



# Canfei Nesharim

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## ***Appreciating Nature's Blessing: A Tu b'Shevat Seder*** **Speaking Notes for Seder Leaders<sup>1</sup>**

### ***World 1: Land***

#### **Introduction:**

- In winter, the earth's potential is buried in the land. Thus, we focus on the blessing of the land.
- Through trees and farms, the land provides all of our food.
- Trees also provide oxygen for us to live and capture carbon dioxide, which helps maintain the delicate balance of our atmosphere.
- Rain forests are also the home of countless plants and animals that have provided cures for disease.

#### **What we are grateful for – TREES!**

- Let's look at the main reason for this holiday, a product of the land: the tree.
- Trees contribute continually to the health and well-being of all mammals, by providing oxygen through photosynthesis. An average size tree gives off enough oxygen to keep a family of four breathing for one day.
- Trees help reduce air pollution that can cause health problems in humans. In one year, an acre of trees absorbs the amount of carbon dioxide you produce when you drive your car 26,000 miles.
- Trees also provide water, by converting fog to water. In one night, a 100-foot redwood tree can turn fog into the equivalent of four inches of rain, passing it on to plants, animals and nearby creeks.
- The roots from trees help prevent erosion and landslides, and prevent the property loss and damage that can be caused by floodwaters. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, some of the worst damage from the storm surge and winds was inflicted on those areas where coastal vegetation had been removed.

#### **How is it threatened?**

- Today, only about half the world's forests that existed a thousand years ago remain.
- The World Bank estimates that tropical forests, the primary source of livelihood for about 140 million people, are being lost at a rate of approximately 1% or 17-20 million hectares annually.
- With the trees, go a myriad of species that are reliant on the forest ecosystems.

#### **How do we cause this damage?**

- By purchasing wood that is harvested from forests that are not managed effectively.
- By building housing developments that infringe on forests and farmland.
- By buying non-recycled paper and other paper goods.

#### **What does the Torah say?**

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<sup>1</sup> These speaking notes were created and piloted for Canfei Nesharim by the Young Israel Shomrei Emunah and the Kemp Mill Synagogue in Silver Spring, MD. They are intended as a guide for community leaders conducting Canfei Nesharim's "Appreciating Nature's Blessings" Tu b'Shevat Seder, and as a resource for community leaders conducting other Torah and environment programs. If you have questions about these notes, or need further information, please contact Evonne Marzouk at [evonne@canfeinesharim.org](mailto:evonne@canfeinesharim.org).

- One of the key sources advocating halachic responsibility to use these gifts of nature wisely is Bal Tashchit (the prohibition not to waste). This mitzvah begins with trees, but expands to a broad category of prohibited waste.

*Devarim 20:19-20*

*When you besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by forcing an ax against them: for you may eat of them and you may not cut them down – for is a tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? Only the trees which you know that they are not trees for food, you shall destroy and cut them down; and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you until it be subdued.*

- Clearly the Torah is telling us that we should be careful which trees we cut down, and for what purpose. The mitzvah is expanded to all forms of waste:

*Rabbi Shimson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent 19th Century scholar, defines the edict against destroying fruit trees as: An example of general wastefulness... the purposeless destruction of anything at all is taken to be forbidden, so that our text becomes the most comprehensive warning to human beings not to misuse the position which G-d has given them as masters of the world and its matter by capricious, passionate or merely thoughtless wasteful destruction of anything on earth. (Commentary on Devarim 20:19)*

### **What can we do to protect the trees and the land?**

- Make a commitment to buy more organic produce. Organic foods are gentler to the land because they do not use pesticides and include crop rotation which keeps the soil healthy.
- When purchasing wood, use sustainably harvested brands. (There are several certification bodies - the Forest Stewardship Council is the most well known). Due to a high profile/high pressure campaign, Home Depot carries a lot of sustainable harvest certified wood, so go to Home Depot and ask for it!
- Buy Paper products with 100% Post Consumer Waste (PCW) nothing less! Pre-consumer waste content products are not coming from recycled materials.

## **World 2: Water**

### **Introduction:**

- Water is the most essential of components of Hashem's creation.
- It is from which life comes forth and that which sustains life.
- We use it for drinking, cleaning, and sanitation.
- Through its use in agriculture, it is responsible for all of our food.
- It is also responsible for all clothing made from natural fibers such as cotton and wool.

### **What we are thankful for**

- While there is no specific bracha for water, its blessing is in every part of our life. It is appropriate that we use the bracha "shehakol nihiyeh bidvaro" since water is truly created by Hashem's word.
- Without water, no human could live.
- We bathe in it, brush our teeth with it, wash our clothes with it and clean our dishes with it.
- In our own bodies, water regulates our body temperature, helps with absorption of nutrients, and carries oxygen to all parts of our body.

### **Where does the water go (and what goes with it)?**

When your water goes down the drain, it goes through a complex cleansing process. The water needs to be cleansed of the following pollutants that have been washed down the drain:

Soap  
Laundry Detergent  
Cleaners  
Bleach  
Pesticides  
Sewage  
Toilet paper  
Prescription drugs (ingested into our bodies)  
Fertilizers

### **How are our water resources threatened?**

- In the year 2000, 1.1 billion people still did not have access to improved water supply and 2.4 billion people lacked access to improved sanitation.<sup>2</sup>
- "Water stress (which, two-thirds of the world's population are likely to face by 2025), caused by climate change, uncontrolled urbanization, unplanned water withdrawal and inappropriate water policies make matters worse. Shortage of water also means shortage of food, as 80% of our water consumption is applied for irrigating crops."<sup>3</sup>
- More than half of the world's major rivers are seriously depleted and polluted.<sup>4</sup>
- Did you think this is only a problem in the developing world? Think again! The Anacostia River is so badly polluted, it has been named one of the most polluted rivers in America.<sup>5</sup>

### **How do we cause this damage:**

- By pouring toxic products down the drain

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<sup>2</sup> Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme, 4 December 2002 [Note from the Executive Director].

<sup>3</sup> - Note from the Executive Director Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (4 December 2002 UNEP/GC.22/INF/33).

<sup>4</sup> World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, 1999

<sup>5</sup> American Rivers

- By pollution that goes down storm drains, including litter, oil spills, and soap from washing our cars (the storm drains go directly to the water)
- By wasting water – dripping faucets, over-long showers
- By eating beef. Production of beef and poultry is responsible for 18% of the total water use in American society. Red meat is responsible for 3 times the amount of water use and more than 12 times the land use than poultry. Together, waste from meat and poultry is responsible for 20% of all the common water pollution in our society. Also the amount of pasturelands required to raise cows often results in forests being cleared to make way for them.

### **What does the Torah say?**

*Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 155:21:*

*A person must distance his outhouse from his neighbor's drinking well so that it is clear that the liquid from the outhouse is not reaching the well.*

*The Rama adds in his gloss there:*

*And some authorities disagree and maintain that one must distance one's outhouse as far as necessary to avoid damage, even if the public road separates the two houses.*

- The Torah is teaching us of the importance of protecting drinking water supplies, and our responsibility to protect our neighbor.

### **What can we do to preserve water resources?**

- Reduce beef in your diet. Try to change one beef meal per week to chicken or fish. (It's better for your health, too!)
- Eliminate or reduce toxic chemicals from your household
- Reduce water consumption - consider water and energy efficient appliances
- Don't buy bottled water – if you feel that your drinking water is not safe, filter your water.

## **World 3: Oceans/Marine**

### **Introduction:**

- The oceans provide food and resources for human beings, and also are the basis of the food chain – providing food for birds, larger fish, and other mammals that keep our ecosystems thriving.

### **What we are thankful for**

- Our ocean covers nearly 70% of the earth's surface.
- The ocean teems with life, each species interacting with a myriad of others. The swirling currents in every ocean bring nutrients and oxygen to creatures thousands of miles away. The rich upwelling that brings the cool deep waters to the surface and supports massive populations of fish along the west coast of North and South America.
- The oceans regulate the climate and weather patterns of our world.
- The oceans provide recreation and a sense of peace for the people who enjoy them.
- To continue to appreciate the beauty and strength of the ocean and subsist from its bounty, there are some important steps we must take to protect it from the numerous pressures and threats it faces.

### **How it is threatened**

- Over-fishing. Our technology and ability to catch fish from the ocean has rapidly improved, resulting in greater catch efficiency and ultimately more fish being taken from the sea. In fact, there are too many fish being taken from the sea, leading to a rapid decline, and in many cases, depletion of fish stocks.
- Bycatch: Another concern is that many species that are not targeted by fishermen still end up on their hooks or in their nets unintentionally. This is known as bycatch. These include sea birds, sea turtles, whales, dolphins, sharks and a myriad of fish species not targeted by fishermen. Bycatch is of great concern since it leads to the major disruption of the food chain and the ocean's ability to thrive and provide a food source for all species (including humans).
- Pollution: Although the oceans may seem limitless and pure, in fact, they are being polluted.
  - The seafloor is littered with debris ranging from household trash to drums of discarded nuclear waste.
  - Discharge pipes from factories, runoff from agricultural and farm lands, residential lawn fertilizers, and of course sewage outfalls, accumulate in the ocean. In many instances, these toxics are passed up the food chain and concentrated in species that are on the top of the food chain.
  - Another concern is the mercury emitted into the air that rains down on the ocean. This mercury comes from coal fired power plants which emit tons of methyl mercury into the air – a byproduct of the coal burning process. This mercury is eaten by tiny organisms who are eaten by small fish. These small fish are then eaten by larger fish who are then eaten by even larger fish. Ultimately, the fish at the top of the food chain like TUNA, SWORDFISH and other species have rather high concentrations of mercury in their tissue. The problem is so pervasive that the EPA has issued mercury warnings for pregnant women and children.
- While there is much debate over its impact and severity, the science is becoming abundantly clear that, as a result of greenhouse gases, the ocean is warming up.
  - Sea levels have already slightly risen, and if the ocean rises as predicted, many low lying coral atolls and islands will be underwater by century's end, leaving millions of island refugees.
  - The 2005 Atlantic hurricane season set records for quantity and force of hurricanes; Katrina's power was fueled by warm sea surface temperatures in the gulf. Even though the data is still not conclusive, the signs suggest that warmer seas from increased global temperatures will lead to more powerful hurricanes and simply more of them.

- Scientists see signs that the gulf stream, the marvelously complex system that exports the equator's heat toward the North Pole and helps balance the planet's temperature, may be slowing.
- Japan, a voracious consumer of marine resources, is now discovering that the drastic depletion of its own fish stocks is linked to the loss of underwater seaweed colonies -- caused, in turn, by rising sea temperatures from the current warming trend.

### **How do we cause this damage?**

- By purchasing fish species that are overfished or that use fishing methods that kill other fish in the process.
- By using toxic products that are going down the drain
- By wasting electricity, causing the need for new power plants and more mercury pollution.
- By using fossil fuels, wasting electricity, and driving inefficient cars, causing global warming.

### **What does the Torah say?**

*Talmud Bava Batra 81a. One of the ten regulations established by Joshua for settling in the Land of Israel was that non-residents of Tiberias were allowed to fish in the Kinneret with fishing rods only and not nets.*

- The Torah is trying to teach us restraint so that there will be enough fish for today and for tomorrow.

### **What can we do to preserve ocean resources?**

- Make a commitment to buy sustainable seafood. Ask your local seafood store to carry sustainably harvested seafood species. See #6 in the “resources” section for a list of sustainable fish.
- Use less toxic cleansers. They go down the drain and eventually make their way into our ocean food chain.
- Participate in a beach or river cleanup.

## ***World 4: Air Quality and Global Warming***

### **What we are thankful for:**

- Clean air is critical for the proper functioning of our bodies. It's so obvious that we sometimes forget to be grateful! But it is a gift at every moment from Hashem.
- The blessing of a balanced climate, created by the appropriate concentrations of elements in our atmosphere.

### **How it is threatened:**

- Most outdoor air pollutions are generated directly or indirectly by the burning of fossil fuels, such as gasoline in cars and coal in power plants. Two common outdoor air pollutants, ozone and fine particulate matter, pose an especially high risk to public health.
- A recent national study indicates that fine particles with a diameter of less than 10 micrometers (called PM10) cause about 64,000 extra deaths every year, corresponding to an increase of about 31 percent in the mortality rate from cardiopulmonary cause in the most polluted cities.
- The World Health Organization estimates that air pollution will cause 8 million deaths by 2020.<sup>6</sup>
- More people die from air pollution in metropolitan areas in Israel, compared to traffic deaths in all of Israel in a given year. A collaborative effort between the United States and Israel revealed that 710 people died from human caused particulate pollution vs. 550 traffic deaths in a year.<sup>7</sup>

### **Global Warming:**

- All of the 10 warmest years on record have occurred since 1990. 2005 was officially the hottest year on record.
- Since the Industrial Revolution, carbon dioxide has risen by 31% principally due to the combustion of fossil fuels.<sup>8</sup>
- Mt. Everest glaciers have retreated some 5 kilometers in the past 50 years.<sup>9</sup> Glaciers represent a major source of water for countries on either side of the Himalayan Mountains. Decrease in ice cover will mean less recharge of the streams and lakes that depend on that source of water.
- Since the mid-1990s, Alaskan glaciers have been thinning by 1.8 meters a year, over three times as fast as during the preceding 40 years.<sup>10</sup>

### **How are we causing this?**

- The majority of consumer-based air pollution is caused by transportation and electricity use in the home.
- Home electricity use, including home heating, hot water, air conditioning, appliances and lighting, are responsible for 24% of the total air pollution in America.
- The impacts from consumer-use of cars and light trucks are 22% of common air pollution and 46% of toxic air pollution.
- These pollutants cause human deaths and also are warming the climate.

### **What does the Torah say?**

*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Kinyan, Laws of Neighborly Relations 11:1. Any work causing dust or ash must be conducted at a distance from other people so that the wind will not carry waste particles to them.*

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<sup>6</sup> WHO report 1999

<sup>7</sup> Israel Ministry of Environment, Israel Union for Environmental Defense and the US Environmental Protection Agency

<sup>8</sup> Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2003, Environmental Protection Agency

<sup>9</sup> Earth Policy Institute, Selected examples of Ice Melt From Around the World

<sup>10</sup> Earth Policy Institute, Selected examples of Ice Melt From Around the World.

- The Torah is teaching us about our obligation to protect others from air pollution that might harm their health.

**What can we do to protect our clean air?**

- When you buy your appliances, make a commitment to buying the most energy-efficient model. Even if efficient models cost a bit more, they will save you money through lower energy bills.
- Use cold water in the washing machine. 90% of the energy used for clothes washing goes to heating the water.
- Along with assessing your appliances, consider your lighting. Replacing the four most-used bulbs in your home with compact fluorescent lights can make a big difference. If you can, replace them all!
- Don't keep your lights on for all of Shabbos. Use a timer! There are socket plug in timers as well as wall switch timers readily available on the market.