



Trees in Jewish Thought Lesson Plan

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril, 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.

Overview: In this lesson, students will explore a Jewish teaching on planting and using trees. They will learn in study partners several texts from the Torah, Midrash, and later commentators about Jacob planting trees to be used for the Sanctuary, and those trees singing when they were used. Discussion questions will spur students to think in pairs, and then share with the larger group, about how they use trees in particular and resources in general. Experiential activities will help bring the textual learning to life and ground it in lived experience.

Time: 45 minutes to 2 hours

Objectives:

- To raise awareness about the array of ways we use and benefit from trees
- To put forward a Jewish model for using trees in particular and resources in general
- To develop students' connection to trees and the natural world through direct experience.

Introduction to the Source:

Shortly after the exodus from Egypt, God commands the Jewish people to build a Sanctuary in the desert. That Sanctuary was to be constructed, in part, out of 59 large beams of acacia wood. Yet deserts are not known for their wood, and the Midrash addresses the question of where the wood for the Sanctuary came from. It picks up on a textual nuance in the verse where the beams are commanded—an apparently superfluous definite article 'heh'--to reveal a powerful teaching from the depths of the Jewish Oral Tradition.

Development:

Ask the students to split into pairs (chevrutot) and hand out the source sheet to each person. Ask them to learn it together for 15-20 minutes (the Hebrew text is for those whose skills allow them to read it; others can simply use the translation) and to share their thoughts with each other. The questions included on the learning sheet can serve as a guide for their discussion in pairs, as well as afterward when the pairs come together for a whole group discussion to share their thoughts and insights: How do you understand this teaching? Why did the planks of wood sing when they were being brought to build the Sanctuary? What factors contributed to their wanting to sing? What does it mean that a tree sings? What is the sound of their song?

Suggested experiential linkages:

See the 'Experiential Activities' attachment for activities that could be used for this program.

Concluding Discussion and Activity:

a) Questions to Pose:

- How do we use trees? How do we benefit from trees?
- Discuss how Jacob would likely act in our society today. Where would the wood for his house come from?
- What about our consumption of trees--would the trees and other things that we use from the natural world sing in light of the way we are using them? How can we use items in such a way that they sing at

being used? What are some of the spiritual roots of unsustainable wood consumption and deforestation?

b) Group Activity:

As a group, come up with a list of ways to be mindful of one's consumption of trees, and ways to use them with intention and holiness. Examples include:

- Only buying wood from producers certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. Information is available at www.fsc.org
- Come in to 'back to school day' with no *new* paper. Instead, reuse the backs of previously used paper from your home or office.
- Receive only the mail you want and need. Cancel (much of) the junk mail you receive by going to <http://www.donotmail.org/form.php?id=50>
- View your bills online. That includes phone, bank, electricity, cell phone, water, and other bills. Have each of these institutions send you only an e-bill.
- Read news and magazines online and cancel the daily newspaper and monthly magazine subscription
- Borrow books from friends' libraries instead of buying them.
- Plant and tend your own fruit trees.
- If you use firewood, cut down a tree or branch on your own property.
- When asked 'paper or plastic,' say neither. Tell them you brought your own bag or can put the item in your backpack.
- Live in a smaller house. Think of all the wood you save by not building those extra rooms.
- Buy products in bulk. Doing so requires less packaging, much of which is paper.

Additional Free Lesson Plans, Classroom Activities, and Tu Bishvat Haggadot:

Dozens of Activities related to Tu Bishvat are available from the Jewish National Fund's Education Department, at http://support.jnf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=edu_teachers

Other activities can be found at

http://support.jnf.org/site/DocServer/familyfunevent_treesource.pdf?docID=901

Tu Bishvat Greeting Card Activity from Canfei Nesharim: This activity, designed for students between the ages of six and ten, involves telling about Tu Bishvat and then creating Tu Bishvat cards for friends and family. It is available for free at <http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=19043>

Tu Bishvat Platters for Seniors: This activity is designed for teens and involves them preparing Tu Bishvat fruit platters for seniors. See <http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=19046>

Tu Bishvat Lesson Plan from Tzedek (London): The seven-page lesson plan, which includes twelve 'Giving Tree Cards,' has been taken directly from Tzedek's (London) successful Jewish Festival Resource and contains cross curricula links to literacy, geography and science. Through an exploration of the classic story "The Giving Tree", by Israeli author Shel Silverstein, pupils are encouraged to appreciate and consider their relationships as caretakers of the world. The lesson plan can be downloaded for free at <http://tzedek.org.uk/file/Tu%20Bishvat.pdf>

Tu B'Shevat Activity: Giving Thanks to Hashem for Nature. For ages 3-6. The children will give thanks to Hashem for the beautiful, interesting and useful things in nature and make a "Thankful Tree." They will also sample the fruits of the seven species of Israel and other traditional Tu B'Shevat fruits. See <http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=19039>

Branching Out: Your Tu Bishvat Haggadah, written and designed by Nina Woldin of the Jewish National Fund's Education Department. This 26-page Tu Bishvat Haggadah contains a wealth of information and activities to guide participants through the Tu Bishvat seder. It is available at <http://support.jnf.org/site/DocServer/BranchingOut.pdf?docID=921>

Additional resources and haggadot for Tu Bishvat seders Canfei Nesharim has designed three haggadot for Tu Bishvat seders on the themes of 1) Appreciation for Nature's Blessings 2) Food: Blessings and Responsibility 3) Bal Tashchit: Do Not Destroy. They are available at <http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=19047>