



Tree of Life

Topic

Tu B'Shevat, Torah

Grade Level(s)

4th – 8th

Big Ideas

- The Torah can be a source of spiritual growth.
- The Torah has many branches that can blossom if nurtured properly.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Make a connection between literal trees and the Torah as a metaphor for trees based on *pesukim* in the *Tanakh*
2. Use Tu B'Shevat as a time to reflect on how to grow themselves
3. Make a plan for personal growth based on the Torah

Relevant Vocabulary

תנ"ך (<i>Tanakh</i>)	The Bible
דְּבָרִים (<i>Devarim</i>)	Deuteronomy
מִשְׁלֵי (<i>Mishlei</i>)	The Book of Proverbs
פְּסוּקִים/פְּסוּקִים (<i>Pasuk/Pesukim</i>)	Verse/Verses
אָרוֹן (<i>Aron</i>)	The Ark (Where the Torah is Placed)
כְּבוֹד אָב וָאֵם (<i>Kibbud Av v'Em</i>)	Respecting One's Parents

Materials / Technology Needed

- *Pesukim* from *Mishlei* (included at end of document)
- Images of trees (optional)
- Drawing app (optional)
 - Sketchpad (web-based sketching tool)
 - Tayasui Sketches (available for iOS)
 - Ibis Paint X (available for Android)
- Drawing materials (optional)
- Pens, pencils (optional)
- Paper (optional)

Background for Educators

Tu B'Shevat, the new year for trees, falls on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shevat. The name *Tu B'Shevat* comes from the Hebrew date on which it falls. The number "15" is written ט"ו in Hebrew because "tet" is the ninth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and "vov" is the 6th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Sages decided on this date because it is the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the blooming of the trees in Israel (Tractate Rosh Hashanah 14a).



Tree of Life

The primary purpose of declaring a new year for trees was to determine the age of a tree and when its fruits were eligible to be consumed. Over time, the day has evolved into one that celebrates the species of Israel and the environment in general with a particular focus on the seven species mentioned in the Torah (Devarim 8:8) and the *mitzvah* of taking care of the earth.

The day also offers opportunities to nurture and grow one's connections to the Torah. In the Tanakh, the Torah is compared to a tree of life (*Mishlei* 3:17 – 18). This idea is furthered by the Sages, who explain that, like a tree, the Torah improves life and lights fires in others (*Ta'anit* 7a).

The emphasis on the Torah as tree of life is reiterated in the traditional liturgy, where the *pesukim* from *Mishlei* are recited as the Torah is returned to the *aron* at the end of the Torah service. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, they are recited here because it reminds that, even though Adam and Eve were forbidden from eating from the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, the Torah can provide the roadmap for how to live, which is the true gauge of immortality (Koren *Siddur* Ashkenaz, p. 168).

Description of Activities

1. Take students outside to look at trees.
 - a. If learning remotely, students go outside on their own or look out their windows.
 - b. If it is cold outside, remember to bundle up.
 - c. If no trees are available, show images of trees. Encourage students to open windows and to stand up while they ponder trees in order to give a sense of being outside.
2. Ask students what benefit we get from trees and/or what they like about trees. Answers might include oxygen, shade, a place to rest one's back, paper, a place to climb, aesthetic beauty, etc. Some leading questions might include:
 - a. What do you want to do when you see a tree?
 - b. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you see a tree?
 - c. What inspiration do you get from trees?
3. Show students the *pesukim* from *Mishlei*. Depending on the level of the class ask students if they recognize the *pesukim* or simply explain that these *pesukim* come from *Mishlei* and are traditionally said in reverse order when the Torah is returned after it is read.



Tree of Life

4. Ask: How is the Torah like a tree? Answers could come from a freeform brainstorm or could be related directly to the ideas about trees from step 2. For example:

Oxygen	The Torah is the item that the breathes life into the community.
Shade	The Torah contains many ideas that can bring us comfort when we are troubled.
Backrest	The Torah is always there when we need something to prop us up.
Paper	The ideas from the Torah provide a canvas on which we can create a better world.
Climbing	The Torah contains many mitzvot that inspire us to climb higher in our lives.
Aesthetic Beauty	The Torah is full of interesting narratives.

5. Explain that the connection between trees and the Torah offers an opportunity for growth on *Tu B'Shevat*. Just as *Tu B'Shevat* marks a new year for trees, the day can also mark an opportunity to take stock of personal growth.
6. Students draw a Torah growth tree. This can be drawn digitally, drawn on paper, or mapped out with words.
- Make a tree trunk that represents the Torah.
 - Add branches that represent *mitzvot* from the Torah that students would like to do better. Some possible branches might include:
 - Tzedakkah*
 - Looking out for one's neighbor
 - Looking out for those in need
 - Observing Shabbat
 - Kibbud Av v'Em*
 - Add leaves that represent what would indicate personal growth in that area. For a example, a student might draw a branch representing *Kibbud Av v'Em*. The leaves might represent listening the first time a parent asks for help, doing extra chores around the house without being asked, and speaking in an appropriate tone of voice when having conversations with parents.
7. Do periodic check-ins with students to see how their actions are making their Torah trees grow.
- Optional Visual Element: Create a Torah tree for the class and add leaves as the class reports their own personal growth.



Tree of Life

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

- Students pick one *mitzvah* and focus on one avenue of personal growth in it.
- Instead of writing, students represent their mitzvot and leaves of growth through images.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Students explore other metaphors for the Torah (e.g. Torah as water (Tractate Baba Kama 82a)) and create visuals for how those metaphors apply.



Tree of Life

Mishlei (Proverbs) 3:17 – 18	משלי ג:יז – יח
Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.	דַּרְכֶּיהָ דְּרֻכֵּינֶעַם וְכָל־נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם:
It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and those who uphold it are happy.	עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתֹמְכֶיהָ מְאֻשָּׁר:

Mishlei (Proverbs) 4:2	משלי ד:ב
For I give you good instruction; do not forsake my Torah.	כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם תּוֹרַתִי אֵל־תַּעֲזֹבוּ: