**Simplicity as a Jewish Path***For a 75 – 90 minute session. Designed by Becky O’Brien. This is a lesson plan I developed for personal use, hence it is written as notes to myself to remind me what to talk about, it is not meant to be complete or read as is. I would love to hear from you if you use these materials as this is a topic I am passionate about and would be eager to discuss with others.*

PR BLURB: If you think you are too busy for this session then it’s probably exactly what you need! Simplifying one’s life is a process, done most effectively with the support of others who are doing the same. Together we will explore the issues and principles of Voluntary Simplicity and share experiences, ideas, frustrations, and successes on the road to a simpler life, with an emphasis on the spiritual disciplines and rewards inherent in the simplifying process, using Jewish vocabulary.

**(5-10 minutes) Opening Circle** – Share your name and one specific thing cluttering your life that you want to get rid of, could be a physical object, or a time commitment, or a person/relationship, or an email newsletter.

**(3 minutes) Moderation**. Judaism advocates neither excessive consumption and materialism, nor ascetiscm and deprivation. The same with the Voluntary Simplicity movement, which some misunderstand as being about cheapness, scarcity or deprivation. It’s really about expanding joy and appreciation and finding what really matters to you and increasing that. In so many ways it is about more, not less. **Mitzrayim** - slavery in Egypt, we in some ways have created our own slavery to the demands of time and possessions we create for ourselves. This is about freeing ourselves!

**Clutter** (whether physical, time or emotional) **develops in two ways**: through acquisition, through letting too much in (buying too much, over-committing to obligations, not having sufficient boundaries) and not letting things go once they are in, not allowing for a healthy flow of objects, relationships, commitments through your life. Consider for a moment whether your struggles with too much, your blocks to a more simple life, stem from excessive acquisition or not letting things go, or a combination of both. Different ones of the various Jewish values we’re going to be getting into can be most usefully applied depending on what your particular blocks are.

 There is a philosophy as well as a practice of Voluntary Simplicity, the Hebrew term is *histapkut b’me’ut*— contentment with less, and it is one of the attributes or “soul traits” of Mussar, a Jewish practice of personal growth and development.

**(15 minutes)** Betsy Teutsch identified **seven Jewish values** or principles that align with Voluntary Simplicity:

[*Anava*](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/humility.html)– Humility  
[*Hodayah*](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/gratitude.html)*-*Gratitude   
[*Ba'al Tashkit & Haganat Hatevah*- Avoiding Waste and Preserving Nature](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/nature.html)  
[*Bitul Z'man*](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/time.html) [- Wasting Time](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/time.html)   
[*Tzedek/Tikkun Olam*](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/justice.html) [- Social Justice and Improving the World](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/justice.html)  
[*Kehilla*](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/community.html)*–*Community  
[*Menuchah*](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/rest.html)*–*Rest  
  
[***Anava***](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/humility.html)– **Humility**We are instructed to walk humbly with God. This suggests that we might need to contract ourselves and take up less space and use less resources. Environmentalists talk about minimizing "ecological footprints." One way to do this is by choosing to live beneath our means. The US has 5% of the world’s population but accounts for 22% of fossil fuel consumption, 24% of carbon dioxide emissions and 33% of paper and plastic use. Setting inside the environmental impact (a Jewish value we’ll look at shortly), what does this say about our humility especially when most of this is for way beyond our needs. Humility also applies around excessive consumption and the phenomenon of keeping up with the Jones. In the past this was addressed by Jewish sumptuary laws that put limits on how grandiose life cycle celebrations can be. And, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 29b) teaches that one is not to appear publicly in a way that flaunts his or her wealth, as this lifestyle not only leads to arrogance, but also can shame others and lead them to covet.

[***Hodayah***](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/gratitude.html)***-*Gratitude**  
Much of what drives our excessive consumption of material goods is taking for granted what we already have. You get that new appliance or car or shirt, how long does the excitement last? How long before we’re over and looking for something else to acquire? The truth is that we are insatiable. Of desire the Talmud says, "Satisfy it and it becomes ravenous; starve it and it becomes satisfied." We keep trying to feed our desire and it never works. Gratitude is part of the antidote, it’s how you can turn your back on desire and foster a sense of wholeness of completeness so that you can begin to be immune to advertising and the pull of the new social status of “busy-ness”.

Hakarat ha'tov - "recognizing the good" -- this is where blessings come in, the Torah asks us to use blessings to identify and acknowledge what we often take for granted as mundane. Practicing gratitude is recognizing the good that is already yours, about truly recognizing the abundance already in your life. From this

"Who is rich? One who is content with his lot/happy with what he has." -Pirkei Avot

***Ba'al Tashkit & Haganat Hatevah* [- Avoiding Waste and](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/nature.html" \t "_blank)**[**Preserving Nature**](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/nature.html)  
The statistics mentioned earlier about the disproportionate levels of consumption and waste compared to America’s population get directly to these Jewish values. Our very non-simple lives filled with buying unneeded items has a significant environmental impact.

Bal Taashit developed from a Biblical prohibition against cutting fruit bearing trees during times of war and that being the fruit bearing trees of your enemies. Over time the sages expanded this prohibition to include careless destruction of trees at any time, and then it was further expanded to a general sense of unnecessary destruction or waste.

In our endless chase of “more and more” we should be considering the environmental impact, from cradle to grave. What raw materials were needed to create this item, what processes were used to turn those raw materials into the final good, how is it packaged, how did it get from its place of creation to where it was sold to you, how did it get from the store to your home, what happens to it when you’re done with it? Let’s not forget the processes beyond only those most immediate and obvious to us; lest us not minimize the true waste and destruction attached to each thing we buy. A true grasp of this helps us take our purchasing more seriously, gives us pause.

[***Bitul Z'man*- Wasting Time**](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/time.html)  
When we think of clutter we usually think of physical items, the “stuff” filling up our closets, garages, and basements. But we can also clutter our lives with being too busy. How much of our time are we wasting with unnecessary activities. And it also isn’t necessarily “worthless” or unpleasurable activities. In fact, as likely if not more likely we’re cluttering our lives with activities we do want to do—like social engagements, volunteering, extracurriculars for our kids, etc. But we often do too much and our lives are complex and far from simple and we end up not enjoying any of them and adding tremendous stress and “schedule clutter” to our lives. I’ve noticed being busy become almost a status symbol in the last few years, as if the busier you are the more popular and important you are.

Interestingly, time clutter and complexity is also tied to physical clutter as well. In *Your Money or Your Life*, a Voluntary Simplicity classic by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez, they ask the question: “How much of your time/life force does it take to buy things? Is it worth it?” For most of us, one of our biggest time obligations, one of the biggest factors taking away from a simpler life, is work. When we buy things we might want to consider how much of our time we spent earning the money to pass for this item. If we are buying something we don’t really need we should consider how our time spent earning the money to buy it was wasted.

Finally, Hillel taught, "the more possessions, the more worries." How much time do we spend obtaining, maintaining, storing, and worrying about possessions? In extreme cases it’s as if the possessions possess the owner rather than the other way around.

[***Kehilla***](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/community.html)***–*Community**When our lives are too cluttered, we can lose track of what’s most important to us. When many of us are asked to distill our lives down to what we value most, to our most simple values, we often say “friends and family”, community. But we can overburden ourselves with stuff and commitments and complications and neglect community. It can start to be easier to have a simpler life and make simpler choices if we go back to our simplest values: community, and start to give community the attention it deserves.

Rabbi Marc Soloway wrote about how cluttered our lives can get with iphones and email and other gadgets and tools meant to make us totally connected. Yet these items complicate our lives and “in the illusion of being more available, we sometimes become totally unavailable.”

[***Menuchah***](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/rest.html)***–*Rest**Every year, there is an annual effort to highlight overconsumption by turning “Black Friday”, the Friday after Thanksgiving, traditionally the biggest shopping day of the year, into "International Buy Nothing Day." We Jews have a tradition that sponsors one of these days every week! Shabbat, a day of cessation from commercial transaction, is a cornerstone of Jewish life. Shabbat is in great part about avoiding work and not consuming. Shabbat is about deciding for a day to let everything, including ourselves, just be. These fifty-two annual "Buy Nothing Days" allow us to trade consumption for personal and communal renewal.

[***Tzedek/Tikkun Olam***](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/justice.html)[**- Social Justice and Improving the World**](http://www.jewishsimplicity.org/justice.html)  
Perhaps you’ve seen the bumpersticker, “Live simply so that other may simply live.” This speaks back to some of the things raised earlier in “humility” and “do not destroy” about the U.S.’s inordinate ratio of consumption and the injustice that necessarily arises from that. The average American will throw away 45 tons of garbage in our lifetimes and an estimated 33% of that is packaging! And in so many ways living a simpler life can help tikkun olam, heal the world—essentially through several of these other categories

**(10 minutes)** Text Study: chevruta for 10 minutes with text and questions (see below). Have people break into pairs and give each pair one text with questions.

**(10 minutes)** Group discussion

**(10 minutes)** Text study: chevruta, switch to a new partner and new text/questions (see below). Hand out a new text and set of questions to each pair.

**(10 minutes)** Group discussion

**(5-10 minutes)** ClosingCircle - What are you saying "yes" to, what are you going to add to your life as a result of simplifying? (perhaps more time for a hobby, more time with loved ones, peace of mind, a new Shabbat practice, more money because you're going to sell something you don't want/need...)

**TEXT/QUOTES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Of desire the Talmud says, "Satisfy it and it becomes ravenous; starve it and it becomes satisfied."

Questions:  
What do you think this teaching means? Do you think it is true? Do you have examples from your own life or that you’ve observed in others that prove it true or false?

Reflect on a time when you really wanted a physical item and finally obtained it. How long did the excitement and newness of ownership last? Then what happened?

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11th century Spanish poet, philosopher and rabbi Shlomo ibn Gabirol taught, "Seek what you need and give up what you do not need. For in giving up what you do not need, you will learn what you really do need."

Questions:  
We once were slaves in Egypt. In what ways have you personally, and we as society, created our own slavery to the demands we put on ourselves? Do you feel enslaved by any specific obligations or physical objects in your life? Have you ever gotten rid of anything (objects, relationships, time commitments, magazine subscriptions…) and then felt a sense of relief and freedom?

Is there anything you are considering giving up? What are the reasons for why you haven’t given it up yet? What do you think you could create space for in your life by giving it up?

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The Vilna Ga'on teaches three steps toward simplicity, 1) acquiring less, 2) becoming happy with what you already have and 3) cultivating a feeling of having everything you need.

Questions:  
In trying to move toward a simpler life, which of the above steps would be most useful to you? Which would be the hardest to do? To what extent are you already doing these?

What do you think the difference is between #2 and #3?

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"Who is rich? One who is content with his lot/happy with what he has." –Ben Zoma, Pirkei Avot

Questions:  
When have your felt richest, or most satisfied, in your life? When have your felt most discontent and wanting? What circumstances contributed to how you felt, and was there a correlation between your feelings and the amount of money and “stuff” you had at the time?

What are you currently grateful for in your life? Are there things you are taking for granted that you could nurture a sense of gratitude for?

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There is a midrash, "No one leaves this world with even half his desires fulfilled."

Questions:  
If you were to settle into the fact that you’ll never have everything you want, how do you think it might change your pursuit of the things you want?

How might *hodayah*, gratitude, serve as an antidote to endless desire?

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Contemporary simplicity philosopher Jerome Segal says, "Consider the act of saying grace before a meal. Here the core is an attitude of thanksgiving, of appreciation. The focus is on recognizing the full value of what one has, rather than lamenting what one does not. While one can mouth the words, one cannot authentically begin a meal with a benediction of grace and at the same time maintain a sense of dissatisfaction with what one has. There is a certain peaceful contentment that is part of genuine thankfulness."

Questions:  
Do you regularly say prayers before meals or at any other time? If so, how, if at all, has it affected your sense of gratitude and satisfaction? If not, are there other ways you feel and express gratitude for what you have?

When have you felt peaceful contentment in your life? How do you try to cultivate peaceful contentment?

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“As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. We will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.” – A.J. Heschel, Man is not Alone

Questions:  
How do you think the advance of civilization has contributed to a decline in a sense of wonder (and/or do you even agree with this statement)?

In what ways do you think your sense of appreciation has declined? What in your life are you taking for granted? And why? What about modern civilization might be contributing to that sense?

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“Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit* – do not waste or destroy.”   
- Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 32a

Questions:  
How would you rewrite this to reflect the modern-day equivalents, to have the same meaning but sound contemporary? (I.e., what might be equivalent to and more relevant than “break a vessel” in 2012?)

In what ways is your current lifestyle violating this mitzvah? If you simplified your life would it reduce the amount of waste and destroying you are committing? How?

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Rabbi Harold Kushner retells Shel Silverstein’s Missing Piece. A circle had a large triangular wedge cut out of it. "It wanted to be whole, with nothing missing, so it went around looking for its missing piece. Because it was incomplete, it could only roll slowly as it rolled through the world. And as it rolled slowly, it admired the flowers along the way. It chatted with butterflies. It was warmed by the sunshine."  
When the circle finally found the perfect piece to make it whole, it was overjoyed. But now it rolled so fast, it had no time to savor the world. The circle “gets it” and decides to leave the perfect piece behind and returns to contentedly searching for its missing piece. "The lesson," Kushner concludes, "is that in some sense we are more whole when we are incomplete."

Questions:  
Do you agree with Kushner’s conclusion about the meaning of this story? If not, what do you think is the moral of the story?  
  
If you knew that something you wanted that you think will really make you happy actually wouldn’t make you happy, how would that affect your pursuit of that thing? Are there things you really want now because you believe they will make you happy?

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Rabbi Yisrael Salanter once noticed that a fancy restaurant was charging a huge price for a cup of coffee. He approached the owner and asked why the coffee was so expensive. After all, some how water, a few coffee beans and a spoonful of sugar could not amount to more than a few cents.

The owner replied: “It is correct that for a few cents you could have coffee in your own home. But here in the restaurant we provide exquisite décor, soft background music, professional waiters, and the finest china to serve your cup of coffee.”

Rabbi Salanter’s face lit up. “Oh, thank you very much! I now understand the blessing of Shehakol – ‘All was created by His word’—which we recite before drinking water. You see, until now, when I recited this blessing I had in mind only that I am thanking the creator for the water that He created. Now I understand the blessing much better. ‘All’ includes not merely the water, but also the fresh air that we breath while drinking the water, the beautiful world, around us, the music of the birds that entertain us and exalt our spirits, each with its different voice, the charming flowers with their splendid colors and marvelous hues, the fresh breeze – for all this we have to thank God when drinking our water!”

Questions:   
What actions, objects or events do you consistently under-value and under-appreciate? In the style of Rabbi Salanter’s epiphany in the above story, take one of those under-appreciated things and uncover what you’ve been taking for granted in relation to that thing.

How do you imagine invoking a blessing could expand your sense of recognition and gratitude?

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