

Stream of Conscience

Topic

Mitzvot and *Middot*, Challenge and Response,
Tu B'Shevat,

Grade Level(s)

7th – 12th

Big Ideas

Our actions have hidden implications that, when added up, can have a major impact on the world at large.

People have a responsibility to actively learn about the implications of their actions.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Understand the Biblical imperative to take care of the Earth
2. Relate the Biblical imperative to use and take care of the Earth's resources to the environmental impacts of their technology usage
3. Compose a plan to use technology in an environmentally responsible way

Materials / Technology Needed

- Learners' personal devices
- [The Environmental Impact of Streaming](#)
- [ChatGPT vs. the Climate: The hidden environmental costs of AI](#) (through the 4:10 mark)
- [The Carbon Footprint of the Internet](#)
- *Pesukim from Beresheet* (at the end of this document)
- Poster board and colorful writing implements (pencils, markers, etc.)

Prepare in Advance

This activity presents an option to invite a guest to present to learners. If using this option, make sure to confirm the guest's appearance and, if using technology for the presentation, to check that all technology is properly set up and working.

Relevant Vocabulary

פָּסּוּק / פְּסֻקִים (<i>Pasuk/Pesukim</i>)	Verse(s)
בְּרֵאשִׁית (<i>Beresheet</i>)	The Book of Genesis
חַזְיָל חַכְמִיָּה זְכָרוֹנָם (לִבְרָכָה) (<i>Hazal</i> <i>Hachameinu</i> <i>Zichronam Livrachah</i>)	The Sages (Our Sages May Their Memory Be for a Blessing)
קְהֻלָּת רַבָּה (<i>Kohelet Rabbah</i>)	Ecclesiastes Rabbah (A section of <i>Midrash Rabbah</i>)
חוּמָשׁ (<i>Chumash</i>)	The Five Books of the Torah (printed as a book)

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Background for Teachers

“Be fertile and increase and fill the land and conquer it... I have given you every seed-bearing plant that is on all the land and every seed-bearing tree; for you they shall be food ([Beresheet 1:28 – 29](#)).” With this statement, God seems to give humans free reign to rule the land and sustain themselves from it.

However, the permission is not as simple as it might appear. Later, the Torah reports, “YHVH, God, took the human and placed him in Gan Eden to work it and protect it ([Beresheet 2:15](#)),” thus giving the human the responsibility of taking care of the world that the human inhabits.

Hazal pick up on the different statements about the land, and they explain that the land does not belong to the people who inhabit the Earth and that people have a responsibility to take care of and not destroy the land. If people do not care of the land, there will be no one to repair the damage done. (e.g. [Kohelet Rabbah 7:13](#)).

While the primary concern for Hazal was agricultural, the Industrial Revolution created potential concerns for the land on a larger scale; and modern technology has created hidden dynamics that affect the world at large. Single posts to social media can use enough energy to [power a household for five to six years or even an entire country for a year](#). While a single email might not be particularly harmful to the environment, the preponderance of emails sent on a daily basis has been shown to have a large environmental impact. The question, then, can be asked of how technology use can fit into the Biblical prompt to both use and take care of the land.

While traditional Jewish wisdom views Tu B’Shevat as simply the New Year for counting the age of trees, the day has evolved over time to be a day that celebrates the flora of the Land of Israel and also a day on which to focus on how to take care of the Earth. The day, then, presents an opportunity to explore how technology fits into the discussion about the Earth. However, this activity can be used throughout the year as deemed appropriate.

Note that this activity is not meant to make a judgement about the scientific validity of any claims about the Earth’s environment. Rather, it is meant to help learners reflect about how their use of technology affects the world on a larger scale and how Jewish wisdom can inform technology habits as they relate to taking care of the land.

It should be mentioned that the relative merits of using paper is a topic that, while connected to the issue of technology use, is too large to cover as part of this activity. It can be worth pointing out that, while there is evidence that going paperless is beneficial, there are also arguments in the other direction (see for example [this article](#)).

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Description of Activities

1. Ask learners to take out their personal devices and check their usage over the past week.
 - a. How much time have they spent on their devices?
 - b. What apps have they spent the most time on?
 - c. Note which apps learners use the most.
2. Show the ChatGPT vs. the Climate video. This also could be a good time to bring up how much energy social media can use.
 - a. **Guest Option:** Invite an expert to present the different issues to learners. The guest could present in person or over Zoom.
3. Discuss:
 - a. Based on what you have seen and heard, what is the potential environmental impact of technology usage as technology continues to advance? [This discussion could include the materials used to build the devices, how more powerful devices use more energy, how much energy is used to run servers, et al.]
 - b. Which apps that you use do you think have the most impact? [Note that this discussion could include the amount of time spent on particular apps.]
4. Present the texts from *Beresheet* about using the Earth's resources and protecting the Earth. Discuss:
 - a. While these *pesukim* obviously do not address technology usage directly, what might they imply about technology usage?
 - b. How might these sources affect your approach to using technology?
5. Divide learners into pairs or small groups to brainstorm ways they can be more mindful about their technology usage relative to the environment. Learners create presentations that show how they will change their technology usage. As part of their brainstorming, learners should decide how they will present their ideas in a way that is mindful of technology usage.
 - a. [The Carbon Footprint of the Internet](#) could be used as a way to start learners thinking about what they can do.
6. Learners present their ideas to each other.
7. Discuss:
 - a. Why did learners choose the presentation methods that they used? Why might one presentation method be better than another?

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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

- Compare and contrast reading a page of Torah from a *Chumash* and from a digital source. How does it feel to read each one? Which one feels more natural? Which do you prefer? What do you think is the environmental impact of each method?
- Illustrate the story of [Honi the Circle Maker](#).

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners explore the benefits of the bidet relative to using toilet paper.
- Learners read the [story of Honi the Circle Maker](#) and explain how it informs the discussion about technology use.
- Learners compare the environmental impact of having a guest presenter in person (e.g. transportation impact, any technology needed on site) vs. having a guest presenter over video conference (e.g. impact of a long video conference). How would the impact be different if the presenter could take public transportation? What about if they could ride a bicycle to appear on site?

Beresheet 1:28 – 29

²⁸ God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and increase and fill the land and conquer it and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all the living things that crawl on the land.

²⁹ God said, “Behold I have given you every seed-bearing plant that is on all the land and every seed-bearing tree; for you they shall be food.

בראשית א:כח – כט

כִּי וַיְבָרֶךְ אֲתֶם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וְרֹבוּ וְמֶלֶאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וְכַבְשָׂה וְרַדְוּ בְּדִגְתַּת הַיּוֹם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיָּה הַרְמִשְׁתָּה עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הָנִיהְ נָתַתִּי לְכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָּל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-הַעַץ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ פָּרִיעָץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לְכֶם יְהִי לְאָכְלָה:

Beresheet 2:15

¹⁵ YHVH God took the human and placed him in Gan Eden to work it and protect it.

בראשית ב:טו

טו וַיַּקְהֵל יְהִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיַּנְחֵהוּ בַּגְּרוּעָן לְעָבֵדָה וּלְשִׁמְרָה: