

Developing a 9th Grade Environmental Education Curriculum for Orthodox Jewish Day Schools: Integrating Science and Torah Learning
Submitted by Canfei Nesharim

I. Proposal Summary:

- The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) has called upon its membership to support a Torah-based environmental movement and encouraged its members to partner with Canfei Nesharim to develop programs for their communities.
- For over 13 years Canfei Nesharim has developed environmental education materials and workshops that combine science and Torah.
- A recent survey indicates that there is a need and a desire within the Orthodox community to develop and institute both formal and informal educational tools to overcome blocks to sustainable behaviors. These tools include developing formal, classroom curriculum that integrate Jewish teachings and environmental concepts and developing informal outdoor experiences that enhance one's spiritual connections to nature. This proposal is directed at developing curricula using formal pedagogical tools.
- A central organizing principle of Canfei Nesharim is that *education leads to action*. Learning Torah teachings and scientific facts about the environment motivates us to live sustainably within the framework of a religiously observant lifestyle.
- Canfei Nesharim proposes to develop a 9th-grade curriculum that will integrate current scientific knowledge about the environment with Torah learning, i.e., using the principles of Torah u'Maddah (the integration of religious and secular knowledge).
- The new curriculum will be tested in 4 pilot schools over a 2-year period with full, professional evaluations conducted on all phases of program development and implementation.
- Teachers will be trained during an intensive workshop that will provide scientific and Torah background, and pedagogical tools to ensure success in the classroom.
- Funding request for the two-year project is \$50,000 for the program coordinator, teaching materials, videography and workshop.

II. Identification of Need: Three realities have historically limited the involvement of Orthodox Jews in environmental advocacy and in environmentally sustainable behaviors.

1. Involvement in environmental action within the Orthodox community has been limited because until almost 13 years ago, with the founding of Canfei Nesharim: Sustainable Living Inspired by Torah (<http://www.canfeinesharim.org>) there was no formal organizational structure to identify or coordinate the actions of Orthodox Jews who cared about the environment. Canfei Nesharim addressed this gap, developing programs and material for synagogues, schools and individuals interested in teaching and sharing environmental perspective based on religious values.

2. The beginning of the modern-day environmental movement as a whole was mainly not religious, as demonstrated by the largely secular nature of the early Earth Day activities. This reality has created tension between Orthodox Jews who have a firm commitment to the Torah and those conservationists/preservationists who founded the environmental movement and are either secular or less tied to the Torah's precepts. Religious Jewish organizations have therefore been less likely to sign on to what has been perceived as a secular environmental movement, rather than one based on Torah.
3. While there is a long history of Jewish teachings about the environment, most Orthodox Jews are minimally aware of this body of knowledge, or where aware, have not connected them with modern environmental issues/actions. (Weber 2016).

While these clear barriers exist, a recent, Canfei Nesharim-supported, first-of-its-kind study (Weber 2016) identified increased environmental education in Orthodox day schools and yeshivot as a high priority among Orthodox Jews across the religious and political spectrum. This study demonstrates *a need and a desire within the Orthodox community to identify educational tools to overcome these blocks to sustainable behaviors*. The focus of this application is to develop a curriculum that integrates environmental science and Torah learning and, thereby, enhance environmentally sustainable behaviors that are integrated with and enhanced by a commitment to Torah Judaism.

III. Educational Approach: A central organizing principle of Canfei Nesharim is that *education leads to action*. Learning Torah teachings and scientific facts (Maddah) about the environment motivates us to live sustainably within the framework of a religiously observant lifestyle. For over 13 years, Canfei Nesharim has developed environmental education materials and workshops that combine science and Torah. Using this experience, we now propose a high school curriculum based upon our ebook exploring traditional Jewish teachings on the environment, ***Uplifting People and Planet: Eighteen Essential Jewish Lessons on the Environment***, edited by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk (<http://canfeinesharim.org/uplifting-ebook/>). This ebook is the most comprehensive study available in English of how Jewish traditional sources presented in a variety of methods teach us to protect our natural resources and preserve the environment. Using the expertise of our Science and Rabbinic Advisory Boards, we will develop a curriculum that will connect with the multiple intelligences found in a classroom to account for the varied methods students use to learn.

Critical to the curriculum's success is the integration of current scientific knowledge with Torah learning, i.e., Torah u'Maddah. Rabbi Norman Lamm (2010) defined this relationship: "Torah, faith, religious learning on one side and Madda, science, worldly knowledge on the other, together offer us a more over-arching and truer vision than either one set alone." In this vision, familiarity with both science and Torah provides the student with a solid foundation for comprehending the complexities involved in

today's environmental challenges while internalizing while internalizing responses to those realities that are appropriate to an Orthodox lifestyle.”

- IV. **Unique Role of Canfei Nesharim in Developing an Environmental Education Curriculum for Orthodox Day Schools:** Shortly after the launching of Canfei Nesharim it became clear that many Orthodox Jews did care about the environment but needed a formal structure within which they could find their voice. In its 2007 statement, the RCA saw in Canfei Nesharim the structure required to stimulate interest in the environment among Orthodox Jews as it called upon its membership to support a Torah-based environmental movement and encouraged its members to partner with Canfei Nesharim to develop programs for their communities. By creating tools to support environmental education in the Orthodox community, Canfei Nesharim has inspired a broader base of environmentally-educated Orthodox Jews.

In what was, perhaps, the first formal assessment of the Orthodox community's attitudes about environmental issues, Canfei Nesharim conducted a survey of Orthodox day schools "...to explore the interest and possibilities for such programming..." with the outcomes used to identify best methods to address these needs (Epstein 2009). Following this assessment, Canfei Nesharim developed and piloted curriculum materials to support middle school students in learning about environmental ethics through Jewish texts. These materials are available at <http://canfeinesharim.org/schools/>. Since then, Canfei Nesharim has continued to create high quality source materials to educate synagogues and schools with Torah-based environmental wisdom.

Now Canfei Nesharim is in a unique position to take the next step to build the foundation of a Torah-based environmental movement by piloting a new educational curriculum program, starting with schools in the New York area and expanding to schools across the United States. Using our curriculum in schools will inspire students and their families to commit to environmental action. We envision a world where the Jewish community is committed to preserve and protect our environment, inspired by Torah values.

- V. **Project Outline:** This project will assemble a team under the auspices of the Canfei Nesharim Rabbinical Advisory Board chaired by Rabbi Yosef Blau of Yeshiva University composed of educators, scientists, curriculum specialists and videographers. In the first year of this 2-year pilot program period, we will develop a curriculum and associated materials (text-based, video supplements, science-based) focused on the 9th grade. We are choosing this level because it can also be adapted by teachers across a range of grade levels for students in middle school and the upper grades of high school. Central to the success of this program is an intensive teacher training conference to be held either in spring before the end of the school year or in late summer before the start of the new academic year. During this intensive workshop, teachers will become familiar with the basic scientific and Judaic content necessary for the success of the curriculum. The teachers, science, Judaic, arts, etc.

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for this workshop will be from two pilot schools in the New York City region. We are currently in the process of identifying those schools. In year two of this project, we will identify two other Orthodox high schools in other regions of the country. Teachers from these schools will experience the same intensive workshop in a format to be developed. Our long-term goal is to have all the teachers participate in a retreat to encourage collaboration and share experiences to strengthen the program. Dr. Daniel Weber (School of Freshwater Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Chair of the Canfei Nesharim Science Advisory Board, has experience developing and conducting high school teacher workshops for environmental science modules. Therefore, we have the experience and expertise required to develop and conduct similar workshops for this project.

Canfei Nesharim's web-based materials will be a key ingredient for providing both scientific and Torah-based sources of information for students and teachers. This is critical because environmental information found on the internet can vary in quality and accuracy.

VI. Project Evaluation: Each stage of this process (workshop, teacher performance, student cognitive and affective learning outcomes, educational materials, etc.) will undergo an intensive evaluation procedure to identify both strengths and weaknesses and to ensure the continued growth of the program. We are currently identifying potential professionals who will assist us in this phase of our project.

VII. Funding Request: Funds are requested for a project coordinator, developing course materials including short videos to enhance learning experiences, contracting with a professional evaluator, travel for workshop presenters and curriculum developers. We estimate that we will require \$50,000 for the two-year pilot project with funds equally split between the two years. We are currently involved in identifying potential candidates for the positions of project coordinator and videographer.

VIII. References:

Epstein, S. Environmental engagement in Orthodox day schools: suggested educational strategies. Canfei Nesharim. February 2009.

Lamm, N. Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition, 3rd Edition. Maggid Books, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem.

Weber, DN. Saving the Planet: Perspectives from the Orthodox Jewish Community. Project of the GreenFaith Leadership Program. 2016.