“The Whispering Wall”

MAGAZINE PAGES 17–19

Special thanks to Canfei Nesharim, an organization dedicated to teaching about the relationship between Judaism and the environment.

The article tells the story of the Kotel through the voice of a hyssop plant. In this lesson, students will analyze the narrative choice of the hyssop; consider the Biblical and contemporary uses of hyssop; and identify other ways in which plants are used by humankind. Through this study, students will recognize the humbling nature of human dependence on and need for plants and the environment.

OBJECTIVES

► Students will explore the significance of the hyssop plant in Jewish tradition and the essential role of nature in everyday life.

► Students will identify aspects of nature that are used by humans and understand how the relationship between humans and nature can be humbling.

VOCABULARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>בַּבִּטָן</td>
<td>herb</td>
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<tr>
<td>עָמִיר</td>
<td>plant (n.)</td>
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<td>בְּשִׂמְךָ</td>
<td>spices</td>
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<tr>
<td>דָּשָׁן</td>
<td>furniture</td>
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<tr>
<td>לָחֵשְׁמֵם</td>
<td>to use</td>
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<tr>
<td>מַעְדִּית</td>
<td>medicine</td>
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<td>עֶשֶׂב</td>
<td>wood</td>
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Have students visit babaganewz.com to take a virtual tour of the Kotel and to get an authentic za‘atar recipe.

ACTIVITY: HYSSOP, HOLINESS, AND HUMILITY

1. Begin the lesson by reading the article “The Whispering Wall” on pages 17–19 of Babaganewz. Ask students:
   - Why do you think that hyssop is the narrator chosen for this article?
   - In your opinion, is the hyssop a good narrator for the piece? Why or why not?
   - How would you characterize the voice of the hyssop on the article?
   - Which part of the hyssop’s story did you find the most moving? Why?

   Read the text from Berakhot 28b.

   How does this text apply to the end of the article we just read?

2. Explain to the class that they will now explore some of the ancient uses for this plant, a grayish shrub with thin woody branches that needs minimal resources to grow, and sometimes even grows out of little cracks in stone.

   What, according to the article, is the most common use of hyssop today?

   What do you think makes hyssop different from other plants found in Israel, for example, a date palm or a cedar tree?

   Study and discuss the remaining Jewish texts cited below.

   What is the role of the hyssop plant in these sources?

   Why do you think God would want the “lowly” hyssop plant to be given such important jobs?

   What are examples of other plants that have crucial roles within Judaism?

   Explain to students that hyssop was a source of cleansing and purification throughout Jewish history. Why is it appropriate?

   Why do you think God would want the “lowly” hyssop plant to be given such important jobs?

   What do you think makes hyssop different from other plants found in Israel, for example, a date palm or a cedar tree?

   Study and discuss the remaining Jewish texts cited below.

   What is the role of the hyssop plant in these sources?

   Why do you think God would want the “lowly” hyssop plant to be given such important jobs?

   What are examples of other plants that have crucial roles within Judaism?

   Brainstorm as a class a list of uses for plants and products made from them.

   Do any other living things benefit from those same plants? Discuss a few examples.

   We know that people are the most important aspect of creation, but we depend on the rest of creation to sustain us in every way. How can knowing this help us feel humble?

   How should that knowledge inform our actions vis-à-vis the environment?

   Why would contemplating nature make us more or less superior to the animals? How could studying the night sky or a bee in flight or a rushing stream have such a great impact on us?

How would a “humble society” treat nature? How can we move closer to that ideal?

JEWISH TEXTS

BERAKHOT 28B

Know before Whom you stand.

This text, re-written in the singular, is often inscribed on arks in synagogues all over the world and throughout Jewish history. Why is it an appropriate inscription?

Why do you think it is often switched to the singular?

How might this text make someone feel during tefillah? Why is that emotion an important one to have when praying?

SHEMOT 12:21–22

Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Pesach offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts.

What is the context of this text? [Moshe’s instructions for the Jews on the eve of their exodus from Egypt.]

What role does hyssop play in this text?

MIDRASH TANHU MA METZORA 3

[Why must the metzora bring cedar wood as part of a purification sacrifice?] Because the metzora became haughty like a cedar tree, the metzora was afflicted with tzara‘at.... [And why hyssop?] Because among all the trees none is lower than the hyssop, and since the metzora has become lowly he or she will be cured by the use of the hyssop.

Explain to students that tzara‘at is a physical affliction brought on by improper speech, usually lashon hara.

Why is hyssop part of the purification process for someone suffering from tzara‘at?

Why is hyssop partnered with the other items mentioned in the verse?