



Teenkun Olam®
a Jewish self-esteem builder

Subject Area: *Tikkun Olam & self care*

Target age group: Teens in after-school / evening programs

Objectives:

1. Strengthen self-esteem & self-respect
2. Introduce teens to *tikkun olam* participation
3. Appreciate *simcha shel mitzvah* -- joy of the mitzvah

Cycle : *Teenkun Olam* is designed for a two semester, once-a-week program, according to the following cycle:
Week 1 – study and discussion (component I, below)
Week 2 – group preparation for *tikkun olam* activity
Week 3 – T/O project activity (component II)
Week 4 – evaluation and discussion integrating previous

study and project activity (component III).

The program is easily adaptable to courses that meet more often, such as by increasing the frequency of the *tikkun olam* project, inviting guest presenters, including relevant books and films, and studying other *mitzvot* pertaining to the T/O activity.

Background

Jewish communal and educational institutions have, in recent years, increased their emphasis on *tikkun olam* ("T/O") to respond to the mission of *Am Yisrael*: to restore wholeness to a broken world and be a light to the nations. T/O studies and activities have become key components in Jewish education programs, including those serving teenagers.

This author's experience in leading after school teen T/O courses has been that (1) self image, identity, and group acceptance are the primary demonstrated concerns of the teenagers (2) such concerns exert greater influence on group dynamic and discourse than interest in T/O per se, and (3) such concerns are frequently resolved through participation or acquiescence in peer driven social behavior and pursuit of popular culture enticements. In a Jewish context, we can consider whether this is a form of contemporary 'idol worship' contributing, in



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severe cases, to incidence of teenage depression, substance abuse and other ills.

Teenkun Olam puts the well-being of our youth as the primary objective of the program, while sowing seeds of responsibility for the well-being of the world. A combination of topically focused Jewish text study and an ongoing human-services project are offered to help teens internalize a sense of self-dignity, affirm that they be treated *as if created in the image of g-d*, and reduce their reliance upon cultural conformity for validation of identity and self-worth. An accompanying measure of *simcha shel mitzvah* (joy of the mitzvah) reinforces that service work can be uplifting and internally satisfying for the teenager – and an effective alternative to risk-inherent activities.

Program Summary

Typical T/O courses survey a variety of text based *'tikkun olam mitzvot'* supplemented with visits by outside professionals and/or occasional sampler activities. Instead, *Teenkun Olam* focuses intensely on three core components:

- (I) Jewish text-based studies and conversations focused on self-care, respect, preservation and satisfaction.
- (II) A consistent human services project that puts the teens in contact with a constant population and provides a high likelihood of successful performance.
- (III) Ongoing evaluation of how the knowledge and experience gained from (I) and (II) can influence the teens' lives.

Core Components

(I) Text-based studies expose the teens to the Jewish wisdom on developmental and self-identity/self-esteem issues, and provide a starting point and context for discussion of such issues.

The following sequence of discussions is suggested:

- 1. You are created in God's image.** *"And God said, "Let us make [hu]man in our image, after our likeness."*

Text: Torah and commentary. *B'reishit/Genesis* 1:1-1:31



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Discussion Questions (DQ's):

What does it mean to be created in God's image? What does that require of you with respect to yourself? To others? Of others to you?

Is it necessary to believe in God to accept the core lessons of this teaching? [a question best confronted early and revisited throughout the program]

2. Being your own best friend: *Sh'mirat Habriyut*. A look at Judaism's concern that you treat yourself with respect.

By keeping the body in health and strength one walks in the ways of God ...[Therefore] it is a person's duty to avoid whatever is harmful to the body and to cultivate habits that lead to good health. – Maimonides

Text and Discussion Guide: Chapter 9, *Sh'mirat Habriyut -- Be your Best Friend*. Artson, Bradley S. and Gevirtz, G., Making a Difference: Putting Jewish Spirituality Into Action, One Mitzvah at a Time, Behrman House, Inc., 2001

Re *Judaism and alcohol abuse*, see Chapter 26, Golub, Jane E. and Grishaver, Joel L., Zot ha-Torah: This is the Torah, Torah Aura Productions, 1994

3. You are your neighbor's neighbor. Loving your neighbor is a 2-way street.

Text: Torah and commentary. *Vayikra* / Leviticus 19:18 "Love your fellow/neighbor as yourself."

When a non-Jew challenged Hillel to teach him the whole torah while he stood on one foot, Hillel answered: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah – all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

We teach others how we want to be treated by offering them practical lessons through how we care for them: not by imposing our own desires on them, but by refraining from what we ourselves don't like. [Hillel said] By treating others with respect, dignity, and kindness, whether deserved or not, we demonstrate how human beings should be treated. Artson, B., The Bedside Torah, Contemporary Books, 2001, p.119

DQ's: Who are 'neighbors'? What does this *mitzvah* teach about being your neighbor's neighbor? How can you cultivate appropriate neighborly



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relations? What if you are not successful? What do you do if your neighbor is not a good neighbor? What is your obligation to protect yourself?

Lesson note: This is a good topic for a visiting expert on subjects such as healthy relationships, co-dependency, self-protection/defense techniques, etc.

4. [1 or 2 sessions] **Tzedakah & Simcha shel mitzvah.** Giving, receiving and the joy that comes with.

"Without simcha, a mitzvah is incomplete." Abraham J. Twerski

Text (teacher's resource): Blech, Benjamin, The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism, Alpha Books, 1999, pp. 55 – 62. Twerski, Abraham J., Twerski on Spirituality, Shaar Press Publications, 1998, Chapter 9.

Stories: Buber, Martin, The Legend of the Baal-Shem, Princeton University Press, 1995 -or- Buber, Martin, Tales of the Hasidim, Schocken Books, 1991
Buber, Martin, The Legend of the Baal-Shem, Princeton University Press, 1995 - or- Buber, Martin, Tales of the Hasidim, Schocken Books, 1991

Readings:

a. *A single mitzvah done in joy contains God – all of god, for God cannot be divided! – within it, and may give us all the wholeness [shalom or shelemut] we need. The seeming smallness of the deed or the moment is no obstacle to its containing the infinite fullness of God's presence.* Green, A. The Language of Truth, Jewish Publication Society, 1998, p.226.

b. *I believe that giving and receiving are two sides of the same currency that circulates with a constantly changing balance at all times, among the ever succeeding generations of Jewish philanthropists great and small. Giving and receiving are relational, like up and down; they could not exist without each other and they interpenetrate each other's realm. I would even go so far as to speculate that great acts of tzedakah themselves, or instances, in times of crises, of great self-sacrifice – do not exist in a pure form. Most parents I know would if, God forbid, they had to, give their own lives so that their children might live. And yet in those last moments before this horrible sentence were carried out, might there not also come an exquisite self knowledge and fulfillment that perhaps might be worth all the paler satisfactions of many un-lived years [Tzedakah] is in the design of human nature. And to cast giving as the opposite of receiving – as in the conventional wisdom that "it's better to give than to receive" – is to miss the point entirely.*

-- Allen Appel, author, from Olitzky, Kerry M., Eight Nights, Eight Lights: family Values for Each Night of Hanukkah, Alef Design Group, 1994, p. 31.



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DQ's: What is "the point"? Describe a situation when you were generous to another. When another was generous to you. What did you receive by giving? What did you give by receiving? What were the expectations of the giver and receiver? Is it reasonable to expect to receive when you give? Is it Jewish?

DQ's: Why should doing a mitzvah bring you joy? What is joy? What brings you joy? How do you pursue joy? What/who are you dependent on to experience joy? Is there a relationship between your joy and your sense-of-self worth? Does your pursuit and experience of joy strengthen you? Weaken you?

5. Chasing the Idols, Smashing the Idols. We reject worship of idols.

Story: The legend of Abraham smashing the idols.

DQ's: What idols did Abraham smash? Why? Who were they important to? What was to be gained and lost by accepting and worshipping the idols? What was to be gained and lost by smashing them? Do you worship any idols today? What are they? Do you have any with you, within you? Are you better with them? Without them? For those you could do without, what would it take to smash them?

For further text reference and DQ's re idol worship, false prophets and cults, see Chapter 40, Golub, Jane E. and Grishaver, Joel L., Zot ha-Torah: This is the Torah, Torah Aura Productions, 1994

6. Hannukah and You. The opportunity to be different, to experience miracles, to dedicate yourself.

Text: Grishaver, Joel, Building Jewish Life – Hannukah, Torah Aura Productions, 1987, pp. 44 – 47.

Readings:

Weber, Sally, *Hanukkah, Self Esteem and the Jewish Family*, Jewish Family magazine. [copy included with these materials]

Cohn, J., The Christmas Menorahs: How a town Fought Hate, Albert Whitman & Company, 1995

"From the first rays of the sun in the morning, through our meals, our chores, our friendships, our studies and our work, we respond to a vast array of fragrances, sounds, visions and thoughts each day. Whether we pay attention to all these sensations, whether they evoke a sense of joy and gratitude in us



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reveals more about our won attitudes than it does about the miracles of daily living.

... [These] events can be experienced as traces of something larger.

Every day can ignite a response of wonder and awe.

Transforming an everyday practice [or occurrence] into the occasion for a mitzvah infuses a dimension of holiness into an otherwise commonplace occurrence.

By involving us in a network pf deeds, and by understanding those deeds as a response to the Divine, Judaism infuses our daily pattern of activities with a sense of wonder, with the possibility of mystical awakening at every turn." Artson, B., The Bedside Torah, Contemporary Books, 2001, p. 328 – 329.

DQ's: What does Hannukah teach you about knowing yourself and being yourself? About isolation and conformity? What is being weak? Being strong?

Are you aware of the the miracles in your daily life? What are they? How do you respond to them? How can you make your own miracles? What would you like to happen to you that you would consider a miracle? What miracle would you like to see happen for the world?

What does dedication mean to you? What will you dedicate yourself to? How is every day Hannukah?

7. The Pharaohs of Narrow-mindedness. We think, speak and act with free and open minds.

Text: Torah and commentary of Pharaoh and the slaves in *Mitzrayim*. Chapter 14, "Talmud Torah: Learning Matters," Artson, Bradley S. and Gevirtz, G., Making a Difference: Putting Jewish Spirituality Into Action, One Mitzvah at a Time, Behrman House, Inc., 2001

DQ's: Who was narrow minded? Pharaoh? The slaves? Who/what are the Pharaohs and slaves in your personal life? How are you like Pharaoh? Like a slave? Who holds mastery over your thoughts, your speech, your actions? What does it take to release yourself from mastery? What's learning got to do with it?

8. Shem Tov – a Good Name. You are your reputation.

A person gets three names – one that his parents call him, one that his friends pin on him, and one that he acquires by the way he acts. But the one he acquires for himself is better than all the others. (Tan. Vayak'heil 1)

When we strive to achieve a shem tov, we seek a good reputation among people whose standards are high and whose character we respect. Only our



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actions toward others ... can influence their judgment. Borowitz, Eugene B. and Schwartz, Frances W., The Jewish Moral Virtues, the Jewish Publication Society, 1999, p. 229

Text (teacher's resource): Borowitz, Eugene B. and Schwartz, Frances W., The Jewish Moral Virtues, the Jewish Publication Society, 1999, pp. 227-236.

DQ's: In the first statement above, what is meant by "better"? What is the importance of a good name? What is the relationship between a good name and reputation? Between a good name and popularity? Which is more easily gained, popularity or a good name? Which is more easily lost? Which is more enduring? More valuable? Which is more closely identified with self-identity? With how others identify you – others in your family, your peer group, your community?

9. **Histapkut – Contentedness.** Self-satisfaction, moderation and limit setting.

"Who is rich? One who is happy with what he has. Pirke Avot 4:1

Text (teacher's resource): Borowitz, Eugene B. and Schwartz, Frances W., The Jewish Moral Virtues, the Jewish Publication Society, 1999, pp. 161-172.

Torah and commentary. *Shmot / Exodus 20:14* "Do not covet ... anything that is your neighbor's."

DQ's: How do you become content with what you have? What are the benefits? How do you know when to say "enough"? When to say "no"? What are the challenges associated with moderation and limit setting? What are the benefits? How do you protect and preserve your limits? How do jealousy and greed affect your health? When is it worthwhile not to be content?

10. Early in the program discuss the **mitzvah pertaining to the group service project**. e.g., study *Hiddur P'Nai Zaken* – esteeming the elderly – for a project involving senior citizens. ["Rise before the aged and show respect for the elderly." Vayikra / Leviticus 19:32]

(II) A human services project that gives teens the opportunity to implement values explored in the text-based conversations, seek and acknowledge the dignity in all people, reinforce that they be treated in all relationships with the same respect that they give to others and enjoy *simcha shel mitzvah*.



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Likelihood of achieving these outcomes is enhanced if the following criteria are applied in selecting the project:

- chosen by the teens from among a few options
- good cooperation from the service organization
- regular communication between the teacher and service organization's staff
- stable subject population and opportunity for relationship building
- demographically similar/familiar population (to extent possible)
- scheduled during regular class meeting time (1x per month)
- potential for continuation in subsequent semesters

Regularity and continuity of contact, and familiarity with the subject population should increase the potential for relationship building and success vis-à-vis the desired outcomes. For example, projects involving local senior residential facilities, long-term group homes for youth, reading-to-the-blind, recreation programs for disabled persons, or English language tutoring may present a higher likelihood of success than involvement with more fluid populations.

Several volunteer opportunity guides are included with these materials. Not all offers to volunteer are accepted by service providing organizations. Service providers make an investment in working with volunteers, and will have to be assured of the class's commitment to consistent and quality participation before they accept the class volunteers.

Note: advance preparation of an engaging theme, activity, lesson etc. that the teens will lead during each visit is vital to the success of the project. For example, our activities at a senior citizen group home included: (a) Names – Where does your name come from. What's in a name? How has your *shem tov* – good name – affected your life? (b) Birthdays – what are the different kinds of 'birthdays' we experience during our lives? (c) Earliest memories of holiday celebrations. (d) What are our 10 plagues? Even with predetermined activities – such as in an English language or reading-to-the-blind project – the materials for the week should be reviewed in advance. Use the class session preceding the T/O project week to fully prepare. For our senior citizen project, we also used this session to bake and freeze desserts that we took to the senior residence [more Torah teachable moments about food, leadership, working together, organization, etc.].



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(III) Ongoing evaluation of how the knowledge and experience gained from the above may be put into practice in the teens' daily lives; and sharing the *simcha shel mitzvah*.

Format:

Review

Journaling.

Pairs discussion.

Group discussion.

Impromptu skits.

This component (week 4 in the cycle) begins with a brief group review of the most recent discussion topic (3 weeks earlier) and T/O project session (1 week earlier). The teens should then be encouraged to journal or note-take to reflect on any impact of the program on their day-to-day lives – attitudes and outlook, confidence, relations and behavior. Survey questions may be used to initiate writing:

- Was the discussion topic relevant to your life?
- Have you thought about the discussion at any time during the past 3 weeks? If so, in what context?
- What are your thoughts about last week's service project? What were your feelings during and after the project?
- What was given and received by participants in the project? Did you have a '*simcha shel mitzvah*' experience?
- Has this program affected or influenced you in any way?

Teens then choose partners (these may be consistent pairings during the program) to share their writings with. Significant/remarkable responses are then (if permitted by the student) shared with the whole group, with all asked to compare and contrast their experiences. Sharing in impromptu-skit or mime form is lively, fun and often allows expressions withheld from dialog.

Finally, the leader/teacher should periodically remind the teens of the desired outcomes of the program – it's not a secret! Receive their input on what program modifications will further those goals and implement along the way.

Teachers: Please add your constructive suggestions to this manual.

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TEENKUN OLAM RESOURCE LIST

Note: resources are suggested for leader learning, reference and preparation.

Characteristics and Needs of Adolescents: A Comparative Study, compiled by John Long, *The NAMTA Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 Summer 1993

** Artson, Bradley S., It's A Mitzvah! Step-By-Step to Jewish Living, Behrman House, Inc. and the Rabbinical Assembly, 1995

**** Artson, Bradley S. and Gevirtz, G., Making a Difference: Putting Jewish Spirituality Into Action, One Mitzvah at a Time, Behrman House, Inc., 2001

*** Artson, B., The Bedside Torah, Contemporary Books, 2001

** Blech, Benjamin, The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism, Alpha Books, 1999

**** Borowitz, Eugene B. and Schwartz, Frances W., The Jewish Moral Virtues, the Jewish Publication Society, 1999

*** Buber, Martin, The Legend of the Baal-Shem, Princeton University Press, 1995
-or- Buber, Martin, Tales of the Hasidim, Schocken Books, 1991

*** Green, A. The Language of Truth, Jewish Publication Society, 1998

**** Golub, Jane E. and Grishaver, Joel L., Zot ha-Torah: This is the Torah, Torah Aura Productions, 1994

*** Halpern, Sharon D., To Learn is To Do: a Tikkun Olam Roadmap, UAHC Press, 2000

** Isaacs, Ronald H. and Olitzky, Kerry M., Doing Mitzvot: Mitzvah Projects for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, KTAV Publishing House, 1994

*** Telushkin, Joseph, Jewish Wisdom, William Morrow and Company, 1994

**** Twerski, Abraham J., Twerski on Spirituality, Shaar Press Publications, 1998

**** any Chumash with contemporary translation and commentary



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VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES LISTINGS

Community Opportunities For Youth Directory, Boulder Valley School District
contact 303 499 1125 for copy of brochure
www.bvsd.k12.co.us/community/commopbrochure.shtml

L'Chaim, Intermountain Jewish News
annual publication includes complete Jewish community directory
contact 303 861 2234

VOC Guide 2004, Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado
contact 303 715 1010
www.voc.org