

Lesson One: M'dor L'Dor HaOlam Omed – Balancing Future Needs with Habits Today

Goals and Purpose of Lesson: This forty minute lesson will engage students in a discussion and exploration of issues that are related to Environmental Sustainability and Stability that have an impact on all of us as Americans, as citizens of the world and as intelligent and caring Jews. We will also show that Judaism provides us with a framework, in which we can discuss these issues and our responsibility to act on behalf of the earth and its resources from a Jewish value base.

In the following activities and discussions, students will

- Discuss and consider issues that are related to all of us regarding our environment
- Learn and articulate that Judaism shows concern for our environment and has traditional and time-honored teachings that show this concern
- Learn and commit to deeds of Environmental Sustainability that are doable and represent our taking care of our own environment
- Articulate that we must all do our part to show concern for our environment and work towards its maintenance; it is an important *mitzvah* that we can and should do

Introduction: The teacher begins by stating that Judaism teaches us that G-d created our world and its resources, with the intention that it would continue to support us from generation to generation. However, our scientists and environmentalists are giving us a different story. We are thinking about vacation. What will we be doing and enjoying that is related to our environment and its resources? Can we just assume it will always be there for us and those that come after us to enjoy?

The teacher will now ask students to list the many different ways in which we *use* and depend upon the land and its resources daily. The class will continue to brainstorm about these uses and needs we have for the land (e.g. eating foods that come from the land, enjoying flowers that grow, enjoying the shade of a tree, playing along the shore line and in the water, hiking on picturesque trails, etc.). The teacher should point out that since vacation is not far away, students should list recreational uses of the land and the resources in which they will engage as well.

It is suggested that these items be placed on a board or easel chart as a composite list from the class.

This activity should continue for about 10 minutes.

Now the teacher continues by stating that the environment and its resources are not a constant; this is a fact with which we must deal and for which we should take responsibility.

Let's consider the following facts about our own environment here in California:

1. Global warming is generally projected to cause ocean levels to rise as much as 55 inches or more by the end of the century.
2. California residents must be prepared to deal with floods, erosion and other results of rising sea levels.
3. California companies are NOW being told to halt federally subsidized insurance for properties considered to be at risk of flooding, erosion and other related problems due to rising sea levels, of which there are more annually.
4. It is estimated that along the shoreline, and especially in San Mateo and Orange counties, more than 100,000 people and their residences and businesses will be affected.
5. Also at risk are airports in San Francisco and Oakland and large sections of beach up and down the California coastline.

[Information culled from <http://www.emm.com/ecosystems/article/39444>]

Further, here are additional facts about our changing environment that have a serious impact on all of us:

- More than half of the world's major rivers are seriously depleted and polluted. Water scarcity has caused nearly all of the rivers in the land of Israel to become polluted or depleted, though efforts since 1993 are working to restore the major rivers in Israel.
- Nearly 1.8 million people die worldwide each year due to urban pollution. In Israel, more people die from air pollution in metropolitan areas in Israel than from traffic deaths in all of Israel in a given year. *(A collaborative effort between the United States and Israel revealed that 710 people died from human caused particulate pollution vs. 550 traffic deaths in a year.[1])*
- 13,000 species are listed as threatened or endangered with extinction or as species of concern under the Endangered Species Act. Current extinction rates are more than 100 times what they would be without human intervention (i.e. normal rates of extinction). *Biodiversity provides not only food and income but also raw materials for clothing, shelter, medicines, and water, all of which are essential to human survival.*
- Large predatory fish in our oceans have been reduced to a mere 10% (by mass) of pre-industrial levels. That means that 90% of all large fish have been removed. A recent study predicted that all seafood may be extinct by the year 2048.
- The US economy is based on coal and oil, with 70% of our oil purchased from foreign nations. In 2008, the United States will pay more than \$700 billion to import oil. Oil from the Middle East and other places (such as Venezuela) finances hostile regimes. Air pollution from tradition fuels also exacerbates asthma and lung disease. But saving energy will save you money!

[1] Israel Ministry of Environment, Israel Union for Environmental Defense and the US Environmental Protection Agency

[Information provided by Evonne Marzouk, Executive Director of Canfei Nesharim]

So, what is our part? What can we do? Do you notice changing shorelines? Are we feeling that there is an increase of related environmental challenges? Are any of these things related to our list from before about our using and depending upon the land, our environment and all of its many resources? And..... what has this got to do with Jewish responsibility and doing *mitzvot*, if anything?

Allow students to discuss this and the teacher should lead them to a point where they accept that there is great reason to be concerned. *Students should be given Handout #1.*

This should last about ten minutes.

The teacher continues:

Consider the following story of Choni HaM'agel, for which the text is found in the Talmud (Ta'anis 23b). [Here is just an easily accessible narrative.]

Choni HaM'agel seems to have been a forward thinking environmentalist who was aware of his surroundings and his interrelationship with the land. We are taught that when the world needed rain, Rabbis would send school children to him and they would grasp the corner of the garment he was wearing and plead, "Father, Father, give us rain." He would then ask G-d to send rain for the sake of the children that had come to him.

One time he prayed for rain during a drought and to make his point, he drew a circle and refused to move from within a circle until the rain came - which it finally did. We are also told this is how he received the name Choni HaM'agel, Choni the one who drew circles.

Another story that is told of Choni HaM'agel is one in which he learns an important lesson about our land and its trees. One day he was journeying far, and eventually, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" The man replied: "Seventy years." To this reply, Choni asked him: "So, how can you be certain that you will live another seventy years and see the fruit that this tree will produce?" The man replied, "See, I found already grown carob trees in the world. Obviously those who came before me planted these for me so I too must plant these for my children and the generations that follow."

Choni then sat down to eat and once he was satisfied, he fell asleep. We are taught that as he slept, a cave formed around him and hid him. He stayed

asleep for 70 years. Finally, he awoke and came outside of the cave. He noted that there was an elderly gentleman gathering and eating carobs. Choni asked the man, "Excuse me, sir, did you plant this tree from which you are now eating?" The man replied, "No, my grandfather planted it for me so I could eat and now I will do the same for my grandchildren."

What important lessons about how we care for the land on which we live and its resources are found in this story?

What do we learn here from Choni both about the need to *pray* and *work* towards maintaining the balance and sustainability of our environment?

Choni teaches us about the footprint we inherit and leave on the earth from which we take and on which we depend. What are the implications of this lesson in our lives?

What can and must we do to show our appreciation for what former generations left us and how do we act in a way that shows we are thinking of future generations? How/does this feel Jewish to think this way?

The story and follow up should include time for students to respond and write down their ideas. Students should receive Handout #2. This activity should take about fifteen minutes.

The teacher continues and brings the lesson to a close:

So, let us think about this. Choni teaches us to understand and be sensitive to the needs and sustainability of the land and our resources and to think NOT JUST OF WHAT WE WANT TODAY but more importantly what we, and the generations who come after us, will need tomorrow. How do we do this?

Okay, now we all know that Judaism is as much about action as it is about thinking and planning. So, we must all ask what we will do to help sustain and keep our environment as healthy and viable as possible. *What are we willing to do?* Students will be given about five minutes to brainstorm and if each student can commit themselves to two or three actions of Environmental Sustainability during the coming summer months, they will be working to maintain the balance in our environment we must all work to achieve.

Students should understand that in this way they will hopefully be able to continue to use what the land has to offer us due to the efforts of the generations before us and help to insure that our children will be able to do the same.

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Student Handout #1

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Student Handout #2

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Suggested Follow-up Activity: In thinking further about the impact of our actions on our planet and upon the ecosystem that must support all of us, go to www.junkraft.com and check out what one team did to bring attention to the problem of plastic marine debris and what it is doing to our environment.