

Lesson Plan for Primary-Aged Children “A Jewish Values Tree”

Goals

Students will:

- Begin to understand that many children live in difficult circumstances.
- Learn Jewish values that help them approach the issue of caring for children.
- Describe what children need to make sure they are taken care of.
- Learn about the *aitz chayim* (tree of life).

Materials

- Large paper bags with holes cut out on the bottom and sides so that children can fit their heads and arms through the holes (one per student)
- Pre-cut paper leaves, bigger than actual size (five per student)
- Construction paper
- Markers or crayons

Optional

- Pictures cut from magazines depicting children, families, and things that children need such as healthy food and warm clothing
- Glue
- Other decorative supplies

Lesson

1. Tell the students that they are going to learn about the importance of caring for children. Explain that some are very poor or do not live in safe homes. Others are homeless or do not have enough food to eat. Discuss why this would be very difficult for someone who is the same age as they are.

2. Teach them that Jewish values can help us approach many issues, like caring for children. Discuss the following values: *shalom* (peace), *ahavah* (love), *kavod* (respect), *rachamim* (compassion), and *chesed* (caring). When do they experience each of these

in their lives? When do they use these values in their behavior towards others? Give the students five leaves each with the values written on them.

3. Ask students what children need to make sure they are taken care of (good child care, healthy food, warm clothing, etc.). Have students draw pictures of these, as well as anything that demonstrates the values they have just learned (children playing peacefully, parents caring for their children, etc.).

[NOTE: If your class is comprised of mostly three-year-olds, who may not be able to draw representational pictures; you may instead have them select pictures you have cut from parenting magazines and other magazines depicting these images.]

4. Make Jewish values trees. Take large brown paper bags and glue the leaves and pictures onto them. Decorate as desired.

5. While the bags are drying, teach the children the song “Tree of Life”: It is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it and all of its supporters are happy (2x). Shalom, shalom (2x).

6. Help the students put the bags over their heads. Tell them that each one of them is an *aitz chayim* (tree of life) and that the Torah is often compared to an *aitz chayim*. (The song they just learned is referring to the Torah.) It contains the Jewish values that we try to live by and it helps us approach important issues like caring for children.

7. Have the students pretend to be like trees or march around in front of others. Sing “Tree of Life.”

Lesson Plan for Elementary-Aged Children “A Jewish Values Tree”

Goals

Students will:

- Begin to understand that many children live in difficult circumstances.
- Learn Jewish values that help them approach the issue of caring for children.
- Describe what children need to make sure they are taken care of.
- Learn about the *aitz chayim* (tree of life).

Materials

- Two pieces of butcher paper taped together with a large tree drawn or painted on it. Its roots should be visible.
- Crayons or markers
- Scissors
- Construction paper
- Glue

Lesson

1. Tell the students that they are going to learn about the importance of caring for children. Explain that some children are very poor or do not live in safe homes. Others are homeless or do not have enough food to eat. Discuss why this would be very difficult for someone who is the same age as they are. Have them share their feelings about this.

2. Teach them that Jewish values can help us approach many issues, like caring for children. Write the following values on the board: *shalom* (peace), *ahavah* (love), *kavod* (respect), *rachamim* (compassion), and *chesed* (caring). Discuss each one. When do they experience each of these in their lives? When do they

use these values in their behavior towards others?

3. Tell the students that a Jewish values tree needs roots so that it will be strong. Have them write these values, as well as any others, on the roots of the tree.

4. Ask the students what children need to make sure they are taken care of (good child care, healthy food, warm clothing, etc.). Have students draw pictures of these, as well as anything that demonstrates the values they have just learned (children playing peacefully, parents caring for their children, etc.). They are going to be putting these up on the tree as well, so they should be in the shape of leaves, branches or fruits. Have them cut out their pictures.

5. Encourage the students to share their pictures and then glue them to the tree.

6. Teach the students the song “Tree of Life”: It is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it and all of its supporters are happy (2x). Shalom, shalom (2x). Ask one of them to write this on the tree.

7. Tell them that their Jewish values tree is an *aitz chayim* (tree of life) and that the Torah is often compared to an *aitz chayim*. (The song they just learned is referring to the Torah.) It contains the Jewish values that we try to live by, and it helps us approach important issues like caring for children.

8. Display the tree in a public place in the congregation.

Lesson Plan for Intermediate School Grades

“A Jewish Values Tree”

Goals

Students will:

- Learn in more concrete terms about the difficult circumstances in which children live.
- Learn Jewish values that help them approach the issue of caring for children.
- Describe what children need to make sure they are taken care of.
- Think through their role in *tikkun olam* (repair of the world).
- Learn about the *aitz chayim* (tree of life).

Materials

- Six pieces of butcher paper; every two pieces should be taped together.
- Markers
- Scissors
- Construction paper
- Glue
- “Every Day in America” sheet from page 7 in this section.

Lesson

1. Tell the students that they are going to learn about issues surrounding the care of children.

Ask them how much they know regarding facts about children. Encourage them to think about poverty, hunger and violence, as well as child care, health care and literacy programs. Pass out the “Every Day in America” sheet and have a volunteer read the facts aloud. Are they surprised by any of the statistics? How does reading the statistics make them feel?

2. Teach them that Jewish values can help us approach many issues, like caring for children. Ask them if they can think of any Jewish values that might be relevant. Make sure they include: *shalom* (peace), *tzekek* (social justice), *ahavah* (love), *kavod* (respect), *rachamim* (compassion), and *chesed* (caring). Write them on the board and discuss each one. When do they experience each of these in their lives? When do they

use these values in their behavior towards others? How can they use these values to address the issue of caring for children?

3. Have students brainstorm what children need to make sure they are taken care of (good child care, healthy food, warm clothing, etc.). Discuss the list.

4. Break the students up into three groups. Give each group some butcher paper. Have each group draw a large tree on the butcher paper making sure its roots are visible.

5. Tell the students that a Jewish values tree needs roots so that it will be strong. Ask them to write their list of values on the roots of the tree.

6. Have them draw pictures on construction paper based on the list of things that children need to make sure they are taken care of, as well as anything that demonstrates the values they have just learned (children playing peacefully, parents caring for their children, etc.). They are going to be putting these up on the tree, so they should be in the shape of leaves, branches or fruit. Have them cut out their pictures.

7. Bring the students back together and ask each group to share their trees.

8. Teach the students the term *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). Judaism obligates us to help make the world a better place. Discuss the following text from the Talmud: An old man was planting a tree. A young person passed by and asked, “What are you planting?” “A carob tree,” the old man replied. “Silly fool,” said the youth. “Don’t you know that it takes 70 years for a carob tree to bear fruit?” “That’s okay,” said the old man. “Just as others planted for me, so will I plant for future generations.” Ask the students how they personally might contribute to the welfare of children.

9. Display the tree in a public place in the congregation.

Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof: A Program for Teens

By Dana Tarley, 2003-2004 North American Federation of Temple Youth Social Action Vice President, and Mira Lyon, 2004-2005 North American Federation of Temple Youth Social Action Vice President-elect

Timeline

25 minutes: Introduction and discussion on *tzedek*

15 minutes: Introduction to project and making cards

30 minutes: Introduction to and discussion of problems facing children in our nation today

20 minutes: Responding to the need and making kits for children in need

Materials

- Sign saying *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* in Hebrew, English and transliteration
- Blank cards—enough for 5 per participant
- Markers, decorations, examples of what to write
- Copies of the handout “Each Day in America” on page 7 in this section
- Supplies for the kits to be donated to children in need

Procedure

Introduction and Discussion of Tzedek

Show a sign saying “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*” in Hebrew and in transliteration.

Discussion Question: Does anyone know what this means? [Allow time for responses.] It is “Justice, justice shall you pursue” from the book of Deuteronomy, or *D'varim* in the Torah, chapter 16, verse 20.

Discussion Question: In looking at the text we notice that justice is written twice. What are some possible explanations for the repetition of the word justice?

Possible Answers:

- To teach us to pursue the goal of justice through just means.

- To teach us that we need justice for ourselves as well as justice for others.

Rav Ashi in the Talmud says that the first *tzedek* is pure justice. The second is for compromise—something we often all must make if we want justice, as people may have different ideas of the meaning of justice.

Discussion Question: What is justice? Give examples of something that you’ve seen that is unjust, and how it could have been made just. In Deuteronomy 16:19 we are taught not to “recognize anyone by face,” meaning not to judge them based on what they look like.

Discussion Question: Have you ever been judged based on what you look like, or judged someone else based on how they look? Why is this/why is this not just?

Discussion Question: Are there some issues where you really aren’t sure about what is *just*? When something may be *just* for one and *unjust* for another? Give examples (e.g., tax breaks based on income, affirmative action).

Discussion Question: How do we create justice? This verse does not say to pray for it, or talk about it, but rather to pursue it, to chase after it. With what other values should we do this? (e.g., with peace, compassion, change)

Does the word *tzedek* remind you of another Hebrew word? *Tzedek*, justice, and *tzedakah*, charity, come from the same root word. Both are what we are commanded to pursue and do—to help others as well as ourselves.

In Reform Judaism we believe that a Messianic Age, a time of unity, understanding, and peace, will be created by cooperation and effort by humans. One way to reach this is through *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. We must work to gather the sparks of holiness and light scattered throughout the world and bring them together to complete God’s creation. We do this by fulfilling *mitzvot*.

Introduction to Project and Making Cards

Discussion Question: How do you define the word *mitzvah*?

Literally, it means “commandment,” though it is frequently translated as “good deeds.” What is the difference between the two translations?

Discussion Question: When have you performed a *mitzvah*, or seen one performed, that helped someone else? How did it make you feel?

Just as we feel good when someone helps us, so too do others feel good when we help them. We can do small things, such as smiling at a friend who is having a bad day, holding the door open for someone, or complimenting them when they do something well.

Let’s do an experiment. We’ll make little cards thanking people for doing a random act of kindness for you, and you’ll give it to them if they do something nice for you, even if they didn’t know it was an act of kindness. We’ll also make some with nice sayings or compliments on them. We’ll take them home and give them out at school or in our communities and try to see where some of them go. We might even get some given back to us!

Invite the participants to make cards—not too elaborate—at this time.

You’ll see soon how much of an impact a few little cards can make, and how far the influence can spread. We can use this for even bigger issues.

Introduction to and Discussion of Problems Facing Children in Our Nation Today

Discussion Question: Do you remember the story of the Jews’ Exodus from Egypt? What was unjust? (They were slaves for 400 years, born into it, no chance of escape, beaten and starved, baby boys killed, all because of their religion.) How was justice created? (Moses came and led them out; God brought the plagues on Pharaoh and Egypt.) But Jews today are still struggling to not be thought of as inferior. We still see anti-Semitism—the struggle is not over. In addition to working for our own freedom, we work to help others still trapped in poverty and injustice in our nation today.

Distribute the handout, “Moments in America for All Children,” with statistics about the state of America’s children and invite participants to take turns reading the statistics, pausing between each to let people absorb the information.

Note that today in our own country, children are caught in poverty and suffer different forms of oppression and injustice.

Discussion Question: What is your reaction to this information? Are you surprised? Discouraged? Motivated?

Comment that just as the Israelite babies’ fate was determined by the circumstances into which they were born, the children whom these facts describe are also powerless about the circumstances into which they were born. However, just as God did not want the Israelites to remain captive, neither does God want children today to remain captive to poverty, hunger, abuse, neglect, gun violence, lack of health care, and other crises that oppress them. Like Moses, we can work to lead children out of such oppression through caring acts and work for justice.

Discussion Question: Why do you think the circumstances of these children are unjust?

There are Jewish answers to that as well as human. We’re taught in Judaism that all people are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, and should be treated as such. We are all created equally. We also look out for *ma’akeh l’gagchab*, others’ safety, and *kibud habriyot*, dignity. *Pidyon shvuyim*, redeeming the captive, is one of the most important mitzvot. We are taught, “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Discussion Question: What do these mean to you? Are they important?

Responding to the Need and Making Kits for Children in Need

Just as you would want someone to help you if you were in this situation, we must help them.

Discussion Question: What can we do?

Make a list or brainstorm. (Examples include signing or making petitions or writing letters to government officials telling them to take action; spreading awareness and education; going to rallies and marches; volunteering with programs or organizations serving children and families in need; raising money to donate to programs helping children and families in need.)

These all take time and effort. Together, we can help the people who have been silenced. We can be their voices.

There are also things we can do right now, such as putting together kits to send to children in need.

Jewish Shabbat and Education Resources

Make kits to send to children in difficult circumstances. For example, poor children in under-resourced schools might need school and health kits like the one detailed below. Children entering foster care might need backpacks with a soft toy and crayons and coloring books. Ahead of time, contact an organization that serves children and families in need (such as a school, health clinic or social service agency) and find out what would be most useful. Plan either to assemble the kits as part of the program now, or give participants a list of the needed items for each kit, and have each student assemble a kit. Plan to collect the completed kits at the next meeting.

School and Health Kits

These are suggested kit contents. The kit contents can be modified based on budget and what the school indicates students most need.

- 1 ruler
 - 1 box of crayons/colored pencils
 - 1 tote/canvas bag
 - 1 toothbrush
 - 1 tube of toothpaste
 - 1 roll of floss
 - 1 bar of soap
 - 1 small shampoo
 - 1 comb
 - 1 small washcloth/towel
 - 1 box of clothing detergent
 - Sterilizing bandages
 - Rubbing alcohol
-
- 1 school notebook
 - 2 pens
 - 2 pencils
 - 1 pencil sharpener
 - 1 eraser



Handout: Each Day in America

- 2 **mothers** die from complications of pregnancy or childbirth.
- 4 **children** are killed by abuse or neglect.
- 5 **children or teens** commit suicide.
- 8 **children or teens** are killed by firearms.
- 32 **children or teens** die from accidents.
- 78 **babies** die before their first birthdays.
- 155 **children** are arrested for violent crimes.
- 296 **children** are arrested for drug crimes.
- 928 **babies** are born at low birthweight.
- 1,154 **babies** are born to teen mothers.
- 1,511 **public school students** are corporally punished.*
- 2,145 **babies** are born without health insurance.
- 2,467 **high school students** drop out.*
- 2,421 **children** are confirmed as abused or neglected.
- 2,483 **babies** are born into poverty.
- 3,477 **children** are arrested.
- 18,221 **public school students** are suspended.*

* *Based on calculations per school day (180 days of seven hours each)*

Retrieved from the Children's Defense Fund website,
www.childrensdefense.org