

TIKKUN OLAM: CHARTING YOUR COURSE

Lesson plan for adults

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Hurricane Katrina: Community Responsibility and Tikkun Olam,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan07/>.

Our tradition teaches us that repairing the world, *Tikkun Olam*, is an essential element of what it means to be a human being and a Jew. Each one of us needs to figure out for ourselves how or when to engage in *Tikkun Olam*. Throughout our lives we make decisions as to whether we will give of ourselves, what we will give, to whom we will give, and how we will give.

These aren't easy questions. The needs of our fellow humans can be overwhelming. We live in a time of cynicism, when our efforts to help our fellow humans are often belittled. Our culture teaches us to look out for Number One. We sometimes worry about whether our efforts actually make a difference to others. In our busy lives, we struggle to make the time necessary to engage in *Tikkun Olam*.

In this lesson we will use Hurricane Katrina as an example of one way Jews have decided to engage in *Tikkun Olam*. We will read some stories of how Jews responded to people in need. Then we will have a chance to discuss how each of us makes decisions about how to engage in *Tikkun Olam* work and what kinds of struggles we face as we make those decisions.

Katrina's Jewish Voices

The Jewish Women's Archive, working closely with the Center for History and New Media, has created an online collection, *Katrina's Jewish Voices* (KJV) <http://katrina.jwa.org>. KJV is a virtual archive of stories, images, and reflections about the New Orleans and Gulf Coast Jewish communities before and after Hurricane Katrina. Included in this collection are many stories of

how Jews have responded to Hurricane Katrina. The site includes photos and reflections by volunteers who traveled to New Orleans and other areas to help in rebuilding.

Please invite participants to browse the website in advance of your meeting. Encourage them to read this story of *An Alternative Family Vacation*, <http://katrina.jwa.org/object/419>, and this article entitled *Beth Israel Torah Ceremony*, <http://katrina.jwa.org/object/384>. Download and copy these for people to read at the beginning of the session, whether people looked at the website ahead of time or not.

1. As a group, **discuss** the following questions:

- What are your reactions to the documents you have read about Jewish responses to Katrina? Do they inspire you to want to get involved in rebuilding?
- Did you or anyone you know volunteer in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita? What did you/they do? Share that story with us.

2. Split up into pairs to engage in deeper conversations about the following questions, which are more personally oriented.

- The story of Hayley Fields teaches us that one person can actually make a huge difference by herself, even as a teenager. Have you ever been passionate about an issue and worked with a community to respond to it? What issues are you most passionate about? Why?
- What kinds of events, situations, or issues motivate you? Does a personal connection to the specific problem inspire you to act?
- Can you think of a time when you took action and you made a difference to a person, group of people, or a community?

- What holds you back from action?
- What are the rewards of doing *Tikkun Olam* work?

3. Come back together as a large group and share a few responses from the partner activity. Then raise the following questions:

- As Jews, what is our responsibility to our Jewish community when they are in need? What is our responsibility to the wider community?
- What is the difference between sending money to help out a good cause and volunteering with your own body and energy? Is it important to you to do both? If not, why is one more important, or easier for you to do, than the other?

4. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel believed that taking action to improve the world was at the center of the Jewish religion. In his essay titled, "Religion in a Free Society," he says, "We are not taught to feel accused, to bear a sense of boundless guilt. We are asked to feel elated, bred to meet the tasks that never end." [Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken Book, 1966) 13.]

- What do you think about this quote? Does it help you feel positive about doing *Tikkun Olam* work, even in the face of seemingly endless need?
- Is taking action to repair the world a way that you express your Judaism?

5. How can one balance the responsibilities of making a living, spending time with family, and the desire to help out in the world? The story of the Zinkow/Abrahamson family provides one model of how a family can

participate in a social justice project together. What other models can you think of that allow one to meet multiple goals at once?

- 6. Conclusion:** Hurricane Katrina provides a vivid example of how Jews take responsibility for their community and how they become engaged in *Tikkun Olam*. Judaism guides us to become actively involved in helping those who have been affected by natural disasters or by injustices.