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Trees and Jewish Thought Speaker's Notes

What follows are some ideas and additional resources which may be used to supplement individuals who will be teaching the "Trees and Jewish Thought" article and source sheet. Listed below are several suggested points which could be mentioned as part of a talk. All sources cited are available on the "Trees and Jewish Thought" source sheet and discussion guide.

Why do we celebrate trees on Tu biShevat?

- Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1: Beit Hillel teaches that Tu Bishvat is the new year of the trees. 1
- Rabbi Pinchas Kehati, in explaining the Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1, says that "the Talmud explains that the New Year for the tree was established in Shevat, 'Because most of the rains have already fallen, and the resin has come up in the trees, and as a result the fruits begin to form now."
- At a personal level, the same process of sap rising within the tree occurs within us, of new vital energy rising within us during the month of Shevat. This is the time we need to ask ourselves: do I experience the Torah as transformative, uplifting, and inspirational?

Trees represent a good environment for people, and long-term sustainability of the land.

- Midrash Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Raba (Vilna edition) 7:28: The Midrash uses trees as symbols of a good environment for people, as the features of an environment which is fragile and must be taken care of.
- Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah (Vilna edition) 25:3: Planting trees is identified as an action which imitates G-d's preparation of the land for people by planting the Garden of Eden. We emulate G-d by preparing the land for future generations by planting trees.
- Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 23a: The Honi source demonstrates the importance of planting for our children.

The prohibition against cutting fruit trees in wartime:

• Bal Tashchit: Avoiding Waste Deuteronomy, 20:19-20:

The rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud (200 C.E.-~500 C.E.) understand these verses as articulating a general principle beyond war and fruit trees. They make a logical inference from a more stringent to a less stringent case. If Jews can't cut down fruit trees in the extreme case of a war of conquest, when destruction is the norm, how much the more so does this apply to normal life. This general principle is the mitzvah of Bal Tashchit, or the prohibition of destroying directly or indirectly anything that may be of use to people.

For more information, see the article on Bal Tashchit by Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, at http://canfeinesharim.org/community/parshas.php?page=17202; and the article on Bal Tashchit by Ellen Cohn in Canfei Nesharim's "Compendium of Sources in Halacha and the Environment," available for order at http://canfeinesharim.org/store/publications.php?page=12014

• "Conservation" perspective – we save trees because we depend on them for our survival Rabbeinu Bachayei, commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19:

His approach could be described as anthropocentric and utilitarian. He sees the Torah's concern about fruit trees as related to the trees' value and usefulness to people. That is, the importance of a fruit tree is

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the food it provides to people.

• Preservation perspective – we save trees because we have no right to destroy other living beings without cause.

Rashi commentary, to Deuteronomy 20:19:

Rashi reads the verse as articulating a concern for the needless destruction of a tree. It deserves to live and not by destroyed by human whim. To him, the Torah is stressing that trees should not be denied food or water or destroyed in a siege on a human enemy.

For more explanation on Rashi's understanding of this verse, see "Tree = Man? Or Tree = Man! Resolving the Ambiguity at the Heart of Bal Tashchit"

by Rabbi Yehoshua Kahan, available at http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=11516
He also explains the position of Ibn Ezra, which is similar to that of Rabbeinu Bachayei

Not all resource use is bad. Some resource use is good. We have an ultimate example of this in the building of the Mishkan. Shemot 26:15-6:

• 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. These verses are the basis of the Midrash that we will learn. The Midrash that follows picks up on a textual nuance in verse fifteen—an apparently superfluous definite article 'heh' attached to the word 'planks'--to explain why the Torah is referring to them as 'the planks' while in regard to other materials for the Sanctuary no definite article is used.

Midrash Tanchuma (Teruma, 9): Deserts are tree-sparse ecosystems, and the Midrash addresses the question of where the wood for the Sanctuary came from. According to the Midrash², when Jacob went down to Egypt, he received a prophecy that his descendants would be redeemed from there and be commanded to build a Mishkan (Sanctuary) in the desert. Before the Exodus, the Israelites cut down those trees and brought them with them through the Sea of Reeds into the desert.³

- Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch understands the word 'rina', used to describe the trees' singing, as from the root 'ranan'--meaning joyful singing—in exaltation and jubilation.
 For more explanation on the acacia wood as a possible understanding of positive resource use, see "The Trees Sang with Joy" by Yonatan Neril, available at
 http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=19094. The Ohr HaChaim explains the deep kabbalistic significance of these planks, which in their vertical position connected the upper holiness to the lower holiness. (For more on the Ohr Hachaim's commentary, see "The Trees Sang with Joy" article.

 . 5) Massive trees like redwoods indeed connect heaven and earth: with roots in the ground and leaves in the atmosphere.
- This Midrash says something very profound when it says that the trees were singing when they were being used in the construction of the Sanctuary. Note how in the Midrash, the cut wood seems to be singing. That is, the already cut wood planks sang when they were being further cut for the Mishkan. Dead wood singing. What makes them sing with such joy?
- The word sanctuary in Hebrew is "mishkan", which means "presence." God chose to dwell in this structure amidst the Jewish people because it and they were holy, and it was produced in a holy way. The trees in being cut down merit to comprise the Sanctuary of G-d.

Rabbi Ibn Sho'eev of Spain: He links the wood used in the Sanctuary to the trees of the Garden of Eden. The

Midrash Tanchuma (Warsaw edition), Parshat Teruma, Section nine.

This is implicit but unstated in the Midrash.

Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, based on the commentaries of Samphson Rafael Hirsch, by Rabbi Matityahu Clark, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1999, p. 245

Sanctuary represents Creation in perfect harmony, existing precisely according to the Divine Will. The Sanctuary represents a return to the Garden of Eden, and the Sages explain how the language the Torah uses in commanding the building of the Sanctuary parallels the language used in Genesis when God created the world.

"How" and "why" we use natural resources matters.

- Using trees today: We have seen that our ancestors related to trees in such a way that the trees broke into song when they were used toward an elevated, long-term use. Their example is instructive for us in terms of how we use trees. Oftentimes, we are not aware we are using a tree. Instead, we relate to a product made of trees in its consumer form—a cardboard box, an envelope, etc. Even if we do know, we may not understand the significance of cutting a tree that may support a rich ecosystem and benefit us in a myriad of ways.
- A lesson for our time: Of course the Torah and Midrash are not saying not to use trees. Judaism recognizes that humans need to use natural resources; the question is how we use them and why we use them. Thus our Midrash can be understood as communicating an ethic of proper use. From it we can learn a Jewish litmus test for how we use trees and other resources: would the tree sing based on how I am using it? From this flows the question: Am I using the wood towards a higher goal? Each person judges this for himself or herself. Each time we ask this question we bring consciousness into our consumption and come closer to consuming in holiness. At a practical level, one might commit to reading the news online and canceling the daily newspaper and monthly magazine subscription; buying 100% recycled printer paper; or purchasing wood only from producers certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.6 Increasing our awareness of how we use natural resources can help us to better elevate these resources in holy use. In so doing we can appreciate the abundant blessings Hashem bestows upon us and make our daily consumption part and parcel of our religious practice.

Why trees are important to humans:

- Oxygen: Trees provide oxygen for us to breath and capture carbon dioxide, which helps maintain the delicate balance of our atmosphere. Trees contribute continually to the health and well-being of all animals, by providing oxygen through photosynthesis. An average size tree gives off enough oxygen to keep a family of four breathing for one day.
- *Biodiversity*: Rain forests are home to half the plant and animal species in the world, even though rain forests comprise only a small percentage of the earth's land area.
- *Food*: Trees produce a significant percentage of human food, including fruit and nuts. The Tu Bishvat seder acknowledges this with thanks to the Creator for these foods.
- *Clean Air*: Trees help reduce air pollution that can cause health problems in humans. In one year, an acre of trees absorbs the amount of carbon dioxide produced from driving a car 26,000 miles.
- *Water*: Trees provide water, by converting fog to water. In one night, a 100-foot redwood tree can turn fog into the equivalent of four inches of rain, passing it on to plants, animals and nearby creeks.
- *Erosion Prevention*: The roots from trees help prevent erosion and landslides, and prevent the property loss and damage that can be caused by floodwaters. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, some of the worst damage from the storm surge and winds was inflicted on those areas where coastal vegetation had been removed.

The significance of deforestation

• **Protecting trees today:** 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." 7 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.

- Multiply this by millions and billions of people around the world and one can begin to comprehend how humans deforest about thirteen million hectares of forest every year. Beforestation to such an extent presents significant challenges for the long-term viability of human civilization which depends on healthy forests to maintain a climate in balance and to support an array of species from which humans benefit. It also raises myriad religious questions about our stewardship of the planet to which Hashem entrusted us 'to work and to protect.'10
- What is a "beneficial tree"? The Sages allude to the far-reaching impacts of cutting trees in teaching that "the lights [of the world] suffer...because of the destroyers of beneficial trees."11 While the Torah places particular importance on fruit-bearing trees, according to some rabbis the definition of 'beneficial trees' can be extended today to include all trees given that humans depend on trees for a range of 'ecosystem services' like filtering water, preventing soil erosion, and converting carbon dioxide into oxygen.12
- One of the environmental successes of modern Israel is the afforestation of the Land of Israel. The Israeli Ministry of the Environment writes that "when Israel was established in 1948, there were fewer than five million trees in the entire area. Today, over 200 million trees have been planted in an active reforestation program spearheaded by the Jewish National Fund." The National Master plan for Forests and Afforestation designates 7% of the State of Israel for preserving existing forests and planting new ones. While in the past the JNF planted mostly Jerusalem pine, today it plants an array of species, including oak, carob, terebinth, cypress, eucalyptus, acacia, olive, almond, and more. ¹³

Further Drashot and Articles on Trees in the Torah and on Tu Bishvat

These articles and more are available at http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php

The Trees Sang with Joy by Yonatan Neril

This drash focuses on the Midrash on Jacob and trees cited above in the speaker's notes, with linkages to how we use trees today. It expands on the ideas contained above and is worthwhile reading in advance of teaching on this Midrash.

The Trees in Jewish Thought by Akiva Wolff.

This piece surveys trees in a range of Rabbinic sources, including on Bal Tashchit, tree planting, settlement of the Land of Israel, and rabbinic decrees related to fruit trees. It expands on the ideas contained in the above speaker's notes and is worthwhile reading in advance of teaching based on these speaker's notes.

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/

According to *The Global Forest Resources Assessment 2005* of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture

Organization.(FAO). The FAO describes the report as "the most comprehensive assessment to date of forest resources, their uses and value, covering 229 countries and territories between 1990 and 2005." It is available online at http://www.fao.org/forestry/fra2005/en/

For an important examination of the central role of deforestation in the demise of numerous pre-modern societies, see Pulitzer-prize winning author Dr. Jared Diamond's book Collapse.

Genesis 2:15. This is based on an understanding of this command as applying beyond the Garden of Eden, where it was given.

Sukka 29a. Rashi understands 'lights' here as referring to the moon and the stars. He also links cutting down beneficial trees with not appreciating the goodness God bestows on us.

For example, Rabbi Natan Greenberg, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Bat Ayin, accepts such an understanding.

[&]quot;The Environment in Israel, 2002," Publication of Israel's Minstiry of the Environment, p. 156

G-d, Man, and Tree by Rabbi Aryeh Strikovsky

The author examines the Torah's question, 'Is man a tree of the field?' and links it to the song of the trees and to stewardship of the land of Israel today. He also explores the command to subdue the earth based on Rabbi Soloveitchik's <u>The Lonely Man of Faith.</u>

Tree = Man? Or Tree = Man! Resolving the Ambiguity at the Heart of Bal Tashchit

by Rabbi Yehoshua Kahan

This dvar Torah explores the verse about man as a tree that serves as the basis for the commandment of Bal Tashchit. He examines several rabbinic understandings of this critical verse.

The New Year for the Trees: A Tu B'Shvat Story by Gershon Kranzler

A powerful story about an Eastern European melamed's (Jewish teacher) Tu Bishvat experience among the snow-covered trees in a forest in Poland and how that nature experience inspired him to be a better educator.

Trees are Us by Rabbi Michael Skobac

A general piece on Tu Bishvat and the importance of appreciating trees and connecting to G-d in nature.

Fruit and Vegetables, Man and Animals by Rabbi Nosson Slifkin This essay is adapted from <u>Seasons of Life</u>. This article focuses on "why the new year of the fruit trees, with all its spiritual significance, is a cause of great celebration." The author contrasts fruit trees with plants that produce vegetables, and explores why Adam is so-called. He also explains the relation between leaving Egypt and Tu Bishvat.

Planting The Tabernacle by Ariel Shalem This drash focuses on the Midrash on Jacob and trees cited above in the speaker's notes, with linkages to cattle grazing in former rainforest land today.

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk, as part of the Jewcology project. <u>Jewcology.com</u> is a new web portal for the global Jewish environmental community. Thanks to the <u>ROI</u> <u>community</u> for their generous support, which made this project possible.