

Divrei Hokhmah

The Environment

Guidelines

Hard to believe, but this is year five of the WLCJ *Divrei Hokhmah* initiative. We started out slowly, but each year gained momentum as more sisterhoods joined in the process of using a brief study session to begin meetings. There is *no better way* to involve your women than to warm them up with a spirited discussion about issues of importance. This year's environmental theme is relevant and, we hope, thought-and-action-provoking.

This *Divrei Hokhmah: The Environment* material is designed as a brief 10-minute (or less – or more!) prelude to your sisterhood and/or region meetings. In addition to the lively conversation and social interaction that they can generate, women will be fulfilling at least two mitzvot -- study and environmental responsibility -- two of Judaism's most revered values.

Why the environment?

First, environmental issues are front-and-center on both the national and local agendas. As we moderns are genuinely concerned about our own health and survival on the increasingly distressed planet Earth, we are even more anxious about its future as we hand it over to our children and grandchildren. With these mini-study sessions we can read and discuss texts about our stewardship of the earth (the first instruction given to human beings) as well as a variety of views – from the Rabbis, Zionist poets, and even Cree Indians -- on nature and the environment.

This year's topic has double appeal. It also reflects the Torah Fund Campaign theme of “*L'avdah ul'shamrah* -- to plant and protect,” God's instruction to Adam when he was placed in the garden, in Genesis 2:14. This directive is part of our ongoing covenant with the Creator, making *us* partners in the process of creation; we are all shareholders in its continued success.

Format

- The format is constantly being refined to maximize its accessibility for leaders and participants. **Anyone can lead the discussion.**
- This year's material contains 11 separate texts, from which you are free to choose.
- There are fewer questions, and they require *very little* prior preparation by the discussion leader.
- ***This year's innovation:*** each unit has an environmentally focused action plan that is complementary to the topic.

Getting organized

- At the beginning of the calendar year, decide which women you want to lead the discussion each month.
- If you have different leaders, give each a copy of the guidelines.

- Before each meeting, make enough photocopies of the Participants Texts so that everyone has her own. Do not rely on having one copy read aloud. It is critical that each woman has the material in front of her. Because some of the passages are long, it is important that women can read them over while discussing the issue.
- A printed text will also allow the participants to take home important resource material: texts, websites of interest, action plans, etc.

Order of study

- Many of the text selections are appropriate (and clearly indicated) for specific holidays or observances: Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Chanukkah, Tu B'Shevat (Honi), Yom Haatzmaut and Earth Day.

General guidelines

- Read over the lesson before-hand and decide which questions you will discuss.
- Keep your eye on the clock. Time goes very quickly!
- Request that answers be kept short and ask people not to repeat what was already said.
- While we have provided some answers, they are not the only ones, or even the best ones.
- Encourage your presenters to think up additional questions.
- Encourage discussion. In text study, there is room for interpretation.
- Always thank everyone for their enthusiasm, insight and wisdom.

Thank you for your participation in this exciting project. We would love to hear your comments.

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President

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(First meeting for the High Holidays)

Renewing Our Pledge Tikkun Olam 5770

Introduction: As we approach this season of repentance and renewal, we might want to focus on realistic goals that have the power to yield both spiritual and practical benefits. They are goals that will benefit us individually – ourselves and our families – and improve our local communities and the world at large.

We can dedicate ourselves to a renewed commitment to our stewardship of the world – focusing on the “olam” of tikkun olam.

Leader: There is a famous midrash which Jewish environmentalists are fond of quoting:

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.”

Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, I on Ecclesiastes 7:13

Discussion Question: *What are some of the realistic goals of environmental responsibility that we might set for ourselves this forthcoming year?*

The most important aspect of this commitment is to pick something – however modest – and fulfill it, unswervingly and with a full heart. As we become comfortable with this behavioral change, more can be added.

ACTION PLAN: Take a carbon footprint test that you can access from numerous websites, several of which are listed below. Once you have a handle on your personal information (and you will be shocked!), you can then decide what action you want to take for this year of 5770.

Shanah tovah!

http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind_calculator.html
<http://www.nature.org/initiatives/climatechange/calculator/>

(Sukkot: 5-6 minutes)

Sukkot: Why the Four Species?

Introduction: All of the explanations about the four species used with the lulav are lovely, poetic midrashim. The explanations are meant to impart a feeling of spiritual connection to the holiday of Sukkot. But there is a pragmatic explanation as well, which has consequences for the environment.

Let's look at the Sukkot symbols – important to Jews from antiquity to the present – through a modern prism. [*Ask for readers for each point.*]

Sukkot is about water. Every day in ancient Israel the priests poured water on the altar and offered prayers about the blessings of water. The four species of the lulav are all about water, too.

- **lulav**, the date palm, was the most water-loving plant of the desert
- **myrtle** (*hadass*) requires the most water of mountain plants
- **etrog** among fruit trees, the etrog requires the most rain to grow
- **“willow of the brooks”** (*arvei nachal*) are synonymous with abundant water, growing often with their roots directly in the streams

Each of these species represents one of the primary habitats of the land of Israel: desert, mountains, lowlands (*sh'feilab*), river or riparian habitats. Together, they make a bio-regional map of Israel, and they hold in the greatest abundance the rains of the year that has passed.

Bringing these four together, we wave them in all directions, up and down, side to side, praying that the coming year will again bring enough water for each of these species to grow and thrive, and with them all the species of each habitat.

Leader: *At Sukkot we pray for the climate, for the stability and the sufficiency of the rain and sun on which every living being depends.*

ACTION PLAN: Help decorate your synagogue's sukkah, or your own, a friend's or a relative's. Be thankful for the bounty we celebrate at this time, and recite the proper *berakbah*.

Hang tapestries, nuts, almond, peaches, pomegranates, branches of grapes, vines, fine meal, wreaths of ears of corn [on your Sukkah]

Talmud Betzah 30b

(November meeting, prior to Chanukkah)

The Eight Days of Chanukkah: Eight Actions to Heal the Earth Through the Green Menorah Covenant

Leader: There are three access opportunities during Chanukkah that invite us to address the planetary dangers of the global climate crisis, what some of us call “global scorching” because “warming” seems so pleasant, so comforting.

We can direct these teachings into actions we take to heal the earth, each of the eight days. [*Ask individuals to read the points below, and the steps for the Green Menorah Covenant.*]

1. **The Talmud’s legend about using one day’s oil to meet eight days’ needs:** a reminder that if we have the courage to change our life-styles to conserve energy, it will sustain us.
2. **The vision of Zechariah, whose prophetic passages we read on Shabbat Chanukkah,** views the seven-branched menorah in the Temple as a living being, uniting the worlds of nature and humanity. The menorah was not only fashioned in the shape of a tree of light, as Torah teaches, but was flanked by two olive trees that fed olive oil directly into it.
3. The image of a powerless community overcoming a great empire gives us courage to face our modern corporate empires of oil and coal when they defile our most sacred temple: Earth itself. And the reminder (again from Zechariah) that we triumph “Not by might and not by power but by My Spirit [*beruchi*, “My breath” or “My wind”], says the LORD, the Infinite Breath of Life.”

Leader: We are taught not only to light the menorah, but to publicize the miracle, to turn our individual actions outward for the rest of the world to see and to be inspired.

So this Chanukkah, perhaps you might want to join the Green Menorah Covenant for taking action – personal, communal, and political – to heal the earth from the global climate crisis. After lighting your menorah each evening, dedicate yourself to making the changes in your life that will allow our limited sources of energy to last for as long as they’re needed, and with minimal impact on our climate.

No single action will solve the global climate crisis, just as no one of us alone can make enough of a difference. Yet, if we act on as many of the areas below as possible, and act together, a seemingly small group of people can overcome a seemingly intractable crisis.

We can, as in days of old, turn this time of darkness into one of light.

ACTION PLAN: Leader will dispense copies of the Green Menorah Covenant for families to use during their Chanukkah candle-lighting.

The Eight Days of Chanukkah: Eight Actions to Heal the Earth Through the Green Menorah Covenant

Day 1: Personal/Household: Call your electric-power utility to switch to wind-powered electricity. (For each home, 100% wind-power reduces CO₂ emissions the same as not driving 20,000 miles in one year.)

Day 2: Synagogue, Hillel, or JCC: Urge your congregation or community building to switch to wind-powered electricity.

Day 3: Your network of friends, IM buddies, and members of and civic or professional groups to which you belong: Connect with people like newspaper editors, real-estate developers, architects, bankers, etc. to urge them to strengthen the green factor in all their decisions, speeches, and actions.

Day 4: Automobile: If possible, choose today or one other day a week to not use your car at all. Other days, lessen driving. Shop on-line. Cluster errands. Carpool. Don't idle engine beyond 20 seconds.

Day 5: Workplace or college: Urge the top officials to arrange an energy audit. Check with utility company about getting one free or at low-cost.

Day 6: Town/City: Urge officials to require greening of buildings through ordinances and executive orders. Creating change is often easier on the local level!

Day 7: State: Urge state representatives to reduce subsidies for highways, increase them for mass transit.

Day 8: National: Urge your congressmen to strengthen and environmental initiatives.

Make our planet's Chanukkah a happy one!

Adapted from Rabbis Arthur Waskow & Jeff Sultar
<http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1315>

Stewards of the Earth

Introduction: From the beginning of creation, humans were given a very specific task: to care for and protect creation. [*Solicit readers for the following texts.*]

The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to plant it and preserve it (*l'avdah ul'shamrah*).

Genesis 2:15

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."

Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, I on Ecclesiastes 7:13

Discussion Questions:

How does the midrashic text (written hundreds of years after the biblical text) complement the Bible text?

How is it different? What might account for the difference?

Are these texts relevant? Are they usable?

ACTION PLAN: Support Jewish environmental organizations:

- COEJL <http://www.coejl.org/index.php>
- The Teva Learning Center <http://tevalearningcenter.org/>
- Hazon <http://www.hazon.org/>
- Green Faith <http://www.greenfaith.org/about/larry.html>

The Torah Fund theme for 2009-2010 is "*l'avdah ul'shamrah*": to plant and preserve. Support this year's Torah Fund campaign!

A Thorn by Any Other Name...

Leader: Concern about objects and materials harmful to our environment is not an exclusively modern matter; the rabbis of the Talmud were concerned about such issues.

The rabbis taught: The early pious ones (*hasidim rishonim*) would hide their thorns and broken glass three handbreadths deep in their field, so they wouldn't hold up the plowing. Rav Sheshet would throw his in the fire, and Rava would throw his in the Euphrates River. Rav Yehudah said: "Whoever wants to be a pious person should observe the laws of damages (*nezikin*)."

Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 30a

Leader: *What issues are the rabbis confronting?*

- maintaining a safe environment
- safe disposal of harmful products such as thorns or broken glass (bury, burn, dispose of them far away from the public realm)
- the correlation between piety and preservation of the environment. Rabbinic laws of damages regulate not only injury inflicted by people or their animals, but also the environment as a means of damage (a pit) or harmful objects such as glass shards, sharp objects.

Leader: *How does this talmudic discussion apply to our environmental challenges today?*

- our environment is polluted by waste and negligence; today's shards and thorns are dioxins and petrochemicals
- we need to educate ourselves about these hazardous materials
- we need to promote public regulation of hazardous waste
- we need to recognize our ethical responsibility to preserving the environment

ACTION PLAN: Research and then support products that are environmentally responsible, and conversely, boycott those that are not.

Experiment with recipes for your own environmentally sound household cleaners.

Window & Glass Cleaner

2 teaspoons distilled white vinegar
1 quart warm water
spray bottle

Mix well, spritz on windows and wipe with a soft cotton towel or newspaper to clean.

(10 minutes)

Dueling Views of Nature

Leader: *Should we assume that Judaism is of one voice about the environment?*

Leader: *Let's read two statements, one from the rabbis and one from a modern Zionist.*

Rabbi Yaakov taught: One who reviews his studies while strolling and interrupts his studies to remark, "What a beautiful tree," or "What a lovely field," is considered as having committed a capital offense.

Pirkei Avot 3:9

And when you, O human, will return to Nature, that day your eyes will open, you will stare straight into the eyes of Nature and in its mirror you will see your image. You will know ... that when you hid from Nature, you hid from yourself... We who have been turned away from Nature -- if we desire life, we must establish a new relationship with Nature.

Mivhar Ketavim, 57-58, by A.D. Gordon (1856-1922), Zionist thinker

Leader: *What is Rabbi Yaakov's teaching on the enjoyment of nature?*

- *Talmud/torah keneged kulam:* (The study of Torah supersedes everything)
- even the appreciation of nature cannot interrupt Torah study; it is sinful

Leader: *What does A.D. Gordon say about nature?*

- people are part of nature
- people must live in harmony with nature
- in setting ourselves apart from nature, we are out of touch with ourselves
- people (i.e. Jews) must reconnect with the land in order to hasten the redemption of the Jewish people

Discussion Question: *How might we reconcile these two views today?*

Notes on A. D. Gordon

Born in Polodlia, Russia, A. D. Gordon was involved in the early Zionist movement. He immigrated to Palestine, settling first in Petah Tikvah and later in Degania. He believed that the physical work of the land would hasten redemption for himself and the Jewish people, that labor created an organic interrelationship between the man, the land and the culture.



ACTION PLAN: Plant a tree in a public space: your synagogue or community, maybe even in honor of A. D. Gordon.

(Recommended for March meeting)

Earth Day: Here's to You, Kids...

Leader: *The following is a famous story from the Talmud. While it might, at first blush, seem to be a simple story, its message is not.*

Honi the Circle Maker

Many years ago in the land of Israel, there lived a man called Honi, the Circle Maker. Sometimes Honi would talk to God, asking God for rain for the hot, parched land while standing inside a circle he had drawn on the ground. Hence the name, Honi the Circle Maker.

One day Honi was walking along the road, when he saw a man planting a tree. He asked the man, "How long until the tree you are planting will give you something to eat?"

"Seventy years," said the man.

"So *why* are you planting that tree? Do you *really* think you will be around to eat its fruit in 70 years?" asked Honi.

"I don't know," said the man. "But I do know that I found trees with fruit that someone else planted a long time ago. I want to plant trees so my children will find trees with fruit, as I did."

Leader: *What is the relationship between the story of Honi the Circle Maker and the following statement by Gaylord Nelson, former governor of Wisconsin and co-founder of Earth Day*?*

The ultimate test of man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard.

ACTION PLAN: Announce well in advance that you are going to have a synagogue-wide collection of plastic bags on April 22. Take all of the collected bags to a recycling location recommended within your community.

***Earth Day**, celebrated in the US on April 22, is a day designed to inspire awareness and appreciation for the earth's environment. It was founded by U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisconsin) as an environmental teach-in in 1970 and is celebrated in many countries every year. This date is spring in the northern hemisphere and autumn in the southern hemisphere.

Abraham Joshua Heschel The Wonders of Nature

Leader: Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most prominent Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary for several decades, influencing generations of rabbis and educators. He believed that the cultivation of reverence and awe is one of the great contributions of religious traditions.

References to the goodness of creation are found in many of our daily prayers. Of this Heschel wrote:

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a *legacy of wonder*. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to *take things for granted*. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin...The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. [*emphasis Heschel's*]

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pages 43, 46

Discussion Questions: *How do we develop this will to wonder?*

How can Heschel's belief about wonder bolster the environmental cause?

Answers might include:

- through prayer and acknowledgment of the wonders of creation, we direct our attention to what is going on around us
- indifference hardens us to beauty as well as to devastation
- the ability to express wonder is a source of contentment and happiness

ACTION PLAN: There are many *berakhot* that Jews can recite daily expressing wonder over the blessings of nature, such as the creation of fragrant trees, plants, spices, beauty, food (bread), grains, grapes, fruit, seeing wonders of nature, and many more.

Commit to reciting at least one *berakhab* daily in appreciation for God's bounty. [It can be done silently, by yourself, or with others around to respond "amen." For a list of some of these *berakhot*, consult the Mitzvah Yomit card included in this year's Women's League Calendar Diary.]

(Spring meeting, near Yom Haatzmaut)

Rachel (1890-1931) **Founding Mother of Modern Hebrew Poetry**

Leader's Introduction:

Into the 20th century, Jewish poetry, like most other Jewish writing, was the domain of men. From the Renaissance through the flowering of modern Hebrew poetry –that produced Bialik and Tchernichowsky – no female poets emerged despite the fact that poetry was very popular with women. It was only in the 1920s that women began to write serious poetry, with intellectual intent, in Hebrew.

Rachel Bluwstein, born in Russia in 1890 – one of the few Jewish women known by her first name (like Golda or Mathilde) -- is rightfully considered the “founding mother” of modern Hebrew poetry. In 1910 Rachel and her sister Shoshana immigrated to Palestine where she began working in agriculture.

She joined Kevutzat Deganyah, where she published her first Hebrew poem in the prestigious literary journal *HaShiloach* in 1920. It was not only the first poem written by a woman to be published in the journal since its creation, but was in fact the first poem by a professed woman poet in modern Hebrew poetry. Like other Zionist poets, Rachel tied her love of nature to the return to the Land of Israel where religion, per se was abandoned, but the secularized product was infused with spirituality.

Thus she writes in one of her most famous poems:

Land of mine, I have never sung to you nor glorified your name with heroic deeds/or the spoils of battle/all I have done is plant a tree/on the silent shores of the Jordan.

Discussion Question:

How is Rachel's celebration of the land of Israel a departure from those of the past?

- past glorifications were of military (or intellectual) heroes (Moses, Joshua, Samson, David, Bar Kochba, rabbinic heroes, spiritual leaders, etc.)
- the East European model was also one of military heroism and conquest
- heroism to the *haluzim* (pioneers) was in the physical reclamation of the land, making it habitable and able to provide nourishment, pleasure and shade

Do you think that Rachel's poetry still resonates in the modern state of Israel?

ACTION PLAN: If your synagogue is going to have a Yom Haatzmaut celebration, save some of the trees that Rachel so dearly loved: develop a plan to reduce the use of paper in your sisterhood and synagogue communities. e.g. unnecessary mailings, photocopied song sheets, multiple flyers.

(5 minutes)

Muddying the Waters

Leader: The prophet Ezekiel, who began prophesying during the Babylonian Exile, provides a variety of pronouncements about Jerusalem's doom and its eventual restoration. When predicting the ultimate restoration of Israel, Ezekiel first describes God's displeasure with the bullies within His flock, bullies who diminished its (the nation's) strength and unity, causing it to be scattered abroad. Through Ezekiel, God promises to provide a leader (a new David) who will tend and shepherd the nation with care.

The metaphor is applicable even today, and is one that is embraced by environmentalists.

Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but must you also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but must you also muddy with your feet what is left?

Ezekiel 34:18

Leader: *What images emerge from this prophecy?*

- Sheep grazing
- lush grazing grounds
- trampled grounds, unfit for use
- clear water
- muddy water
- land in abundance
- environment ruined

Leader: *How is this metaphor of a destructive and devastated Israel applicable to us today?*

- God has provided sufficient resources (food and water) for us to survive
- we must be grateful through vigilance of the earth's abundance
- we must leave the land intact for future use

Leader: *What does the image of muddying the waters suggest to you?*

ACTION PLAN: Develop or participate in a project in your synagogue or community that will help to restore neglected or damaged land. Help to create a healthier environment: remove trash, plant a garden or trees, help to restore its usefulness.

(5 minutes)

The Blessings of Civilization?

Introduction: Environmental concerns are timeless, universal, and reflect a pronounced anxiety. Let's look at these statements from two non-Jewish Americans.

*Only when the last tree has been cut down,
Only when the last river has been poisoned
Only when the last fish has been caught,
Only then will you find that money cannot be eaten.*

Cree Indian prophecy

The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Discussion Questions:

- *How do some individuals regard modernity as a challenge to environmental health?*
- *Are compromises with environmental health necessary for progress?*
- *Are they worth it?*

ACTION PLAN: Support organizations that foster awareness and activism on behalf of endangered species.

The National Audubon Society's Endangered Species Campaign helps to enforce the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and to protect endangered species.

<http://www.audubon.org/campaign/esa/>

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has a homepage for its endangered species program.

<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>

The National Wildlife Federation <http://www.nwf.org>

The World Conservation Monitoring Centre provides a searchable database of endangered species and other useful information. <http://www.unep-wcmc.org/>

The Wildlife Conservation Society <http://www.wcs.org/>