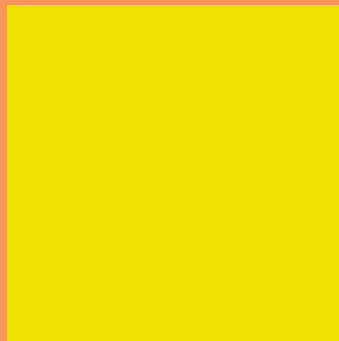


3



ENCOUNTER WITH THE
ENVIRONMENT: SOCIAL AND
ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

MODULE THREE

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ENVIRONMENT: SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This handbook is intended as didactic support for teachers to further elaborate on the following theme: 'encounter with the other: social and ecological issues'. The age group is 13 to 15 year olds. It gives the teacher or facilitator the opportunity to develop this theme appropriate to the students' understanding.

In 1966, the historian Lynn White, Jr. gave a speech to the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*. One year later that speech was published as an article. White's article caused a lot of controversy. One of the reasons for this was the ecological issue that came to the fore in the 1970s. According to White, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition lies at the root of the ecological crisis. This religious tradition allowed scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and industrialization to progress unrestrainedly, without paying attention to possible damage to nature. Without this careless attitude to progress, White says, the ecological crisis would not exist. To defend this thesis, Lynn White points to Gen. 1:28:

God blessed them: God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air and every living creature that crawls on the earth."

G-d commands Adam and Eve to subdue and rule over the Earth. Both the idea that man is above nature, and the idea that there is no longer a divine presence in nature itself, would lead to despotic behavior. And that in turn leads to the careless destruction of biodiversity and climate change.

White's essay stirred up controversy among religious groups. Christianity was quick to respond. Judaism also disagreed with White's argument. The Jewish answer to White appeared in many forms. There are organizations like *Jewcology*, for example, that try to reconcile the Jewish faith with an ecological world view. There are also those that point out that the Tanakh contains concepts and commandments that are contrary to the opinion of Lynn White, Jr. This module agrees with the proposition that the Tanakh can provide important pointers for a theological-ecological orientation.

3.1.2 CONTENTS OF THE HANDBOOK

A literal reading of the Tanakh can lead to violence. Violence can be broken down into two meanings here: on the horizontal axis there is violence in the name of nature. On the vertical axis there is the violence against nature. This module deals with both axes, and encourages reflection on their points of contact.

This teacher's handbook distinguishes between 'basic subject material' and 'in-depth subject material'. Each chapter provides didactic suggestions. The basic material runs parallel to the student's handbook, but offers extra background information and work methods. The point of departure is a story about polarization linked to ecological issues. Afterwards, the topic 'violence *in the name of* nature' is discussed. This is approached through the theme of polarization. Hereafter, the topic 'violence *against* nature' is introduced. We approach this topic from a theological point of view: *the bal tashchit* principle. This ethical principle, which can be translated into 'do not destroy/waste', offers a useful paradigm for students to reflect on current climate issues and related social issues. The handbook offers the etymological and symbolic background of this commandment, together with different interpretations.

The in-depth material offers additional material that the teacher can use at their discretion. The first in-depth chapter is devoted to Catherine Chalier, who offers an interesting interpretation of the complex relationship between Judaism and nature. This is followed by two chapters about the climate crisis and food waste. All three in-depth chapters are supplementary to the basic subject matter, but can also be studied independently. The handbook concludes with a glossary and bibliography.

3.2 CLIMATE (PROTESTS)



Figure 3.1
The Video Clip

3.2.1 THE STORY

The video shows a conflict at school. Ariella is a Jewish girl who learns through the evening news about forest fires in Australia. To satisfy her hunger for more information, she sneaks to the computer at night. Her research reveals an avalanche of ecological crises, while the mysterious words *'bal tashchit'* reflects in her eyes.

At school she hears terrible news: the city council and the school board have decided to cut down a piece of the forest nearby. For years now there has been a shortage of parking spaces. Ariella decides to contest this decision, and she starts a protest movement. However, her movement soon starts dividing people up. What started out of noble intentions, threatens to escalate into full blown conflict. What is the role of the mysterious words *bal tashchit* in all this?

3.2.2 DISCUSSION

This part is optional.

Discuss the video with the students in the classroom: what did they see?

Possible questions about preliminary knowledge and personal reflection can be asked:

- Do the pupils recognize Ariella's feelings (the girl)?
- Would the students join Ariella in protesting?

- Do the students feel that Ariella went too far with her actions?
- Is destroying or attacking property, for example through graffiti, allowed in some cases? Why would it be allowed?
- What associations do the students' protest evoke to current situations and challenges? Do the students recognize similar situations in real life?
- Did the students recognize some of the 'ecological disasters' that Ariella found on the internet?
- Do the students also experience the climate problem as a 'problem'?
- What is, according to the students, the position of Judaism in the climate debate? Is there even such a 'position' according to them? Do Jews bear a responsibility, and do they have to take action?



Figure 3.2
Source: © ystewart
henderson / Adobe Stock

3.3 POLARIZATION

3.3.1 GENERAL This part is **basic subject material**.

People have differing opinions on many subjects. A difference of opinion is inherent to communication and is not problematic in itself. In every society there are subjects on which (groups of) people have different opinions. It only becomes problematic when these different opinions and views lead to conflict, or when certain (groups of) people are personally attacked.

We can speak of polarization when contrasts between opposing groups keep increasing. The two groups face each other as 'opposite poles'. The term 'polarization' seems to appear more often in recent years. People talk about increasing polarization between certain groups in society, or politicians who make use of polarizing statements and thus deliberately want to set people against each other. This in order to increase their own following or to divert attention from other social problems.

Polarization is not always negative. Different points of view, dynamics of polarization, and conflicting opinions can be of importance for a society. It creates an open debate, in order to scrutinize and denounce possible abuses or to implement social changes. But when solely radical points of view are given attention, and the moderate voices in the debate disappear, people may feel compelled to choose either side. Society can be strongly divided. There is no longer any attention for nuance.

Polarization can also be described as an 'us vs. them' kind of thinking. In this way groups of people are placed diametrically opposite each other. Examples of such groups are groups based on ethnic, cultural or religious differences; poor versus rich, the people versus the elite, political right versus political left, men versus women, government versus citizens, and so on. Polarization can escalate, thus leading to conflict, aggression, violence and possibly war. The climate debate can also result in polarization. This section invites students to reflect on the phenomenon of climate protest. The 'climate marches' are a topical theme. Yet they also raise many questions. When do protests go too far? Do protests lead to more polarization? Is protest always the right way to come to solutions?

According to the Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma, it is important to distinguish polarization from conflict.

A **conflict** is obvious. A problem arises, and around that problem there are different 'problem owners'. For one 'this' is at stake, for the other 'that'. These differences are 'conflicts of interest': different problem owners have different interests. In part these are based on rationality. The backgrounds, the motives, are easier to trace, and so are the steps. This explains why a constructive conversation is a good method for dealing with conflict. A conversation can clarify the different interests, give them a place, and offer a rational solution.

Polarization is complex. It is harder to identify the problem owners. Furthermore, motivations are harder to trace. There is a big world behind people's actions, where feeling and irrationality play important roles. That is why a constructive conversation is much less effective: It leads to so-called 'fake conversations'. What is needed, Brandsma says, is strong leadership. A strong leader can, with the right attitude and tone, acknowledge the real concerns, and at the same time point out the real problems in the debate. A leader must not remain indifferent and neutral, but adopt an inclusive attitude. And since polarization is an us vs. them thinking, a leader must be able to give a voice to the middle: the group of doubting, indifferent, and neutral people.

The story at the beginning of the lesson shows us a conflict, as a result from climate change leading to polarization! There is an 'us vs. them' dynamic, embodied very emotionally by the characters Ariella and Levi. Together with the problem, clear problem owners can be identified that interpret the problem differently. This leads to 'conflicts of interest'. The school board recognizes the problem of a parking shortage, and wants to address it. Ariella recognizes a climate issue, and thinks this is more important. The problem does not escalate too much, and the school principal manages to dismantle the conflict with constructive conversation. He offers a rational solution, which everyone rationally accepts.

3.3.2 DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

At school, in the media, with politicians, between certain groups in society; every day we are confronted with an 'us vs. them' kind of thinking.

ASSIGNMENT. The students can be divided into groups and each group receives a newspaper article, or searches independently for a newspaper article, about polarization. The students analyze the article on the basis of the following questions:

- Which conflict comes to the fore in the article?
- Which two poles are opposite each other?
- Are both sides of the story given, or is one perspective shown in more detail than the other?
- What do you think about the reporting?
- Do you agree with the climate protesters? Why or why not?

The analysis of the article can then be reworked and presented before the class.



Figure 3.3
The Video Clip

ASSIGNMENT. The story at the beginning of this module shows us how Ariella, frustrated with the school's decision to cut down a part of a forest, starts a protest group. The students can reflect on the theme of polarization through this story.

- Do they think Ariella is polarizing? Is Ariella partaking in 'us vs. them' kind of thinking?
- Does the story show us a conflict, or polarization? This is a conceptual question.
- Are there elements in the story that could suggest 'a process of polarization is happening?'
- Do they understand Levi's reaction? Would they also be reticent? Do they feel reticent about the climate strikes happening today?
- The school director invites Ariella and Levi for a conversation. Can a dialogue help solve an 'us vs. them' thinking? How?
- How can we envision depolarization? Can you give examples of possible solutions?
- Do they think it is possible to take action without polarizing? What could such a non-polarizing protest look like?

3.3.3 POLARIZATION: DEEPENING MATERIAL

The Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma has done a lot of work on the topic of polarization. He developed a scheme that reveals the internal dynamics of polarization. In this section we discuss this scheme.

3.3.3.1 GENERAL

According to Brandsma, polarization consists of three basic law has five main players or types of persons involved. Furthermore, there are four essential game changers to realize depolarization.

The three basic laws of polarization.

1. Polarization is a **thought construct**. Based on identity characteristics, oppositions are created in groups of people. Man vs. woman, left vs. right, etc.
1. Polarization fuels statements about the **identity of the opposites**. 'They don't want to understand', or 'they only want to do harm', are typical examples.
1. Polarization is a **dynamic of feeling**. Addressing what is emotionally involved is at least as important as arguing, reasoning, and factchecking. Talking about the identity of the other person is rarely truly factual.

The five main players

1. **Pushers** are the most visible group. These are the people who seek out and stir up debate, always daring to make extreme statements, and pressuring people in the middle to choose a side. Each pusher is stuck in their own right, and thinks they have an absolute hold on the truth.
2. **Joiners** are somewhat less visible. These are the followers of the pushers. They defend and support the pushers, but can more easily return to the neutral middle.
3. **The silent middle** is not visible. This is the group of people who feel the pressure to choose a side, but are often held back from doing so.
4. **Bridge builders** try to put themselves above the poles in order to connect, create understanding, and thus dissolve polarization. However, this can often encourage polarization, instead, when they start to be identified with one of the poles.

5. **Scapegoats** are the victims of radical polarization. They are identified as the culprits of a problem, and often have no defense against a maelstrom of blame. Both the bridge builder and the quiet middle can end up in this position.

Four game changers for depolarization

1. Change the **target audience**. Instead of fighting the poles, it is better to strengthen the middle.
2. Change the **topic**. Instead of talking about the identity of others, place the agenda of the middle at the front.
3. Change **positions**. Don't stand above the involved parties, but find a credible position in the middle.
4. Change the **tone**. Do not evaluate by speaking in terms of right or wrong, true or false, but address the dynamics of feeling within the debate.

3.3.3.2 DIDACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

ASSIGNMENT. The students can answer, classically, or by writing a paper, the following questions:

- Based on the extra information on polarization, do you think the school principal's conversation is depolarizing, or just deconflicting? Does such a conversation always help depolarize?
- Describe the tone/attitude of the three main characters: Ariella, Levi, and the school principal.
- Does the school principal apply the four game changers well?
- Do you recognize the five main roles in the story?
- What is meant by the statement, "polarization is a thought construct"? Explain in your own words.
- Can you give examples of statements about the identity of the other in polarized topics? The examples may come from personal experience.

3.4 THE BAL TASHCHIT-PROHIBITION

This part is **basic subject material**.

3.4.1 GENERAL

The environmental crisis raises important questions about the link between humans and nature. Which role do humans play in relation to nature? The answer to that question is an important piece of the puzzle to map out the encounter between humans and nature. Within the Jewish tradition we can distinguish at least two options: humans can behave as despots, or as caretakers. In the following we will treat this distinction.

The tension between the two clearly emerges in the story of the Garden of Eden. G-d creates Adam and Eve and gives them instructions on how to behave towards the natural world.

3.4.1.1 GEN. 1:27-28

[27] So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.

[28] God blessed them: God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air and every living creature that crawls on the earth."

3.4.1.2 GEN. 2:15

[15] Adonai, God, took the person and put him in the garden of 'Eden to cultivate and care for it.

Both passages use different verbs to describe the actions of Adam and Eve. In the first passage Adam and Eve have to 'fill' the earth, 'subdue' it, and 'rule' over it. What comes to the fore in this passage is 'despotic behavior'. A despot is an autocrat who, without regard for the his subjects, dominates his realm. Here we see the accusing finger of Lynn White, Jr. looming up.

In the second passage, however, Adam and Eve seem to be assigned a different role. Again this is reflected in the use of particular verbs: Adam and Eve have to 'work' the earth and 'watch over' her. After all, Adam and Eve take care of nature in the name of G-d. So in the first passage nature seems to be the property of humans, to handle it as they see fit. In the second passage, however, humans are reminded that in the end everything is the creation, and the property, of G-d. That puts the importance of our position into perspective.



Figure 3.4
Source: © ystewart
henderson / Adobe Stock

3.4.2 THE BAL TASHCHIT PASSAGE

A literal reading of the Tanakh can lead to violence. If we read Gen. 1:18 literally, as Lynn White, Jr. does, we can come to the conclusion that the unbridled destruction of nature is permitted. The Tanakh, however, reveals a more complex relationship with nature. Many Judeo-ecological individuals and groups point out that the Tanakh is also concerned with the protection of nature. To argue this, they often refer to a certain prohibition: *bal taschit*.

In this section we first discuss the passage as we read it without context in the Torah. Afterwards we consider its symbolic and etymological backgrounds. Following this we put forward different interpretations of the commandment. We conclude this section with some didactic suggestions.

3.4.2.1 DEUT. 20:19-20

[19] When, in making war against a town in order to capture it, you lay siege to it for a long time, you are not to destroy its trees, cutting them down with an axe. You can eat their fruit, so don't cut them down. After all, are the trees in the field human beings, so that you have to besiege them too?

[20] However, if you know that certain trees provide no food, you may destroy them and cut them down, in order to build siege-works against the town making war with you, until it falls.

3.4.2.2 ETYMOLOGY AND SYMBOLISM

The verb '(don't) destroy' is derived from the Biblical Hebrew root sh.h.t. [destroy]. That word, *schachat*, is synonymous with the word *kilkul*, which means spoil or corrupt. Modern Hebrew translates sh.h.t. to: spoil, hurt, waste; destroy; sin; corrupt; murder.

The word 'destroy' should therefore be understood in a broad sense, and is closely related to the notion of 'waste'!

The passage mentions 'trees in the field'. This emphasis on the field, or *sadeh*, is striking. The field symbolizes everything that requires care before it can bear fruit. Furthermore, the symbol of the tree is not coincidental. A tree carries, within Jewish intellectual history, a lot of meaning. A tree can symbolize nature enabling (human) life through its function in planetary oxygen exchange. A tree can also symbolize growth and development. After all, trees continue to grow during their lives, retaining the ability to produce fruit. Finally, the tree can also symbolize the spiritually elevated person, such as the Torah scholar or *Tzaddik*.

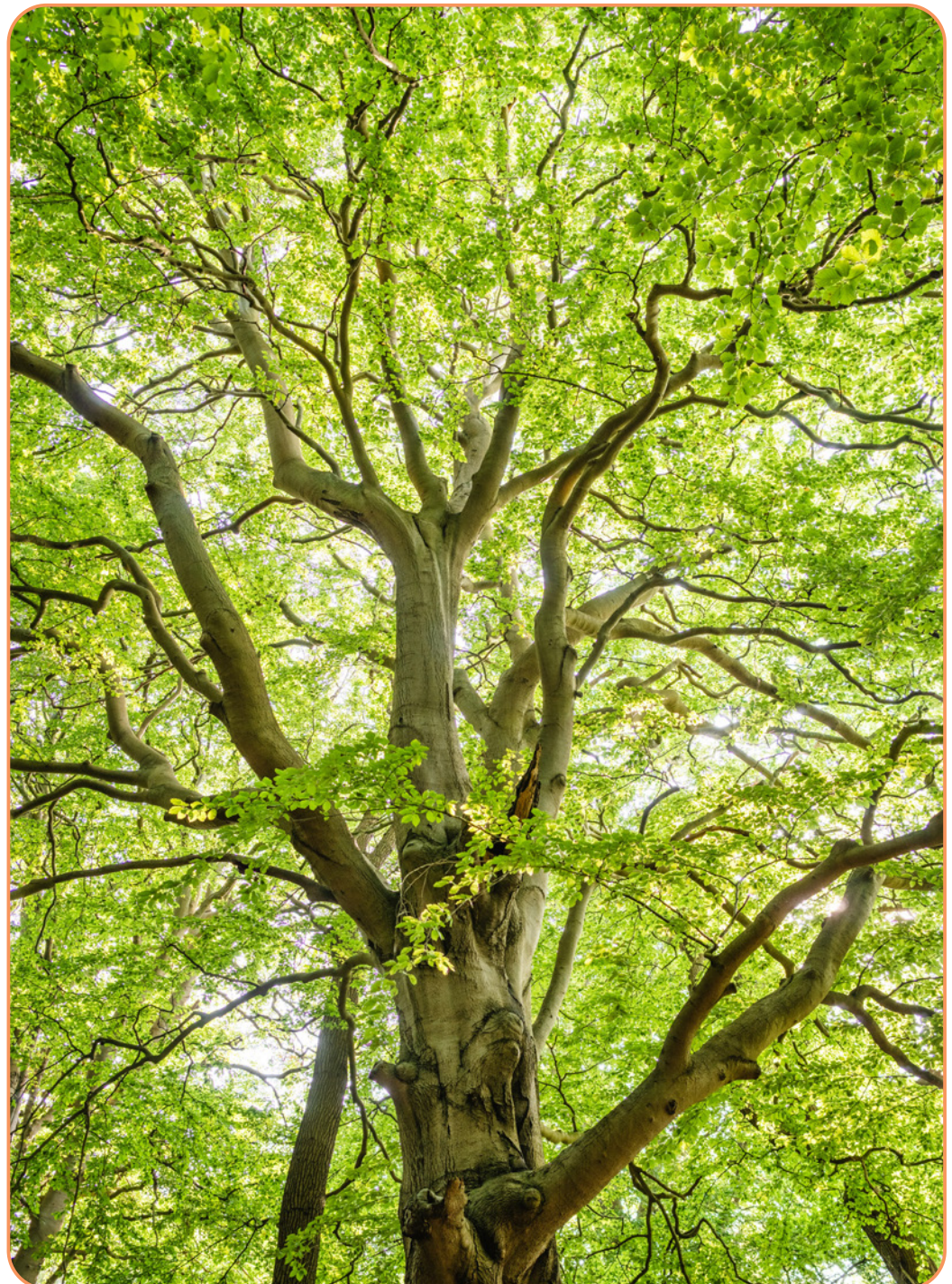


Figure 3.5
Source: © Felix Mitterm /
Pexels

3.4.3 INTERPRETATION OF THE BAL TASHCHIT PROHIBITION

The Tanakh's meanings are not always obvious. The Tanakh originated in a world that is very different from the present one. This makes understanding and interpreting more difficult. And yet the Tanakh is rich in meaning. It is a common saying that the Torah has seventy faces. Rabbis have developed various techniques to interpret and decipher all those meanings. Those techniques are like keys that open the lock of the Tanakh.

3.4.3.1 HOW TO INTERPRET? KAL V'HOMER!

One of those interpretation keys is *kal v'homer*. That literally means: 'from difficult to easy'. In the Tanakh we often find commandments and prohibitions in very specific situations. *Kal v'homer* shows us how we can deduce something from a less probable situation for a more probable situation. Or in other words: what does a specific case tell us about how to behave in general?

The biblical prohibition *bal tashchit* forbids, in times of war, to cut down fruit trees to gather wood for a siege. We already noted how the image of the 'fruit trees' was not chosen accidentally. The image is especially important as a symbol for the natural environment, our life support system. Rabbis therefore started to apply the prohibition in a broader sense, making it applicable to all kinds of useful materials, objects, and resources for humans, and even to the human body. That movement, from an exceptional, specific situation to a general one, is *kal v'homer*.

3.4.3.2 BAL TASHCHIT: A UTILITY ASSESSMENT

Keith Wolff, in his book *Bal Tashchit: The Jewish Prohibition against Needless Destruction*, examined the rabbinic interpretations of the *bal tashchit* prohibition. He concludes that *bal tashchit* protects nature, but not unconditionally. There is always a trade-off or assessment. Thus, **the prohibition is gradual, not absolute!** The focus is, first and foremost, on what something potentially provides, not on its existence per se.

The more something is of use, or produces benefit, the more protection it enjoys. Human life, the body and health, enjoy the most protection. This is followed by objects that are useful more than once, and finally by objects that are useful only once. An apple tree produces multiple apples, while one apple can only be consumed once. So, an apple tree should receive more protection. This also means that the more knowledge mankind has about the natural environment, and thus of the utility that the natural environment provides, the greater the scope of the prohibition.

3.4.3.3 BAL TASHCHIT: BEYOND THE UTILITY ASSESSMENT

With the previous, widespread interpretation of *bal tashchit* we encounter a problem: the focus on profit or utility can very quickly turn into a focus on (economic) profit solely for the sake of profit. When everything revolves around utility, we forget the fundamental respect for all life. Such a kind of thinking can sacrifice sustainability on the altar of profit.

So, contemporary rabbis do not always agree with the previous interpretation of *bal tashchit*. They point out that only later rabbis began to focus on the potential profit or utility. The Torah, they argue, defends a different ethos:

“What seems to have been missed in past rabbinic interpretation of *bal tashchit* is that the rule given in the Torah is both literally and fundamentally about sustainability – about what sustains you.”

[...]

However, if we incorporate the spirit of the Torah, we can go far beyond such utilitarian measurements. The Torah after all doesn't just protect the trees when it says, “Is the tree of the field a person, to come before you in the siege?” It ascribes a kind of subjectivity to them.

More than this, the deepest Torah guidance is that we must respect the sources of life. That spirit is expressed in so many ways – including not just in *bal tashchit*, but also burying the blood/soul of a wild animal one has slaughtered, never eating blood, which represents the life force, and never combining milk, the source of life, with meat. Life – all life – is the purpose of Creation.

- Rabbi David Seidenberg

3.4.4 DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

ASSIGNMENT. This module mentions the term “despotism”: the behavior of a ruler who rules purely out of self-interest, without regard for his or her subjects. This definition makes it clear that it is a political term, but the term can also be used metaphorically to refer to any careless, inconsiderate act, possibly with destructive consequences. We can this way act toward nature.

The students can reflect on this metaphoric definition of despotic behavior. In class, possibly by means of a mind map, examples can be listed of a careless treatment of nature.

- Do the students think that the world sometimes treats nature carelessly? Or do they recognize this in their own (family or societal) environment?
- Do they themselves sometimes display ‘despotism’ in relation to nature? If so, in what ways?

ASSIGNMENT. Let the students first read this Talmud passage that deals with the bal tashchit prohibition and then answer the question. How does the Babylonian Talmud apply the *kal v’homer principle*?

3.4.4.1 THE TALMUD PASSAGE – KIDDUSHIN 32A

Whoever breaks vessels or rips up garments, destroys a building, stops up a fountain, or ruins food is guilty of violating the prohibition of bal tashchit.

Difficult: for a siege you need wood, and yet you can’t just cut down fruit trees.

Easy: in everyday situations you can easily destroy objects or food, so you shouldn’t do it.

ASSIGNMENT. Let the students answer the following questions or carry out assignments on the basis of Rabbi David Seidenberg’s article. If the text turns out to be too difficult to comprehend on their own, the teacher is free to go over the article in class, and then to guide the students more closely.

Rabbi David Seidenberg writes: The Torah after all doesn’t just protect the trees when it says, “Is the tree of the field a person, to come before you in the siege?” It ascribes a kind of subjectivity to them.”

- Think with the students about what Seidenberg means by ‘subjectivity of trees’. Let the students do research around the term ‘subjectivity’ and learn it independently.
- Do trees have as much right to life as people, or are they ‘less important’? Do they have a similar point of view concerning other phenomena of nature?

ASSIGNMENT. Let the students read the following passage from Rabbi David Seidenberg's article. Afterwards, the following questions can be discussed.

David Seidenberg writes: "More than this, the deepest Torah guidance is that we must respect the sources of life. That spirit is expressed in so many ways – including not just in bal tashchit, but also burying the blood/soul of a wild animal one has slaughtered, never eating blood, which represents the life force, and never combining milk, the source of life, with meat. Life – all life – is the purpose of Creation."

- Let the students mark/underline what they do not understand, and ask questions about it.
- Do they agree with Rabbi Seidenberg's interpretation of these passages?
- How do they feel about this passage?
- In what ways do they try to show respect for every life, for all aspects of Creation? Do they understand what Rabbi David Seidenberg means by this?

ASSIGNMENT. The students can answer the following questions.

- **What is the *bal tashchit* passage literally about?**

The destruction of fruit trees (orchards), during a siege in times of war.

- **Is *bal tashchit* a positive or negative commandment?**

It is a negative commandment, or prohibition, since it prohibits certain behaviors.

- **What does *bal tashchit* mean? Can you explain its etymological links?**

Bal tashchit literally means 'don't destroy', and comes from the etymological root sh.h.t., which is linked to the Hebrew word for corrupting: kilkul. So destroying is linked to wasting!

- Explain the *kal v'homer* principle using your own words.

Kal v'homer means from 'difficult to easy' or from 'exceptional to probable (circumstances)'. If a certain commandment already counts in exceptional situations, it certainly counts in everyday, more common situations.



Figure 3.6
Source: © Markus Spiske /
Pexels

3.5 CATHERINE CHALIER: IN THE LORD'S TRAILS

This part is **basic subject material**.

3.5.1 GENERAL

The *bal tashchit* prohibition teaches us to deal with nature in a utilitarian way. The central question is: what yields the most good/utility/profit? As shown above, human health was seen by rabbis to be the highest good. However, we can also approach the relationship between Judaism and nature from a different angle. Catherine Chalier, a Jewish philosopher, formulates an approach that is very different from any profit maximization or utility assessment. Her central theme is that, since nature has been touched by the same breath of creation as humans, humans and nature have a common destiny. Chalier, in other words, also starts from the covenant between G-d and man.

According to Chalier, G-d presents itself as a Trail in nature. That does not imply that G-d exists in nature. Through the act of creation He separates Himself from the world, and stands above it. In that sense, the glory of G-d is that He placed someone in the world who can seek Him in it, and can answer Him. Mankind's task, therefore, is to search for the traces of G-d and to bring their meaning back to life. This entails viewing all beings from the same perspective: as a creation that fundamentally refers to G-d, the Creator.

This perspective requires the right attitude. First of all, we must not be swallowed up by our own selfish interests. Chalier places modesty and disinterest against self-interest. Contemplation on nature lifts us above our own, private interests, and makes us think and reflect on something outside of us. Secondly, nature has to be read as a 'Book' that we have to interpret in order to know Him. After all, the Creator of nature and the giver of the Torah is the same G-d. It is precisely the Tanakh that commissions us to look at nature as the work of G-d, in which He left His mark. Nature is just as much a riddle that demands interpretation; the truth that emerges from it is equally a revelation of the Word of G-d.

This perspective leads us to a new meaning of the notion of 'subjects'. The book of Genesis, as shown above, gives the message to Adam and Eve to subdue nature and rule it as a despot. According to Chalier we should not interpret this 'subduing' as an abuse, exploitation, or a reduction to utility. What it means is that we find the Trail of Creation in what we control and cultivate. This recognition reminds us that this world is not the property of humans. G-d placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden to take care of it in His name.

3.5.2 DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

Assignment. The students can answer the following questions.

- **What do you think about Chalier's interpretation?**

Open question

- **Right or wrong: According to Chalier, The Traces of G-d are proof that G-d is in nature.**

The Traces are proof that nature is G-d's Creation.

- **Explain in your own words the difference between Chalier's philosophy and the utility assessment interpretation of the bal taschit commandment.**

Chalier attaches great importance to disinterest, the focus on something outside of us instead of our own interests, in order to experience nature with the right attitude. After all, a correct experience of nature recognizes nature as an equal element of Creation. In other words, it is not about approaching nature as a system we can exploit, but about recognizing its shared destiny with humans.

- **Are there similarities between the interpretation of Catherine Chalier and that of Rabbi David Seidenberg?**

They complement each other in their attempt to move away from a quasi-economic profit maximization concerning nature. A proper Jewish attitude, according to them, approaches nature as something that is of value in itself.

3.6 CLIMATE ISSUES

3.6.1 GENERAL This part is **basic subject material**.

The vast majority of the scientific community agrees that we are finding ourselves in a climate crisis. The main reasons are considered to be a declining biodiversity and an increasing global temperature.

Global warming can have serious consequences for many ecosystems: heat waves, extreme drought, increasingly severe hurricanes, severe flooding, and so on. Due to the melting of glaciers, sea levels are likely to rise even further. In addition, the oceans may heat and acidify, which will have an effect on the underwater world and water cycle. Changes in the water world and water cycle may affect the availability of water. In addition to flooding, there may therefore be a lack of water in some places. In that case, a lack of fresh water leads to less irrigation, reducing harvests, with negative consequences for many communities that depend on these harvests.

The ecological crisis also has social repercussions. On the one hand, vulnerable sections of the world population are affected more severely by climate change, since they lack the (economic) means to adapt and protect themselves. On the other hand, the climate discussion is leading to an increasing polarization. Examples are the ecologists vs. the oligarchy, the protesting students vs. the government, the scientists vs. the conservatists.

One possible solution for climate change is sustainability. Sustainability means that systems remain productive and diverse indeterminately. To do this, we must take care of the system that ensure our existence and personal development. Nature, as we can infer from above, is this system.

3.6.1 DIDACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

ASSIGNMENT. The students can reread Rabbi David Seidenberg's article and/or the section on Catherine Chaliar, and write a short paper in response to one of the following questions.

- Does Rabbi David Seidenberg connect the bal taschit prohibition to the concept of sustainability? How does he do so? Is he convincing?

Is Catherine Chaliar's Jewish philosophy of nature aimed at sustainability?

ASSIGNMENT. At the end of the lesson, have the students write down in a sentence or short text what they have learned. What stays with them? What did they find important? Are they going to change something in their lives? Are they going to encourage others, e.g. family, to make that change with them? At the end of the lesson they can hand over the small text or sentence.



Figure 3.7
Source: © Gustavo Cruz /
Pexels

3.7 GLOSSARY

Consumption

Consumption refers to the use of goods and services.

Ecosystem

An ecosystem is another word for a natural community, in which a collection of species or organisms within a certain environment exist in relation to each other. An ecosystem is a part of the general natural environment. Well-known examples of ecosystems are forests, lakes, rivers, and so on.

Migration

Migration indicates the movement of a group from one location to another.

Utility assessment or calculus.

A utility assessment attempts to determine in a discussion what produces the most utility. The word utility means more than just usefulness, and thus must be understood in a broad sense. Other words for utility are: good, benefit, gain, and advantage. Utility can also be used in ethical discussions. The good is then equated with the most useful. For example: what makes the greatest number of people happy, and the smallest number of people unhappy?

Sometimes one speaks of a utility calculus. Calculus is another term for calculation. So a utility calculus is a calculation, or consideration, of what produces the most good, utility, or benefit.

3.8 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

1 INT LIVING ROOM NIGHT

We see a family sitting in their living room. They're watching TV. There is a news reporting on the wildfires in Australia. We zoom in on the girl's face looking intrigued.

Father: Wait, is it THAT late? It's time for bed, Ariella.

Ariella (indignant): Wait, what? No! It was just getting interesting!

Mother: You've already stayed up later than usual. You've got school tomorrow!

Father (spurring on): Come on!

2 INT ROOM NIGHT

Ariella goes to her room. She is laying in bed, with her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. After a while she gets up and walks to the door. She opens the door carefully and enters the hall. It's dark; everyone has gone to bed. She stealthily walks through the hall. She enters another door.

3 INT COMPUTER ROOM NIGHT

Ariella takes a seat behind a computer. She starts looking up things like 'climate change' and 'climate crises'. The camera zooms in on her eyes while we see images mirrored in them, getting bigger, all of them depicting environmental disasters and climate strikes. Through the images, the words 'bal taschit' pop up.

Teacher: Ariella, wake up!

The background scene changes to that of a classroom. Ariella, who was dozing off, suddenly jumps upright. The class is laughing. One boy, Levi, looks concerned.

Ariella: I'm sorry! I wasn't sleeping!

Teacher: I understand the classes can be boring, but try to stay awake either way.

Ariella: I will! Sorry!

The school bell rings.

Teacher: All right, time for a break!

4 EXT PLAY GROUND DAY

The kids walk out of class, unto the playground.

Levi: How come you're so tired, Ariella?

Ariella: I've been up all night. There was a news reporting on those fires in Australia and...

The conversation becomes muted while we overhear another conversation taking place.

Student A: Well, that's a shame, do they HAVE to cut down the trees?

Ariella overhears the conversation.

Ariella: Huh? Sorry, what are you guys talking about?

Student A: They are planning on cutting down a part of the forest next to school.

Ariella: Why? How do you know this?

Student B: There's a problem with the lack of parking space. My dad's on the school board. They're working with the city council to find a solution.

Ariella: And they decided to cut down trees?

Student B: I guess so...

Ariella: Well, we can't let that happen. I have an idea...

5 EXT SCHOOL ENTRANCE DAY

A couple of days pass. Levi arrives at school. There's a group of students, all holding up signs. He recognizes Ariella, standing in front of the group, holding a petition. Everyone in the group is wearing green badges.

Levi: What's going on here?

Ariella: We're protesting! After hearing about the school's plans I've decided to take matters into my own hands. I've made a petition! And look, already ten people signed up!

Levi: Oh. So what are you going to do with this?

Ariella: Send it to the principal. And we already made some plans for if he doesn't want to listen.

Levi: Like what?

Ariella: He'll be sure to get the message if it's painted on the school walls... We got other things planned as well, but I can only tell you after you signed up and got your green badge. You wouldn't want a red one, would you? Here you go.

Ariella holds up the petition in front of Levi.

Levi (hesitant): Uhm... I don't know...

Ariella: What's wrong? As a Jew you're supposed to know how important this is!

Levi: What does that mean?

Ariella: Oh, come on, the Tanakh clearly forbids the destruction and waste of nature. There is literally a command called *bal taschit*. Do you even know what that means?

Principal: I do!

Ariella and Levi turn around in surprise. They see a man in a suit sizing them up.

Principal: Shalom!

Ariella and Levi: Shalom!

Ariella: I apologize, I didn't see you.

Principal: I have an idea: why don't you two join me in my office? Let's talk about this little revolution!

Ariella: Okay...

Principal (turning to the group): All right, everyone! Time to get to your classrooms!

6 INT PRINCIPAL OFFICE DAY

The principal enters the school building, followed by Levi and Ariella.

Principal: Take a seat. You two had quite the interesting discussion going on. Ariella, would you like to tell me what's going on?

Ariella: We heard about the school's plans to cut down the trees. As Jewish people, we can't let that happen. It's forbidden.

Principal: Oh yes, you mentioned the famous *bal taschit*-command. What can you tell me about it?

Ariella: It's a command from the Book of Genesis that means: 'You shall not destroy'. It's a negative command because it prohibits you from doing something. In this case, it prohibits the school from carelessly destroying the forest.

Principal: I see. Well, this might ease your mind: the school board and city council have agreed to create a new bus stop. No trees will be cut down.

Ariella: Oh, well, that's goo -

Principal: But that's not the important issue I want to talk about. Why were some students wearing green badges, and did others get red ones?

Ariella: So that we know who's on our side...

Principal: Why did you need to create sides?

Ariella: Because the *bal taschit*-command is absolute! It's pretty simple! I've read a lot about it.

Principal: Have you read the Torah-passage in which you can find the command?

Ariella doesn't respond. She never did. The principal opens one of the slides of his desk and grabs the bible out of it.

Principal: "When, in making war against a town in order to capture it, you lay siege to it for a long time, you are not to destroy its trees, cutting them down with an axe. You can eat their fruit, so don't cut them down. After all, are the trees in the field human beings, so that you have to besiege them too?"

Levi: So it's about not cutting down fruit trees in times of war, as long as they are still useful!

Ariella: But then why did I find the command being applied to other situations?

Principal: Because the Tanakh can mean many things, and we can discuss these different meanings. Discussion and interpretation is the way we learn! So protesting can be a good way to raise concerns, and ask important questions loud and clear, but let's not turn on each other just yet.

Ariella: Okay... I'll talk to the others. I'm sorry. But the trees are safe?

Principal: They definitely are. If not, I would just replant them in my office!

They all laugh. Levi and Ariella are visibly relieved.

Principal: All right, let's get to class, you two. I'll speak to the teacher. Chop chop!

Ariella looks up at those last two words.

Principal: I don't mean that literally!

3.9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bernstein, Ellen, & Fink, Dan. "Blessings and Praise" and "Bal Tashchit". In *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, Second Edition, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 457-476. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006.

Brandsma, Bart. *Polarisation: Understanding the Dynamics of Us Versus Them*. BB in Media, 2017.

The Complete Jewish Bible. Translated by David H. Stern. Clarksville MD: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 2017.

Chalier, Catherine. *L'Alliance avec la Nature*. Paris: Cerf, 1989.

Helfand, Jonathan. "The Earth Is The Lord's." *Religion and Environmental Crisis*. Edited by Eugene C. Hargrove, 38-52. London: The University of Georgia Press.

Lamm, Norman. "Bal Tashchit: The Torah Prohibits Wasteful Destruction." *MyJewishLearning*. Accessed May 31 2020. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/bal-tashhit-the-torah-prohibits-wasteful-destruction/>.

Martens, Bart. "Waarom de Strijd voor de Bescherming van het Leefmilieu een Sociale Strijd Is." *Samenleving en Politiek* 15, no. 8 (Oktober 2008): 4-13. <https://www.sampol.be/2008/10/waarom-de-strijd-voor-de-bescherming-van-het-leefmilieu-een-sociale-strijd-is>.

Neril, Yonatan. "Judaism and Environmentalism: Bal Tashchit". *Chabad*. Accessed May 31, 2020. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1892179/jewish/Judaism-and-Environmentalism-Bal-Tashchit.htm.

Pollefeyt, Didier. "De Bijbel in het Ecologische Debat." *Ter Herkenning* 22, no 3 (November 1994): 168-180.

Schwartz, Eilon. "Judaism and Nature: Theological and Moral Issues to Consider While Renegotiating a Jewish Relationship to the Natural World." In *Judaism And Environmental Ethics: A Reader*. Edited by Martin D. Yaffe, 297-308. Lexington Books, 2001.

"Bal Tashchit: A Jewish Environmental Precept." In *Judaism And Environmental Ethics: A Reader*. Edited by Martin D. Yaffe, 232-251. Lexington Books, 2001.

S. Schwarzschild, Steven. "The Unnatural Jew." In *Judaism And Environmental Ethics: A Reader*. Edited by Martin D. Yaffe, 269-282. Lexington Books, 2001.

The William Davidson Talmud. "Kiddushin 32a." Sefaria. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://www.sefaria.org/Kiddushin.32a?lang=bi>

Seidenberg, David. "Bal Tashchit: What's Wrong With the Jewish Law Against Destruction and Waste – and How to Fix It". *Tikkun*. Accessed June 5, 2020.

White, Jr., Lynn. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155 (March 1967): 1203-1207.

Wolff, K.A. "Bal Tashchit: The Jewish Prohibition against Needless Destruction." PhD. Diss., University of Leiden, 2009. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/14448>.

KU LEUVEN



Prof. Dr. Luc Anckaert (*1962) holds degrees in Philosophy and Theology at the KU Leuven. He published books and articles on Rosenzweig, Levinas, Kafka, V. Grossman and biblical narratives, but also on biomedical topics. His book *A Critique of Infinity. Rosenzweig and Levinas* was awarded a golden medal by the Teyler Foundation. He teaches Jewish Philosophy at the KU Leuven.

Pierre Costalunga (Luik, 1997) is a scientific researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, Belgium. Costalunga graduated from KU Leuven (Belgium) with a bachelor's and master's degree in Philosophy. He is part of the center for Research in Political Philosophy and Ethics (RIPPLE).



EDUC8 Consortium



This book was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund – Police.

