



SHAVUOT 2020

 Areyvut

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION



Shavuot marks the receiving of the Torah by Moshe (Moses) on Har Sinai (Mount Sinai) and is commemorated by all-night Torah study called a Tikkun Leil Shavuot. While children don't often stay up all night, they can participate by staying up past their usual bedtimes to study Jewish topics or Torah and learn during the day time over Shavuot. This holiday highlights the Jewish value of learning for its own sake, a critical and important value and concept, especially today. We learn Torah not for grades, not for some future career, not to make one's parents happy, but for the simple pleasure of learning and growing from the experience.

This booklet was designed to help those at home over Shavuot, due to COVID-19 and the Coronavirus pandemic, have materials to learn and discuss with their children and/or students. Although the target audience is students, this packet can be a resource and tool that can be used to engage all audiences in meaningful learning, dialogue and reflection, including adults.

The topics - general concepts and particular mitzvot - were selected for their relevance, utility and their connection with Areyvut's work. While designed for Shavuot, this resource can be used by parents and educators throughout the year.

I would like to thank Judith Kuper Jaffe, Talia Rapps and Rena Ray for their help and efforts in bringing this to fruition.

I encourage you to share this with family, friends and colleagues and to please share your feedback with us at info@areyvut.org.

Wishing you and yours a Chag Sameach and an enjoyable and memorable holiday.

Daniel Rothner
Founder & Director

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHAVUOT AND SIMCHAT TORAH

At first glance, the holidays of Shavuot and Simchat Torah are very similar. Shavuot is the day we receive the Torah, while Simchat Torah is the day we celebrate the Torah. Why do we need two separate holidays? Wouldn't the day we receive the Torah be the best time to celebrate it?

There is a parable which may help answer these questions:

There once was a boy who loved riding his bike, and every day he would ride to the same bike shop and admire the sleek, red bike in the display. One day, his father told him that if he practices riding his bike for an hour a day for an entire month, showing his commitment, then he would buy him the red bike. Needless to say, the boy accepted the challenge and practiced every single day to earn the bike of his dreams. When the end of the month arrived, the boy's father took him to the store and the boy brought home his new prized possession. Imagine his joy! The child continued to apply his same work ethic, training every day for months in preparation for the big County Race. When the day of the race arrived, the boy sped past the competition and earned first place. Imagine his sense of accomplishment!

To bring this parable to life, Shavuot and Simchat Torah are each days of extreme joy for the Torah. Shavuot is the day we work hard staying up all night learning Torah to merit receiving it the next day, just as the boy trained hard on his old bike in order to earn the new one, and boy was he happy when he earned it! Simchat Torah is the day we celebrate finishing a cycle of reading the Torah portion each week, just like the boy celebrated winning the big race, showing that all the hard work was worth it.

Each one of us should take to heart that Shavuot is the day we earn the Torah, which is the source of all blessing, by staying up all night and showing how badly we want it. Once we receive the Torah on Shavuot, we follow it up by studying the Torah and showing our commitment to it, accomplishing our goals on Simchat Torah.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is Shavuot?
2. Why do we celebrate Shavuot and why is it significant to the Jewish people?
3. Why is it a custom to stay up and learn all night on the first night of Shavuot?
4. What are the best things to learn on Shavuot night?
5. Why do we divide the Torah into weekly portions?
6. There are many different ways one can learn Torah. What are some examples?
7. What can we do to dedicate more time to learning Torah in the coming year?
8. When we received the Torah, we were all united like 'one person with one heart'. The value and power of unity and cooperation is one of the big lessons that we carry with us today. What are modern day examples of ways that the Jewish people can unite together as one?



TORAH STUDY

In Jewish tradition, studying is not something we do just to become more knowledgeable, or to know how to behave later on in life. Judaism teaches that study is itself a spiritual act. By studying we become closer to God and closer to our ideal vision for ourselves.

We make a blessing before we study Torah to remind ourselves that we are not studying this ancient text just because it is historically significant, literarily magnificent, or because it helps us understand Jewish law. We study Torah because it sanctifies our lives and helps us discover meaning and purpose in life. Studying Torah draws us closer to God.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

The one occupied with the needs of the community is like one who is occupied with matters of Torah.
—Talmud Yerushalmi, Brakhot 5:1

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your favorite Torah portion or story?
2. Why?
3. What does it teach you?
4. Why do we study Torah?
5. Why is it important?
6. Is studying Torah as important/less than other mitzvot?
7. Is other education as important as Torah study?
8. Does this include all Jewish study, or specifically Torah?
9. When does engaging in one mitzvah exempt you from having to perform another Mitzvah?
10. Is serving the community at the same level as Torah study?



MOSHE, AN EXEMPLARY LEADER

Leadership is crucial for thriving as a nation. The Jewish paradigm of leadership is embodied by Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our teacher). Let's analyze what the Torah tells us about his qualifications as a leader and what we may learn from it in order to apply these lessons to our daily lives.

We are told that Moshe was humbler than any other man (Bamidbar 12:3). This quality is crucial because a leader must be solely committed to his people, abandoning self-glory in pursuit of national glory and the welfare of his people.

The Torah also describes how from a very young age, and with limited prior interaction with the Jewish people, Moshe felt a strong connection to them. When Moshe was a lad in Pharaoh's palace, he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jewish slave and he stopped the Egyptian in his tracks. This story is the reason that Moshe was forced to run away from Pharaoh's house. Moshe felt a deep and powerful connection to his people which overcame all reason and caused him to sacrifice everything to save the life of a fellow Jew.

This strong sense of connection toward other Jews is also seen after the sin of the Golden Calf, when God says He will destroy the Jewish people and make Moshe into a great nation (Exodus 32:10). Despite the honor and glory that would come with being a single forefather [Judaism has 3 forefathers, none of which are Moshe], Moshe turns down this offer and tells God to forgive the sin of the Jewish people or else erase him from the Torah (Shmot 32:32). The Talmud lists this as one of 3 instances in which Jewish leaders "flung words at God" (what we would call Chutzpah) (Berachot 31a-b), thus showing the lengths Moshe Rabbeinu went to save the Jewish People.

These instances have the common thread of selflessness and commitment. Moshe was willing to forego the luxuries of Pharaoh's palace and the prestige of having his own nation to protect his people. For our daily lives, each one of us has people that rely on us, whether family, friends, etc., and we must support each other and focus on the common good, as we all rely on each other. In today's day and age, we must look for a leader who is focused on contributing toward the common good, who ignores accolades, and will never give up on his people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is leadership?
2. Are real leaders born or taught?
3. What are the qualities of an effective leader?
4. Who are the important leaders of Judaism?
5. What makes a great Jewish leader?
6. Why do Jewish movements, both historically and in contemporary times, often rely on charismatic individuals as agents of change?
7. How much is leadership defined solely by management skills, and to what degree does it rely on the ability to articulate and embody a vision that will inspire the community?
8. How are today's generation of leaders different?



HIDDUR MITZVAH / BEAUTIFYING A MITZVAH

While our mitzvot demand very concrete requirements, our tradition also teaches about Hiddur Mitzvah/ beautifying a mitzvah. A sukkah must have certain dimensions and must be constructed in a particular manner. The cup for Kiddush must be large enough to hold a specified minimum amount of wine. While some may be satisfied with minimum concrete, measurable standards, the Jewish tradition recognizes and encourages the addition of an aesthetic dimension.

Beauty enhances the mitzvot by appealing to the senses. Beautiful sounds and agreeable fragrances, tastes, textures, colors, and artistry contribute to human enjoyment of religious acts, and beauty itself takes on a religious dimension. The principle of enhancing a Mitzvah through aesthetics is called Hiddur Mitzvah.

The concept of Hiddur Mitzvah is derived from Rabbi Ishmael's comment on the verse, "This is my God and I will glorify Him" Exodus, 15:2. *"Is it possible for a human being to add glory to his Creator? What this really means is: I shall glorify Him in the way I perform mitzvot. I shall prepare before Him a beautiful lulav, beautiful sukkah, beautiful fringes (tzitzit), and beautiful phylacteries (Tefillin)."* [Midrash Mechilta, Shirata, chapter 3, ed. Lauterbach, p. 25.]

The Talmud Shabbat 133b adds to this list a beautiful Shofar and a beautiful Torah scroll which has been written by a skilled scribe with fine ink and fine pen and wrapped in beautiful silks.

"In keeping with the principle of Hiddur Mitzvah," Rabbi Zera taught Bava Kama 9b, "one should be willing to pay even one third more [than the normal price]." Jewish folklore is replete with stories about Jews of modest circumstances paying more than they could afford for the most beautiful etrog to enhance their observance of Sukkot, or for the most delectable foods to enhance their observance of Shabbat.

Hiddur Mitzvah means taking the time and making an effort to create or acquire the most beautiful ceremonial objects possible, polishing or cleaning the object, or taking care of it in order to enrich the religious observance with aesthetic dimension.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Share an example of a Jewish ritual object that is beautiful in your eyes.
2. Provide an example of a Jewish ritual object that is not.
3. Do you feel differently when using each object?
4. How?
5. Do you feel you are glorifying God in a special way when you using a beautiful ritual object to do a mitzvah?
6. Do you feel that you are not respecting God when using an inexpensive or ugly ritual item?
7. How expensive is too expensive when using two ritual objects?
8. How should we classify heirloom ritual objects that may not be as beautiful but communicate a deep familial history?



HAKARAT HATOV / GRATITUDE

The Hebrew term for gratitude is hakarat hatov, “recognizing the good.” Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is out there. If you’ve lost your job, but you still have your family and health, you have something to be grateful for. If you can’t move around except in a wheelchair but your mind is as sharp as ever, you have something to be grateful for. If you’ve broken a string on your violin, and you still have three more, you have something to be grateful for. When you open up to the trait of gratitude, you see clearly and accurately how much good there is in your life. Too many of us tend to focus what we are lacking that we barely perceive the good. The Mishnah says: “Who is rich?” and then answers, “Those who rejoice in their own lot.” (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

The famous violinist Itzhak Perlman was stricken with polio as a young child and walking on stage was no small feat for him. He wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. One evening, the audience applauded and then waited respectfully as Perlman made his way slowly across the stage to his chair. He took his seat, signaled to the conductor to begin, and began to play. No sooner had he finished the first few bars than one of the strings on his violin snapped with a report like gunshot. At that point, Perlman was close enough to the beginning of the piece that it would have been reasonable to have brought the concert to a halt but after waiting a moment, he signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off. Perlman now had only three strings with which to play his soloist part. He was able to find some of the missing notes on adjoining strings, but where that wasn’t possible, he had to rearrange the music on the spot in his head so that it all still held together. When he finally rested his bow, the audience rose to their feet and cheered wildly. They knew they had been witness to an extraordinary display of human skill and ingenuity. Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. “You know,” he said, “sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much beautiful music you can still make with what you have left.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. We have to wonder, was he speaking of his violin strings or his crippled body?
2. And is it true only for artists?
3. Do we have the attitude of making something of beauty out of what we do have, incomplete as it may be?
4. Discuss your wants and needs.
5. Are they different since the pandemic started?
6. Discuss what you are grateful for.
7. Can we be “rich” by being satisfied with our lot?

HUMILITY

We learn important messages from the Torah. One such message is the example of humility. Moses' authority was challenged by disgruntled members of the Jewish nation. He was well aware of his special relationship with God and the responsibility he carried as leader of the Hebrews. Nonetheless, he truly did not view those achievements as reason for arrogance. Moses was confident leader demonstrated humility, recognizing that everything was a gift and not an entitlement.

We all need to find this balance. We have innate gifts and successes we've attained through hard work, but we can still be humble, but not with false or crippling humility that does not allow us to acknowledge our strengths. Humility is living with the understanding that we are simply doing our part by making a unique contribution to the world using the tools and strengths that God has given us. We all have those unique capabilities, so let's respect ourselves and each other while remaining humble.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are you are good at, either naturally or through hard work?
What are your unique gifts?
2. Can you see your siblings and/or friends' talents?
3. How can we use our special talents but not brag or make others feel inferior?
4. Do others sometimes make you feel less by them bragging?
5. How do you demonstrate pride but not boast?
6. If you're confident about your strengths, does it matter if others don't know?
7. Can you laugh at yourself?
8. Can making yourself small help you feel big inside?



THINKING ABOUT THE FOOD WE EAT

In the Torah, we are told very specifically that we cannot eat whatever we want whenever we want. Discipline, in Judaism, is an important part of eating. According to the Torah, things we eat and don't eat render us holy. Making these intentional choices teach us that food and eating are sacred matters.

While some of us may choose to keep kosher in different ways and some might not, it's important to keep in mind that making wise choices about the food we eat elevate the act of eating. We want to learn that we can't eat anything anytime and any way that we want. Eating healthful food is a sacred activity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of foods do you like to eat?
2. Do you know where these foods come from?
3. Which kinds of foods makes you feel good when you eat them?
4. Why is it important to eat together with your family?
5. What is the value of applying discipline to what we eat? Observing Kashrut?
6. Consider what would elevate your family's eating.
7. Do you think about a meatless diet?
8. Do you consider organic farming?
9. Locally grown food?
10. What other things should we consider when consuming food?



OUR BODIES

It is difficult in our society to have a sense of respect and acceptance for our own bodies with all their inherent differences. Women especially are often held to impossible standards when it comes to body weight. Eating disorders abound, mostly for girls, but also amongst boys. Boys and girls, men and women, become obsessive about weight and appearance, and the importance of bodily appearance can, unfortunately, overshadow other life interests and relationships. Even in the midst of the pandemic, media emphasizes weight gain, growing hair and more unkindly.

Our Torah teaches us to be holy, and one of the ways to become so is through treating the body as sacred. No matter what its size, shape or appearance, the body, just as it is, is considered holy.

It is paramount to counteract society's messages, which places so much emphasis on the body as an object. By placing emphasis on caring for one's body through healthful eating, bathing, and dressing in clean and attractive clothes, we can teach that a sense of bodily sanctity can be nurtured.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the best ways to take care of your body?
2. How do healthy food choices contribute to your sense of the body's holiness?
3. What are the best ways to take care of your body?
4. What gives us our sense of value?
5. How do we describe others in consideration of body image?



MITZVAH (MITZVOT, PL)

In its primary meaning, the Hebrew word Mitzvah means “commandment.” It refers to the commandments given to us by God, with the additional application by our Talmudic Rabbis. Often, the word Mitzvah is translated as “a good deed” but according to traditional Judaism, a Mitzvah is not optional (like a good deed may suggest) and many Mitzvah are not good deeds but rather dictate a beautiful Jewish way of life.

While we often hear people discussing the Ten Commandments, there are actually 613. There are 248 ‘can-do’, positive commandments, and 365 ‘don’t’, negative mitzvot totaling 613. Some Mitzvot are found in the Torah while others, mitzvot d’rabbanim. Some are commanded to be completed at a fixed time (ex. Hearing the Shofar blast) and others could be done at any time. The Torah teaches us that all the commandments are important.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What are commandments important to live in a good Jewish life?
2. Name examples of three negative commandments.
3. Name examples of three positive commandments.
4. Name examples of three-time bound commandments.
5. Name examples of three non-time bound commandments.
6. Discuss the easiest commandment for you to follow.
7. Discuss the most challenging commandment for you to follow.
8. How can we follow mitzvot even when it’s too tough or we don’t agree with it?
9. What can you inspire others to follow mitzvot?
10. Is it easier or harder when our friends are doing the same mitzvot?

RULES

Our mitzvot are rules and Jews have all sorts of rules in our lives. Throughout the Torah and Talmud, we learn about rules and consequences. We learn how to follow rules and how we become better people and better citizens of the world.

Some rules are serious, make sense, are easy to follow, and others are more difficult and make less sense to obey. They vary greatly. Some are more universal rules. Some are easy to obey, and some are more open to interpretation.

People are instructed to follow some rules for the betterment of themselves and society. It is each person's choice to follow the rules; however, there are consequences when rules are broken.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Name some rules.
2. Name rules that are universal.
3. Name rules that make sense to you.
4. What are some rules that are easy to follow? Why are they easy?
5. What are some rules that are harder to follow? Why are they hard?
6. Name rules that you follow, but do not make sense to you.
7. Why do you follow them?
8. Do you think about the consequences when you are thinking about a rule?
9. Is it because of the consequences of breaking rules, or the reward, that encourages you to follow the rule?
10. What is an example of a rule that you follow simply because you believe in it?
11. Is wearing a mask and maintaining a social distance easy to follow?
12. How do you feel when you follow rules and your friend does not?

TZEDAKAH / CHARITY

"Rather, you shall open your hand to him, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking."

Tzedakah, often translated as charity, is a cornerstone of Judaism's challenge to think beyond ourselves. We are all commanded to perform acts of charity, each person to the best of their ability. We learn from Ya'akov Avinu that one should donate 1/10 (10%) of his earnings to charity. If one desires to give more than 1/10, they should make sure not to exceed 1/5 (20%).

This mitzvah applies to helping all people who need it. The Rabbis teach us that one is first supposed to help his family, then his community, then his city, and so on. During times of crisis, it is even more critical that we help each other, as we are all in the same boat and in this together. Sharing ideas of what you find to be an especially worthy charity and how to contribute is a great way to effect meaningful change in the world and actively help those who are in need.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What does tzedakah mean to you? How would you define it?
2. Why is it important to give tzedakah?
3. What inspires YOU to give tzedakah?
4. Share one place you or your family have given tzedakah to in the past. Why did you choose this organization or cause?
5. Do you agree that people should first help places closest to them (their family, then their community and so on)?
6. How does it make you feel when you give tzedakah?
7. What does a person need in order to live a healthy and comfortable life? Who is responsible for providing these things?
8. How might you strengthen someone who is in danger of financial trouble?
9. How does tzedakah relieve inequality and injustice in the world?

BIKKUR CHOLIM / VISITING THE SICK

It has been said that a society can be best evaluated by its treatment of the less fortunate. The Gemara (Sotah 14a) teaches that we have a Mitzvah to follow in God's ways, and that this mitzvah includes the requirement to take care of the needs of the ill. Those who are sick are unable to care for themselves and require assistance in order to complete tasks they would normally do without a problem. It is our job to help the sick in any way possible while maintaining their dignity. Visiting the sick helps them emotionally by putting them in a better mood and letting them know that people are thinking of them. This, in turn, even helps them recover more quickly, as numerous studies have shown that a positive outlook is beneficial for a patient's recovery.

Before we visit the sick, we must make sure that it is a good time for them to accept visitors. It may be a good idea to ask their loved ones if there is a particular activity or gift that would especially brighten their day. Judaism teaches that one does not fulfill his obligation of visiting the sick unless he prays for them as well. In today's day and age, "visiting" the sick can be performed by video chat, phone call, or even old-fashioned post-cards: the more you show you care, the better.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What makes visiting the sick so important?
2. Visiting the sick can alleviate physical and emotional pain. How can we set aside time to visit those in need of comfort and support?
3. In what way is visiting the sick like saving a life?
4. How does performing Bikkur Cholim make you feel?
5. Are there things that we see or understand differently after performing this Mitzvah?
6. Can you remember a time when you felt sick? What helped you feel better?
7. Discuss a time when you made somebody feel better. What did you do?
8. Why do you think the rabbis placed such an emphasis on praying for the sick?
9. What is the connection between health and prayer?



HACHNASSAT ORCHIM / WELCOMING GUESTS

"Yossei the son of Yochanan of Jerusalem would say: Let your home be wide open, and let the poor be members of your household."

Welcoming guests is a major way we can show our commitment to helping those around us and fostering a culture of giving. Imagine the feeling you would have if on your first Shabbat in a new community, over 10 people invited you to join them in their Shabbat meal! Hachnassat Orchim applies in many different contexts. For our neighbors and fellow community members, it has the effect of showing that we value them and appreciate them. For visitors to our communities, it is a way to make people feel comfortable despite not being in their typical environments, and it can transform their Shabbat from a lonely one into one filled with connection and joy.

Our forefather most associated with Hachnassat Orchim is Avraham, who was also the founder of our religion. This may be because he realized that in the same way that God provides for us no matter who we are, so too we take care of strangers and make them feel like they belong even if we do not yet know them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is Hachnassat Orchim such an important mitzvah?
2. What are some examples of Hachnassat Orchim in the Torah?
3. What are different ways one can fulfill this mitzvah?
4. How can we make our guests feel welcome?
5. What are some of the needs that guests might have, and how can we provide for them?
6. Aside from food, what else are people looking for when they come to your home?
7. Reflect on a time when you were the recipient of Hachnassat Orchim. What did you learn from the experience?
8. What are some organizations in your area that provide food and shelter to those in need?
9. How could we take the initiative to bring the value of Hachnassat Orchim into our homes and communities?



SHMIRAT HALASHON / POSITIVE SPEECH

"Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully."

God has given us a wonderful gift, one which is relatively unique to humans among all other animals: the ability to speak. When the Torah describes that God blew a breath of life into Adam, it says that he became a living soul, which Onkelos translates it as "a speaking soul." This teaches us that one of the defining features of our lives on this Earth is our use of speech.

Speech is a main way we communicate our feelings to others. When we give someone a compliment, we are able to transform their day into a brighter one just by five seconds of speech. When we thank someone, we are able to show our appreciation and let them know how important they are to us. Words have tremendous power. If we find ourselves upset, we have an important decision to make: will we use our words to spread negativity to those around us, or will we try to focus on the positives in our lives and look for something nice to say? If we think someone or something is silly, we have the choice to mock them or to hold back our comments and let that person continue to feel good about him/herself. Let's do our best to use our words to advance the world in the direction of growth and positivity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What is the essential goal of Shmirat HaLashon?
2. How can speech positively impact our relationship with others and with God?
3. How do the halachot (laws) of Shmirat HaLashon help us to better relate to others?
4. What positive character traits lead to kind words? What negative character traits lead to hurtful words and Lashon Hara?
5. How does Shmirat HaLashon better people's lives? How does Lashon Hara destroy people's lives?
6. Why do the rabbis connect Lashon Hara with the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash (Temple)? How might the mitzvah of Shmirat Halashon lead to the building of the new Beit Hamikdash?
7. How does seeing good in others promote Shmirat Halashon? How does Shmirat Halashon promote seeing good in others?

KIBBUD AV V'EM / HONORING PARENTS

"Honor your father and your mother, in order that your days be lengthened on the land that the Lord, your God, is giving you."

Honoring one's father and mother is a central tenet of Judaism. It is in the Ten Commandments, and God promises long life to those who practice it. Honoring one's parents is compared to honoring God Himself, as God is a partner in bringing one into this world together with one's parents. When one thinks about the significance of this commandment, it becomes clear why it is a cornerstone of Judaism.

Honoring one's parents shows appreciation for all they have done. If one does not show appreciation for the people who raised, fed, and bathed them, to whom will they show appreciation? While honoring one's father and mother may be challenging at times, one should remember the challenges every parent has when raising a child and go the extra mile to show appreciation. Those who are blessed to still have grandparents should try to show appreciation for the people who raised their parents and helped raise them, and let them know the important role they play in their lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the meaning of the word "honor." What does it mean to honor your father and mother?
2. Why do we need to honor our parents? Why might God have given us this commandment?
3. What specific actions constitute honoring your parents?
4. What motivates us to honor our parents?
5. How does this commandment connect the past and future?
6. Why might the reward for honoring our parents be so great?
7. How can we show respect to our parents and grandparents even when their beliefs or opinions are different from ours?
8. What can you do to strengthen your relationship with your parents?



TIKKUN OLAM / REPAIRING THE WORLD

"Now the Lord God took the man, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it."

Tikkun Olam is often used to describe acts of social justice and environmental awareness. Tikkun Olam focuses not only on fixing any damage in the world, but also on bringing the world to the harmonious state for which it was created. Tikkun Olam suggests that while the world is innately good, God purposely left room for us to improve upon His work.

Tikkun Olam applies both on the national level and the individual level. It is important for Jews to participate in repairing the world through acts of tzedakah (justice and righteousness) and Gemilut Chassadim (acts of loving kindness). Without the concept of tikkun olam, evil and injustice are more present in this world.

There is a deeper meaning of the term Tikkun Olam: The root of the word "Olam" comes from the same root as the word "Helem," which means hidden. We need to repair the world so that its Creator is no longer hidden within, but rather shines through everything in magnificent, harmonious beauty. In prayer, we discover the divine sparks both in the magnificent world around us, as well as within our own selves. In the study of Torah, as we apply divine wisdom to our everyday lives, we reveal the divine sparks hidden within.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What do the words tikkun olam mean?
2. How does tikkun olam affect the modern world?
3. What improvement does our world need?
4. What do you find both encouraging and discouraging when you think about taking initiative to repair the world?
5. Can you remember how you developed a social conscience? Was there anyone who was a model for you?
6. When you were young, did you have ideas about how you wanted to improve the world?
7. What are concrete examples of tikkun olam?
8. What have you done to repair the world? Give some examples.
9. Can you think of any examples of people or organizations that are currently working to repair the world which inspire you?

BAL TASHCHIT / DO NOT DESTROY

The Mitzvah is rooted in the Torah, Deuteronomy 20:19–20. In the Torah, the command is said in the context of wartime and forbids the cutting down of fruit trees in order to assist in a siege. In early rabbinic law however, the bal tashchit principle is understood to include other forms of senseless damage or waste. The Talmud applies this principle in wasting of lamp oil, the tearing of clothing, the chopping up of furniture for firewood, or the killing of animals. In all cases, bal tashchit is invoked only for destruction that is deemed unnecessary. Destruction is explicitly condoned when the cause or need is adequate.

In contemporary Jewish ethics advocates often point to bal tashchit as an environmental principle. Jewish vegetarians often point to bal tashchit in justifying vegetarianism or veganism, arguing that an omnivorous diet is wasteful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is bal tashchit important to you?
2. Do you feel like stewards of the earth which God created?
3. Provide examples where you reuse, recycle or reduce.
4. How do you help your parents, your teachers, and your community to fulfil bal Tashchit?
5. In the disposable era that we live, where things are better replaced than repaired, how do we understand this Mitzvah?
6. What additional things can you do?



TZAAR BAALAI CHAYIM / KINDNESS TO ANIMALS

In the very beginning of the Torah, God created the world and all of its creatures. Sages teach that people should learn to appreciate the uniqueness of each of God's creations. The Talmud, considered an essential authority on Jewish law and custom, notes that the study of animals can lead to personal growth. For example, we learn cleanliness and modesty from the cat, honesty from the ant, and good manners from the rooster (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 100b). The Midrash Rabbah, a commentary on the Torah, teaches that those who learn to recognize the specific needs of God's creatures are destined for greatness. Moses was chosen as the leader of the Children of Israel because of his compassion to a single runaway lamb.

The literal translation of the Hebrew phrase Kindness to animals/tzaar baalei chayim is "the suffering of living creatures." Biblical scholars agree this means preventing animals from feeling pain. Rabbinic sages acknowledge that animals have feelings, and several stories in the Torah equate kindness to animals with human virtue. Since animals play an important role in our lives, there are rules in the Torah about their treatment, such as feeding your animals before you eat (Deuteronomy, 11:15), and giving animals a day of rest on the Sabbath (Deuteronomy, 5:14).

After all, we are all God's creations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you have pets?
2. Do you consciously consider your pet's needs: hunger, shelter, feelings?
3. Have you considered the animals kept in the zoo?
4. How do we care for and rehabilitate animals who would not survive the wild?
5. How do we express compassion to animals?
6. Discuss testing medicine and makeup on animals before distributing it to humans.

