

Protecting Rainforests and Indigenous Peoples: Jewish Values and Responsibilities: A lesson plan for adult or teen learning

Goals

Through this session, participants will:

- Gain a greater appreciation for the importance of tropical rainforests
- Deepen their understanding of the threats that rainforest face
- Be able to explain how deforestation increases levels of greenhouse gases
- Learn about the connection between deforestation and human rights for indigenous peoples
- Study Jewish texts that articulate the moral and religious values that can undergird work on behalf of rainforests and indigenous peoples
- Gain motivation for rainforest activism

Opening

Leader: (Distribute copies of the text sheets to all participants) We begin with a brachah (blessing) that is traditionally recited upon seeing trees in blossom for the first time in spring:

(See text one) Blessed are You, Our God, Who rules through time and space, whose world lacks nothing and who fashioned wondrous creations and goodly trees that human beings enjoy.

Example discussion questions:

1. One is supposed to recite this blessing only when seeing at least two trees simultaneously in blossom. What might be the reasoning behind that?
2. One is supposed to recite this blessing the first time one notices trees flowering each year. What is special about the first blossoms and why should we notice them?
3. What are some ways that trees bring blessings and enjoyment to our lives?
4. Do you have any special memories of a particular tree or forest?

Introduction to Rainforests, Deforestation, and the connection to climate change and human rights

Optional – the leader may wish to show a brief video as an lead-in to this subject. Here are some suggestions and links, with the length of the video in minutes and seconds:

Climate 101 – Deforestation: National Geographic – 2:30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic-J6hcSKa8>

Amazon Watch: Standing with Indigenous Peoples, Defending the Rainforest – 5:22

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmaQ1a54_ak

The Hidden Costs of Hamburgers – 7:51

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut3URdEzIKQ&t=81s>

Alternatively or in addition, the leader may wish to give participants a brief “quiz”:

1. What percentage of the world’s land area is covered by tropical rainforests?
 - a. 20%
 - b. 6% (correct)

- c. 30%
 - d. 10%
2. For the past decade, the average area of tropical rainforests that have been deforested is approximately equal to the size of :
 - a. Rhode Island
 - b. Maryland
 - c. Mississippi (correct – over 48,000 sq. miles on average per year)
 - d. Texas
 3. What percentage of the world's species are found in rainforests?
 - a. 6%
 - b. 30%
 - c. 50%
 - d. 80% (correct)
 4. If deforestation were a country, it would have greenhouse gas emissions greater than:
 - a. England
 - b. Germany
 - c. France
 - d. The entire European Union combined (correct)
 5. In contrast, if tropical rainforests are protected and replanted, it would eliminate what percentage of the world's greenhouse gas emissions?
 - a. 10%
 - b. 20%
 - c. 30% (correct)
 - d. 50%
 6. In the Peruvian Amazon, when the rights of indigenous peoples to rainforest land were recognized in 2002, greenhouse gas emissions from those areas went down the following year by:
 - a. 20%
 - b. 40%
 - c. 60%
 - d. 80% (correct)

Leader: Which of these answers most surprised you? Which ones, whether you previously knew the answer or not, do you find especially important? Do you feel more called to action after hearing these answers? Why or why not?

Note: The leader may also wish to review information or graphs from some of the fact sheets in Part I of this packet.

Jewish Values and Rainforest Protection

Note to Leader: This section contains far more texts for discussion than a class can cover even in several hours. Depending on your available time and what values you most want to emphasize, three to five texts should be sufficient. Alternatively, divide the participants into smaller groups, assigning each group one text for deeper reflection. When everyone is gathered back together, each small group can share a few comments about the text they

studied. All the texts in this section are also found (in the same order) on the “Text Sheet for Participants,” without the guiding questions that are found below.

2. Psalm 96:9-13

Bow down to the Eternal majestic in holiness; tremble in God’s presence, all the earth! Declare among the nations, “The Eternal is ruler!” the world stands firm; it cannot be shaken; God judges the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult; let the sea and all within it thunder, the fields and everything in them exult; then shall all the trees of the forest shout for joy at the presence of the Eternal, for God is coming, for God is coming to rule the earth; God will rule the world justly, and its peoples in faithfulness.

Discussion questions: What is the connection between justice and the earth and sea rejoicing? What are some present-day injustices that are making the earth and sea suffer? What do you think it means for a forest to “shout for joy”? What might we do to help tropical rainforests “shout for joy”?

3. Ezekiel 34:17-19

To the rams and the bucks: Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied?”

Discussion questions: Who are today’s “rams and bucks”? What are they trampling and muddying? Who would be God’s flock today? Why do you think Ezekiel portrays God as choosing the weak over the powerful? What does this say about who our society today thinks of as “winners” and “losers”? What can we do to side more with those, like indigenous peoples, who are suffering from the “trampling” of modern-day “rams and bucks”?

4. Rabbeinu Bahya, (Biblical commentator from Spain, 1255-1340) commenting on

Deuteronomy 20:19, which prohibits cutting down fruit trees even in times of war: It is not the actions of a wise and understanding nation to needlessly destroy something so worthy [as a forest], and therefore you should not expend energy to cut down a tree; rather you should protect it from destruction and damage and take blessing and benefit from it.

Discussion questions: Why would an army want to cut down trees in times of war? If you are prohibited from doing so even during war, what does that say about the importance of trees? What would be some examples of wise and unwise actions today? What benefits and blessings come from forests? What steps can you take to help protect forests?

5. Deuteronomy 11:13-21

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Eternal your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your

fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Eternal's anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Eternal is assigning to you. Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates— to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Eternal swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.

Discussion questions: This passage, traditionally recited as the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, was understood as talking about God punishing a society for sinful behavior. How might we reinterpret it in modern times to speak to us about the natural consequences of sinful energy use or deforestation? What are some “false gods” that we worship today, and how do they affect our relationship with life on this planet? What are some “words” that are important for us today to impress upon our heart, and how should we go about impressing them there?

6. Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi (Biblical commentator from Provence, 1280-1345), *Matzref La-Kesef* on Deuteronomy 22:6-7 (a passage describing how one should let the mother bird go when collecting eggs from a nest)

In our pride we foolishly imagine that there is no kinship between us and the rest of the animal world, how much less with plants and minerals. To eradicate this foolish notion God gave us certain precepts, some concerning minerals, others vegetable, others animal, and others human. Above all we are bidden to be compassionate to all other human beings: “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Next in order come our relationships with the animals... for this reason, the Torah commands us to show pity to them, to send away, rather than to capture of harm, the mother bird when we collect eggs. In a descending scale come the precepts governing the plant world, since they are further removed from us. We are forbidden to cut down fruit trees and the like. After this comes the soil and inert matter, which is further removed but still akin to us. Thus the land itself must be rested every seven years. To conclude, the Torah inculcates in us a sense of our modesty and lowliness, so that we should be ever cognizant of the fact that we are of the same stuff as the ass and mule, the cabbage and the pomegranate, and even the lifeless stone.

Discussion questions: What are some ways you feel kinship with animals, plants, soil and minerals? What are ways you feel distant or distinct from them? Why is recognizing our connections and kinship important? How do you think humanity would behave differently if we emphasized such kinship? How would you describe the “pride” that keeps us from feeling kinship? What might encourage us to feel greater kinship with rainforests? With indigenous people?

7. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Leading rabbi of the German Orthodox community, 1808-1888), *Third Letter of Ben Uziel*

One glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all creatures; none is by or for itself, but all things exist in continual reciprocal activity -- the one for the All; the All for the One.

Discussion questions: In what ways do you think nature is a battle for survival? A glorious chain of love? Which do you think is more accurate? What do you think Hirsh might have meant by “reciprocal activity”? What are some examples of that from rainforests? From the realm of human activity?

8. Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 25:3

Rabbi Yehudah ben Shimon began, "'After the Lord your God shall you walk' (Deuteronomy 12:5). But is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to walk after the Holy One... Rather, the Holy One, from the very beginning of the creation of the world, was only occupied with planting first. Hence it is written (Genesis 2:8), 'And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden.' You also, when you enter into the land, only occupy yourselves with planting first. Hence it is written, 'When you shall come to the land, you shall plant.' (Leviticus 19:23)"

Discussion questions: Have you ever thought of God as a gardener or planter of trees? How does planting trees enable us to “walk after God”? Describe something you have done yourself or seen or heard about others doing that you think “walked after God”?

9. Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 23a

One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.

Discussion question: Honi was recognized as a great sage, yet he didn’t understand something that this anonymous old man understood. Why do people, including smart people, sometimes make the same mistake as Honi? How does our society ignore consequences to future generations? What can we do to encourage more thinking about such consequences? How does shortsighted thinking contribute to problems like deforestation?

10. Martin Buber (Jewish philosopher, 1878-1965), from *I and Thou*

I contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground. I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air—and the growing itself in its darkness. I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life. I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law—those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate.

I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it. Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me. This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused. Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its entirety. The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity. Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.

Discussion questions: What do you think Buber meant by “if will and grace are joined?” What does that have to do with making the leap to an I-Thou relationship? Have you ever had an experience such as that Buber describes, when something in nature was encountered not as an object but as something you were in relationship with? What do you think enabled you to experience that, and what might help others have the same experience? How can we have a relationship with forests and people who are halfway across the globe?

Closing

We close with the tradition brachah (blessing) for seeing a beautiful plant or animal (including humans). Ask participants to share memories of something particularly beautiful that they have seen, then recite (text 11) – Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, that it is thus in Your world.

Optional – play a musical version of this blessing “Beauty of the World” copyright 2010, by Sababa. Available on iTunes, or play a video version with lovely nature scenes – 4:10
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZnQKzcs9qI>

Texts for Discussion – Jewish Values for Protecting Rainforests

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3. Ezekiel 34:18-19
Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied?"
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11. Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, that it is thus in Your world.