

## Lesson Plan – Environmental Ethics

*The following lesson plan is a suggestion of how ideas and resources contained in this unit could be incorporated into a 60-minute class period for a high-school age class. This lesson plan will focus solely on one particular idea within the thought of Rabbi Sacks. There are many other themes found in this unit of resources on the Jewish perspective on the environment which would take more classroom-time to explore with your students.*

**Goal:** To explore Judaism approach to the environment through the voice of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l.

### 1-10 minutes: Opening Activity - Video

- Watch this 1:34 minute video: [Rabbi Sacks on Eco-Judaism Roots](#)
- Ask your students to reflect on the following quote from the video:

*“In other words, God says to us, “Here is the universe. I have made you the single most powerful force in the universe, but you are My guardians, My trustees, and therefore, you have to protect and preserve the environment for the sake of future generations.”*

Questions to frame the discussion:

- Does this mean we cannot use the natural world for our own purposes?
- Why did God make humankind so powerful?
- Why does God limit our use of this power?
- Why do we have a responsibility to future generations?
- Why is it important to remember that God created the universe?

## **11-30 minutes: Biblical Laws on the Environment**

Divide your students into 5 groups and assign each group one of the biblical mitzvot listed below to research. They should read the original verse in the Torah, and the writings of Rabbi Sacks (See the sections in this unit on ‘**Environmentalism in classic Jewish sources**’ and ‘**Texts from the writings of Rabbi Sacks on Environmentalism**’).

Challenge them also to think about what this mitzvah can teach us about at least one environmental challenge facing our generation (with practical examples).

1. [Shabbat](#) (Source: Bereishit 2:1-3)

The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that had been undertaken: He ceased (*or “rested”*) on the seventh day from doing any of the work.

And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy—having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done.

2. [Shemittah](#) (Source: Shemot 23:10-11)

Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.

3. [Chukim](#) (Laws about animals, seeds and clothes that have no obviously logical explanation)  
(Source: Vayikra 19:19)

You shall observe My laws. You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material.

4. [Shiluach Ha-kan](#) (the law of sending away the mother bird)  
(Source: Devarim 22:6-7)

If, along the road, you chance upon a bird’s nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young.

5. [Bal Tashchit](#) (the law of not uprooting a tree in war)  
(Source: Devarim 20:19-20)

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?

Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.

### **31-55 minutes: Presentations**

Ask each group to present their mitzvah, point out what Rabbi Sacks has to say about it, and then what they think we can learn from it to help us tackle the environmental challenges we face today.

### **56-60 minutes: Summing up**

Come back together as a class to discuss. In the last few minutes of the class ensure your students have understood the Torah's approach to the environment, and what Judaism's environmental ethic is. If there is time, you could ask your students to consider what practical initiatives they could embark on in the local community that would reflect the Jewish value of environmentalism (see the *Bet Nidrash* section of these Teaching Resources).