“A Tree in Israel Speaks”

PAGES 18–19

This lesson plan provides several different ideas for enhancing your teaching about Tu B’Shevat. By using the article about the oak on Mount Tabor as a springboard for discussion, the lesson invites students to reflect on the role and place of trees in their world. The activities listed below include various educational approaches to the topic: art, music, text study, role play, and creative writing.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider trees that they have personally encountered and reflect on the life and contributions of those trees.
- Students will express the personal value they place on those trees.

VOCABULARY

אֲלֵנָה - oak tree
ֹנוּק - trunk
לְקָפָה - branches
לֵילָה - leaves

QUOTES & QUESTIONS

“I dare you to walk by me without stopping. Go ahead, try it; I’m certain you’ll fail. Few among you can resist the lure of my majestic presence beckoning you to lounge in the shade by my side. What provokes such confidence? History, my friends—the history of this place.”

Discuss what makes this tree so special that people cannot pass by without stopping. Make a list of the events on the board. This tree has witnessed 600 years of history in Eretz Yisrael. Relate this time frame to other periods of Jewish history that your class might be studying.

Would this tree have been alive then?
What was happening 600 years ago in North America?
Why did the Mount Tabor oak lose some of its glory in the twentieth century?
Relate this to the concept of l’vedah u’leshamrah, protecting the environment. Is this diminished glory good or bad? Why?

ACTIVITIES

Choose from among the variety of activities below to help students appreciate the significance of trees in Judaism, history, and their lives. These activities are designed to enrich your teaching about Tu B’Shevat.

CIRCLES OF LIFE

Create a class puzzle that, when assembled, will depict the history witnessed by the Mount Tabor oak. Prepare a large outline of the cross section of a tree on poster board by drawing large concentric rings. (An example is available to view at www.babaganewz.com/teachers.) The teacher should prepare one ring for each event that the article highlights. Starting with the outside ring—i.e., the most recent historical event—pairs of students prepare one ring by drawing and writing about one specific event from the article. When all students have created one ring, assemble the tree cross-section. You may want to complete a similar tree cross-section for a tree in your community or near your synagogue or school.

SELF-PORTRAITS

Study the text from Devarim 20:19. Ask students to imagine that they were trees and draw self-portraits as such. Encourage students to think metaphorically about the following questions as they create their portraits:

What would be your roots? Leaves? Branches? Trunk?

For a more complete lesson based entirely on this activity from the Shevat 5764 issue of Babaganewz, visit www.babaganewz.com/teachers.

EYEWITNESS

In the article, the oak tree witnesses Galilean history. The Torah tells us of other things in nature that can serve as a “witness.” In Devarim (Parashat Ha’Azinu, Devarim 32:1) we learn that heaven and earth can be called upon to act as witnesses. Choose an event in Tanakh or Jewish history that you have studied in class. Ask students to play the roles of a tree, the heavens, and the earth who have come to report on the details of the event you have chosen. Students should consider the unique perspective that each would bring to the report. Compare the tree to the heaven and earth and discuss which was the strongest witness of the three and why.

A BLESSED NAME

Study the story from Ta’anit 5b cited in the Jewish Texts section of this lesson about the man who receives gifts from a tree and how he blesses the tree for its kindness. Discuss why the blessing that the man gives is so special. Assemble photographs of various trees that grow in Israel. (The Jewish National Fund is a good source for posters and pictures of trees.) Students can compose their own benedictions focused on a particular type of tree. Try to get pictures of trees whose names are used as people’s names in Hebrew. Looking at the picture, discuss what types of symbolic blessings parents are giving children by naming them with the name of a tree (Ilan, Ilana, Erez, Dikla, Oren, Tamar, Alon).

TREE TUNES

Teach a song with tree or nature imagery to students to sing at your school’s Tu B’Shevat Seder. Choose a tune to “Etz Hayim Hih,” the song “Ilan Ilan” (based on the text from Ta’anit 5b) by Abie Rotenberg and Shlomo Simcha on the album “Aish,” or “Shirat Ha’Asavim,” lyrics by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslov and music composed by Naomi Shemer. (Visit www.babaganewz.com/teachers for a link to the lyrics for this song.)

I SPY

Have students create stories about a specific tree at their home, school, or synagogue. Stories should be written in first person, as if the tree is telling what it has seen. Students will include a description of the tree, major events that happened close by that the tree could have witnessed or heard about, and how the tree felt about some of these events. What made the tree happy, sad, lonely, and so on? If possible, students can attach a photograph of their tree to their writing.

TODAH RABBAH

Assign students to write a thank you note to God for a tree that might be like a personal friend to them. Ask students to think about special trees they remember from home, vacation, camp, the neighborhood, or anywhere else. If students cannot think of a specific tree that has special meaning to them, direct them to write the thank you note for their favorite fruit tree. Each note should end with either the blessing for fruit or the blessing from Ta’anit 5b. These notes can be incorporated into a Tu B’Shevat Seder in school or at home.
BIO-POEMS
Introduce the following poetic form for students to use to create a poem about the Mount Tabor oak in the article, or about another tree that they know.

Name of Tree
Three adjectives to describe the tree
Lives near______________________________________
Wishes to______________________________________
Dreams of______________________________________
Who fears______________________________________
Who enjoys_____________________________________
______________________________________________
Who plans______________________________________
______________________________________________

JEWISH TEXTS

TA’ANIT 5B–6A
A man was journeying in the desert. He was hungry, weary, and thirsty, and he lighted upon a tree, the fruits of which were sweet, its shade pleasant, and a stream of water was flowing beneath it. He ate of its fruits, drank of the water, and rested under its shade.

When he was about to continue his journey he said:
“Tree, oh tree, with what shall I bless you?
Shall I say to you: May your fruits be sweet? They are sweet already.
That your shade be pleasant? It is already pleasant.
That a stream of water may flow beneath you? Lo, a stream of water flows already beneath you.
Therefore, I say: May it be God’s will, that all the shoots taken from you be like you.”

DEVARIM 20:19
...For a person is as the tree of the field....

Discuss why the Torah compares trees and people.
How are trees like old friends or relatives?

Compare ways we think of trees to ways we should treat people. Why would it have been terrible if that Mount Tabor oak had been cut down? What would have been physically lost, and what would have been symbolically lost?