



Tinkering and Text on Tu B'Shevat

Topic

Tu B'Shevat, Mitzvot and Middot

Grade Level(s)

5th – High School

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Connect the *mitzvah* of בַּל תִּשְׁחִית (Bal Tashchit, not destroying useful objects) to ט"ו בְּשֶׁבֶט (Tu B'Shevat)
- Upcycle items in various states of disrepair to create tools they can use for planting
- Develop a more nuanced view of what constitutes waste, garbage, etc. through a text about Bal Tashchit

Materials needed

- Items in various states of disrepair. These items could include torn clothing, used paper, broken electronics, plastic cartons, water bottles. They will be used for building, art, etc.
- Glue, multi-colored duct tape, markers, pencils, etc. (Optional). These items can be used for enhancing, connecting, etc. the items in disrepair.
- 1 copy of the *Shulhan Aruch HaRav* text sheet for each student (separate download)

Background for Teachers

While *Tu B'Shevat* (the 15th day of the month of Shevat) has long been the date on which all trees celebrate their birthdays (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 1:1), it has taken on greater prominence as a day for environmental awareness in recent years. As such *Tu B'Shevat* has become linked to the *mitzvah* of *Bal Tashchit*.

The *mitzvah* of *Bal Tashchit* prohibits destroying or wasting items that could be useful. The most basic form of the *mitzvah* proscribes cutting down trees that produce fruit while permitting non-fruit-bearing trees to be cut down for other purposes (*Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 20:19-20). However, rabbinic interpretation extends the prohibition to include other things that have value, like oil and animals (Tractate *Shabbat* 67b and Tractate *Hullin* 7b).



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With greater emphasis being placed on taking care of the environment, *Bal Tashchit* takes a position of greater prominence, especially with the modern imperative to “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.” Just how far does the obligation not to destroy something extend? When is recycling enough? How much do people need to go out of their way to preserve something instead of throwing it out? Addressing these questions can lead to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to take care of the environment and to fulfill the mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* (and it can also encourage great acts of creativity).

For some examples of upcycled garden implements, check out [this video](#).

For some examples of upcycled lawn art, check out [this link](#).

Prepare in Advance

- Collect items to be used for making things to help with planting or creating art for beautifying a garden:
 - Ask parents to donate broken and/or torn items that they are thinking about throwing out. Remind parents not to send in sharp objects.
 - Gather old, broken, disrepaired items from around the synagogue. Remember, no gathering God’s name!
- Lay out the disrepaired objects for students to see and to access.

Description of Activities

1. Show students the different items in their various stages of disrepair.
2. Challenge students to tinker with the items and create something that can help with planting or creating garden art.
 - a. Divide students into groups of 2-4.
 - b. Examples of possible new recreations include watering cans, trowels, and garden decorations.
3. Groups present their creations to each other and demonstrate how they have repurposed the items at their disposal.
 - a. Outdoor Option: If there is an available garden, take the class outside to test out their creations.
4. Share *Devarim* 20:19-20 with the class (included below). Ask:
 - a. According to the Torah, what does God command about trees? [Not to destroy fruit-bearing trees. May cut down non-fruit-bearing-trees for other purposes.]
 - b. How do you envision this verse might be understood by later interpreters?
5. Hand out copies of the text from *Shulhan Aruch HaRav*. Students read the text to each other and discuss the questions in *havruta* (learning pairs). Remember to walk around the room to make sure that students understand the basic meaning of the text and stay on task.



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6. Discuss one or more of the following questions:
 - a. What might qualify something as beyond use and worthy of being discarded?
 - b. Where might there be an imperative not only not to destroy but rather to fix an item?
 - c. Where does recycling fall in the *mitzvah* of *Bal Tashchit*?
 - d. How would you define “destroying” something for no purpose?
7. Ask students to clean up the materials. Tell them that the remaining items must be either disposed of or taken home. [Note that this clean-up step should take on greater meaning after students have engaged with the materials and the texts since students should develop a more nuanced perspective about what constitutes waste, garbage, etc.]

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Assign specific tools and gadgets that students should create with the disrepaired items.
- Summarize the text from *Shulhan Aruch HaRav* and have students focus on the discussion questions.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Challenge students to consider whether displays of emotion could override *Bal Tashchit* (e.g. breaking a pencil to show anger).
- Students explore Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's outlook on the world and how his views on *Bal Tashchit* fit in with his overall approach.



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Devarim (Deuteronomy) 20:19-20	דברים כ: יט-כ
<p>¹⁹When you [surround] a city... to make war on it and to capture it, do not destroy its trees... You may eat from them but you may not cut them down. Is a tree of the field [like] a person [who can escape] from you [by running] into the [surrounded] city?</p> <p>²⁰Only a tree that you know does not yield [fruit] you may... cut down. You may build [machines to help you defeat] the city... until you [defeat] it.</p>	<p>יט כִּי־תִצּוֹר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ לְגִדּוֹחַ עָלֶיו גְּרֹזֶן כִּי מִמּוֹנוֹ תֹאכַל וְאִתּוֹ לֹא תִכָּרֵת כִּי הָאָדָם עַץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבֹא מִפְּנֵיךָ בְּמִצּוֹר :</p> <p>כ רק עץ אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְעַע כִּי־לֹא־עֵץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא אִתּוֹ תִּשְׁחִית וְכָרַתְּ וּבְנִיתָ מְצוֹר עַל־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה עַד רִדְתָּהּ :</p>