Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

Students’ Course Book

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Unit One: Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

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

The Roots of our Connection to the Land

Trigger Activity: Your teacher will show you a picture, puzzle or some visual aid of their choosing to begin the discussion of our connection to the environment. You might take a walk, see a short film, check out some websites or have other experience that will begin our discussion about our environment and our Jewish responsibility to care for it.

After the trigger activity, you will be asked to share your reactions.

At this point, your teacher will ask you and your classmates: So, do you see this need to care about the environment as a Jewish Responsibility? Write your own observations here.

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Your teacher now asks you: Where in our Jewish texts do we find the first indication of the relationship between G-d, us and the land on which we survive and thrive?

Let’s consider the very beginning of the story of Creation of the World which is how our Torah begins:
In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the land. And the land was unformed and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep and a wind of G-d was over the water. G-d said, “There shall be light” and there was light. And G-d saw the light and that it was good and G-d separated the light from the darkness. G-d called the light day and the darkness, G-d called night; and it was evening and morning, one day/period of time.

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

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

Further, in the following chapter of *Bereshit*, we read about how there was
no steward entrusted with the care of the land that G-d had created. G-d
then creates the human being from the dust of the earth and places the
human in the Garden of Eden that G-d had created. In Chapter Two, verse
15, we read:

ט וַיַּקְחָה ה הָאֶלֶּה אַלִּים אֱלֹהֵי עָלָיו אֶת הַגֵּדֶן שֶׁיָּצָא כֹּל לָעַבְדָּדֶל שָׁלֹחַּוּ לְעָבְדָדֶל לְעָבְדָדֶל

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

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

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

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

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

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4. Consider the following statement and react to it:

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

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

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

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

• G-d intended for us to be stewards and maintain and cultivate all aspects of G-d’s Creation, insuring that all that G-d created interacts in a reciprocal and healthy manner of sustainability. This was G-d’s system of interdependence. Look back at the texts from this lesson and consider where you see indications that this notion of us depending on all elements of our environment and the reciprocal dependence of these elements on us is expressed.
Suggested follow up activity: Go back with your class and look at Chapter One of Bereshit. Note how different elements are added as G-d moves along in G-d’s creative activity and that at times along the way, G-d “pauses,” so to speak, and we see G-d’s stamp of approval in the refrain, что хорошее
Can we see this as “G-d’s approval” of G-d’s intended system of interdependence? Think of the final statement when this process is completed; what is G-d saying here about the totality of what G-d has created?

לא ונוּרַא אלִ-מ אַהְדָּלִיהָ אָשְׁרָ עָשָׁה וַהֲוָה תוּב מַאַדְּ וְהִיַּעֲרֵב וְהִיַּבְּקֶר

- And G-d saw all that G-d created and behold it was very good and there was erev and there was boker, the sixth yom.
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Lesson Two: Something Went Very Wrong

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

Consider the following statement,

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

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

What was נְתָן לְאֵת? How were the humans to originally live in it? Have we in fact continued to practice the prescribed actions of לְעָבְדָד? Why or why not?
Think about it and get ready for action: With your chevrutah/learning partner, list ways in which you think we interact with our environment that do not successfully follow the practice and maintain the balance of לְעָבְדָה. As you create your list, think of things that you do individually, your family does, and our community does in terms of using and interacting with our environment that may cause harm and hurt its balance. You might want to label your list accordingly:

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

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

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

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

ט אֶתְנָה חָוֶלֶת אֶתָּה נְלָ וַאֲשֵׂי צִדְקִים תִּמְסָּה חַיְּהַ בֶּדְרָתי אֵתָהּ אֲלֵי-טָ

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

What is so wrong by this point?

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

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

Let’s think about this together: So, we as humans may have the best of
intentions but unfortunately, we can get in our own way when our actions do
not match our intentions. As Torah-observant Jews, we claim that the lessons and instruction we need are all found in our Torah and its supportive instructions as indicated in the Talmud and elsewhere. In the cycle of our lives, we find it challenging to constantly remind ourselves of the need for accepting the ongoing responsibility to think not just of the immediate needs and desires we have but to do long range strategic planning and live accordingly.

What do I personally do that is not the most economical use of resources that I could change? (Remember the list from Lesson I)
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What about my family?
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What about my community?
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How/what could I change in my use of resources that would promote Environmental Sustainability that is not too hard but just involves my being more aware of the gift of the land that G-d gave us to use? (Now, we are beginning to address and work towards Izzun in our use and working of the land while observing the mitzvah of Bal Tashchit.)
Now let's commit to action: Margeret Meade tells us that if each person would take care of their own square foot of the world, we would all be better off in so many ways. Do you understand what this means for you as an individual and for us as a group? This should be discussed for a while.

So, let’s decide as a group on between three to five actions we will commit ourselves to during the coming months to see if we can in fact make a difference individually and collectively. What would we like to do as actions to become more aware of and protect our environment in which we live?

Some possibilities are:

- Turning off water when not in use
- Turning off lights, computers, electrical appliances when not in use
- Using both sides of paper
- Making sure thermostats are set at reasonable temperatures
- Daily measurement of the trash our group produces; can we lessen the amount by being more aware of it?
- More conservative use of paper supplies and other “disposable” supplies, to make them last and conserve waste; can we chart out
some of these trends in our Science class or in some public place in our school?

- Watching the packaging of new things we purchase
- Measuring amount of food thrown away daily; trying to lessen the amount.
- Begin a composting program.
- Use of alternate forms of transportation when moving from place to place in close proximities (Consider that walking is one of the most healthy things we can do!)

The goal here is to find three to five DOABLE and REALISTIC actions that can be sustained by this group for a period of time during this coming year. Check the various resources indicated here for additional ideas; talk to your Science teacher, find out what else is being done in your community. Once you and your group have committed to these three to five actions, publicize them in your school and try to get others to join your efforts as you work to increase the degree of Environmental Awareness in YOUR school community. You might also want to define three to four checkpoints during the year at which you evaluate how you are doing. One way to do this is to define your three to five actions and set a timetable, e.g. we will begin using both sides of the paper and turn out lights immediately; we will begin a campaign to have members of our community be conscious of packaging and see if we can change our buying habits by X, and so on.

List these actions here:

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