



INTERFAITH
RAINFOREST
INITIATIVE

JUDAISM

A TOOLKIT ON FOREST PROTECTION FOR
RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is part of a series developed by the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative meant to inform and inspire faith communities to action to help safeguard tropical forests and their inhabitants. The Initiative believes the time has come for a worldwide movement for the care of tropical forests, one that is grounded in the inherent value of forests, and inspired by the values, ethics, and moral guidance of indigenous peoples and faith communities.

This Jewish Toolkit presents a series of reflections, meditations, prayers, talking points, and lesson plans aimed at Jewish practitioners, and assembled with the help of Rabbi Daniel Swartz and Rabbi David Rosen. It is not meant to be exhaustive or final, but represents a living document that can evolve over time with the help and for the benefit of faith communities.

INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is an international, multi-faith alliance that is working to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders and faith communities to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, NGOs and businesses on actions that protect rainforest and the rights of those that serve as their guardians.

QUESTIONS?

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is eager to work with you to protect tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples. Contact us at info@interfaithrainforest.org.

PARTNERS

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative welcomes engagement by all organizations, institutions and individuals of good faith and conscience that are committed to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of rainforests.



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OPENING REFLECTION (D'VAR TORAH)

TROPICAL RAINFORESTS: TREES OF LIFE

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

“It is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy.”

We quote this verse from Proverbs 3:18 when we return the Torah to the ark, but how often do we actually reflect on its meaning? For example, why is the Torah compared to a tree? Wouldn't a mountain be grander, a lion be more powerful, a shield feel more protective? And just what is a tree of life?

Though the authors of Proverbs were not modern ecologists, they knew, as have humans since the dawn of civilization or even before, that trees play an important role in our lives. Indeed, in many ways, as Ibn Ezra said in commenting on Deuteronomy 20:19, “the life of humans depends on trees.” Rabbeinu Bachya, commenting on the same verse, added: “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.” (Torah Commentary, Bachya ben Asher.) And this sense of blessing is especially true in the wondrous, life-filled places we call tropical rainforests.

I want to explore with you today how these rainforests are not only wondrous but also critical to life on our planet, and why protecting them is not only environmentally critical but also an important human rights issue. As we proceed on this exploration, I'll also highlight some of the values our tradition espouses that call on us to make this a Jewish priority and not simply an ecological one.

So just what is a tropical rainforest, and where are they found? Merriam Webster defines them this way: a tropical woodland with an annual rainfall of at least 100 inches (254 centimeters) and marked by lofty, broad-leaved, evergreen trees forming a continuous canopy. In other words, hot, wet, and very green places. They are found in tropical regions across the globe, in countries as different as Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Indonesia. It is hard to convey with mere words just how life-filled these natural Gardens of Eden are, but if you've ever been blessed with the opportunity to walk in one, you know that they are worth protecting simply because of their beauty, just as one would protect the Mona Lisa or Michelangelo's David.

But they are far more than just beautiful. They are critical hotbeds of biodiversity. Though they cover only 6% of Earth's land surface, they provide homes to some 80% of all documented species. Our sage Maimonides taught (Guide for the Perplexed, III:14), we are not to “believe that all things exist for the sake of humanity. On the contrary, one should believe that every species exists for its own sake and not for anything or anyone else.” If that is so, then surely the home of such a high proportion of all species is worthy of protection. But far too many tropical forests are disappearing: the last decade saw the destruction of forests covering an area equal to France, Germany and Great Britain combined.

Healthy rainforests also protect against flooding and mudslides. They provide clean water and more than a quarter of the oxygen we breathe. Fish and a wide array of crops can be harvested sustainably in healthy rainforests. The National Cancer Institute in the United States estimates that 70% of anti-cancer medicines derived from plants have come from rainforests. Each forest that is cut down, therefore, removes these natural protections, eliminates the possibilities of sustainable harvests, and possibly destroys medical miracles before they can be discovered.

Rainforests are also a key part of the struggle to combat climate change. If deforestation of tropical rainforests were a country, it would have higher greenhouse gas emissions than all the countries of the European Union combined. If, however, we protect and re-grow rainforests instead of cutting them down, we could eliminate almost a third of all greenhouse gas emissions planet-wide. Just think: even before eliminating coal or building solar power plants, just by protecting and replanting rainforests, we'd solve one third of the problem! People have talked about designing carbon capture and storage technologies to help address climate change. But we already have an incredible natural one—one that has amazing side-benefits instead of risky side-effects. So which will it be: adding more than another Europe's worth of greenhouse gases, or taking us a third of the way to solving humanity's greatest problem?

But protecting rainforests isn't just an environmental issue—it's also inextricably tied to human rights problems. Across our planet, there are over 5000 different indigenous peoples, with a total population of approximately 370 million. Some 200 million of those live in tropical rainforests. And these people face very real threats not only to their ways of life, but also to their very existence.

In parts of the world, the rights of indigenous people to live in and care for ancestral lands are ignored, despite international agreements such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Even where such rights are recognized, however, they are often enforced weakly or not at all, subjecting the forests that indigenous peoples depend upon to degradation and destruction, polluting water sources, and eliminating traditional livelihoods. And far too often, it is not just land that is taken, but lives.

Global Witness, an international human rights environmental and anti-corruption group, has documented nearly 1000 killings of environmental defenders since 2010, many of them indigenous leaders. Such murders are occurring at increasing rates and in more locations. Even when actual violence doesn't occur, threats of violence are used to force indigenous peoples from their lands, typically by large agribusinesses, extractive industries, or the illegal drug trade.

Where indigenous rights are protected, however, rainforests also thrive. Deforestation rates in lands controlled by indigenous groups are much lower than in surrounding areas. For example, in the Brazilian Amazon, deforestation-related greenhouse gas emissions were 27 times higher outside of indigenous lands than within them. Just in 2018, additional rights of indigenous people to lands containing tropical rainforests have been recognized in Brazil, the Congo, and Indonesia, among other countries. This produces a synergy that gives me hope, for whenever forests are protected, so too are human rights and vice versa.

Indeed, there are many sources of hope. Perhaps the most fundamental is that we don't need any new technologies to solve the problem. What we have to do primarily is stop cutting down forests. In cases where they have already been cut down, we must at least start replanting indigenous rainforest trees, knowing that it is far easier to maintain the health of an existing forest than to re-create the intricate web of life found in a healthy forest. Even with these difficulties, however, reforestation efforts in many parts of the globe have been successful, so this is a matter of will more than know-how.

And faith groups across the planet are uniting to help provide some of that willpower, through the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, the IRI. I'm proud that Jewish communities are starting to join in this effort. Proud, but not surprised, for we should remember that many of our key texts and moral teachings were developed as indigenous traditions, before we were exiled from our land and, for hundreds of years and in dozens of nations, kept from owning land at all.

What are some of the Jewish teachings that can help energize us? From the time of the prophets, our people recognized the connection between human rights and environmental degradation. For example, Ezekiel wrote about how the "fat and healthy" were exploiting the weaker and degrading their resources. He depicted them as powerful "rams and bucks" trampling on the rights of the weaker sheep, saying: "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?" (Ezekiel 34:18-19) It's not hard to imagine what he would say to those seeking to cut down forests and take lands from indigenous peoples.

Our traditions all speak to us about the unity of life, how all forms of life are related to and dependent on each other. For example, Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi, commenting on the mitzvah of not taking the mother bird and eggs or fledglings at the same time—an early guidance toward sustainable harvest—wrote: "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 the mother bird. 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."

Perhaps most importantly of all, however, our tradition commands us to take responsibility and to take action. Ecclesiastes Rabbah (7:28) teaches this beautifully: "When the Holy One created the first human being, God took that person around all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said, 'See my works, how fine and excellent they are, which I have created for you. Think upon this and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it there is no one to set it right after you.'"

So what can you do? We can take steps to further inform ourselves about tropical rainforests and their protection. We can engage in simple actions that reduce our own role in the forces that lead to deforestation: avoiding products made from tropical woods or palm oil, or reducing beef consumption. We can support some of the advocacy campaigns of the IRI or of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life on behalf of rainforests. But I believe it is equally important that we come to see this as a moral issue, an issue of Jewish values. Holding fast to those values, we can truly become supporters of the tree of life—and that can help make the whole planet happy.

TALKING POINTS

1. **The importance of trees in the Jewish tradition.** The Torah is compared to a tree: “It is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy.” (Proverbs 3:18) Why? Because trees are so important to life: Ibn Ezra said in commenting on Deuteronomy 20:19, “the life of humans depends on trees.”
2. **Why rainforests are important.**
 - a. They are critical hotbeds of biodiversity. Though they cover only 6% of Earth’s land surface, they provide homes to some 80% of all documented species.
 - b. Rainforests provide many “services,” including: protection from flooding and mudslides; clean water; more than a quarter of the oxygen we breathe; sustainable harvesting of fish, and a wide array of crops.
 - c. They are an important source of medicines. The National Cancer Institute estimates that 70% of anti-cancer medicines are derived from plants that have come from rainforests.
 - d. Rainforests are also a key part of the struggle to combat climate change. Deforestation produces more greenhouse gas emissions than all the countries of the European Union combined. Tropical forest protection, however, could eliminate almost one third of all greenhouse gas emissions planet-wide. They provide a natural, in-place and risk-free way to capture and store carbon.
3. **The Jewish tradition values species intrinsically.** Maimonides taught (Guide for the Perplexed, III:14) that we are not to “believe that all things exist for the sake of humanity. On the contrary, one should believe that every species exists for its own sake and not for anything or anyone else.”
4. **Protecting rainforests is a human rights issue.**
 - a. Out of 370 million indigenous people, 200 million live in tropical rainforests. Deforestation poses real threats to this population.
 - b. Limited indigenous land rights are recognized, and those recognized are often not enforced.
 - c. Forest protectors are also subject to threats and actual violence. Global Witness has documented nearly 1000 killings of environmental defenders since 2010, many of them indigenous leaders.
 - d. When indigenous rights are protected, rainforests also thrive. For example, in the Brazilian Amazon, deforestation-related greenhouse gas emissions were 27 times higher outside of indigenous lands than within them.

5. Deforestation is a solvable problem.

- a. In many places, efforts to combat deforestation have been successful.
- b. We don't need any new technologies to solve the problem, just determination and political will. And faith groups are key to providing that determination and will.
- c. Faith communities are starting to become involved and can play an important role in raising the profile of rainforest protection.
- d. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is a key way to get involved as a person of faith.

6. Action steps.

- a. Take steps to become further informed.
- b. Avoid tropical wood products and palm oil and reduce beef consumption.
- c. Support advocacy campaigns on behalf of forests.
- d. View this as a moral issue that Jews should get involved in.

PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS

BIBLICAL SELECTIONS

(TRANSLATIONS FROM THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY)

Psalm 96

(1) Sing to the Eternal a new song, sing to the Eternal, all the earth. (2) Sing to the Eternal, bless God's name, proclaim God's victory day after day. (3) Tell of God's glory among the nations, God's wondrous deeds, among all peoples. (4) For the Eternal is great and much acclaimed, God is held in awe by all divine beings. (5) All the gods of the peoples are mere idols, but the Eternal made the heavens. (6) Glory and majesty are before God; strength and splendor are in God's temple. (7) Ascribe to the Eternal, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Eternal glory and strength. (8) Ascribe to the Eternal the glory of the Name, bring tribute and enter the divine courts. (9) Bow down to the Eternal majestic in holiness; tremble in God's presence, all the earth! (10) Declare among the nations, "The Eternal is ruler!" the world stands firm; it cannot be shaken; God judges the peoples with equity. (11) Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult; let the sea and all within it thunder, (12) the fields and everything in them exult; then shall all the trees of the forest shout for joy (13) 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.

Psalm 104

(10) You make springs gush forth in torrents; they make their way between the hills, (11) giving drink to all the wild beasts; the wild asses slake their thirst. (12) The birds of the sky dwell beside them and sing among the foliage. (13) You water the mountains from Your lofts; the earth is sated from the fruit of Your work. (14) You make the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for man's labor that he may get food out of the earth—(15) wine that cheers the hearts of men oil that makes the face shine, and bread that sustains man's life. (16) The trees of the LORD drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, God's own planting, (17) where birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the junipers.

Hosea 2

(20) In that day, I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will also banish bow, sword, and war from the land. Thus I will let them lie down in safety. (21) And I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy, (22) And I will espouse you with faithfulness; Then you shall be devoted to the LORD. (23) In that day, I will respond—declares the Eternal—I will respond to the sky, and it shall respond to the earth.

Ezekiel 34

(26) I will make these and the environs of My hill a blessing: I will send down the rain in its season, rains that bring blessing. (27) The trees of the field shall yield their fruit and the land shall yield its produce. [My people] shall continue secure on its own soil. They shall know that I am the Eternal when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from those who enslave them. (28) They shall no longer be a spoil for the nations, and the beasts of the earth shall not devour them; they shall dwell secure and untroubled. (29) I shall establish for them a planting of renown; they shall no more be carried off by famine, and they shall not have to bear again the taunts of the nations.

Job 12

(7) But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; The birds of the sky, they will tell you, (8) Or speak to the earth, it will teach you; The fish of the sea, they will inform you. (9) Who among all these does not know That the hand of the Eternal has done this?

Job 14

(7) There is hope for a tree; If it is cut down it will renew itself; Its shoots will not cease. (8) If its roots are old in the earth, And its stump dies in the ground, (9) At the scent of water it will bud And produce branches like a sapling.

Song of Songs 1:14-2:3

(14) My beloved to me is a spray of henna blooms From the vineyards of En-gedi. (15) Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair, With your dove-like eyes! (16) And you, my beloved, are handsome, Beautiful indeed! Our couch is in a bower; (17) Cedars are the beams of our house, Cypresses the rafters. (1) I am a rose of Sharon, A lily of the valleys. (2) Like a lily among thorns, So is my darling among the maidens. (3) Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, So is my beloved among the youths. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my mouth.
O Allah, give water to Your slaves, and Your livestock, and spread Your mercy, and revive Your dead land.

LITURGICAL RESPONSIVE READING (FOR JEWISH OR INTERFAITH SETTINGS)

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

When tragedy strikes, when a crisis such as deforestation looms,

It is natural to look the other way, to deny, to disbelieve, to pretend that life can go on as before.

Alas! This cannot be happening—it must be but a nightmare.

When the mind does not want to grasp, the heart too often closes, denies.

Denial is natural – but futile, even dangerous. Actions taken today that could save forests, species, our very climate, may be as empty speech if put off till tomorrow.

The forests burn, the carbon curve climbs, the waters rise—there is such a thing as too late.

To this personal denial, those who put the siren song of profits above the call of the prophets add deception; they assure us the status quo is acceptable and sustainable.

They lull us with the poppy-milk of false prophecies.

It's not happening; or it's inevitable; and anyway it won't be so bad.

Or if it is, we can trust in technology to find a painless solution.

With deception and delusion, we are distracted from justice.

But justice delayed and justice denied bring the sword into the world. (Pirkei Avot 5:8)

This day, we recommit to the pursuit of justice, as we remember:

Zion will be saved by justice, her repentant ones by righteousness. (Isaiah 1:27)

But even when we confront the tragedy of tropical rainforests degraded and destroyed, when we contemplate what is being lost.

We may feel disconnected, abandoned, powerless; we may sink into the murky waters of depression. And so we must learn again to hope.

We remember: the Temple in Jerusalem, when it stood, was the center of our people's world.

There, we gathered. There we felt God's presence. There, life was given meaning.

Through the Temple, we felt connected to the Most High.

A connection many thought eternally severed when the Temple was destroyed.

And yet, even in the midst of loss and mourning, hope may arise like a freshly planted sapling:

"One may lay down at night weeping, yet in the morning, joyous song." (Psalm 30:6)

We must remember the past. But we have learned in ages since that the whole world is our Temple.

The dwelling-place of holiness, the gateway to the sacred.

The Earth and all in it, our mystics saw as garments of the Shekhinah, the indwelling presence of the divine.

And so, hope reborn, we can reconnect with our Creator through our connection to all creation.

And yet today, this most basic of connections is being severed, as the cancer of deforestation spreads, as ancient canopies are felled, as countless species are wiped out, as indigenous communities lose ancient homelands, ways of life, sacred places that have sustained them for generations.

Too many have become disconnected from the consequences of their choices, what we consume and how we travel. We live isolated from those even now facing fires and floods, droughts, disease and dislocation fanned by the flames of forests destroyed, of our climate itself changing.

How do we help each other see such choices as moral decisions, as foundations for sustainability and justice?

What would it take for the purchase of teak or palm oil to be seen as a sin, or the search for sustainably sourced coffee a mitzvah?

How can we wake from our slumber, see the cost of our bargains, move from what is convenient to what is required?

Help us, Breath of Life, to hear the cries of those already in peril, to be moved to act for those yet to come.

Each Yom Kippur, we each search our souls,

Examining our personal faults, striving for self-improvement.

But this very moment, indeed every moment can become a time for collective soul-searching,

Reflecting not just on our individual actions, but also those of society.

What is the moral state of our community? How have we fallen short?

What is the nature of our responsibility to distant forests? Have we considered the fates of threatened indigenous peoples, who for so long have lived in and cared for these forests? How have we failed to pursue climate justice?

We, created in the image of the Divine, have the ability:

Which path shall we choose?

Will we shut our ears to the pleas of the earth, the cries of the forests, the fluttering wings of iridescent butterflies or the growls of jaguars, the voices of climate refugees?

Or will we grasp hands across divides, climb from depths of despair, and help shape a better future for the planet and all people?

Today, Breath of Life, help us to reconnect to you, to all life on this planet, to our responsibility to care for others and to the consequences of our actions and inactions.

Help us to see that we are not alone, powerless against a global problem.

May we realize that our cries, though they come from the depths, will be heard.

Our lives, rewoven together, can make a difference.

If, with clear eye and strong heart, we face disaster unflinching,

Strengthened by each other, inspired by the Breath of Life,

It may yet come to pass that we will again stand mountain-strong.

Our dirge turned into dance, sackcloth undone and bound instead with joy (Psalm 30:12).

Ecclesiastes Rabbah (7:28) tells a tale of God endlessly creating and destroying worlds. Finally, God created this one. The Divine Breath led Adam, earthling, and Eve, Life-giver, through the green and growing garden, and the Voice called to them:

See my works, how fine and excellent they are. Now all that I have created, you see arrayed before you.

Think upon this and do not corrupt and destroy my world, for if you do, there is no else to restore it.

That Voice calls to us still, more urgently than ever.

This is our sacred task. Now, let us work for healing, together.

PRAYER FOR THE PROTECTION OF FORESTS

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

“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.”
(Psalm 96: 12-13)

Our Creator, may we so live our lives that the forests shout for joy! May we grow in wonder at their beauty; grow in appreciation at the diverse life they sustain; and most of all, grow in our commitment to be good guardians of Your earth, as we have been instructed from the beginning. Help us to “raise our voice like a shofar,” (Isaiah 58:1) to speak for the trees and for the web of life they stand at the center of. And help us especially to protect Your Edenic rainforests from deforestation that degrades and destroys them. Bless us as we strive for justice for all those whose lives are woven into their fabric, especially our indigenous sisters and brothers, whose own voices have been so long ignored. This and every day, may we be blessed to become supporters of your Tree of Life.

PRAYER FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

“Let the mountains produce well-being for the people, the hills, the reward of justice.” (Psalm 72:3)

O God of Justice, strengthen us so that we become true pursuers of justice. Strengthen our connections with indigenous peoples across our planet. Help us to realize our connection to those of Your children who have so often been exploited and oppressed, whose pleas have been ignored and whose wisdom has been disregarded. Let us learn from and support them as they seek the wellbeing of their people and their lands, including Your majestic rainforests. May they secure the rights they deserve, so that they may live secure lives. Help us to appreciate their guardianship of their environments, and work with them to sustain life upon our planet for generations to come.

PRAYER FOR ALL WHOSE LIVELIHOOD DEPENDS ON THE FORESTS

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

“You bring on darkness and it is night, when all the beasts of the forests stir.” (Psalm 104:20)

M'kor Chayim, O Source of life, Song of the World, open our ears to the symphony of life that stirs throughout Your beautiful forests. Open our eyes to see the many-splendored web that weaves Your creatures into the great forest tapestry, from iridescent butterflies in cloud-covered canopies to the shadow-spotted jaguars prowling among the buttress roots. Open our minds to the wondrous cycles of water, air and soil, the miraculous flow of life itself. Most of all, open our hearts to our own connections to all of this life, so dependent on Your forests, from forest-dwelling peoples to the birds singing amidst the foliage to the ever-present, yet often unseen parade of insects. Help us to understand rainforests not as resources to be extracted but as ancient communities to be honored. Give us the strength and wisdom to build a just transition from livelihoods dependent on forest destruction to sustainable economies of mutuality, so that these living cathedrals can inspire for countless generations yet to come.

PRAYER FOR WISDOM IN LEADERS IN GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

“O God, endow the ruler with Your judgments, the leaders with Your righteousness; that they may judge Your people rightly, Your oppressed ones, justly.”
(Psalm 72:1-2)

Rabbeinu shel Olam, O Teacher of us all, pour out your spirit on all leaders of our society – those elected, those appointed, and those who serve as leaders through their roles in business, culture, and society. May they unite with all who seek to be Your partners L'taken Olam b'Malchut Shaddai – the sacred task of working with You to heal our world. Help them to connect deeply with all of humanity, indeed all of creation, and through those connections to realize their responsibility to rainforests and all threatened ecosystems, to our indigenous brothers and sisters, and to generations to come. Help them to prioritize long-term collective goals above shortsighted self-interests. Most of all, inspire them with visions of a just, verdant, and sustainable future and strengthen them for the hard work of making that vision become a reality.

PRAYER FOR OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AS CONSUMERS AND CITIZENS

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

“Do not corrupt and destroy my world, for if you do, there is no else to restore it.” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28)

O Source of mercy, help all of us, inattentive, distracted and busy as we often are, to awaken both to the wonders surrounding us and to our responsibility for ensuring they not only survive but flourish. Heighten our awareness of the moral consequences of our daily actions and inactions, including our choices about what and how to consume. Share Your wisdom with us, that we may make our choices not because of momentary impulses but due to eternal values. Help us to restrain our envy and pride, so that we may separate desires from necessities, while recognizing the great needs of our fellow human beings. Remind us always of our power, individually and collectively, and strengthen us so that we use that power to move our society and world toward healing, justice, and peace. Help us to overcome the weariness of temporary defeats, to let eternal hope touch our hearts, and to rise once more to do Your will. And through all our choosing and striving, help us to raise the next generation to be wiser, kinder, and more connected to each other than we have been.

ADDITIONAL LITURGICAL RESOURCES

1. A prayer that was offered at Standing Rock, alongside the indigenous people working to protect the land there: <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/hashkiveinu-standing-rock>
2. Environmentally-themed Tu B'Shvat (the Jewish New Year of the Tree) Haggadot:
 - a. <https://ritualwell.org/list/five-tu-bshevat-rituals>
 - b. <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/pray-if-earth-matters-tu-bishevat-seder>
 - c. <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/new-year-trees-tu-bishevat-seder-everyone>
3. Environmental versions of the “Al Chet” prayer of confession: http://www.neohasid.org/stoptheflood/environmental_al_chet/
4. “Tisha B’Av in a Time of Climate Crisis” — Liturgy for Tisha B’av (the fast day commemorating the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples) developed by COEJL and the Shalom Center: <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/flaming-fire-consuming-everything-tisha-bav-time-climate-crisis>

LESSON PLAN

PROTECTING RAINFORESTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: JEWISH VALUES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

By Rabbi Daniel Swartz

This lesson plan is targeted at 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 distributes 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:

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 a 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

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 Issue Primers, Country Primers, or Resource Guide published by the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

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.

1. 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”?

2. 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”?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. 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 Hirsch might have meant by “reciprocal activity”? What are some examples of that from rainforests? From the realm of human activity?

7. 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”?

8. Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a

“One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Ḥoni 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. Ḥoni 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: Ḥoni 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 Ḥoni? 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?

9. 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:

Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, that it is thus in Your world.

Optional: before or after the blessing you may choose to play the 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>



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