



Experiencing the Levels of Tzedakah and Ba'al Tashchit

Amy Atkins

Subject Area: Jewish History & Culture & Eco-Judaism

Single/Multi-unit lesson plan: Can be done in 1 to 3 days or in 5 separate parts

Target Age: 6th grade – 12th grade (possible applications for adult education)

Objectives:

- 1) Participants will learn the concept of ba'al tashchit (do not destroy) as it relates to Jewish commentary on the ecological crisis.
- 2) Participants will understand Rambam's levels of Tzedakah.
- 3) Participants will gain self confidence and a sense of accomplishment.
- 4) Participants will learn what it feels like to support each other and to be supported.

Text of lesson plan

Set up

Prior to the participants' arrival, the educator must set up a few items.

- 1) The educator must designate the start and finish line for part 1 of the lesson.
- 2) The educator must create a minimum of a 3 part obstacle course. The first section can be as easy as running through tires and/or crawling under/over a jungle gym or as creative/complicated as the educator wants to be. In the middle of the course, the educator puts a bin with various items that one could reduce, reuse or recycle. At the end of the course there is a hoop or basket and a ball.
- 3) The educator or a designated ropes course facilitator sets up the giant's ladder high ropes element. (if you do not have access to or knowledge of high ropes courses, you can modify this section or this day to just include the index cards).

Execution

Part 1 – Experiencing the origins of the ba'al tashchit (not destroying trees in times of war)

- 1) Begin your lesson with all students standing in a line next to one another with arms outstretched and fingertips almost touching. They should be standing at the edge of a forest or group of trees. The more dense the trees, the better. There should be a finish line designated at the opposite edge of the group of trees. Students must race with

arms outstretched to the other end of the forest and the finish line. They cannot drop their arms at any time. The first person to arrive is the “winner”.

- 2) At the finish line, ask students how that could have been easier/faster. If someone does not say removing the trees as an easier way to get through, propose it to the group.
- 3) Then tell the story of the origin of ba'al tashchit the Torah commandment to not cut down trees in times of war and discuss how and why this makes “winning” a war more difficult.
- 4) Why would G-d make this law for the Jewish people? Why would G-d intentionally create a barrier for the Jewish people to win wars? What other laws exist where G-d asks the Jewish people to consider the natural world in their every day lives? i.e. Requiring a park or greenery when you build a city.

Part 2 – Experiencing the modern interpretation of ba'al taschit (as developed by Jewish Environmental Educators nationwide – specifically Adam Berman, Gabe Goldman and other JENE educators)

- 5) Move participants to a pre-set obstacle course on a low ropes course or playground.
- 6) Explain to the participants that this concept of ba'al taschit in modern time has been interpreted to mean that we should not waste. Just as Jews were not able to waste trees needlessly during a time of war, you should not waste items needlessly in your quest for the necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter). Ask students what are ways that they could be more careful about not wasting. If it does not come up in conversation, talk about reducing (packaging (on food or toys), buying less clothing, etc.), reusing, and recycling as ways one could not waste. Ask for examples from their personal lives where they are doing this or could be doing it better.
- 7) Then, students will run through the obstacle course part 1, continue on to part 2 where they pull an item out of the bin and announce how it could be reduced, reused or recycled. Then the participant picks up the ba'al (ball) and throws it through the hoop or basket. Once they make the basket (they have to keep trying until they make it) the time is stopped. The winner can be the person with the best time or the person who thought of the most creative way to reduce, reuse or recycle something, or both.

Part 3 – How caring for the earth is part of tzedakah & Introduction to Rambam's levels of tzedakah

- 8) After all participants make it through the obstacle course, move on to the high ropes course. Ask the students to talk about how ba'al taschit could help them in their desire to do the mitzvah of tzedakah. How is caring for the earth, tikkun olam, related to acts of charity? i.e. a) if you are not wasting, you have more money/time/supplies to give as charity b) when you finish with a toy or outgrow clothing you can donate these items to be reused by someone in need c) all of these practices keep resources from being destroyed to make new items so rainforest habitat can be better protected and people will not lose their homes.
- 9) Next, discuss with students about Rambam and the concept of levels of tzedakah. Talk about how Rambam created a rubric to help us become even more of a mensch by giving us direction.

- 10) Take index cards with the definitions of each level and shuffle them (do not indicate the ranking on the cards). Ask students to arrange the cards to the order by which Rambam feels is the lowest to highest levels of tzedakah. When they are finished, ask them to explain why they chose the order they did. If the order is different, show them Rambam's levels and explain why he chose these.

Part 4 – Experiencing Rambam's levels of tzedakah

- 11) Divide the students into pairs.
- 12) Before the first pair climbs, ask them how they would like to be encouraged by the rest of the team. Do they want the other participants to keep quiet? Do they want words of encouragement? Do they want suggestions as to how to solve the problem? Talk about how just as each level of tzedakah may be more difficult to do, so may climbing this ladder. By climbing, they get to experience how difficult it may be for some people to perform each level of tzedakah, where it may be easier for others.
- 13) Each pair will attempt to climb the Giant's Ladder. The concept of this high ropes course element is that the pair of participants work together to get both participants up the rungs of the giant ladder.
- 14) Let each team of participants know that as far as they can climb is still a contribution. Just as any of Rambam's levels are still tzedakah and still good, so is the contribution they will make to the activity. Once they are finished talk about how every level of the giant's ladder takes effort and, in this case, teamwork. Each level gets harder and harder, but can be done with more effort and perseverance. Talk about the benefit of a community assisting you in difficult tasks that better the world whether it be levels of charitable giving or making lifestyle changes for ba'al taschit.

Part 5 – Brit Adamah: Bringing the lesson “home” (also developed by/adapted from JENE instructors)

- 15) Once everyone has climbed the ladder, have everyone sit in a circle.
- 16) To sum up the lessons of the day (or multiple days), talk about how creating change in the world is not always easy and takes sacrifice, patience and possibly even collaboration with others.
- 17) Talk to students about the concept of a brit i.e. brit milah (bris – covenant of circumcision, covenant between G-d and the people of Israel) and the idea of a brit adamah a brit with the earth. You can also talk about adam (man/human) and adamah (earth) and the fact that they have the same root. So, a brit adamah would be a covenant you are making with the earth.
- 18) Ask participants to think about something they could do in their everyday life that would contribute to reducing, reusing and recycling. It needs to be something they do not already do and something that is measurable or observable. If a student says, I'm going to watch less TV, ask by how much? Will they turn off the TV after 1 program? Will they not watch TV unless there is a certain program on that they want to watch and not just flip through channels? What they will do with their time instead? Have them write their specific brit down on a piece of paper. If it is possible, you can give it to them later in the year or mail it to them in a few months.

Materials

This lesson plan is ideally used at a summer camp or a school that has both a high and low ropes course as well as people trained in facilitation of these elements. The educator that is teaching the lesson does not have to actually be a trained facilitator. If you chose to remove the giant's ladder activity, the lesson can be done in many other locations.

- Playground or low ropes course that includes tires to run through, a jungle gym, rope swing or other "obstacles"
- Timer or watch
- Items that can be reduced, reused or recycled i.e soda can, paper, newspaper, glass jars, sticks of individually wrapped gum, etc. (be creative)
- High ropes course that includes a "Giant's Ladder" element that is in or near a forest or group of trees
- A facilitator certified in leading high ropes courses with knowledge of set up and break down and belay techniques. You can hire a person or a company to set up and break down the course and to oversee safety.
- Harnesses and helmets of various sizes. You do not need one per participant, but you need at least 2 or 3 of each.
- Index cards pre-marked each with one of Rambam's levels of Tzedakah
- Paper and pens/pencils

Resources

A. Levels of Tzedakah - Adapted from Mishneh Torah, Laws of Charity, 10:7-14 – Chabad.org

[1] The greatest level, above which there is no greater, to support a fellow Jew by endowing him with a gift or loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding employment for him, in order to strengthen his hand until he need no longer be dependent upon others...

[2] To give to the poor without knowing to whom one gives, and without the recipient knowing from who he received. For this is performing a mitzvah solely for the sake of Heaven. This is like the "anonymous fund" that was in the Holy Temple [in Jerusalem]. There the righteous gave in secret, and the good poor profited in secret. Giving to a charity fund is similar to this mode of charity, though one should not contribute to a charity fund unless one knows that the person appointed over the fund is trustworthy and wise and a proper administrator, like Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon.

[3] When one knows to whom one gives, but the recipient does not know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to walk about in secret and put coins in the doors of the poor. It is worthy and truly good to do this if those who are responsible for distributing charity are not trustworthy.

[4] When one does not know to whom one gives, but the poor person does know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to tie coins into their robes and throw them behind their

backs, and the poor would come up and pick the coins out of their robes so that they would not be ashamed.

[5] When one gives to the poor person directly into his hand, but gives before being asked.

[6] When one gives to the poor person after being asked.

[7] When one gives inadequately, but gives gladly and with a smile.

[8] When one gives unwillingly.

B. Brit Adamah and the Ba'al Taschit obstacle course are adapted in part or directly from the JENE (Jewish Environmental Nature Educators) Training. Their use in this context is new.

C. Ba'al Taschit: When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down. (Deuteronomy 20:19)