



Trees in Jewish Thought Experiential Activities

Prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril, with assistance from Nili Simhai and Gabe Goldman. This material was prepared as part of the Jewcology project. Jewcology.com is a new web portal for the global Jewish environmental community. Thanks to the [ROI community](#) for their generous support, which made this project possible.

Introduction

These teachings on trees can be brought to life through experiential activities that complement and draw out the central messages. Study and discussion guides (available on Canfei Nesharim's website) can be used for chevruta (study partner) learning, which can then be combined with experiential activities to complement and reinforce the lessons. Many of the activities are meant to promote a 'na'aseh v'nishma' (we will do and we will hear) experience, through which doing the activity leads to an understanding that was not possible without the doing. Through the doing of these activities the participants will be able to understand the teaching in a way that would not have been possible through textual learning alone.

Note to educator: Introduce the experiential activity as follows, by linking it to the teaching from the Midrash Tanchuma. The teaching conveys that there is more to trees than cardboard or tissues. The trees of the Midrash sing in joy because of how the Jewish people used them. These activities facilitate participants connecting to trees in a way they have not before: as living beings that we can be in relationship with.

A. Outdoor Experiential Activities

Make trees real by having students really experience trees: take them outside to a forested area and do one of the following activities:¹

Guided visualization on trees

Introduction: The recent Jewish custom to plant trees on Tu B'Shvat is important and praiseworthy, but it will not make up for the rate at which our consumption of trees results in their being cut down. According to statistics based on the governor-appointed Wisconsin Council on Forestry, “In just one year, the average American consumes enough wood and paper to make up a tree 100 feet tall and sixteen inches in diameter. That breaks down to 43 cubic feet of wood and 681 pounds of paper per American per year for building supplies, newsprint, printing and writing paper, tissue towels, product packaging, mail and thousands of other products.”² It is as if an average US resident cuts down a large tree every year, likely without being aware of it. In our lifetimes, each of us will probably consume a small forest of 70 to 80 large trees. Our extended family will likely consume several thousand trees in their lifetime—a larger forest.

Visualization: Look at a tree that is about 100 feet tall and sixteen inches in diameter. Imagine that all the wood and paper you use this year comes from this tree. Now look at these ten similar-sized trees. Picture using them for your consumption of wood for the next decade. Look again at these ten trees, plus these other 70 spanning a good chunk of the forest that is front of us. Think about how you will consume this amount of trees in your estimated 80-year lifetime. Now let's have a 360 degree perspective, which includes several hundred trees.

¹ Taken and adapted from “Nature Activities for Children,” online at <http://www.naturepark.com/act.htm>

² From “Wisconsin Forestry,” a group sponsored by the governor-appointed Wisconsin Council on Forestry and with leadership from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The group is comprised of leaders in the Wisconsin forestry community who direct the state's efforts to achieve sustainable forestry. Available online at www.wisconsinforestry.org/

Consider how you, your spouse, and two children in their lifetimes will consume the equivalent of all the trees in the forest that is now around us. Now multiply that by 10 to arrive at an estimate for the 10 families on your block or apartment building. Visualize the span of trees between here and...(choose an appropriate location).

(Only include this at this point if it seems the group would be open to it: Now visualize the consumption today of the world's 6.5 billion people. Some, a small minority, consume the wood of the trees they plant and tend themselves near their homes or fields. Perhaps some of you have met such people. But most of the six billion consume the wood of trees they have never seen, cut from forests in this country and also Russia and Brazil, Canada and Papua New Guinea. Some of the wood is cut from forest plantations—second growth like these trees planted by people. Some of it is old growth—trees hundreds or even thousands of years old, supporting tremendous biological diversity. Because to supply wood to so many people demanding so much wood, you need a lot of trees. And one more detail—the world population is growing to between 8 and 10 billion people, and every day more of the people consume more like us Westerners who use one big tree a year. It's hard to wrap our minds around it—billions of people consuming billions of trees.)

- **Really Look at Trees:** Choose a partner. Partner A (you) should close your eyes, and Partner B should find something nearby of great beauty or interest in nature for you to look at. Have them carefully lead you to the object with your eyes closed. When you get there, have them adjust your head so that you will be able to look directly at the item, within focusing distance. When they touch your thumb, open your eyes and look at the object as if you are taking a picture, and then when they touch your thumb again, close your eyes. With your eyes still closed, describe the object to the other person. You will have a vivid image in your mind which you will not soon forget. The authors of *Spirit in Nature* write “Just as a photographer can use a close-up or panoramic lens, so, too, can the hikers guide their partners to such sites as a small patch of colorful lichen or a wide open mountain vista...Have the partners switch roles and repeat as often as time and interest allow.”³
- **Get a New Perspective on a Tree** Have your students lie face upward under a large tree. Have them look into the branches. Can they see the top branch? What patterns can they see? What other things are present? They can pretend to be the roots of the tree in the soil. What do they feel like? What animals can they see moving around in the tree?

As they lie looking upward, read the following, from Rabbi Akiva Wolff: “Trees play an important role in transforming the inanimate world, including the sunlight, into an environment in which other forms of life, and ultimately people, can survive. Trees and other plants absorb and utilize the sun’s rays, through photosynthesis, to produce energy that becomes available to other living beings – indeed it is the primary source of usable energy to other forms of life. Also, trees and other plants are able to utilize the inanimate world for their nutrition – which they absorb through their roots, and transform into usable nutrition for other forms of life. In other words, trees and plants make the planet into a life support system for other forms of life, and ultimately for people. Without trees and other forms of vegetation, life as we know it would not exist, the oxygen content would be far lower, and the climate and the hydrological cycle would be vastly different.”⁴

- **Touch and Identify a Tree:** Have your students split into pairs. Ask one student to blindfold the other and lead them to a tree to get to know it by feeling the bark texture, finding branches and figuring out any other way to recognize a specific tree without looking at it. Still blind-folded, have them lead their blind-folded-partner back to where they started. Now have them take off the blindfold and try to find their tree using their sense of touch to confirm it. What other senses helped them to locate their tree? (sounds, sense of balance, smells, warmth etc.) *Note to educator:* physically demonstrate with a partner how to lead someone blindfolded in the forest—slowly, with verbal warnings about obstacles, and with one hand on the partner's far shoulder and the other hand on the partner's arm.
- **Listen to Trees:** Take your students to a quiet place in nature and ask them to try to listen to the song of

³ *Spirit in Nature: Teaching Judaism and Ecology on the Trail*, by Matt Biers-Ariel, Deborah Newbrun, and Michal Fox Smart, Behrman House, 2000, p. 11. The description here is adapted from the ‘Opening the Eyes of the Blind’ activity.

⁴ Taken with permission from his article on Tu Bishvat and Trees.

trees and the sound of nature. Tell them that according to the Jewish tradition, each blade of grass has its own song. It sings quietly, for those who are attentive enough to hear it. Nature was created with song, and it reflects back the song it was created with.

B. Indoor experiential activities:

- **Gather tree products** like disposable plates and cups, cardboard boxes, paper, junk mail, newspaper, food packaging, etc., and place them on a table in the room. Use them as teaching tools during this lesson. Try entering the classroom with your arms full of these objects and dump them on the floor in the middle of the classroom to begin the lesson.
- Ask everyone to **close their eyes** and think of the most wonderful tree-encounter they have had. Don't have them share, as it will take too long, but then go into one of these activities.
- **Brainstorm** how many tree-uses you can see in the room you are sitting in (don't forget clothes and what's in hand-bags/backpacks).
- **"Categories" game on tree usage.** Form teams, and have them come up with usages for trees for 5 different letters of the alphabet (B, D, M, O, Y), and then each team has 5 minutes to list as many as they can for each letter (books, banister, bowling pins, decoys, dowels, driver (golf club), etc). Go around and each team says one until they run out, getting a point for each one.
- **Quotes on the Wall:** Put pieces of paper around the room with different quotes taken from the trees essay or speaker's notes. Give participants some time to stand in front of each quote, read it and write any thoughts or responses on the paper around the quote. They can write comments about the quote itself, or comment on others' comments about it. They should then move on to the next quote and do the same, until they have gone around the room. This activity gets participants standing and moving, and can be a good activity for when participants first walk into a room, especially if they will be coming in over a staggered period of time and a group discussion can not be begun until everyone is there. Then use these pages as a jump-off to a group discussion and continue the dialogue around the quotes.
- **Bibliodrama:** Do a skit based on the narrative of the Midrash Tanchuma about Jacob and the acacia trees of the Sanctuary. Give voice to the characters in the story by having participants act it out. Based on the teaching of Rabbi Ibn Sho'eev, the bibliodrama could start in the Garden of Eden with Adam taking saplings from there. More extensive information on bibliodrama can be accessed online.
- See also Trees, Earth, and Torah , ed. Arthur Waskow ~p. 365 for more activities