



Name That Critter

This activity explores the power of naming something. Often when we think of the language of Breishit – dominion and ruling over Creation and stewardship – we imagine physical acts or resource use. But it is possible to enact dominion through more subtle intellectual pursuits as well, such as naming. This activity highlights our ability and propensity for putting ourselves above the rest of Creation through naming, the positive and negative aspects of that ability, and the responsibility that comes with it.



For this activity you will need some living creature. The easiest choice might be a houseplant. But you can also see if there is anything interesting in the science lab – a salamander, a guinea pig, some crickets or some worms might capture the students' imagination more readily than a plant.

1. Begin by placing the creature in the center of the circle or at the front of the room.
2. Tell the students that they are the first human being in the entire world to see this creature. (Shtick it up – maybe they are explorers in the Amazon who discovered a new species or Martians who just landed on Earth). They get to name this creature.
3. Ask them to start by brainstorming a list. This is a list of words describing the creature, phrases with their impressions, their reactions to it, etc. Give a few minutes of silent writing for this. Then ask them to create a name using their list of words and ideas as inspiration.
4. When they are done, give time for everyone to share their names and a brief explanation.

Discussion:

1. In verse 19 it says that God brought each of the animals before Adam, to see what he would call them. How did Adam know what to name each animal? How did you know what to name this creature?
2. (Our tradition teaches that Adam evaluated the true essence of each animal in order to name it. This is especially clear when we remember that Adam was looking for a partner, a mate for himself. He looked at the inner spirit of each creature, looking for a life-mate, and was able to name the animal. We also learn that names in Hebrew represent the essence of that particular object.)
3. What does our tradition teach about the power of words?
 - a. Words have the ability to create or destroy worlds. We learn this from God's creating of the world through words and through the affects of *lashon hora*.

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4. Read an excerpt from Joseph Cornell (in box below). How does naming something change our relationship with it?
 - a. Naming something can help us create a deep relationship with it. It can help create an “I/Thou” relationship, as with Adam. Or it can be a way of gaining power over something and then dismissing it. It can cause one to think “I know what this is, I know its name, I don’t need to know more.” Thus we learn that naming is a powerful thing that can be used positively or negatively and that our power over the rest of creation is not limited to just physical power)

Take Away the Power of Names

Our society and schools seem to rest too much faith in the power of names and labels. We are, I think, wrongly led to believe that if we know the name of something, we know that entity. The quest seems to be only in learning the name of something; when the name is learned, the quest to know apparently stops. Naming tends to remove the mystery, and when the mystery is gone there is no further searching.

What’s in a name? White Oak, *Quercus alba*: does the name tell us of the five foods and five medications that come from the tree? Does the name tell us the color of the flames when burned, the scent of the smoke . . . ?

- “Four Golden Rules” by Tom Brown

Just as your own essence isn’t captured by your name, or even your physical and personality traits, there is also much more to an oak tree, for example, than a name and a list of facts about it. You can gain a deeper appreciation of an oak by watching how the tree’s mood shifts with changes in lighting at different times of the day.

- “A Few Suggestions for Good Teaching”, by Joseph Cornell

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This curriculum module was made possible by the funds granted by the Covenant Foundation. The statements made and views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of the Teva Learning Center.