

Using Environmental Art to Deepen Jewish Themes

Lori Shaller and Rain Zohav

SESSION SUMMARY

Participants in the session learned a participatory technique to construct meaning on Jewish themes, including “The Creation of the World,” “*Sukkot*,” “The Birthday of the Trees,” “*Bal Tashchit*,” and “Exodus.” They worked collaboratively and prayerfully making a visual representation using nature’s bounty, such as leaves, feathers, stones, shells, flowers, and seeds in an outdoor setting.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Rabbi Rain Zohav has taught classes from pre-k through 8th grade and directed religious schools for twenty years. She has taught “Heschel’s Challenge to Jewish Educators” and “Teaching Tefillah.” Ordained in 2015 by ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, she is the Education Director of Shirat HaNefesh School and Co-Director of Educating for Spirituality, a program of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal.

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LESSON OBJECTIVES:

- ◆ Students will develop understanding about a religious theme, such as the *Yamim Noraim*, spirituality, redemption, revelation, exodus, etc.
- ◆ Students will use environmental intelligence to understand aspects of the theme.
- ◆ Students will deepen their understanding of the theme through their classmates’ manifestations of the created image.
- ◆ Students will work collaboratively.

TIME NEEDED:

40-60 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED:

leaves, twigs, flowers, stones, shells, feathers, and other natural objects

PROCEDURE:

Introduction: “We’ve been talking about the High Holy Days. Let’s see if we can synthesize some of that learning by making a group picture on this 4’ x 4’ piece of ground.”

Students should have grappled with the theme before engaging in this activity, through text study, discussion, a theme web, or other means. Teachers should have already engaged students in thinking about the theme before doing the activity. The day before doing the lesson, ask students to bring in quantities of natural objects such as those listed above. The teacher should also bring in quantities of natural objects to augment what the students bring in.

Find a space outdoors, such as on a playing field or in a park, where the students can gather around a four foot square space. If working outdoors isn’t possible, create a four foot square open space indoors, marked off with some plastic “grass” mats, and a drop cloth perhaps painted in greens and browns or some other semblance of an outdoor area.

Students can be broken into groups of approximately ten students to do the activity or a whole class of up to 20-25 students could work together.

Instruct students that they will be building a visual image of the theme, reminding them of what has already been learned about it. Tell them that the lesson will be done silently and discussed after it is finished.

Have the students place all their objects on the ground outside of the 4' x 4' area. Tell students that anyone can use any object as they take turns placing objects down in the 4' x 4' area. Explain to students that everyone will place objects in the defined area one at a time, that is, one student at a time and one object or series of the same object one at a time. "You will use your 'heart-mind' and listen to each other in the silence to create this picture."

The objects can be used as metaphors, such a shell standing in for the seaside, or as the actual objects they are. Students may move objects already placed in the "tableau" as they add objects to the picture. Students **should not** move their objects back to where they put them if another student moves them, but **should** keep moving forward with the changing image.

Explain that each person placing an object is the sculptor at that moment and can change up to two other objects as needed until his or her turn is complete. Explain that this is a shifting collaborative sculpture and objects will likely shift from their original positions.

As students take turns, going one-at-a-time, putting down objects, tell them what you are seeing, both in terms of the picture unfolding as well as their behavior. Examples:

"I see you separating the newer blossoms from the decaying objects."

"I'm noticing a seaside scene unfolding – good – part of the Exodus takes place at the sea."

"Nice idea to walk around and look at the tableau from different angles before placing an object."

"I see the sense of spirituality manifesting as heaven-ward, with the boughs rising up."

"I like how you're working as an organic unit."

Remind them, if need be, that this is a group creation, so that if one student keeps trying to rearrange everything each time it's her or his turn, they get the message that it's not one person's picture but that of the whole group.

After about 20-25 minutes of the students placing the objects, ask them to step back, walk around the picture they've created and see if it needs any finishing touches. When they are finished, ask them all to sit down around the picture.

Invite the students into discussion about the image they've created. Ask them what they've come to understand about the theme that they may not have really understood before. Ask them how their visions of what the theme might look like through the metaphors of natural objects synched or conflicted with their classmates' visions. Use the time to help students to solidify their understanding of the theme.

ADAPTATIONS/EXTENSIONS"

If done in smaller groups, ask each group to reflect on the other groups' creations, noticing the different areas of focus and use of the objects.

In the city, if a grassy space isn't accessible, use the concrete and let the "natural objects" be objects of various textures, colors, and use, e.g., buttons, fabric pieces, carpet swatches, found pieces of metal, etc.

Have students use the images to create a set and costume drawings for a play about the theme.

Ask students to write about the theme, based on the images they've created.

Take a photo of the sculpture and have each student find a line from text as a title.

Have each student write in response to a prompt such as "This sculpture is *spirituality* because..."