

## **EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE TO REPAIR THE WORLD**

### **Lesson plan for youth**

1. **Consider** the following debate from the Babylonian Talmud tractate Kiddushin 40b:

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were once reclining in the upper story of Nithza's house, in Lydda, when this question was raised before them: **Is study greater, or good deeds?** Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Deeds are greater. Rabbi Akiba answered, saying: Study is greater, for it leads to doing. Then they all answered and said: Study is greater, for it leads to action.

- What could study mean in our world today?
- What constitutes practice or action?
- Which do you think is more important, study or action?
- Do you think this text actually answers the question, and if so, which does it choose?
- Does studying help deepen your experience of "doing," by broadening your perspective on life, or helping you understand another's perspective?

Do you think Jews have an obligation to act to make the world better?

2. **Explain** the concept of *Tikkun Olam* to your students. (You may want to share the story of the breaking of vessels with your students – it is summarized on the intro page to this set of lessons.)
3. **Read** the passage by Gail Chalew about thirteen-year-old Hayley Fields' drive to get a new Torah for Congregation Beth Israel after Katrina flooding destroyed their old Torahs and prayer-books (Download and copy before class: <http://katrina.jwa.org/object/384>, Beth Israel Torah Ceremony).
4. **Summarize** to the students the passage, saying, "Hayley Fields was a young person who wanted to make a difference. She came up with an idea of how to do it and she was supported by her family and community to follow through and make it happen." Then ask them:
  - Is Hayley's story inspiring to you?
  - Have you ever gotten support from adults to do something to make a difference for others? What was it?
5. **Explain:** In our society young people are not often encouraged or empowered to express their ideas about how to repair the world or to put their ideas into action. They are told to wait until they are older and understand things more "realistically." Yet, even when you were very young you probably had a lot of good ideas about how things could be better in your school or your community or the wider world.
  - Have you ever had an idea or dream of something you could do that would help others?

To answer this question, **break up into pairs**. Take five minute turns for each of you to talk about your ideas of how to help improve your school or your community or your world. They could be ideas you had when you were younger or ideas you have right now. When one person is talking, the other person is listening, without comment or judgment, but with encouragement and interest. The leader will keep track of time and tell people when five minutes is over. At that time people in the pairs should switch roles as talkers and listeners.

**Reconvene the group and invite people to share their ideas with the whole group.** Write people's ideas on butcher paper. No one should make jokes or comments while people are answering these questions.

**Continue brainstorming new ideas**, adding to the list:

- Do you have ideas about how your actions could improve things in your school?
- Do you have ideas about how your actions could improve things in your community?
- Do you have ideas about how your actions could improve things in the United States or in the world?
- How can you use your technology skills to help others in creative new ways?

Optional: Together, come up with a group *Tikkun Olam* project based on the young people's ideas. Develop a plan for action, and implement the plan at another time.

**6. Discuss** the role of adults in supporting youth action ideas and plans:

- Can you think of a time when you thought about something you wanted to do to help another person or group of people, but couldn't figure out how to do it?
- Do you think, with the right support, more young people could put out their ideas and make significant things happen?

**7. Discuss:**

So far we've been talking about *Tikkun Olam* in general terms. Now we are going to focus on the issue of poverty and how doing *Tikkun Olam* work can help us understand what it is like to stand in another's shoes.

Here is another excerpt from *Katrina's Jewish Voices*, written by Alex Rubin, a teenager who went on a trip with a group of Jewish families from Boston to volunteer in Erath, Louisiana after the hurricanes. (You can read the full text of his experience at the following URLs: <http://katrina.jwa.org/object/6>, <http://katrina.jwa.org/object/7>)

**The hardest part of the week was not the physical work. On the second day, as we removed more moldy things from the house a beat up truck drove up to the curve. A couple came out of the truck and started going through the moldy trash. Their clothes looked old and shabby. They carefully combed through the things that we had thrown out. We said, "Sir, they are not safe." But they replied, "This is better than what we have." I can't imagine being so poor. But there they were and I felt helpless.**



*Go & Learn: Primary Documents and Lesson Plans  
from the Jewish Women's Archive*

- How does Alex's excerpt here make you feel?
- Do you ever feel "helpless" like Alex did when you see people struggle with poverty?
- While many people feel discouraged, others are working hard to reduce or end poverty in the United States and in the world. They think it is possible to make a significant change. What do you think?

Sometimes the best antidote to feeling helpless is to find out what people are doing to take action in this area. Here are some organizations who work towards ending poverty:

American Jewish World Service: <http://www.ajws.org/>

Jewish Funds for Justice: <http://www.jewishjustice.org/>

One: The Campaign to Make Poverty History <http://www.one.org/>

8. **Conclusion:** How does doing *Tikkun Olam* work make you feel? What gifts do you receive from doing it? What did you learn today that makes you feel hopeful about what you can contribute?