Lesson 7:
Protecting Our Eden

INTRODUCTION

Genesis (2: 1 – 3: 24) presents an enduring image of the Garden of Eden: an idyllic, peaceful place that God presented to Adam and Eve, the first humans. As is well known, the human sojourn in Eden ended tragically: God expelled Adam and Eve from this paradise as a consequence for not abiding by God’s rules (see Lesson 18: Clearing the Path for Others for more about this episode). This lesson will focus on the first part of the story, the wonderful Garden of Eden and the responsibilities associated with maintaining it.

Today, environmentalists often interpret this story as a contemporary metaphor – as people take for granted the paradise that has been given them, Planet Earth, and do not strive to preserve and protect it, they bring upon themselves their own tragic demise. Callous misuse of the natural resources of this world will transform it into a planet unable to sustain life.

This lesson examines how Judaism understands the notions of conservation and preservation. The Master Story introduces the notion of the responsibility to preserve our environment. Text 4, the rabbinic story about Honi and the carob tree, offers parents and children an opportunity to think about how their actions today affect the future of the planet. And parents can come to realize that in the everyday act of raising children they are also helping to protect and preserve their own personal Edens, ensuring that their children will continue to contribute to the world’s future.

While Tu B’Shvat is not central to this lesson, as the “new years” of trees, it has become the holiday most associated with environmental conservation. While all the holidays discussed up until now have a large range of rituals and practices associated
with each one, Tu B'Shvat's rituals have developed more recently, and today it has come to represent the value of protecting our Eden.

LESSON OUTLINE

MASTER STORY: The Garden of Eden

Genesis (Bereshit) 2: 4-17

- The glory of the Garden of Eden is described in great detail.
- Humankind is appointed responsible for the ongoing protection and upkeep of Eden.

TEXTS

SECTION I: EDEN = EARTH

- Humans are meant to be stewards of the natural world.

[2] Deuteronomy (Devarim) 20: 19-20
- It is forbidden to cut down fruit trees during a time of war, even if it will help protect against enemy forces.

[3] Sefer HaChinukh, Commandment #529
- Bal tashchit—the prohibition against needless destruction is a moral imperative.

[4] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 23a - Honi and the Carob Tree
- A man plants a carob tree even though he will not live to eat its fruits.
- Honi sleeps for seventy years to discover that the man’s great-grandchildren enjoy the fruit of his labor.
- Honi does not take satisfaction from the fruits of his own labor.

- The notion of conservation and protecting the world for the future is an idea that can be extrapolated from the Jewish view of the Torah as an inheritance.

**SECTION II: EDEN = CHILDREN**

- People can be compared to trees.
- If people’s positive actions outweigh their learning then they are like trees with strong roots that will endure and survive.

- In educating and acting as role models for their children, parents are planting for the future, much like the man who planted the carob tree.

[8] Jewish Climate Change Campaign
- Environmental messages are embedded in biblical stories and Jewish tradition.
- Teaching children to be environmentally aware stems from modeling that behavior and providing hands-on activities.
The Parent Angle

In this lesson, parents are asked to reflect on:

- How they can see themselves as planting for the future in the way that they parent.
- Teaching children to be aware of the earth’s resources and plan now for how those resources will be available for future generations.
- Personifying the natural world so children will appreciate all aspects of it.
- Teaching children the mitzvah of bal tashchit.

Core Comments

- Students can look forward to learning more about the holiday of Tu B’Shvat in Rhythms of Jewish Living, Lesson 16, where the significance of Tu B’Shvat and its seder is examined along with the importance of planting trees as a way to build Eretz Yisrael and to connect the Diaspora with Israel.

- In Ethics of Jewish Living, Lesson 27: Environmental Ethics, the biblical and rabbinic perspective on human responsibility towards the earth and its maintenance is explored.
OUR MASTER STORY: *The Garden of Eden*

**Genesis (Bereshit) 2: 4-17**

4 Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created. When the LORD God made earth and heaven

5 when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil,

6 but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth

7 the LORD God formed manb from the dust of the earth.c He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

8 The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed.

9 And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

10 A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches.

11 The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is.

12 The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli.

13 The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush.

14 The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur.

And the fourth river is the Euphrates.
15 The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to
till it and tend it.

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the
garden you are free to eat;

17 but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of
it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.”

**Analysis – Master Story**

The first home of the first human beings, as described in the Torah text, was a
wondrous, plentiful garden, offering every fruit imaginable. It is described in utopian
terms, as it provided Adam and Eve what seemed like an idyllic existence. However,
God is clear when He tells Adam that the ongoing existence of the beautiful garden will
be Adam's responsibility, as God has placed him in the garden with the explicit expectation that Adam will “work it and guard it.” The plants and trees of nature, left to their own course, might have degenerated and become wild through neglect or through the gradual depreciation of a once rich soil. The hand of rational humankind, therefore, has its appropriate place in preserving and enriching the soil, and in distributing the seeds and training the shoots to provide for the full development of the plants and trees and their fruits. This "work" was needed even in the garden. "Guarding it" may refer to protecting it from damage that might be caused by cattle, wild beasts, or even smaller animals. Or, alternatively, to the ongoing tasks involved in maintaining fertile land. God entrusts His highest creation with this significant responsibility. There was now a person to till the soil. Gardening was the first occupation, and the first responsibility of ancient humankind, and represented fulfillment of God's plans for partnering with the human race in the ongoing tasks associated with preserving God's creations.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- Why would the omnipotent God require humankind to care for the earth?
- What might be the modern applications of this calling to work and to preserve the earth?
- In what areas of your home life do you tend to connect privileges with responsibilities, and why?
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TEXTS AND ANALYSES

SECTION I EDEN = EARTH

Text 1

Midrash Rabbah, Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) 7: 13

[Homiletic and midrashic material compiled on the biblical text, mainly in Yisrael, from the 3rd to 10th centuries]

At the time that God created Adam, the first [human], He took him, and toured him amongst all the trees of the Garden of Eden. He said, "See My works, how pleasant and fine they are! And all that I have created, I have created for you. Set your mind not to ruin and destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there is none who can repair it after you."

Analysis – Text 1

Environmentalists who wish to find a basis in the Torah for people to take a more active role in reversing environmental damage are often stumped by passages which seem to describe human dominion over the natural world (Genesis 1: 26-28 and 9: 1-3). Psalms 115: 16 seem even more explicit: "The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to man." At first blush, these verses seem to grant Divine permission to humans to treat the Earth as a gift, to do with as they please. In fact, today there are those who assert that these verses sanction people to ignore the damage they cause to the environment, believing that ultimately the Earth will survive through Divine grace.
Despite these arguments, some modern commentators have attempted to rethink the role of humans described in the Torah, and to demonstrate that the image of human “dominion” is actually one of “stewardship.” Stewardship entails that humans are not meant to dominate, or use and abuse the earth, but that they are meant to be keepers, or caretakers of the Earth.

The midrash presented in this Text imagines God giving Adam a tour of the Garden of Eden. With pride, God enjoys showing off the beauty of each tree. God explains to Adam that although Eden (and by extension, the world) is created for human use, as described in Genesis, it comes with responsibility. God warns Adam to take care of the garden and the world—for if the world is ruined or destroyed, there will be no way to fix it or replace it for the future.

Read from an environmental perspective, this midrashic interpretation fits well with an understanding that humans need to take responsibility for the condition of the world. God entrusted humans to maintain the Earth, not to destroy it. Humans need to be stewards of the world, not dominators or destroyers.

This reading can be applied to parent-child relationships as well. It may be “your” bedroom and “your” playroom—but it is also your responsibility to keep it clean and to refrain from damaging it. A neighborhood playground may be open for all kids to play—but it is their responsibility to refrain from littering. Children cannot be forced to finish what is on their dinner plate—but they can be taught not to needlessly throw out food, and not to ask for seconds before finishing firsts. From these examples, children can relate to the idea and implications of human stewardship—the earth is ours to protect and care for.

Does the Torah itself mandate certain responsibilities humans have for caring for the physical world? Many Jewish environmentalists claim that the answer is yes, and use Text 2 as a primary example.
Questions for Discussion:

- What are other ways children can understand the notion of stewardship?
- How does interpreting the human role on earth as stewards as opposed to owners change the perspective on the environment?

Text 2

Deuteronomy (Devarim) 20: 19-20

19 When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?

20 Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.

Analysis – Text 2

In this passage, the Israelites are forbidden from cutting down fruit bearing trees during a time of war in order to lay siege to an enemy fortress. They may eat from the trees, and they can cut down non-fruit bearing trees, but under no circumstances may they cut down fruit bearing ones. The stated reason is given in an almost personified tone: the trees are not like enemy soldiers who will retreat and return the next day to fight again. What is not explained is why fruit trees must be preserved while non-fruit
bearing trees can be cut down. It seems that these fruit trees are held in such high regard because they are a source of continual food and replenishment.

This concept can be understood in peacetime, but in wartime when cutting down trees could save human lives, how could this act be forbidden? Is the Torah placing more value on the life of a tree than on human life? According to later halakhic interpretations, the answer is no—that, in fact, if non-fruit bearing trees are not to be found, then fruit bearing ones can be cut down if it will assist in combating an enemy (see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Kamma 91b and Torah Temimah, note 63, on this verse).

However, environmental researcher and commentator, Jeremy Benstein, offers this explanation:

[A]cts of destruction with dire long-term consequences are inadmissible even for pressing short-term goals. Moreover, a strict distinction must be preserved between human conflicts and our relationship with the natural world, which must be kept out of the fray. Nature must not become a pawn on a human chessboard."


Thus, there is the human world and the natural world. Humans are meant to watch over and protect the natural world, but they should refrain from entangling that world in their struggles and conflicts.

The Rabbis expanded this verse to encapsulate a general principle not to waste or needlessly destroy anything. This principle is generally referred to as bal tashchit (בַּל תָּשׁוֹחֵיט, "do not destroy"). As will be seen in Text 3, this notion is often interpreted as a moral imperative.
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Text 3

Sefer HaChinukh, Commandment # 529

[Book from the 13th century listing the 613 commandments.]

...to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all bad and destructive things. This is the way of the pious and people of action... not destroying even a grain of mustard in this world... if possible they will prevent any destruction they can. Not so are the wicked..., who rejoice in the destruction of the world, and they are destroyers...

ספרא חינוך מצוות

...לאהוב הטוב והטובות והותקיפ ביה, יהמדך כל הקדש באים והותקቤ כל רבי רח מסיכל... רבי משה, ויהיה לך חסידות ו أبرiggsershו ... לא אבודך אפיילו פרגר של חרד קצאל ... ואם יכלל לזרעי ייזיל כל רabler מהשחת יבכל פנים. ולא כל המושיכו ... שמחיה במשחתה עולם... ויהמה המשיחית...

Analysis – Text 3

The Sefer HaChinukh provides a moral dimension to the biblical commandment not to cut down fruit trees in war time. As mentioned above, the rabbis broadened this mitzvah and termed the larger general category bal tashchit—to refrain from reckless and needless destruction. In this text, bal tashchit becomes a way of distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked. Preservation and conservation, even of something as small as a mustard seed, reflects an internal morality.

Taken together, Texts 2 and 3 give parents an avenue for emphasizing a Jewish attitude towards conservation and preservation. The fact that the Torah prohibits the destruction of trees in such strong and direct language elevates the natural world to the level of human importance. The fact that Text 2 could be understood as taking human need out of the picture in discussions regarding human responsibility to the environment – even though halakhah does not understand it in that way – is interesting, to say the least. Text 3 adds a very strong emphasis to that notion of
conservation: that there is actually a moral imperative to saving and protecting this world from destruction.

Questions for Discussion:

✔ What are ways parents can teach children to observe the prohibition of bal tashchit at home? At school?

✔ The Torah seems to give a voice to trees, even going so far as to personify them. How does personifying the natural world help children appreciate its value?

✔ Does a tendency to waste or preserve reflect on a person’s morality?

Text 4

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 23a

[Compilation of teachings of 3rd-6th century scholars in Babylonia (Amora’im); final redaction in the 6-7th centuries]

A. Once [Honi] was travelling on the road, and he noticed a man planting a carob-tree. He asked him, "In how many years will this tree bear fruit?" "Seventy years." "Do you think that you will live for seventy years?" The man replied: "I found a world with carob-trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so too, I plant for my children?" [Honi] sat down to eat a sandwich. He then was overtaken by sleep and he slept. A tel formed about him so that he could not be noticed; he slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he observed a man gathering the fruit from the carob-tree; "Did you plant this tree?" "No; I am the grandson of the man that planted it."

B. [Honi] said to him: "It would appear that I have slept for seventy years." He observed that his donkey had given birth to many herds of donkeys. He then went to his home, and asked the people: "Is the son of Honi still alive?" "His son no, but his grandson yes." He then said: "I
am Honi the Circle Maker"; but they would not believe him. He went to the house of study and heard them say: "Today the laws are as clear as in the days of Honi the Circle Maker, for when he would come to the house of study, he would answer any question put to him by the rabbis." Honi went in and said to them: "I am that Honi"; but they would not believe him... He felt sorry and prayed to God that he might die, and so he died.

Analysis – Text 4

This story is often referred to as the Jewish version of Rip Van Winkle. It begins by relating an incident that occurs between Honi ("the Circle Maker") and a man who is planting a carob tree. Honi was a pre-Tannaitic scholar; he was known for his ability to perform miracles, as well as for his scholarly acumen. Based on the stories related about him, especially an incident in which he was asked to pray for rain (Mishnah, Ta’anit 3: 4), he could also be forceful and brash.

In this story, Honi cannot comprehend why the man would bother to plant a tree that would definitely not bear fruit during the planter’s lifetime. The man calmly responds
that he is returning the favor done him by his ancestors for having planted the trees by planting for the benefit of future generations.

At this point in the story, Honi falls into a deep sleep. When he awakens seventy years later he finds that the man’s grandchildren are now enjoying the fruits of his labor. Honi then begins to revisit the places that formed the core of his life: his home and the house of study. In both places his claim that he is Honi is met with disbelief and incredulity. When he happens to overhear in the house of study that his reputation is still alive with the present generation of scholars, he goes in and reveals himself to be Honi. When they refuse to believe him he wishes for his own demise.

This story, especially the first half (A), is often used today as the basis for a Jewish approach to the environment. Apparently, Honi is puzzled by the man’s selflessness: why invest time and energy in something for which he will certainly gain no benefit? The man’s action and response reflect current environmental attitudes: he enjoyed and benefited from the fruit trees that were around during his lifetime; therefore, he felt compelled to replenish the natural resource that he had used. Like the midrash in Text 1, the carob tree planter comprehends well the importance of future thinking. Like Adam there, if the tree planter does not care and protect the world now, there will be no one to replace the damaged world in the future. And, as emphasized in Text 2, it is specifically the carob tree, a fruit tree, which is the focus of attention.

This part of the story is enticing in its imaginative quality. A trip into the future provides a hindsight perspective on how the actions people take now impact the future. The story provides a nice basis for parents and children to talk about the earth and its resources. Some resources are used constantly, like water and oil, while some are used less frequently. Some can be replenished through planting and other means, while other resources once used are impossible to renew. Parents and children can brainstorm ways they can act as the man did in the story: what are ways that they can begin to prepare for future generations? What limited resources can they, together as a family, begin to conserve so that future generations can enjoy them as well?
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The second half of the story (B) is rarely quoted. It presents a more complicated dimension to the tale, and one that is less appropriate for children, especially the end. And, yet, it too offers an important perspective on how today’s parents can view their role vis-à-vis their children. In the first half of the story Honi was clearly dismayed at the man’s willingness to invest in the future. In the second half of the story Honi becomes extremely depressed when no one in the future will acknowledge his existence or credit him with the role he played in enriching their lives (his great-grandchildren are alive because he fathered their grandparents; the rabbis in the beit midrash are able to elucidate halakhah because of the learning that he contributed).

But why was he not at least happy to see that his efforts in his life paid off in the future? Granted that no one recognized him nor believed his wild story (who would?), but why was he not satisfied with what could only be termed as having lived a successful life? Perhaps his disappointment stemmed from the fact that unlike the man who planted the carob tree, he did not see his learning or his childrearing as a contribution to the future; he viewed those achievements as his own, belonging to himself. Therefore, he was not satisfied at knowing that the symbolic seeds which he had planted had actually come to fruition: his grandchildren had gone on to have their own children, and his teachings had been preserved and continued to be discussed. Instead of feeling content at knowing that the efforts he had made during his lifetime had had a lasting effect, he felt depressed, and wanted to die.

Perhaps the rabbis intended to use this story to present an antidote to Honi’s perspective. The man who planted the tree saw his relationship with the world as a temporary one; the world and its resources were not his to keep, or to do with as he wished. His role was to keep it as it was kept before he was born—he was but a link in a long chain. When applied to the second half of the story, the same holds true with other aspects of life as well. The ideas one develops and the children one rears are not personal belongings. They are contributions one makes to society. Honi’s teachings did not belong to him personally—once taught, they became the basis for future teaching and learning. In this way, when parents raise and teach their children, they are replenishing society with future adults who will likewise contribute
and give back to the world. Both parts of the story reflect a unified message. Protecting this Eden means ensuring the continuance of many facets – natural and physical resources, children and adults who are contributing members of society, and ideas that teach the world how to sustain itself physically and morally. Ultimately, when parents help their children understand their responsibility to the future, they are simultaneously teaching them to be contributing members of society as well.

Questions for Discussion:

- What would the world look like if Honi took a trip to the future today?
- How can imagining a trip to the future help parents and children talk about their own actions today?
- If Honi had taken the man’s perspective, would he still have been depressed? Why did Honi want to die?

Text 5

Dr. Jeremy Benstein, Bein Adam Le’Olom? Jewish Legal and Moral Categories Regarding Nature

[Fellowship director of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership in Tel Aviv]

We do indeed take on commitments in the name of future generations, and responsibilities to them, as it says in Deuteronomy 29: 13-14: “I make this covenant not with you alone, but... [also] with those who are not with us here this day.” The world, like the Torah, is both a bequest that we have inherited from those that have come before, and a birthright we are holding in safekeeping for those that will come after us.


Analysis – Text 5

According to Jewish tradition, there are many ways of categorizing mitzvot. One well known way is to look at mitzvot in terms of whether they deal with the relationship
between people and God (mitzvot bein adam laMakom, מתווה בינ אדם ואמקום), or whether they deal with interpersonal relationships (mitzvot bein adam laChaveiro, מצות בינ אדם לבני). Taken from previous lessons, an example of the first type is prayer, and an example of the second is haknasat orchim (הכנת אורות, hospitality).

Benstein asserts that perhaps a third category can be included: bein adam laOlam (MouseButton bein adam לাולם)—mitzvot that address the human relationship with the physical world. The notion of bal tashchit would clearly fit into this new category, as would the ethic displayed by the man who planted the tree in Honi’s story. According to Benstein, taking on the tree planting man’s perspective is a natural outgrowth of Jewish thought. The Torah explicitly states that the covenant between God and the Israelites was one that would hold for all time, beyond the lives of the people who were physically present at revelation. It also makes clear the notion that the Torah was something inherited from our ancestors, to be bequeathed, in turn, to future generations. Thus, seeing ourselves as a link in a long chain of passed down ideas is not new to Judaism, and is a perspective that can easily be applied to maintaining and protecting the Earth for the future.

Creating that sensitivity and being able to acknowledge a human imperative to care for the world obligates parents in two ways: educating children to be aware of the shared responsibility to the environment, and raising them to be the kind of adults who see themselves duty bound to contribute to society and to community.

Part I of this lesson has examined “Eden” as a metaphor for the physical world, and focused on how Judaism views the human’s responsibility to protect it, as the man who planted the carob tree did.

Part II of the lesson looks at “Eden” as a metaphor for children; children represent the future, and protecting that future means teaching them and encouraging them to see their own actions as positively affecting society and the world. Children need to be raised understanding their role in protecting the future.
Questions for Discussion:

❖ What other mitzvot could be seen as being part of Benstein’s new category of bein adam laOlam?
❖ How does the notion of passing the Torah on to future generations feed into the idea of protecting the environment for the future?

SECTION II  EDEN = CHILDREN

Text 6

Mishnah, Tractate Avot 3: 17

[Compilation of teachings of 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE scholars in Eretz Yisrael (Tanna’im); compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi]

When a person’s wisdom exceeds his good deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree with many branches but few roots. A wind blows, uproots it, and topples it over, as it is written, “He shall be like a desert scrub that never thrives but dwells unwatered in the wilderness, in a salty, solitary land” (Jeremiah 17:6)

However when a person’s good deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may he be compared? To a tree with few branches but with many roots. All the winds of the world may blow against it, yet they cannot move it from its place, as it is written, “He shall be like a tree planted by the waters that spreads its roots by the stream. Untouched by the scorching heat, its foliage remains luxurious. It will have no concern in a year of drought and will not cease from bearing fruit” (ibid. 17:8)

1 In some editions of Avot this passage is numbered 3: 22.
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Analysis – Text 6

This Mishnah explicitly makes the comparison between people and trees. While learning, education, and the development of ideas are all important, Judaism has always placed the greater emphasis on actions and deeds. A person can be brilliant, but if her contribution to her community and society are outweighed by her learning and intellectualism, then she is compared to a tree that will not endure. The tree that will surely survive through the generations is the one that has strong roots. So it is with people: the ones who contribute and take action in the world, are the ones who take root and will never topple.

This Mishnah might offer a way to reread the Honi story in Text 4. The man who took action and planted the carob tree to benefit his future grandchildren was like a tree that could endure the wind—his one act would continue to reap many future positive acts. However, Honi apparently saw things differently. He had not envisioned his learning in terms of planting seeds for future learning; he had viewed his accomplishments as his own. Thus, in the end, he was gripped with a great depression and fatalism; although he was acknowledged by name in the house of study, and was held in high esteem, he could not see the value in actions without being personally acknowledged and recognized.

This Mishnah also offers a way for children to view their own accomplishments and to think about their own goals and objectives. Society tends to reward achievement in many different areas, but should children be encouraged to achieve because of these rewards? The Mishnah would say that those rewards are like the branches that can...
easily be blown away: they look nice at first, but they are temporal. Actions and learning that are directed towards helping society and community may not always be seen, and may not always be rewarded, but they are like the roots that make a tree strong; even though they are hidden, they will endure. The image of the tree in Jewish thought does not just refer to people; as will be seen in Text 7, it can symbolize Torah and the learning and education that parents hand down to their children as well.

Questions for discussion:

- In what way are people like trees and not like flowers or grass?
- What are other ways parents can help their children set priorities so they grow "hidden roots" rather than "outward garlands?"

Text 7

Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan, Planting for the Future

[Contemporary rabbi in the Renewal movement; instructor in Jewish Studies]

Planting for the future is a lot of what parenting is about. Much of what we do day after day has no immediate or obvious effect, and yet the influence of our small, everyday interactions with our children may have great bearing on their futures and even upon the futures of generations yet unborn. “Just as the twig is bent, so the tree is inclined,” says the Book of Proverbs.

By making the effort to create a “small sanctuary” in our homes, we plant the seed of our people’s continuity in the ways of Torah that is called “a tree of life to them that hold fast to it.”


Analysis – Text 7

For Danan, tending to the garden, planting for the future, alludes to the role of parents in raising children. Even the most brief interactions between parents and children can
have an effect on a future parents will never themselves witness. And yet, parents, like
the tree planter, continue to think about these interactions, and to think about how to
teach their children and how to be role models for them despite the fact that they will
never see the final product—the results that will manifest themselves generations
from now.

Danan highlights the symbol of the tree in Judaism as well. The Torah is often
compared to a tree; in many synagogues the congregation sings the verse, “it is a tree
of life to those that hold on to it...” (Proverbs 3: 18), as the Torah is ushered back to
the ark. The image is one that calls to mind the Garden of Eden—Adam and Eve were
expelled from the garden before they could eat from the tree of life. And, yet, the
Torah comes to represent that tree of life: it is a source of morality and ethics that
makes life meaningful. And, like a tree, it is dependable and durable—it lasts through
the generations giving meaning and life. According to Danan, parents help to plant the
seeds for maintaining the Torah’s central role in Judaism by creating a home that
upholds moral and ethical living.

Text 8 offers an example of a group of people who are helping kids learn to take action
that will build strong roots.

Questions for Discussion:

- If parenting is like planting seeds, what are ways that parents can take on the role
  of Adam and the carob tree planter? Describe times when parents find themselves
  more in the role of Honi?
- In what ways is the Torah like a tree of life?
Text 8

Jewish Climate Change Campaign

SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT

'Burning fossil fuels is as if you are burning all of the furniture in your house to stay warm. But you are running out of furniture and it's beginning to stink because of all the smoke. Oh, and the basement is flooding.' That's just one of the metaphors Pesach Stadlin, 31, and the other members of a traveling troupe of teachers used to help get across their Jewish message of sustainability during a two-month odyssey traversing the continental US. The other, biggest, tool is their transportation - a topsy-turvy bus which runs on used vegetable oil.

The bus is a perfect tool for their funky educational message. Stadlin and the other four members of the project converted it to run on used vegetable oil. It has a solar oven on the roof, a worm compost and plants...

[...]

"There's a Jewish phrase about pursuing justice. We can't just sit back and wait for it," Stadlin explained. "We're focusing on the Jews first, so we can get our act together as a tribe and teach other tribes."

The educational idea is to pass along the Jewish Climate Change Campaign pledge, teach about climate change and offer solutions and strategies.

"What kind of light unto the nations do we want to be? We wanted to reach out to Jewish institutions and communities. We helped them form green teams in their institutions, talked to them about energy audits and..."
converting school lawns and sports fields to gardens to grow their own food," he said.

[...]

For Stadlin, environmental messages abound in the Torah. "Joseph foresaw a global climate change. The Torah says there was a drought and a heat wave for the whole world. And what did Joseph do? He prepared during the plentiful years. He put up grain silos for locally grown food - it says in the Torah that it was locally grown. We are in that phase now.

[...]

"Let's say you eat a bag of chips that's been flown around the world to reach you. You are left with this stupid bag at the end that you don't know what to do with. That's a poor design. And that's not how God created Earth. God gave us a manual - the Torah - and placed us in a garden. We believe we are still in that garden. You can wrap it up in concrete but it wants to break through and give us its abundance," Stadlin said.

[...]

"The sun laughs at us as we scrounge around for energy [instead of utilizing its rays]."


**Analysis – Text 8**

Stadlin’s topsy-turvy bus (see above link for a photo) is a great example of how Jewish environmentalism is developing. He and his group use stories from the Torah and Jewish tradition, like the story of Joseph preparing for the famine in Egypt, to support conservation and sustainability. He goes to Jewish schools and communities to teach how they can use the space around them in a more environmentally effective way. And he himself acts as a role model; his bus runs on used vegetable oil and is heated using solar energy. Most importantly, he is helping to protect both aspects of Eden:
personally trying to protect the environment, and simultaneously teaching and encouraging children to take responsibility for the world as well.

Stadlin seems to tie his efforts into the notion of *tikkun olam* (תִּקְוָה עוֹלָם)—the Jewish responsibility to repair the world—to make it a better place. He talks about the importance of pursuing justice and the need for action—Jews cannot sit back and allow the world to deteriorate—they are compelled to act to improve it. He reasons that if he can convince other Jews to model environmentalism and sustainability, then other sectors of society will follow suit.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- In this text, Stadlin seems to connect environmental activism with *tikkun olam*. Do the central goals of Jewish life and living, of *tikkun olam*, evolve with the needs of different generations?
- What role does each Jewish individual and family play in helping to direct what values should be emphasized at any given time in history?
**SUMMARY OF KEY IDEAS**

Some have found the notion of Jewish environmentalism to be somewhat oxymoronic, especially considering passages in the Torah which describe human dominance over nature. However, a deeper examination shows that Jewish tradition advocates the view that the Earth, like the Torah and its teachings, is an inheritance that must be preserved for future generations. The key to that preservation is in raising children who are aware of their responsibility to the Earth and to society in general—children too are part of our Eden that need nurturing and protection.

- This lesson’s **Master Story** highlights that humankind is meant to take an active role in preserving the world’s resources for future generations.
- The ideas that we develop and the children we rear and educate are also part of our investment in the future.
- **Text 1** presents a *midrashic* text which introduces the role of human stewardship, as opposed to dominance, over the natural world.
- **Texts 2 and 3** describe the *mitzvah* of *bal tashchit*—refraining from needless destruction. According to Text 3, conservation and preserving are not only good things to do—they are also moral acts.
- **Text 4** presents a colourful rabbinic story representative of the importance of preserving the world for future generations.
- **Text 5** introduces a new category of *mitzvot*—those that prescribe how one should interact with the natural world. The Earth can be compared to the Torah—we inherited it from our ancestors, and it is our job to ensure that it is passed down intact to the next generations.
- Children are like nature: they need to be nurtured through education and role modeling in how to care for the world, and in how to grow up as contributing members of society. The educating that parents do now has unforeseen effects on future generations (**Texts 6 & 7**).
- Working towards environmental sustainability and conservation of resources has become an imperative. Jews are compelled to act because of *tikkun olam*—the Jewish imperative to improve the world and to be an example for others. (**Text 8**)
CONDUCTING THE LESSON

SECTION I – EDEN AS THE EARTH

Part I – Master Story (approximately 10 minutes)
- Genesis Chapter 2 describes the Garden of Eden and the responsibilities given by God to humankind in terms of preserving it.
- If the Garden is a metaphor for the entire earth, then human beings are established from the beginning to be guardians of the earth.

Part II – Human Stewardship, not Domination (Text 1 – approximately 10 minutes)
- How does the notion of bal tashchit translate into moral living?
  ▶ If time is short, skip this text and focus on Part III instead

Part III – Bal Tashchit, a moral imperative (Texts 2 & 3 – approximately 15 minutes)
- How does the notion of bal tashchit translate into moral living.
  ▶ If time is limited, summarize Text 2 orally and focus on Text 3.

Part IV – Text 4 – Providing for the Future – The Story of Honi HaMe'agel (approximately 20 minutes)
- Set the scene by describing Honi and his reputation.
- Spend time discussing Honi’s response versus the man’s response.
  ▶ What was the difference in their attitudes?
  ▶ Ask students how they would respond to the man planting the carob tree and to finding oneself in the future.
  ▶ If one could see the future, what things would one want to change about the present?

Part V – Planning for the future: A Jewish Idea (Text 5 – approximately 10 minutes)
- Discuss the notion of the Earth as an inheritance and how that perspective alters the way people view their responsibility to the world.
SECTION II – EDEN AS OUR CHILDREN

Part VI – Raising the Future (Texts 6, 7, 8 – approximately 20 minutes)

- Trees, their roots and branches serve as a metaphor for the way we live, the way we raise our children to live.
- Planting for the future is a useful metaphor for parenting. Preserving the world and educating about how to do that is considered by some to be an aspect of being a light unto the nations.

Conclusion (5 minutes)
KEY TERMS

**Bal Tashchit.** [A warning not to destroy] The biblical commandment to refrain from wasting any resource which has legitimate human value. This principle is based on the passage in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 which prohibits the needless destruction of trees during wartime, but was extended in the Oral Tradition to include all forms of wastefulness.

**Eden.** The Garden of Eden. The abode of Adam and Eve. In rabbinic literature it is understood as the place where the righteous dwell in the afterlife.

**Midrash Rabbah.** Homiletic and midrashic material compiled on the biblical text, mainly in the land of Israel, from the 3rd to 10th centuries. It is largely a record of popular sermons delivered by the rabbis to comfort and instruct the general public. Extant on the Torah and the five Megilot, its material preserves much of the oldest homiletic and exegetic traditions of the Jewish people.

**Sefer HaChinukh.** Book listing the 613 commandments and their reasons according to their order of appearance in the Torah. The book was written in the 13th century and is attributed to Rabbi Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona.

**Tikkun Olam.** (Lit., “mending the world”) Originally a rabbinic legal term referring to special enactments designed to improve the conditions of Jewish life. It also appears in the Alenu prayer—part of Malchuyot and recited daily. In the liturgy and in contemporary works of Jewish thought the term is used more in a messianic sense and refers to the ultimate perfection of the world through the emphasis on social justice and gemilut chasadim.
KEY NAMES

Benstein, Jeremy. The educational director of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Center for Nature Studies in Israel, a non-profit educational foundation dedicated to promoting an environmental ethic rooted in cultural and spiritual sources. He received his doctorate in anthropology and environmental thought at Hebrew University and lives in Jerusalem. He is a native of Toledo, Ohio.

Danan, Julie Hilton. Danan received ordination from the Aleph Alliance for Jewish Renewal and is well known for developing the field of Jewish family education. She is also an instructor of Modern Jewish Studies at California State University, Chico.

Honi HaMe'agel. (Hebrew for “Honi the Circle-maker”; pronounced “Choni”) 1st century BCE. At that time, a variety of religious movements and splinter groups developed amongst the Jews in Judea. A number of individuals claimed to be miracle workers in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha, the ancient Jewish prophets. He was one such individual, whom the Mishnah relates was famous for his ability to successfully pray for rain.
RETELLING THE MASTER STORY

_The Garden of Eden_

Back when God made the Earth, God looked down and saw that there was no one to take care of it.

So God reached down into the ground and scooped up some stuff from the earth. He took the stuff from the earth into his hands and formed it into a person. But the person just lay there on the ground like a lump of clay.

There was no life in him. So God bent down again and breathed into the person – called Adam - and Adam became alive!

Adam’s body was made from the earth, but his life came from the breath of God.

Then God planted a garden in the east of Eden for Adam to live in. And since God is God, He is a pretty good gardener. He planted all kinds of trees in His garden; apple trees, and pear trees, banana trees and mango trees, fig trees and who knows what other kinds of trees in his garden. God wanted to make sure there were plenty of good things to eat. (Don’t ask me why he didn’t plant any candy trees!)

Gardens need water to grow, so God took extra care to make sure that there would plenty of water. There were four big rivers that ran through the Garden of Eden. The four rivers are the Pishon River, the Gihon River, the Tigris River and the Euphrates River. The rivers brought a stream of clear, cool water to flow through the middle of the garden to water it and keep it green.
In the middle of the garden God also planted two special trees. One was called the Tree of Life, and the other was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Then God brought Adam to the garden and he told him, "Take care of my garden. You may eat the fruit of any of the trees that I have made to grow there. But be careful. Do not eat any of the fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If you eat any of that fruit, you will be sent out of the garden forever."

So Adam began to live and work in the garden God had made for him. The garden was a wonderful, beautiful place.

Honi Ha-Meagel Sleeps for Seventy Years

A long time ago, there lived in Israel a man named Honi-Ha-Meagel. He was a very wise man.

One spring day, Honi went for a walk. “What a lovely sunny day it is today,” he thought to himself.

He noticed that there were people in the fields planting vegetables and fruit trees. As he passed by a pretty little house, he saw an old man planting a tree.

“Why would such an old man be planting a tree?” he wondered. “It takes a very long time for fruit trees to grow, and planting is hard work. He might not even be around when the tree is big enough to give fruit.”

Then Honi said aloud, “Excuse me sir, but what kind of tree are you planting?”

“This sapling is a carob tree,” said the man. “I love to eat carob on Tu B’Shevat. In about seventy years, this tree will produce carobs good enough for eating.”
“Do you think that you will live seventy more years and be able to eat the carob fruit?” asked Honi.

The man looked surprised. “Oh, no! but I remember seeing carob trees growing when I was a little boy. I ate some of those carobs on Tu B’Shevat. They were so delicious! Those carob trees were planted by those who wanted to leave a gift for younger people. I am planting this tree as a gift for the people who will be living seventy years from now. Then they can enjoy eating carob on Tu B’Shevat too. Just as my parents and grandparents planted trees for me, so I plant trees for my children and grandchildren.”

That’s a very smart thing to do,” said Honi, and he continued his walk. After a short while, he began to feel very tired.

“I’ll just rest for a few moments,” he thought as he sat down on the ground. “Maybe I’ll close my eyes for a while. I’ll eat my lunch when I wake up.”

Honi stretched out on the ground, closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep. While he slept, a wonderful thing happened. A rock appeared nearby. It grew bigger and bigger. After a while, it began to surround Honi. Then it grew into the shape of a tent, with Honi inside. The tent protected him from the wind, from the rain, from the cold and from the hot sun. Honi slept very comfortably inside the tent. He slept on and on for a very long time. He slept during the winter. He slept during the summer. He slept when it was raining. He slept when the sun was shining. He slept and slept. He slept for seventy years!

One day, the tent that covered Honi began to shrink. It grew smaller and smaller until it did not cover him anymore. Honi woke up. He looked around. He stretched and stretched.
“What a good nap I had!” said Honi, his arms out wide and his mouth yawning. “I must have slept for a long time.”

Honi noticed a man picking carobs from a tree nearby. This man was not the one to whom Honi had spoken earlier.

Honi stood up and walked over to the man. “Did you plant this tree?” he asked.

“No,” answered the man. “My grandfather planted it seventy years ago.”

“I can’t believe it,” Honi said to himself. “I must have been sleeping for seventy years!”

“I’m going to plant a carob tree also,” said the man. “See, I have a sapling all ready to plant. Someday my children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy carobs just as I do.”

Honi remembered the words of the old man. “Just as my parents and grandparents planted trees for me, so do I plant trees for my children and grandchildren.”

TIKKUN OLAM

Themes and Major Ideas

- The world is a gift to humankind. We must not ruin or destroy the world.
- Tikkun Olam refers to the practice of caring for the world for future generations.
- Jews should strive to be a light unto the nations and should demonstrate to others how to help save the world’s environment.
- Bal Tashchit refers to the Torah commandment of “not wasting” (This commandment stems from the Torah’s prohibition against cutting down fruit trees during times of war).

Topics for Discussion with Children

- It is our God-given job to take care of the world.
- As Tu biShevat, the “birthday” or “new year of the trees” approaches, it is important for us to be thankful for all that trees do for us, and for us to take care of both the trees and the world around us.
- The Torah teaches us the commandment of Bal Tashchit. Reusing and recycling are ways that all of us can fulfill this mitzvah.
Ages 2-5

Dear Tree by Dora Weber
Through clear, interesting illustrations, this book shows the many benefits which trees bestow upon us, and models different ways in which we can take care of and express our gratitude towards the trees.

Joseph Had Little Overcoat by Simms Tabak.
Emphasizes the need to recycle and reuse. Rather than discard his beloved overcoat, Joseph continually recycles it. He skillfully reshapes and reuses it until not a stitch remains of the original coat.

Ages 3-6

Something from Nothing by Phoebe Gilman.
A story which illustrates the many benefits of recycling. Joseph’s grandfather helps young Joseph find ways to continually recycle and reuse his wonderful baby blanket. Each time Joseph’s grandfather cuts and refashions the blanket; the family of mice who live underneath Joseph’s house pick up the scraps of material and use them to create some new additions to their home.

Sammy Spider’s First Day of School by Sylvia Rouss.
A Sammy Spider story which teaches about respect for animals and emphasizes the necessity of protecting all living creatures. When Sammy accompanies Josh to school, he plays happily in the classroom until his presence is discovered by several of Josh’s classmates. A few frightened classmates demand that someone step on the spider, but Josh reminds his classmates that we must never hurt any of God’s creatures.

Ages 6-12

A beautiful legend that speaks of the necessity of caring for and respecting all living creatures. Hoping to impress and demonstrate his cleverness to the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon promises to build her a palace made of bird beaks. Although all of the birds are willing to give their beaks to Solomon, one small bird, the hoopoe, reminds Solomon of how important a beak is to a bird and how devastated the birds will be without their beaks. Thanks to the riddles which the hoopoe poses to Solomon, Solomon realizes that even though he is a powerful king, he must never misuse his power and hurt other creature.

Watch Abigail Grows a Tree. Abigail plants a small tree in honor of Tu Bishvat and is fearful that it won’t grow.

Also: Planting a tree. A young girl in Turkey plants a tree with her grandfather illustrates the concept of generations providing for generations yet to come.
SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS


For more information about the *topsy-turvy bus* and related environmental activities see: [http://jclimatebus.wordpress.com/](http://jclimatebus.wordpress.com/) and [www.jewishclimatecampaign.org](http://www.jewishclimatecampaign.org) (both viewed on June 13, 2012)

STORIES AND ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN


