, of rest and release. We have considered the underlying principle of ownerlessness — that the land and the fruit of the land are not really ours but God’s. The rules of Shmita force us to relinquish our usual “control” over the land. We are commanded to let the fields lie fallow and not to harvest fruit in order to sell it. We are forced to “let go” of the fruit of our land, declaring it ownerless and letting anyone eat it. Beyond agriculture, the underlying values of these rules can extend to modern cycles of life, our interpersonal relationships, and our use of natural resources.

Ask:

1. In our mostly urban lives now, what is “ownerlessness”, practically and spiritually?
2. What lessons from Shmita can we apply to the ecosystem of human behavior? In cultivating relationships with people and society, what can we “release” and how might that change our perspective on respect and obligations to others?
Part One: Shmita, Shabbat and The Stranger

Text #1: Exodus 23:1–12. (Bolding added for emphasis).

1 You must not carry false rumors; you shall not join the guilty to act as a malicious witness. 2 You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong — you shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute so as to pervert it in favor of the mighty — 3 nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute. 4 When you encounter your enemy’s ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him. 5 When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him. 6 You shall not subvert the rights of your needy in their disputes. 7 Keep far from a false charge; do not bring death on those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer. 8 Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the clear-sighted and upset the pleas of those who are in the right. 9 **You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.** 10 Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; 11 but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. you shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves. 12 Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed.

Text #2: Leviticus 25:1–2, 18–23.

1 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: 2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the LORD.

18 You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; 19 the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security. 20 And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” 21 I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth
year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. 22 When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating the old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in. 23 But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

Part Two: “Let the Needy Eat of It”: With Ownership Comes Responsibility

Text #3: Maimonides. Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee, Chapter 4 Halakha 24.

It is a positive commandment to release everything that the land produces during the seventh year, as it is said “but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow” (Exodus 23:11). And anyone who locks up their vineyard or fences in their field during the seventh year is neglecting a positive commandment. And the same is true of one who gathered all their fruit into their house. Instead, one should declare it all ownerless and everyone should have equal access everywhere, as it says “Let the needy among your people eat of it” (Ibid). One may bring a little into one’s house the way one would bring from ownerless produce...

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Part Three: Who is the Real Owner?

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Text #6: Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon. Shmita.

Amenn. It is possible there is one single reason behind the sabbatical year: “For the land is Mine” (Leviticus 25:23). The land pertains to the Holy One, blessed be He, and the human being is not its owner. For this reason, other things were decreed: a person is supposed to demonstrate that he is not the owner, and therefore produce is made ownerless. Similarly, he also pauses his work that he shouldn’t feel that he [himself] generated the produce...

The sabbatical year teaches a person that in practice, every year, he is not the true owner. This is [also] the focus of the prohibition “Do not waste”: it is forbidden for you to waste because you are not the owner.

Conclusion

Text #7: The Book of Education: Mitzvah 84.

And therefore, He commanded (may He be blessed) that we render ownerless (hefker) all that the land produces during this year, besides resting on it, in order that a person should remember that the land which brings forth produce for him, each and every year, does not produce it through its own strength and virtue. Rather, there is a Lord above the land and above the landlord, and when He desires, He commands him to render them ownerless. There is another
benefit found in the matter, to acquire the attribute of relinquishing, for there is none so generous as one who gives without hoping for a reward. And there is another benefit found in it, that a person should have increased trust in Hashem, may He be blessed, because everyone who finds it in his heart to give and to render ownerless forever all the growth of his land, and the inheritance of his fathers, all that grows in a single year, and experiences this together with his family all his days, neither excessive stinginess nor lack of faith will ever take hold of him.
Written by: Sara Wolkenfeld

Facilitator’s Note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or a 90-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 60-minute class, omit Part Four. For a 90-minute class, include Part Four and allow more time for discussion.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

Humans have a complex relationship with rain. Nature provides us with the water that sustains all life, but in the wrong season or in too great a quantity rain is a destructive and even deadly force. Jewish sources show this precarious balance and highlight our relationship with rain in all its forms. This unit examines rain in those texts, exploring how a traditional Jewish approach to rain can help us cultivate a deeper understanding of our relationship with rain and the environment today.

Let’s think about your associations and experiences with rain. Depending on where people live, their relationships with rain/water vary greatly. Some of you may have experienced drought, while others might have stories of flooding or hurricanes.

Ask:

1. Are there sounds, smells, or significant events that you associate with rain? Are these associations largely positive or negative?

Part One: Waiting for Rain (20 minutes)

“Water” is a poem by Wendell E. Berry (b. 1934), one of America’s foremost environmental poets and activists.


...Fear of dust in my mouth is always with me, and I am the faithful husband of the rain, I love the water of wells and springs and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns. I am a dry man whose thirst is praise of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup. My sweetness is to wake in the night after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.

Ask:

1. Have you ever been thirsty? Have you ever been in a situation where you feared for lack of water?
2. What does it mean for the poet to say, “I am the faithful husband of the rain”? What images does this evoke for you?
3. Do the emotions in this poem resonate with you? Why or why not?
A Time for Rain

The poet has a very intense relationship with rain. A spouse or “husband” might be loyal, patient, and loving. Notice the tension between love of rain and fear of its absence, as well as the deep appreciation of the benefits brought by the rain.

Text #2A is an excerpt from the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ta’anit, the entire first chapter of which is dedicated to discussing the need for and impact of rain and how best to pray for it. Text #2B is the full Nishmat prayer which is referenced in the Talmud text.

Text #2A: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 6b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Abbahu said: From when does one recite a blessing over rain? From when the groom goes out to meet the bride,♭ that is, when there are puddles of water on the ground such that the water below, represented as the bride in this metaphor, is splashed from above by the raindrops, represented as the groom.

The Gemara asks: What blessing does one recite over rain? Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: We thank you, O Lord our God, for each and every drop that You have made fall for us. And Rabbi Yohanan concludes the blessing as follows: If our mouth were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with singing like the multitude of its waves, etc. And one continues with the formula of the nishmat prayer recited on Shabbat morning, until: May Your mercy not forsake us, O Lord our God, and You have not forsaken us. Blessed are You, O Lord, to Whom abundant thanksgivings are offered.


If our mouths were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with jubilation as its myriad waves, if our lips were full of praise like the spacious heavens, and our eyes shone like the sun and moon, if our hands were outstretched like eagles of the sky, and our feet as swift as hinds — still we could not thank You enough, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, or bless Your name for even one of the thousand thousands and myriad myriads of favors You did for our ancestors and for us. You redeemed us from Egypt, Lord our God, and freed us from the house of bondage. In famine You nourished us; in times of plenty You sustained us. You delivered us from the sword, saved us from the plague, and spared us from serious and lasting illness. Until now Your mercies have helped us. Your love has not forsaken us.
Ask:

1. Look carefully at the language of this blessing over rain. What is God being thanked for in this blessing?
2. What imagery is used in Texts #2A and #2B, and why do you think these particular descriptions were chosen?
3. These texts describe a prayer of gratitude for rain. Have you ever responded to rain or another natural event with prayer?
4. How might offering this kind of blessing in response to rain shift our perception of nature?

Let’s appreciate the ways in which the Nishmat prayer recognizes the value of every single drop of rain. In fact, the rain provides a moment to stop and remember important moments of salvation throughout Jewish history.

The Nishmat prayer is traditionally recited on Shabbat and festivals as part of the morning liturgy. Rain, then, creates a sort of mini-holiday, in which we can pause and appreciate each drop as a gift from God, and then go beyond that to reflect on all the many triumphs in Jewish history.

The nature imagery within the prayer is full of movement (our tongues like waves, splashing raindrops, etc.). Take a few minutes to reflect on and react to the power of the imagery, and to compare the emotions evoked here with those you felt while reading Wendell Berry’s poem.

Each of these sources make it clear that while many take rain for granted, without it we cannot survive. What is true about rain is true about our relationship with the broader natural world; we forget to appreciate the resources we have, sometimes remembering only when those resources are endangered. However, while we do not always remember to stop and give thanks, we rarely forget to mourn when rain (or the lack of it) brings about destruction. Let’s take a moment to reflect on what a more mindful and appreciative stance towards nature might look like.

Part Two: The Day of the Rain (8 minutes)

Ask a participant to read Text #3 aloud.

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a–b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

This text highlights the significance of rain in Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Abahu said: The day of rain is greater than the resurrection of the dead. The reason is that while the resurrection of the dead benefits only the righteous, rain benefits both the righteous and the wicked... Similarly, Rav Yehuda said: The day of the rains is as great as the day on which the Torah was given, as it is stated: “My doctrine [likhni] shall drop as the rain” (Deuteronomy 32:2), and lekah means nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: For I give you good doctrine [lekah]; do not forsake My Torah” (Proverbs 4:2)... Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: The day of the rains is as great as the day on which the heavens and the earth were created...
Ask:

1. “The day of the rains” is compared to three distinct events: The resurrection of the dead, the giving of the Torah, and the creation of the world. What did or will each of these events contribute to the world? What is the significance of these comparisons?
2. What would you compare a “day of rain” to in your own life?

This text highlights how every aspect of life is truly dependent on having enough water. “The day of the rains” is compared to major events of the past, present, and future of Jewish life. The giving of the Torah was a major contribution to the spiritual sustenance of the Jewish people. “The day of the rains” is precious — a gift of life and growth. We should mark each day of rain with the same thankfulness with which we would mark the miracle of the Torah being given to Moses or the miracle of creation.

Perhaps most importantly, each of these analogies represents a gift that human beings possess. The balance of nature is a gift that we receive without doing anything to deserve it, and without giving anything back in return.

Part Three: Deserving Rain (22 minutes)

Text #4, from Deuteronomy, shifts the focus from rain as a gift to human interaction with nature, highlighting how we can “deserve” or preserve a positive balance within nature.


13 If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, 14 I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil — 15 I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle — and thus you shall eat your fill. 16 Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow down to them. 17 For the LORD’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.

Ask:

1. According to Deuteronomy, human behavior, whether in keeping or breaking commandments, brings about rain or drought. Who is punished for this behavior — the land or the people?
2. Do you think that human beings can deserve or merit rain? Why or why not?
3. What do you think the Torah means when it speaks about “rain in season”? When is the season for rain — and when is it not the season for rain?
Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers a commentary on Deuteronomy 11:17. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.


The most common misfortune that should stir feelings of repentance is a lack of rain, and therefore most of the tractate [Ta’anit] deals with this issue. As stated in the Torah (Deuteronomy 11:17), a drought is a sign of God’s anger, as both a warning and a punishment. At a time of a dearth of rain, even more than with other disasters, one has no way to improve the situation other than by turning to God and praying. Furthermore, a lack of rain is not simply a local or temporary problem; it can bring catastrophe on the entire country.

Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that a lack of rain in the Bible is a sign of God’s anger, and that the presence or lack of rain can have ramifications on a much wider scale. While today some of us may not use the language of reward and punishment when speaking about rain and natural resources, it is still important to look at the impact of human behavior on the world around us. Let’s take a moment to discuss what steps humans can and should take in response to rain as a natural resource.

Ask:

1. What are some examples of catastrophes that can affect an “entire country”?
2. Natural disasters are not often caused by a single action from an individual. Instead, many actions by many individuals can have a “domino effect” that creates a much larger result. What are some positive actions each of us can take that will have a “positive” domino effect? (For example, not watering our lawns during a drought, or keeping drains and pipes cleared during the rainy season.)
3. Water conservation, in its most basic sense, is conserving a finite amount of water. This often involves the individual sacrificing for the collective. In a time of drought we don’t water our lawns. But it can be difficult enough for individual people to change behaviors — think about how hard it is just to break a bad habit. What about changing the behavior of many people collectively — of an “entire country”? What would a communal change of behavior look like? How would the thankfulness or mindfulness of individuals impact the collective behavior?

Let’s think back to the earlier sources about the ways in which Judaism pushes us to be sensitive to the precarious balance that exists within the natural world. We are meant to be thankful for every drop of rain and appreciate it as a life-sustaining gift.

Part Four: The Blessing of Rain (12 minutes)

In the verses from Deuteronomy rain in its proper time is a sign of Divine favor. Texts #6 and #7 push us to think about the fine line between too much and enough, the careful timing, and all the other factors that determine how rain affects us as individuals and as a society.

Ask participants to read Texts #6 and #7 in chavruta and consider the questions below the texts. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.
The mishna adds: In general, they cry out on account of any trouble that should not befall the community, a euphemism for trouble that may befall the community, except for an overabundance of rain. Although too much rain may be disastrous, one does not cry out over it, because rain is a sign of a blessing. The mishna relates: An incident occurred in which the people said to Honi HaMe’aggel: Pray that rain should fall. He said to them: Go out and bring in the clay ovens used to roast the Paschal lambs, so that they will not dissolve in the water, as torrential rains are certain to fall. He prayed, and no rain fell at all.

What did he do? He drew a circle on the ground and stood inside it and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children and answer their prayers for rain. Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. He said: I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves with enough water to last the entire year. Rain began to fall furiously. He said: I did not ask for this damaging rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.

Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner but continued unabated, filling the city with water until all of the Jews exited the residential areas of Jerusalem and went to the Temple Mount due to the rain. They came and said to him: Just as you prayed over the rains that they should fall, so too, pray that they should stop. He said to them: Go out and see if the Claimants’ Stone, a large stone located in the city, upon which proclamations would be posted with regard to lost and found articles, has been washed away. In other words, if the water has not obliterated the Claimants’ Stone, it is not yet appropriate to pray for the rain to cease.

Shimon ben Shetah, the Nasi of the Sanhedrin at the time, relayed to Honi HaMe’aggel: Were you not Honi, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but what can I do to you? You nag [mithatei]! God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding without reprimand. After all, rain fell as you requested. About you, the verse states: “Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice” (Proverbs 23:25).
A Time for Rain

Text #7: Conclusion of Prayer for Rain. Recited on Shemini Atzeret. Translation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the Koren Mahzor.

םָאַתָּהוּ הָוּא ה’ אֱֹלֵקָנּוּ מַשִּׁבַּהוּ הָרוֹחַ וּמוֹרִידָה הָגָשֶׁם לִבְרָכָה וְלֹא לִקְלָלָה. אָמֵן
לְחַיִּים וְלֹא לְמָוֶת. אָמֵן
לְשֹׂבַע וְלֹא לְרָזוֹן. אָמֵן

For You, Lord our God,
Make the wind blow and the rain fall.
For blessing, and not for curse. Amen.
For life, and not for death. Amen.
For plenty, and not for scarcity. Amen.

Questions for chavruta discussion:

1. Under what circumstances is rain a curse? When does it cause scarcity or death?
2. The last three lines of the prayer seem to be variations on the same phrase. What do the similarities and differences between these lines tell us?
3. What does it mean to want just enough rain?

Bring the group back together to discuss these questions.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

The poem by Wendell Berry and the first section of Tractate Ta’anit place the human being in relationship to rain and nature as a whole. We are the grateful supplicants, bound to nature, and we express gratitude for each and every drop of rain. The second source from Ta’anit equates rain to a gift — one which we can never fully deserve and which provides physical and spiritual sustenance, as well as hope for the future. In contrast, the verses in Deuteronomy and the Rabbi Steinsaltz commentary paint a picture in which human behavior is the cause of rain or the lack thereof. They also remind us of the importance of rain in the right time. The concluding prayers remind us that water is a matter of life and death — something not to be taken lightly. It affects all of us. Even if our actions do not actually affect rainfall, we must ensure that we respect and care for resources that are available. This includes being grateful for what we have, making more thoughtful choices, and taking actions to conserve water and nature more generally.

Ask:

1. We’ve learned that poetry, prayer and study are all ways of being more mindful and appreciative of the natural world. What will/can you do in your life to be more thankful for rain?
Part One: Waiting for Rain


...Fear of dust in my mouth is always with me, and I am the faithful husband of the rain, I love the water of wells and springs and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns. I am a dry man whose thirst is praise of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup. My sweetness is to wake in the night after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.

Text #2A: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 6b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Abbahu said: From when does one recite a blessing over rain? From when the groom goes out to meet the bride,9 that is, when there are puddles of water on the ground such that the water below, represented as the bride in this metaphor, is splashed from above by the raindrops, represented as the groom.

The Gemara asks: What blessing does one recite over rain? Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: We thank you, O Lord our God, for each and every drop that You have made fall for us. And Rabbi Yohanan concludes the blessing as follows: If our mouth were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with singing like the multitude of its waves, etc. And one continues with the formula of the nishmat prayer recited on Shabbat morning, until:

May Your mercy not forsake us, O Lord our God, and You have not forsaken us. Blessed are You, O Lord, to Whom abundant thanksgivings are offered.


If our mouths were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with jubilation as its myriad waves, if our lips were full of praise like the spacious heavens, and our eyes shone like the sun and moon, if our hands were outstretched like eagles of the sky, and our feet as swift as hinds — still we could not thank You enough, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, or bless Your name for even one of the thousand thousands and myriad myriads of favors You did for our ancestors and for us. You redeemed us from Egypt, Lord our God, and freed us from the house of bondage. In famine You nourished us; in times of plenty You sustained us. You delivered us from the sword, saved us from the plague, and spared us from serious and lasting illness. Until now Your mercies have helped us. Your love has not forsaken us.
Part Two: The Day of the Rain

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a–b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Abahu said: The day of rain is greater than the resurrection of the dead. The reason is that while the resurrection of the dead benefits only the righteous, rain benefits both the righteous and the wicked. Similarly,

Rav Yehuda said: The day of the rains is as great as the day on which the Torah was given, as it is stated: “My doctrine [likhi] shall drop as the rain (Deuteronomy 32:2), and lekah means nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: For i give you good doctrine [lekah]; do not forsake My Torah” (Proverbs 4:2)...

Part Three: Deserving Rain


If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, 14 I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil — 15 I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle — and thus you shall eat your fill. 16 Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow down to them. 17 For the LORD’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.


The most common misfortune that should stir feelings of repentance is a lack of rain, and therefore most of the tractate [Ta’anit] deals with this issue. As stated in the Torah (Deuteronomy 11:17), a drought is a sign of God’s anger, as both a warning and a punishment. At a time of a dearth of rain, even more than with other disasters, one has no way to improve the situation other than by turning to God and praying. Furthermore, a lack of rain is not simply a local or temporary problem; it can bring catastrophe on the entire country.
Part Four: The Blessing of Rain


§ The mishna adds: In general, they cry out on account of any trouble that should not befall the community, a euphemism for trouble that may befall the community, except for an over-abundance of rain. Although too much rain may be disastrous, one does not cry out over it, because rain is a sign of a blessing. The mishna relates: An incident occurred in which the people said to Ĥoni HaMe’aggel: Pray that rain should fall. He said to them: Go out and bring in the clay ovens used to roast the Paschal lambs, so that they will not dissolve in the water, as torrential rains are certain to fall. He prayed, and no rain fell at all.

What did he do? He drew a circle on the ground and stood inside it and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children and answer their prayers for rain. Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. He said: I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves with enough water to last the entire year. Rain began to fall furiously. He said: I did not ask for this damaging rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.

Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner but continued unabated, filling the city with water until all of the Jews exited the residential areas of Jerusalem and went to the Temple Mount due to the rain. They came and said to him: Just as you prayed over the rains that they should fall, so too, pray that they should stop. He said to them: Go out and see if the Claimants’ Stone, a large stone located in the city, upon which proclamations would be posted with regard to lost and found articles, has been washed away. In other words, if the water has not obliterated the Claimants’ Stone, it is not yet appropriate to pray for the rain to cease.

Shimon ben Shetab, the Nasi of the Sanhedrin at the time, relayed to Ĥoni HaMe’aggel: Were you not Ĥoni, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but what can I do to you? You nag [mithatei] God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding without reprimand. After all, rain fell as you requested. About you, the verse states: “Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice” (Proverbs 23:25).
For You, Lord our God, make the wind blow and the rain fall.
For blessing, and not for curse. Amen.
For life, and not for death. Amen.
For plenty, and not for scarcity. Amen.
Introduction (10 minutes)

Begin today’s class by reading a story. Ask your students to get comfortable, relax and listen to a story.

Read *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein to the class. The story is about a tree that loves a little boy and all that the tree gives to the child.

Once you are done reading, facilitate a class discussion on the story.

Ask some of these questions:

1. What physical things does the tree provide for the boy throughout his life?
2. What is the relationship between the tree and the boy?
3. Is the boy selfish to be taking so much from the tree?
4. Why does the tree keep on giving? Is it possible to give too much?
5. What is the moral of the story?

*The Giving Tree* talks about the relationship people have with nature — appreciating it and, at times, taking advantage of it. Today’s class is about just that — how Judaism views humanity’s relationship with nature.

Part One: Creating a World (10 minutes)

One of the first things God does after creating Adam and Eve is to place them in a garden.

Read Texts #1 and #2 aloud.

Text #1: Genesis 2:8-9.

8 The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. 9 And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

Ask:

1. Why do you think God placed man in a garden surrounded by trees?
2. What are some of your favorite things to be surrounded by (e.g., toys, friends, siblings)?
The next source describes God taking the first human around the Garden of Eden. It is from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, a collection of midrashim on Ecclesiastes.

**Text #2: Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13.**

בַּשַּׁשָּׁהּ שִׁבְעִים שְׁנֵי סֵפֶר נַעֲשָׂה עַל כָּל אֲדֹנָי נִעַר וַאֲמִל לֶאַם מָשָׂה בְּהַר וַאֲמִל לִי אֲבָא נִעֲשָׂה בֶּן וְאָבָא נִעֲשָׂה בַּמְּדָא שְׁמָעִין לְהוּ אֲבָא נִעֲשָׂה בְּדֶנֶי וְאָבָא נִעֲשָׂה בַּמְּדָא שְׁמָעִין לְהוּ אֲבָא נִעֲשָׂה בֶּן וְאָבָא נִעֲשָׂה בַּמְּדָא שְׁמָעִין לְהוּ אֲבָא נִעֲשָׂה בְּדֶנֶי וְאָבָא נִעֲשָׂה בַּמְּדָא שְׁמָעִין לְהוּ אֲבָא נִעֲשָׂה בֶּן וְאָבָא

When God created the first human, God led him around all the trees in the Garden of Eden. God said to him, “See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything I have created has been created for your sake. Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy My world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.”

**Ask:**

1. God is proud to show Adam the trees in the Garden of Eden. He even calls them “beautiful”. Think of a time you’ve created something that you’ve been proud of. What message is God trying to give to humanity?
2. Looking at Earth today, do you think God would be proud of how we treat the planet?
3. Is it our responsibility to look after Earth? What are some ways we could take better care of our planet?

**Part Two: A Story (10 minutes)**

The Talmud tells a story about Honi, a scholar who lived in Israel over 2,000 years ago.

**Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 23a.** English translation [*bold text*] and commentary [*plain text*] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: *This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit?* The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: *Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree?* He said to him: *That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.*

It is clear from the story that, although the man is planting carob trees, he will not be around to enjoy the carob from the trees.
Ask:

1. What is the value of doing something that you will not benefit from?
2. Can you think of some ways that you could help make the world a better place for your children and grandchildren?
3. How do your actions shape the world?
4. Can you think of another action that may take a long time to show results?

Part Three: Blessing a Tree (10 minutes)

In our next text, we learn about blessing trees.

Read Text #4 aloud.


The Gemara relates: When they were taking leave of one another, Rav Nahman said to Rabbi Yitzḥak: Master, give me a blessing. Rabbi Yitzḥak said to him: I will tell you a parable. To what is this matter comparable? It is comparable to one who was walking through a desert and who was hungry, tired, and thirsty. And he found a tree whose fruits were sweet and whose shade was pleasant, and a stream of water flowed beneath it. He ate from the fruits of the tree, drank from the water in the stream, and sat in the shade of the tree.

The manner. According to this interpretation, the name and its general, national meaning are not entirely distinguished from each other. Instead, Israel the man of the name and its general, national meaning are not entirely distinguished from each other. Instead, Israel the man of Israel in such a way that the personal, individual denotation of Israel the man is appropriate to say that he never died (Rashba; Rav Naĥman: he was close to Rav Naĥman, who asked him various questions of an aggadic nature. Many aggadic sayings are attributed to him; Amud 57; Arukh). Some say that one may converse between courses (Shulḥan Arukh 170:1).

The value of doing something that you will not benefit from? If I say to you that your fruits should be sweet, your fruits are already sweet; if I say that your shade should be pleasant, your shade is already pleasant; if I say that a stream of water should flow beneath you, a stream of water already flows beneath you. Rather, I will bless you as follows: May it be God’s will that all saplings which they plant from you be like you. So it is with you. With what shall I bless you? If I bless you with Torah, you already have Torah; if I bless you with wealth, you already have wealth; if I bless you with children, you already have children. Rather, may it be God’s will that your offspring shall be like you.
Read Text #5 aloud. This text is optional. If you do not have enough time, skip the text and continue with the questions below it.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 43b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

אמר רב יהודה הא מנא דנפיק ביומי ניסן וחזי אילני דקא מלבלבי אומר ברוך שלא חסר בעולמו כלום וברא בו בריות טובות
ואילנות טובות להתנאות בהן בני אדם.

On a related topic, the Gemara cites that Rav Yehuda said: One who goes out during Nisan and sees trees that are blossoming recites: Blessed… who has withheld nothing from His world, and has created in it beautiful creatures and trees for human beings to enjoy.

Today people still say a blessing over the blossoming trees. It is an amazing sight to see — parents and children walking around searching for a newly blossoming tree in order to say a blessing.

Ask:

1. When is the last time you were surrounded by nature? How did it feel?
2. What is the value in appreciating and blessing your surroundings?
3. What do you think it means that the Sages established a blessing to thank trees, or to say when seeing trees blossom?

Conclusion (5 minutes)

The next source is a quotation from Rabbi Yitzchak Eisik Safrin, a 19th century Hasidic Rebbe from Ukraine.

Ask your students to read this text out loud.

Text #6: Rabbi Yitzchak Eisik Safrin quoted in Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters.

Rabbi Yitzchak Eisik said, “The motto of life is ‘Give and Take.’ Everyone must be both a giver and a receiver. He who is not is like he is a barren tree.”

A barren tree is a tree that produces no fruit at all. Rabbi Yitzchak Eisik is teaching us a life lesson here. Just like a tree both gives fruit and takes nutrients from the environment, human beings should live the same way. People should both accept from the world around them and make sure to give back to that same world.

Ask:

1. In what ways can you be like trees — accepting from and giving to the world?
Trees hold such a significant place in Judaism. There is even a holiday, Tu B’Shevat, where we celebrate the birthday of trees! God made sure to plant trees in the Garden of Eden and He was proud to show off His beautiful creation. We have also been tasked with taking care of the trees on Earth, be it through planting new trees or appreciating the ones we now have. Planet Earth is a resource that we need to treasure both by receiving its goodness and treating it well.

**Concluding Activity Options (15 minutes +)**

Trees provide us with so many things, as we saw in *The Giving Tree*. Here are some tree-related activities you could do as a group:

1. Plant a tree with your class.
2. If you have a tree or trees nearby, have your students spend time with the trees. Ask them to write their own tree story.
3. Do a craft project that uses recycled materials. You could, for example, make paper mache trees out of old newspaper and paper towel rolls.
Part One: Creating a World

Text #1: Genesis 2:8–9.

8 The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. 9 And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

Text #2: Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13.

When God created the first human, God led him around all the trees in the Garden of Eden. God said to him, “See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything I have created has been created for your sake. Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy My world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.”

**Part Three: Blessing a Tree**

**Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 5b–6a.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara relates: When they were taking leave of one another, Rav Nahman said to Rabbi Yitzḥak: Master, give me a blessing. Rabbi Yitzḥak said to him: I will tell you a parable. To what is this matter comparable? It is comparable to one who was walking through a desert and who was hungry, tired, and thirsty. And he found a tree whose fruits were sweet and whose shade was pleasant, and a stream of water flowed beneath it. He ate from the fruits of the tree, drank from the water in the stream, and sat in the shade of the tree.

And when he wished to leave, he said: Tree, tree, with what shall I bless you? If I say to you that your fruits should be sweet, your fruits are already sweet; if I say that your shade should be pleasant, your shade is already pleasant; if I say that a stream of water should flow beneath you, a stream of water already flows beneath you. Rather, I will bless you as follows: May it be God’s will that all saplings which they plant from you be like you. So it is with you. With what shall I bless you? If I bless you with Torah, you already have Torah; if I bless you with wealth, you already have wealth; if I bless you with children, you already have children. Rather, may it be God’s will that your offspring shall be like you.

**Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 43b.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

On a related topic, the Gemara cites that Rav Yehuda said: One who goes out during Nisan and sees trees that are blossoming recites: Blessed… who has withheld nothing from His world, and has created in it beautiful creatures and trees for human beings to enjoy.

**Conclusion**

**Text #6: Rabbi Yitzchak Eissik Safrin quoted in Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters.**

Rabbi Yitzchak Eissik said, “The motto of life is ‘Give and Take.’ Everyone must be both a giver and a receiver. He who is not is like he is a barren tree.”
Robert Louis Stevenson, a 19th century Scottish author, wrote in his play *Admiral Guinea* (1892):

“Do not judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds that you plant.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a 19th century American poet and essayist, wrote in *Essays: First Series* (1841):

“The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.”

Ask:

1. What message do you think these writers are trying to share with us?
2. Can you give other examples of small things that are significant?

These authors suggest that harvests and forests come from humble beginnings. In order to produce fields of produce or mighty forests, someone has to plant tiny seeds and acorns.

Ask:

1. Can you think of one small step you have taken that has led to big results?

Part One: The First Gardens (15 minutes)

After God created the basics of the world — light and darkness, the heavens and earth, sky and water — He planted.

Ask:

1. God clearly values plants; they are the first living things He creates. Why does He value them so highly?
2. Do you have a garden? Describe it.
Think of painting or drawing a picture. You start with a blank space, but if you work on it and carefully add things, it becomes a full picture. You have worked hard and created something beautiful.

Ask:
1. How does it make you feel to accomplish something? To finish a project?

If God was the first gardener, he wasn’t the last! He commands the Children of Israel to plant as soon as they enter the land of Israel.

Text #2 is from *Leviticus Rabbah*, a compilation of *midrash* on Leviticus.

Read Text #2 aloud.

**Text #2: Leviticus Rabbah 25:3.**

אף אתם כשאתם_Entered the Land of Israel, occupy yourselves first and foremost with planting. Hence it is written, “When you come into the land, you shall plant trees for food” (Leviticus 19:23).

Ask:
1. Did you expect this to be the first action that the Children of Israel had to do when they arrived in the Land of Israel?
2. Why do you think they were commanded to plant immediately?

When the universe was created, God made gardens before mankind. The first thing the Children of Israel did when they arrived in the Land of Israel was to plant. Clearly, planting is something important and valuable to God.

**Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin 57a.** English translation [*bold text*] and commentary [*plain text*] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

The Gemara explains that *it was customary* in Beitar that *when a boy was born they would plant a cedar tree* and when a *girl* was born they *would plant a cypress* [*tornita*]. *And when they would later marry* each other *they would cut down these trees and construct* a wedding *canopy* for them from their branches.

Ask:
1. Why do you think planting plays such an important role in Judaism?
Planting plays such an important role in Judaism because it signifies new beginnings — when the world was created, when the nation moved into its homeland, and when children are born.

Part Two: Planting for the Future (15 minutes)

Let’s look more closely at how planting connects beginnings with the future, helping us to take a long-term view.

» Read Texts #4 and #5 aloud.


One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree.  
Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.

Text #5 is from Midrash Tanchuma, a compilation of legal and narrative midrash on the Torah named for Rabbi Tanchuma, the first person mentioned in the collection.

Text #5: Midrash Tanchuma. Parshat Kedoshim, Chapter 8.

Even if you find the land full of all good things, you should not say, “We will sit and not plant;” rather, be diligent in planting! As it says “you shall plant trees for food” (Leviticus 19:23). Just as you came and found trees planted by others, you must plant for your children; a person must not say, “I am old, how many years will I live? Why should I get up and exert myself for others? I’m going to die tomorrow.”

» Ask:

1. What life lessons can we learn from these texts?
2. What in your life has been passed down to you from previous generations?
3. What is something you can do today that would benefit future generations?
We may think that planting only benefits us directly; after all, if we plant a seed, we will enjoy its fruits. Yet these sources show us that planting is valuable even if we derive no immediate benefit from our seeds and deeds.

**Conclusion (10 minutes)**

Our final text is a bit surprising. It shows us the priority we are to give planting!

Text #6 is from *Midrash Avot Derabbi Natan*, a commentary on Ethics of our Fathers (*Pirkei Avot*) compiled in 700–900 CE.

**Text #6: Midrash Avot Derabbi Natan, Version B, Chapter 31.**

If you had a sapling in your hand and were told that the Messiah had come, first plant the sapling [and then go out to greet the Messiah].

**Ask:**

1. What is this Midrash trying to teach us?
2. Jews have been praying for the Messiah for thousands of years. How could planting be more important than greeting the Messiah?

One would think that if something so important was happening, we would put down the seeds or the sapling. Imagine seeing a famous person or a beloved grandparent. What would you do? The Midrash is telling us that planting is so important that it comes before anything else; first you finish planting and then you go greet the Messiah (or the grandparent!).

It is almost unexpected to see Judaism’s approach to planting. The act of doing something so small and simple is actually revered in Judaism. What could be more special and important than helping out future generations? Planting a seed or a garden allows us to help preserve and sustain the earth. Judaism places value on thinking about the next generation and how to provide them with a beautiful planet.
Concluding Activity Options (15 minutes+)

1. Each of the texts that we have explored in this class can make a beautiful visual. If you have an artistic class, ask each student to pick one of the sources and create a poster or drawing to reflect its message.

2. Clothespin Planters. Using tuna cans and clothespins, you can make an easy and cute planter for each student to take home.

   **MATERIALS NEEDED:**
   - Tuna Fish Can
   - Clothespins
   - If you are feeling ambitious, paint

   **INSTRUCTIONS:**
   - Take the top off the tuna can and clean and dry it thoroughly.
   - Clip the clothespins all the way around the can. (You may paint the cans to add a little more color to the project)
   - Plant a small plant or herb inside the tuna can.

3. Consider visiting a community garden. If you are teaching a class that meets regularly, consider planting a class garden.
The Power of Planting: Appreciating Seeds and Saplings (Middle School)

Part One: The First Gardens

Text #1: Genesis 1:11–12.

And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good.

Text #2: Leviticus Rabbah 25:3.

Therefore, when you are in the Land of Israel, occupy yourselves first and foremost with planting. Hence it is written, “When you come into the land, you shall plant trees for food" (Leviticus 19:23).

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Tractate Gittin 57a. English translation and commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara explains that it was customary in Beitar that when a boy was born they would plant a cedar tree and when a girl was born they would plant a cypress [tornita]. And when they would later marry each other they would cut down these trees and construct a wedding canopy for them from their branches.

Part Two: Planting for the Future

Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 23a. English translation and commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.
Even if you find the land full of all good things, you should not say, “We will sit and not plant;” rather, be diligent in planting! As it says “you shall plant trees for food” (Leviticus 19:23). Just as you came and found trees planted by others, you must plant for your children; a person must not say, “I am old, how many years will I live? Why should I get up and exert myself for others? I’m going to die tomorrow.”

Conclusion

If you had a sapling in your hand and were told that the Messiah had come, first plant the sapling [and then go out to greet the Messiah].
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IDEAS FOR LEARNING ABOUT OUR WORLD AND NATURE

Introduction

A key to successful family engagement programming is focusing on a relevant theme and choosing age-appropriate books and activities to best highlight the values that parents want to pass on to their children.

The following curriculum outline provides guidance for creating family programming based around three child-friendly nature themes:

- **Do Not Destroy (Bal Tashchit): The Importance of Conserving and Protecting Nature**
- **Kindness to Animals (Tza‘ar Ba’alei Chayim)**
- **Appreciating the Wonders of Nature (Le’He’arich et Pelei HaTeva)**

We invite you to select a theme, choose a book, craft meaningful discussion prompts, and mix and match activities to create a family program for all those living “under the same sky.”

Teaching it to our children means also making them partners in what is so very important.

— Rabbi Steinsaltz
**Introduction**

Long before the concept of “going green” came into vogue, Judaism instructed its followers to do everything they could to protect and conserve the environment. The Jewish value of *Bal Tashchit* (an Aramaic term meaning “do not destroy”) is first mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy (20:19), where God prepares the people for war by instructing them to avoid destroying any fruit-bearing trees they may encounter in battle. The principle of *Bal Tashchit* is based on the premise that the earth was given to humans as a gift, and our primary responsibility is to safeguard the earth from all types of destruction. No sooner was Adam, the first person, created, than God instructed him to “work and guard” the earth (Genesis 2:15). Elaborating on what it means to guard the earth, the Rabbis explain that not only should people view and treat everything in the world as precious, but we must be careful not to damage any part of the world: Whatever is destroyed “cannot be replaced” (Midrash Rabbah, Kohelet 7:13). According to Jewish tradition, people should view themselves as partners with God in creation, striving to maintain and enhance the beauty of the world throughout every generation.

**Jewish Text Sources**

*Genesis 2:15* — “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to work and to guard it.”

*Midrash Rabbah, Kohelet 7:13* — “At the time that God created Adam the first [human], He took him and toured him amongst all the trees of the Garden of Eden. He said, ‘See My works, how pleasant and fine they are! And all that I have created, I have created for you. Set your mind not to ruin and destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there is none who can repair it after you.’”

*Psalm 115:16* — “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth God has given to the children of Adam.”

*Midrash* —

“When the world was created,
God made everything a little bit incomplete.
Rather than making bread grow out of the earth,
God made wheat grow so that we might bake it into bread.
Rather than making the earth of bricks,
God made it of clay
So that we might bake the clay into bricks.
Why?
So that we might become partners
In completing the work of creation.”

*Deuteronomy 20:19-20* — “When you besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down.”

*Sefer Ha Chinukh, Commandment #529* — “This is the way of the pious and people of action…not destroying even a grain of mustard in this world…if possible they will prevent any destruction they can…”

*Kiddushin 32a* — “Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit* (do not waste or destroy).”
Bal Tashchit Takeaways for Parents and Children

- In order to practice “not wasting” we must continually consider how things can be reused, repurposed, and recycled.
- We must be careful not to “use up” or deplete any of the natural resources (water, gas, wood, etc.) that we find in the world.
- Our focus should be on beautifying the world, leaving it in an even more beautiful state than we found it.

Bal Tashchit Lessons from Child Development

- Children love enforcing rules, such as “don’t waste water” (while brushing teeth or washing hands), or “use both sides of the paper when drawing.” Following rules provides children with a sense of predictability, security and mastery.
- Children learn from observing and imitating the actions of others. When parents and adults model care and respect for the environment, children will incorporate these behaviors into their own daily activities.
- The most effective type of environmental education for young children involves allowing children to enjoy nature under the guidance and with the companionship of caring adults. (Sierra Club, 1999, “What Can I Teach My Young Child About the Environment?”). Children who learn to enjoy and love the environment when they are young will become stewards/caregivers of the environment when they grow older. It is important not to teach children in a didactic manner about the responsibility to care for the earth. Studying about the loss of rainforests and endangered species may be age-appropriate for middle school children, but is developmentally inappropriate for pre-school and elementary school students (Cohen & Horn-Wingerg 1993, Coffey 2001, Kellert 2002, Sobel 1996, Wilson 1997).

Suggested PJ Library Books (BT = baby/toddler; PK = pre-K; EE = early elementary)

26 Big Things Small Hands Can Do (BT) — Using soft illustrations and a simple text, this lovely picture book depicts numerous ways in which young children can help care for the environment.

It’s A Mitzvah, Grover (PK) — When a storm damages a local park, Grover and his friends work together to clean the park and repair the destruction.

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat (BT) — An innovative tailor creatively refashions and recycles his fraying coat, educating readers on the value of recycling, while shedding light on the additional Jewish values of storytelling and community.

My Grandfather’s Coat (EE) — While building a new life for himself in America, a grandfather continually transforms and repurposes his beloved coat. As the grandfather’s coat slowly changes, so too does his family. Through his loving interactions with his daughter, granddaughter and great grandson, the grandfather conveys important lessons about Jewish continuity, recycling, and the passing of traditions and stories from one generation to the next.
Pearl Moscowitz’s Last Stand (EE) — When Pearl learns that city workers intend to cut down a beloved tree in her neighborhood, she cleverly thwarts their plans. Not only does Pearl teach her city and her neighbors some important lessons in the values of conservation and diversity, but she provides guidance on how to remain true to one’s principles and beliefs.

Discussion Questions for Children and Families

1. What do you recycle in your house?
2. What does recycling mean? What happens to the items in recycling bins?
3. Why is recycling important?
4. How can we help take care of oceans, rivers, forests and trees? Why is it important to care for nature?
5. What types of destruction and misuse of the environment have you seen?
6. What can we do to make sure that people take good care of the earth?
7. How can we reduce (cut back on) the amount of water or electricity that we use at home?
8. What else can your family do to protect the earth from harm or damage?

Suggested Activities

- Plant a garden in your community — invite families to plant and work in the garden.
- Participate in a gleaning project: Help to pick and gather what remains in the fields of a local farm (ensuring that no piece of food is wasted).
- Make crafts using recycled materials; make treasures from trash.
- Invite families to participate in a park, playground, beach, or neighborhood cleanup.
- Decorate cloth grocery bags.
- Make cloth bags from old T-shirts.
- Make conservation reminder signs, such as “Last one out shut the lights” and “Hush while you brush” (Turn off the water while you brush your teeth). Make them with recycled materials.
- Hold a repair fair where families can repair old books, old toys, old furniture, etc.
- Organize a toy or clothing swap where families can exchange used toys or clothes with one another.
- Contact an organization that will provide a truck/crate for collecting families’ old electronic devices and computers.
- Foster concern for the environment by helping children spend time playing outdoors, where they can explore and fall in love with the environment. For example, hold a family nature hike or scavenger hunt at a local pond, forest, beach, stream, etc.
- Make paper with older kids (ages 7 and up), thereby increasing their understanding of recycling.
Introduction

According to Jewish law, all animals are to be treated with kindness and sensitivity. While the literal translation of “tzaar ba’alei hayim” is “the suffering of living beings”, this Jewish value refers to doing all that we can to prevent animals from experiencing hardship, pain, or suffering. Today’s rabbis continue to consider and make thoughtful rulings about how animals are to be treated. The Torah notes that although humans are allowed to use animals for food and work, animals may not be worked excessively, nor may they be denied food as they work (Deuteronomy 22:10). When animals are to be killed for eating, they must be slaughtered in the quickest and most humane way possible. There are also numerous obligations that animal owners must fulfill. For example: animals are to be fed first, before their owners sit down to eat; animals must be allowed to rest on Shabbat (Exodus 20:8); and one may not purchase an animal without having enough food and supplies to care for it.

Jewish Text Sources

**Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 151b** — “When a person has compassion on God’s creatures, compassion is shown him or her from Heaven. But when a person has no compassion on God’s creatures, no compassion is shown him or her from heaven.”

**Leviticus 22:28** — “No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young.”

**Deuteronomy 22:10** — “You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together.”

**Deuteronomy 25:4** — “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing.”

**Genesis Rabbah 10:7** — “Even those things that you may hold superfluous in the world, such as fleas, gnats, and flies, even they are part of the creation of the world.”

**Pirkei Avot 4:3** — “Do not be scornful of any person, and do not be disdainful of any thing, for you have no person without his or her hour, and you have no thing without its place.”

**Jerusalem Talmud Yevamot 15:3, 14d** — “A person may not purchase an animal, tame or wild, or a fowl, unless he or she has prepared feed for it.”

**Tza’ar Ba’alei Chayim Takeaways for Parents and Children**

- Animals are very important to people and nature. Every animal contains inherent worth and fulfills some vital role and purpose.
- Animals must be treated with great care.
- Through caring for animals we can learn empathy and how to treat others with kindness and sensitivity.
Tza’ar Ba’alei Chayim Lessons from Child Development

- Children as young as 11 months are more interested in live animals than toys.
- Children talk more about animals and ask more questions about animals than about toys.
- Young children feel a natural kinship with, and are inherently drawn to animals, especially baby animals (Rosen 2004, Sobel 1996).
- Studies of the dreams of children younger than age 6 reveal that as many as 80% of their dreams are about animals (Acuff 1997, Patterson 2000).

Suggested PJ Library Books:  (BT = baby/toddler; PK = pre-K; EE = early elementary)

- **How to Heal a Broken Wing** (PK) — A young boy and his family find an injured bird and nurse it back to health, demonstrating practical ways in which even the youngest of children can care for an ailing animal.

- **Sammy Spider’s First Day of School** (PK) — When Sammy the Spider visits Josh’s preschool, Sammy inadvertently teaches the children some important lessons in how to care for animals.

- **A Sick Day for Amos McGee** (PK) — Zookeeper Amos McGee lovingly cares for the animals at the zoo, making certain that each one’s individual needs are being met. When Amos falls ill, the animals take care of Amos with the same love and consideration that he has showered upon them.

- **The Chameleon that Saved Noah’s Ark** (EE) — This innovative story of Noah’s ark portrays the compassionate way in which Noah and his family cared for the animals, and emphasizes the fact that every animal has a unique role to play in the complex web of life.

- **King David and Akavish the Spider** (EE) — A lowly spider, a creature whom a young King David initially believes is unimportant, manages to save the king from great harm, thereby conveying the message that every animal is important and must be treated with care.

- **A Hen for Izzy Pippik** (EE) — When young Shaina finds a lost chicken, she is determined to care for it until its owner returns to town to reclaim it. Despite the protests of her friends and neighbors, Shaina steadfastly protects the chicken and its many subsequent offspring. In the end, Shaina and her entire town are rewarded for Shaina’s unflagging commitment to care for the chickens.
Snow in Jerusalem (K, EE) — Set in Jerusalem, this poignant story shows how the simple act of caring for a cat can lead to the development of empathy, friendship, and concern for the needs of others.

Discussion Questions for Children and Families

1. How, on an everyday basis, can we be kind to animals? In what ways can a person be kind to animals even if she doesn’t own any pets herself?
2. How do human parents take care of their young children? How can we help animals in similar ways?
3. Do any of you have pets? How does your pet help you?
4. Can you think of any other animals that help people? How about cows, or chickens, or horses — in what ways might they help people?
5. Are all animals important? What about bees, spiders, or bats?

Suggested Activities

- With families working together, make bird feeders or bird baths.
- Prepare items that can be donated to animal shelters, such as:
  - Cat hiding boxes
  - Dog chew-toys
  - Dog biscuits and goodies
  - Food bowls (decorate them)
  - Other animal stimulation toys
- Go on a scavenger hunt at the zoo, or on a farm, or at the beach:
  - Take photos of all the animals that you see
  - Search for and take pictures of specific animals (a brown animal, an animal with a tail, an animal that flies)
  - For each animal that you see, make a list of why that animal is important or ways that people can help that animal, or create a list of items that a specific animal needs in order to be happy
- Hold a carnival or fundraising event where the money raised will be used to “adopt” an animal in a zoo or support an organization that provides families in developing countries with needed animals. Visit a zoo or an aquarium. If possible, observe the animals at feeding time, or obtain permission for families to help prepare the food.
- Go to a museum that focuses on animals.
- Visit an animal shelter. Arrange for families to walk dogs or play with the animals.
- Take a hike in the woods. Keep track of animals that are seen; practice walking or moving like various animals; search for animal tracks.
- Go for a walk in the woods, on the beach, or in the park. Have families pick up and throw away all types of items that could harm animals (plastic rings, plastic bags, etc.).
Introduction

Jewish philosophers and theologians believe that the beauty of nature can help individuals connect with their spiritual side. Abraham Joshua Heschel, a renowned 20th century Jewish thinker, believed that our goal as Jews should be to live life in “A state of awe and radical amazement,” waking up each morning and looking at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. The Hebrew word for “gratitude” (hoda’ah) shares a similar root to the Hebrew word for being Jewish (yehudi). The similarities in these two words allude to the fact that those who practice Judaism should strive to train their eyes to see the beauty of nature and to express gratitude for all the wonders they observe. To heighten appreciation for nature, Judaism has created numerous blessings, psalms, and songs of gratitude that can be recited every time one notices a natural wonder.

Jewish Text Sources

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov — “Every blade of grass sings poetry to God...How good and lovely it is then when one is able to hear this song of the grasses.”

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 77b — Rab Judah said in Rab’s name: “Of all that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in God’s world, God did not create a single thing without purpose. [Thus] God created the snail as a remedy for a scab; the fly as an antidote to the hornet’s sting; the mosquito [crushed] for a serpent’s bite; a serpent as a remedy for an eruption, and a [crushed] spider as a remedy for a scorpion’s bite.”

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Honey From The Rock — “To be a Jew means to wake up and to keep your eyes open to the many beautiful, mysterious, and holy things that happen all around us every day.”

Psalm 19:2 — “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse of the sky tells of God’s handiwork.”

Daily Shemoneh Esreh prayer — “We acknowledge You, declare Your praise, and thank You...for Your miracles that greet us every day, and for Your wonders and good things that are with us every hour.”

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 54a — “On five impressive landscapes our Sages determined one recites the blessing: ‘Baruch Atah Adonoi, Eloheinu Melech ha’olam, oseh ma’aseh bereshit’ (Blessed are You, Lord, Our God, King of the Universe, Who reenacts the work of creation). The five are: seas, rivers, mountains, hills, and deserts.”

Le’He’arich et Pelei HaTeva Takeaways for Parents and Children

- The world is full of beauty.
- Part of our responsibility as Jews involves taking time to see the beauty and wonder in nature and expressing appreciation for all that we see.
- To increase appreciation for nature, Judaism offers words of blessing and praise that can be recited upon spying one of nature’s many wonders.
Nature helps children develop powers of observation and creativity and instills a sense of peace and being at one with the world (Crain 2001).

When children play in natural environments, their play becomes more creative and imaginative; they become more collaborative and cooperative with their peers; their language becomes richer and more descriptive (Faber Taylor et al. 1998, Fjortoft 2000, Moore & Wong 1997).

Exposure to natural environments improves children’s cognitive development by improving their awareness, reasoning and observational skills (Pyle 2002).

Children require many opportunities to explore their environment in a natural way and slowly develop a loving relationship with the earth.

Young children often develop an emotional attachment to what is familiar and comfortable to them. If they are to develop a sense of connectedness with the natural world, they need frequent positive experiences with the outdoors. Providing opportunities for such experiences and sharing them with young children is the essence of environmental education. Environmental education for the early years focuses primarily on young children exploring and enjoying the world of nature under the guidance and with the companionship of caring adults. (Sierra Club, 1999, “What Can I Teach My Young Child About the Environment?”).

**Suggested PJ Library Books:** (BT = baby/toddler; PK = pre-K; EE = early elementary)

**Good Night, Laila Tov** (BT) — While enjoying an outing to the beach, followed by an overnight camping trip, a family finds ways to pause and acknowledge the many wonders they encounter.

**The Apple Tree’s Discovery** (PK) — A young apple tree has difficulty seeing and appreciating the beauty of nature and the changing of seasons because it is preoccupied with a desire to grow stars on its branches. In the end, the tree discovers that there is a star within each of us, and that every living being possesses its own unique inner beauty.

**More Than Enough** (PK) — A family prepares for Passover, while rejoicing in the wonders of fresh fruits, rain, and the acquisition of a new kitten. The family uses the Hebrew word “Dayenu” each time they encounter an amazing new wonder in nature and/or within their family.

**The Shabbat Puppy** (PK) — Every Shabbat, a young boy and his grandfather spend time walking outdoors, observing and reflecting on the beauty of nature. Can the boy’s young, rambunctious puppy join the grandfather-grandson outings without disturbing the peacefulness of these special Shabbat walks?
Appreciating the Wonders of Nature  
(LeHe'arich et Pelei HaTeva)

**Picture a Tree (K)** — A beautiful book on how to observe and appreciate trees by looking at them through a variety of lenses and perspectives.

**New Month, New Moon (EE)** — Set in Israel, this book follows the nighttime adventure of a family that journeys to the desert in order to view and learn about the spectacular birth of the new moon and the start of a new Hebrew month.

**Discussion Questions for Children and Families**

1. Can you describe one of the most beautiful or unusual things you have ever seen outdoors in nature?
2. What do you need to do in order to find beautiful and amazing things in nature?
3. What can we say or do when we find something unusual in nature?
4. Why is it important to spend time outdoors noticing some of the wonders of nature?

**Suggested Activities**

- Play “Gratitude Freeze Dance,” using *Dayenu, Halleluyah*, or some other Hebrew song that hints at gratitude. Have the children freeze whenever the music stops. Before resuming the dancing, tap several “frozen” children on the head, asking them to say something for which they are thankful.
- Invite families to go on a nature scavenger hunt. Take photos, gather specimens, and/or check off on a list specific items that they find.
- Go on a micro-environment scavenger hunt. Have families use a hoop or masking tape to mark off a small outdoor area, and then make a list of all the treasures that they discover.
- Have families go outdoors and build mini-sukkahs using some of the natural materials they find outside (branches, leaves, flowers, etc.).
- Make nature collages using a variety of materials collected during a walk outdoors.
- Consider making *shalom* (welcome) signs, family name signs, or picture frames using items that have been found in nature.
- Make nature block prints: Use paint and rollers or brushes to cover natural items with paint, then lay a piece of paper on top of the paint-covered items to create an interesting print.
- Gather and paint rocks, using them as paper weights, game pieces, or pieces for creating rock sculptures.
- Teach families the blessing to recite upon seeing a wonder in nature, and have them go outside and find items for which they can recite the blessing: “*Baruch Atah Adonoi, Eloheinu Melech ha’olam, oseh ma’aseh bereshit*” (Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who reenacts the work of creation).
- Have families decorate the cover of a nature journal, a book that will accompany them on hikes and outings and will serve as a place for drawing pictures and/or writing notes about the wonders they observe on their journeys.
- Hold a cloud gazing activity: Ask families to lie on blankets and describe the shapes they see in the clouds. Go to Pinterest to find some tasty cloud snacks that can accompany your cloud-gazing.
- Create a Storywalk™: Take apart a book and display its pages on sign posts. Ask families to walk outdoors, moving from sign to sign, following a trail and reading the book as they enjoy the wonders of nature.
- Decorate bags and create nature grab bags. Have families find various nature items and put them into their bags. Then ask family members to reach in and try to guess what they are feeling.
The word “nature” is one of the fuzzy words that are used — and abused — to express many diverse concepts and meanings. It may be used to describe the existing order, but there are other common usages in which Nature is spelled with a capital N. Due to atheistic (or agnostic) coyness, it sometimes means almost the same thing as God. The ever popular “Mother Nature” is only one of the ways in which the term is personalized and idealized.

Two of the more formal definitions are closely linked. Nature is the totality of existence. Anything and everything, from the mightiest galaxies to the smallest sub-atomic particles, the whales and the lice, all are parts of nature. Nature also comprises all the laws of existence, the rules by which all the parts operate, and the relationships among them. In a slightly broader sense, nature is the usual order of things, which keeps on going as long as nothing interferes with it.

Naturalists, the people engaged in studying natural sciences, are probably the people who use the word “nature” most rarely. They are busy with their studies and are frequently too immersed in detail to have the time and inclination to use this all-encompassing (and rather vague) term. However, nature and natural laws are far more important to other human beings. The questions we pose are not about nature per se, but rather about our relationship with nature. Humanity can be in harmony with nature, in conflict with nature, or indifferent to nature — these are some of our choices. Such choice is not an abstract problem; we face it whenever we build a city or weed a garden, when we light a cigarette or educate a child.

The first thing that has to be remembered is that we humans are part of the natural world. Often, either for valid reasons or because we are arrogant and egocentric, we view ourselves as separate and distinct from the rest of creation. We speak about “humanity” and “nature” as if we exist in one way, and the rest of the world exists in a different way. This dichotomy between man and nature is neither simple nor accurate. Granted, nature without the presence of man would be very different; yet humanity, although unique and distinct, is still part of nature. Whether we define nature as the totality of existence, or as the set of laws that govern it — we are included in it.

The obvious notion that humanity is a part of nature has some startling ramifications. We say that nature is silent; nature follows its course; nature does not care about people; nature does not have intentions; nature does not have purpose; nature does not have thought. However, we are part of nature, and we have all these traits. Nature, as it manifests in a storm, does not think and does not feel, but nature as it manifests in animals feels pain, attraction, hunger. Nature as it manifests in humanity thinks, writes poetry, and prays. Could we say that man is not a thinking creature because his hands and feet do not think? One part of the whole is a thinking part, and therefore we say that man is a thinking creature, a feeling creature. In the same way, we have to say that nature feels, thinks, is purposeful, and does right and wrong, insofar as we humans do those things.

On the other hand, it is also clear that there is a difference between humans and the rest of nature. Even without discussing the theological question of whether we have souls while other creatures do not (or, if animals do have souls, whether human souls are superior), and while setting aside the question of whether other creatures can think about their actions, still, humans are distinct from other creatures.

The primary distinction is that, from our very creation, we have free will, which we exercise through the many choices we make. While the rest of nature seems to be bound by rigid laws (of physics and chemistry), or by instincts and reflexes, we are not bound by our innate nature in the same way as other creatures in the world. A sheep cannot decide to begin hunting and eating other animals, and even a well-behaved tiger cannot decide to become vegetarian because of humane (or tigerish) considerations. We, as people, can choose whether to prey on others or to graze.

Furthermore, according to an anthropological definition, man is a creator of tools. Since we have tools, which enormously enhance our power, we change nature considerably, and at will; consequently, we have the freedom to move around, to live underground or above ground, to build and to destroy, to create bizarre things that never existed
before. Man is also the creator of words; since we have words and language, we can conceive elaborate plans, transmit them to other people and other generations, and thereby change nature.

Our distinction from other parts of nature is apparent in our behavior as well. We do many things that no other animal does; for instance, we dress. Also, we are the only creatures that kill our own species en masse; that is also unnatural. Ever since the beginning of our existence, we have exercised our ability — whose boundaries are expanding daily — to change things at will. Our free will is sometimes frivolous, often foolish, but in any case, it pushes us to try, and sometimes to do, many new things. We have managed to form and destroy a great number of things, and we are still creating and innovating.

We have even succeeded in turning our basic weakness into strength. Biologically, we are not specialized; other creatures far surpass us in almost every capacity. They are better at running, jumping, swimming, climbing, and so many other skills. All our senses are inferior to those of other creatures. Even our brain lacks many special capacities. We cannot find our homes like dogs; we cannot navigate like birds; we cannot move in the dark like bats. Yet we have created, with our rather clumsy fingers, tools and machines that enable us to outrun the cheetah, to outfly the eagle, to outspin the spider.

The natural world can be seen as a vast orchestra in which each of the creatures has a distinct voice and sound. A drum and a flute are not interchangeable. The spider can produce threads; the bee cannot. We humans made ourselves, somehow, into a combination of all the creatures, and we can do everything. We can make honey and we can sting; we can plant and we can destroy; we can kill and we can resuscitate. All these abilities are part of our strange, diverse nature.

Our power of choice enables us to do things for our good and our benefit, and also things that are against our best interests. A baby goat will not jump down from a high rock unless it can do so without being hurt. It has an instinct for self-preservation. A baby human cannot be trusted in the same way: a child might jump or creep down and be injured. We can rely on an apple tree not to produce oranges, but we cannot rely on a human to be consistent. According to the ancient explanation, this is because humans have both good and evil inclinations. Nowadays we would say it is because we humans have cut ourselves loose from the total rule of instinct, and instead, we have the ability to make both good and bad choices.

Of course, we may say that the question “What is natural?” is of no importance. Why should we bother about it? We change things, but so does every other creature, from a microbe or a virus, to a plant, to a complex animal. The bee makes pollen into honey; the simplest plants take air, water, soil, and sunshine and make them into fruit; locusts can devastate a country, and beavers can flood valleys. Why is all that considered natural, while some of our actions are not?

The difference is quantitative. In the course of many generations, our abilities have grown to surpass those of almost any creature. The quantity of changes can become qualitative, and cause irreversible results. Creating a vast new lake, or destroying species, are not intrinsically different from what other creatures do, but the dimensions of the event have many more implications. What is more important, however, is that our flexibility and our free choice — even in the narrow limits within which our physical existence can be sustained — make it possible for us to do amazing things, some of which no other creature can do. We can create permanent radioactivity, we can genetically engineer. Our emotional and spiritual capacity is even broader than our physical existence, and therefore we can do even more in those realms. We do not know the full extent of what we can do, nor all of the sometimes frightening, sometimes uplifting, always surprising consequences of our actions.

Our freedom compels us to be more, rather than less, careful about what we do, because we have the power to do so much. The need for deliberation about our deeds goes further than general caution. If we make changes which are too abrupt, or go against the grain, or exceed a certain limit, we damage the fabric of existence. For even if we believe that
nature does not care about good and evil, it seems that nature does care about sustaining basic forms of life. Certain things that we have created go against nature — not because they are impossible, but because they go against this sustaining flow. We have to keep within certain boundaries; if we do not, we may kill ourselves, both physically and psychologically.

Our bad luck is that our excesses may not kill us immediately. We know, from our experience as a species as well as from personal experience, that nature does not always react immediately. Leaning over an abyss may not immediately result in a fall; a child playing with matches may have some time to enjoy the fire before he gets burned. In a similar way, we do not have the same reaction that animals have to poison, or, for that matter, to wrong; we can digest both. Therefore, we can harm ourselves physically and morally without knowing that we are doing so — until the inevitable results.

This is the reason we need to figure out what the natural laws and regulations are and by which ones we humans must abide. In the realm of our physical deeds, we now have a whole body of knowledge — although still far from perfect, and sometimes quite inconclusive — about ecology. This subject is developing, and becoming increasingly popular, because of the fear that we may step out of the boundaries, and eventually destroy ourselves. The same problem exists also in regard to our behavior and way of life. Some of the many things that we can do mentally are still within the boundaries of nature, or at least of our part of it; others may go against the general flow, and eventually destroy us.

The fundamental question, then, is, should we move “back to nature,” should we stay where we are, or should we develop even more? Should we correct nature, change nature, destroy nature? Should we do all those artificial things that are humanly possible?

This question, which was never a theoretical one, has become even more critical in our time, when artifacts — those things that we build which are not “natural” — are becoming increasingly powerful. We have to decide how “natural” we should be. It begins with as simple a question as whether a woman should wear makeup, but it goes much further. Should someone have plastic surgery? If I want to kick somebody, I usually do not do it; a dog or a donkey cannot be trusted to behave so well. So should we return to “natural” manners, or is that not proper behavior? Is “natural food” — a big fad today — actually superior to other food? Is it unjust to pay double for organically grown produce? Things are not necessarily better just because they are natural; a loaf of bread is better to eat than raw grain. We can eat and digest sugar, though it may not be healthy for us; we can eat paper, but we cannot digest it. We may say that artificial sweetening is not good because it is not natural, but we can actually create artificial sweeteners out of a variety of materials; we can create cloth from oil; we can do the most bizarre things. Should we go “back to nature”? How far should we go? And if we do, why should we be vegetarians, like cows, and not carnivores, like tigers? Tigers, too, are a part of nature. Since we have choice, we have confusion.

These are questions not just for each individual human being, but for all of humanity. Some people have very clear-cut answers: everything natural — which means that which has not been changed or interfered with by man — is basically good, and those things that are not natural are evils that we humans have created. If we take a little philosophical jump back to the views of Rousseau, we see that idealizing nature is not a new idea. A number of educational systems were built according to these ideas. Even more so, some of the biggest political movements of our times were influenced by them. Most of these attempts ended badly, even disastrously — basically, because it seems that “nature” and “good” are not synonymous. Even if we decide that we do want to return to nature, we cannot do it. Being both a part of nature and apart from nature, it is very difficult to determine what is natural for us, and what is unnatural. To complicate the problem further, humankind is distinct in not having any “natural” group to compare it with.

There are wild rats and domesticated ones, wild bulls and domesticated cows, but here are no “wild” human beings existing in a “natural state.” Even the most primitive individuals and cultures are not a part of raw nature. Being human means that a great part of our existence is artificial, man-made.
With all that, we still have to be careful about our “mental ecology.” We can draw some models and broad guidelines from nature about what can and should be done. However, we must remember that it is we who make those guidelines, that they are not written explicitly in red letters in nature. Furthermore, sometimes they can be abandoned, ignored, or changed. We should honor the patterns by which nature generally seems to function, but at the same time, we should take these rules with more than one grain of salt. Moreover, using the general “laws of nature” as guidelines can be quite dangerous. Take, for instance, the Darwinian view of the world as “the survival of the fittest”: it has been used in very ugly, vicious ways to justify killing (and even genocide), because “the fittest survive.” That was not only morally very wrong, but it also showed how people can misunderstand a notion, turn it into a slogan — and then misuse it.

Furthermore, even if we decide to follow the “law of the jungle”, it is not that simple. The jungle is complex; it has a myriad of different creatures that do not all behave alike. The mouse and the elephant both live in the wild, but behave differently. The amoebas and the cockroaches are very fit; they have existed longer than many other species. Should they be our models? The tyrannosaurus and the saber-toothed tiger have long been extinct, while squids and even earthworms have survived. Being able to chop off somebody’s head is not a mark of superiority — not even in nature at its rawest.

What are the right models for our social life and our family life? This, too, is not an abstract question. What are our standards for deciding what is best? Nature provides so many models that the answer depends on who is defining the standards. Nature is too diverse, too strange, and offers too many choices to provide specific directives for human behavior. Given these caveats, we can look to nature for general guidelines, at least to determine when we are doing something that is very wrong.

The Talmud states, “Even if we were not given the Law, we could learn how to behave from the animals.” We would learn family life from the doves — they seem to be devoted to each other, they form permanent couples, and there are fewer divorces among them than among humans. They sometimes fight, they do not always behave like doves, but at least they do form permanent couples. We can learn sanitary behavior from the cats. They behave so very nicely — they cover everything neatly. However, even the models of the dove and the cat do not have labels saying that they are the right way for humans to behave. Maybe we should behave sexually like cats, and sanitarily like doves. That would be a different picture, but it would also be imitating nature.

Nature, then, is like a gigantic book. In that book there are many pages, each with different pictures, some of which are contradictory. We can always quote examples to prove whatever point we want to make, as people do from anthologies or books of quotations. Our freedom of choice gives us the ability to do everything, and our bond to nature compels us to use nature as a guideline, but also to make constant adaptations. When we read the pages of the book of nature, we need a commentary, because without one we get mixed up, we get lost in all the information that can be found there.

Yet, there are some advantages in consulting the book of nature. We may want to find out about our behavior, our emotions, our customs: are they just artifacts, temporary man-made structures that will topple naturally if not held together by our willpower? When we find certain things that exist and flourish all around us, then we know that we are working with nature, and not against the general flow of nature. Of course we can, and do, express ourselves and behave in “unnatural” ways, but we know that they are bound to fall. A better understanding of the natural laws does not compel us to obey them, but we cannot ignore them. Watching nature can give us some notion about what is permanent and what is ephemeral, what is a promising path and what is a blind alley.

In this way, we will perceive that many grand moral and philosophical ideas are verbal restatements of things that exist all around us in nature. We cannot expect to hear nature express them in words, but they are there in other forms. It is as if we, who are endowed with the gift of speech, have to listen to others who can only use sign language. One should not look for the Ten Commandments on a fossil; yet they can be found enacted in animate and inanimate
entities. This is true not only about very broad subjects, such as the importance of life, mutual aid, and the like; the idea of progress, for example, may sound very modern, but every seed growing into a tree proclaims it.

Watching nature may also help solve some problems and contemporary dilemmas. We can rely on book knowledge and journal ideology, but we can also derive some lessons about education from a cat teaching a kitten how to hunt; we can learn from birds about taking care of the young; from some animals, about sexual life; and from any social creature, about proper behavior during war-time. We may also learn about how precious life is, as well as about self-sacrifice. We can therefore learn many important lessons from nature. We can see how certain noble and gracious things are done naturally — namely, without the interference of the special human ability to distort and change instincts. For example, when a maternal instinct is diverted toward a pet, when the instinct of self-preservation is subject to an ideology, or so many sensual deviations (e.g., bestiality). This does not mean, however, that we cannot search and find parallels also to the most atrocious things; in fact, it would be strange if there were none. If some deed or form of behavior has no natural counterpart, it may be just an abstract idea that can exist only in the mind but is impossible to realize because of inherent inconsistencies. If people do have the material and psychological ability to do something, there must somehow be a parallel to it in nonhuman nature.

However, finding some bizarre case does not turn such a behavior into a model for general conduct. There is a consensus, and there are general rules, and some even more general ones. These general rules that are found all around us should serve as guidance. Moving too far away from “raw” nature is not impossible, but should be taken as a warning. When we seek a path and find ourselves in a deserted place, this may be an indication that we have lost our way. Of course, this does not mean that the knowledgeable naturalist is always a better human being; a person may know what is right, and still decide not to act accordingly.

In a way, all of this can be summarized through a very old legend. When God created man, God said (Genesis 1:26), “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Traditionally, it is understood that God was speaking to the angels. If so, the plan was not very successful; we are not like angels. According to another interpretation, God was speaking to the whole of creation, to all of nature. In that case, “Let us make man in our image” means, “Let each of you contribute something.” The fox and the dove, the tiger and the sheep, the spider and the bee each contributed a small part — as did the angels and the devils.

We humans contain all the parts. Some of us are foxier than others, or more sheepish than others, but altogether, we contain all the traits found in nature. In that way, we are the sum total of nature, containing the macrocosm in our own microcosm. Somehow, we have to learn from all our partners, and perhaps pray that the extra part — that “Divine spark” contributed by God — will help us make the right choices.


1 Strangely enough, both Communism and Nazism, different as they may be, are linked to the same source idea of returning to the primeval order; obviously, not with the same understanding of what that order is.

2 If one prefers fiction, see for instance Lord of the Flies by William Golding, or the film based on it.
Discussion questions:

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz asserts that people and nature are not “separate and distinct” — that “humans are part of the natural world”. What issues does this raise?

2. Humanity can be in harmony, in conflict, or indifferent to nature. How might humanity be harming itself physically and morally? What are ways we are doing this without realizing it?

3. What do you think of as natural and how “natural” should we be as individuals? As communities or societies?

4. Rabbi Steinsaltz asks: “Should we move ‘back to nature,’ should we stay where we are, or should we develop even more?” What is the role of our free will and personal choice?

5. How can a more thoughtful approach to nature help us solve local or global problems?