

Alef-Beit Ethics
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Subject area: Jewish Ethics and Values; Jewish Living and Identity;
Torah/Talmud

Lesson plan: Multi-unit lesson plan

Target age: all ages

Objectives: To develop an understanding, appreciation, and integration of Jewish ethical values through learning, discussion, values clarification and application in real time life.

After experiencing this process, students will understand that: though there are clear ethical guidelines in Jewish teachings, the applications are complex and are usually very specific to the individual situation. This principle will: a-help them compare and contrast their first response to a given interaction with an appropriate Jewish value. B-realize that apparent similar situation may ask for different responses. C- When in doubt, it is usually wise to study further and/or ask for advice and clarification. Instead of looking for 'the correct answer' it is more helpful to find what is best after considering all the parameters of any given circumstance.

My Proposal for 2010-5770 Chidush is entitled, 'ALEF-BEIT ETHICS. The idea is to take two ethical terms from each letter of the Alef Beit and present teachings and discussions around the practical application of these terms, both in their positive and negative aspects. Some of these terms seem clearly positive, and others clearly negative. However, on deeper analysis from a traditional and teaching perspective, none of them are monochromatic. For example, although truth is usually a positive value, the sages say that sometimes peace 'trumps' over truth, especially if telling the truth will cause quarrels and rifts between friends and family.

The process would involve 1-teaching the Hebrew word and its meaning. 2-Having an age-appropriate discussion A) whether or not and why this is a value to strive for, and B) If there is disagreement-which hopefully there will be- to discuss the justification for each side. 3-Bring in relevant Jewish texts and contexts to support either side. 4-Followup discussion to see if there are any shifts in opinion.

There are several valuable goals from this project. One is to think about issues in terms of ethics. Another is to develop critical and discriminatory thinking, i.e., to realize that one cannot apply the same principle in every situation, even when they seem superficially similar. A third benefit is to learn to compare one's one baseline thinking with Jewish perspectives, and thereby to grow in one's own self-understanding and also to become attuned to a Torah approach on life and interpersonal relationships. Finally, to help the student realize that there may be more than one outlook and solution to any given ethical problem, and therefore we can learn to 'agree to disagree' and hopefully still live and work in harmony.

ALEF-EMET-TRUTH; ACHRAYUT-RESPONSIBILITY

BET-BITACHON-TRUST; BECHIRAH-CHOICE

GIMEL-GAAVAH-PRIDE; GEVURAH-STRENGTH

DALET-DERECH ERETZ-GOOD MANNERS; DIMAMAH-SILENCE

HEI- HISHTADLUT- PERSONAL EFFORT; HAKARAT HATOV-GRATITUDE

VAV-V'AHAVTA LEREIACHA KAMOCHA- LOVE YOUR FRIEND AS YOURSELF; VATRANUT-OVERLOOKING HURTS OR INSULTS

ZAYIN-ZERIZUT- DILLIGENCE, QUICKNESS; ZIKARON-KEEPING MEMORIES

CHET-CHEVRUTA – WORKING TOGETHER; CHESED-KINDNESS

TET-TAHARAH-PURITY;TIYUV-IMPROVEMENT

YUD-YASHRUT-STRAIGHTNESS, HONESTY; YOKER-VALUING OBJECTS OR TIME.

KAF-KIBUD AV V'EM-HONORING FATHER AND MOTHER;KA'AS-ANGER

LAMED-LIMUD-LEARNING ; LASHON TOV- GOOD SPEECH

MEM-MERIRUT-BITTERNESS, SADNESS; MESORAH-TRADITION

NUN-NEDIVUT- GENEROSITY; NE'EMANUT-LOYALTY

SAMECH-SAVLANUT- PATIENCE; SAKRANUT-CURIOSITY

AYIN-ANAVAH- HUMILITY-EZRA-HELP

PEI-PERISHUT-ABSTINENCE; PESHARAH-COMPROMISE

TZADI-TZEDAKAH-RIGHTEOUSNESS; TZE'AKA-PROTEST

KUF-KORBAN-OFFERING, SACRIFICE; KEHILLAH-COMMUNITY

REISH-REGESH- EMOTION, PASSION; RETZINUT-SERIOUSNESS

SIN-SIMCHA- HAPPINESS, JOY; SHALOM-PEACE

TAV-TIKUN OLAM-REPAIRING THE WORLD; TEFILLAH-PRAYER

Here are some sample lessons.

HEI: HISHTADLUT-EFFORT; HAKARAT HATOV-GRATITUDE

HISHTADLUT: EFFORT

1-word derivation. In earlier times, Lhishtadel meant to persuade or become on good terms with. In modern times, it has come to mean personal effort. In Europe, a Shtadlan was a person who intervened with the secular authorities on behalf of the Jewish community.

2-questions: What is the value of effort? Should you always try to get something, regardless of the object, or the method? What are examples of objects or methods that are not correct. (someone else's things; taking without asking; things that may be harmful or dangerous, etc.) How does and/or should one feel, if efforts seem to fail?

3-Jewish sources. Refer to the prohibition of coveting-the tenth commandment. If relevant, discuss the FAQ of how can the Torah legislate or demand a feeling.

Refer to the Talmudic quote; In the place where there are no men, HISHTADEL- attempt to be a man. Refer to the Talmudic teaching: 'Why does a person respect their mother more than their father? Because she 'MISHTADALTO- attempts to endear him- more than the father. If possible, raise the famous theological debate about the relationship between Hishtadlut and Hashgacha Pratit ie if G-d decrees that something happen or not happen, why make an effort?

4-follow up discussion to see if there is a shift in thinking. For example, If G-d is ultimately in charge, perhaps this explains why we should not desire negative things, or negative ways of getting things, and we do not need to feel bad if we do not get what we want after trying. End with teaching from Zohar: 'There is no good desire

of a person that gets lost.' In other words, if a person tries to do something good, or even thinks about doing it, there is a positive effect in the universe. Also bring teaching from Reb Zushia; Some people want to do good but can't and others do good but do really care about it, so G-d creates an angel that is a combination of the two.

HAKARAT HATOV-GRATITUDE.

1- **Word derivation.** Hakarah means to recognize, to be aware of. This word is used most famously in the Torah regarding Joseph and his brothers in Genesis: 'And Yosef recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.' Discuss this verse in the context of the story. It will help highlight the concept of gratitude as a way of recognizing or not recognizing the good that someone else is or does. About the word Tov, good, the first use of it in the Torah is in the verse, 'Lo tov-it is not good- that Man shall be alone. This of course is used to introduce the first woman. Here too the context is important: When Adam later blames his wife for eating from the tree of knowledge, the Torah says, 'The woman who you gave me...' and Rashi comments- from here we see that Adam was ungrateful for G-d's gift to him.

2- **Initial discussion:** Give examples of things and people you are grateful for. Be as specific as you can. What do you ignore that you could be grateful for? Why do you ignore some things? If you would not have anything without G-d, why do you have to be grateful to people? Should you be grateful to animals or other things in nature in the same way? What is so bad about not being grateful?

3- **Jewish sources;** In the morning we say Modeh ani..I give thanks..What are we specifically giving thanks for? The holiday of Passover is all about being grateful. When the Torah says, 'A new king arose who did not know Pharaoh,' Rashi says one opinion that it was the same king but he was ungrateful for what Joseph did for him and his nation. Also, the rabbis elaborate about how Moshe did not perform the first three plagues because the water and the earth had protected him. You can have a long discussion here as to how this teaching relates to the above question of whether or not a person needs to be grateful even to something that is not human. You can also include the law about making blessings for food and other benefits in a discussion about gratitude.

4- Follow up. Review the question's in 2 with the new information. A take-home principle might be: Other people deserve our gratitude because they could chose not to do something nice or beneficial. When we acknowledge benefits from the non-human world, we are showing our appreciation to G-d who created those things or circumstances that benefited us, and we are opening channels of blessings to come into our lives.

LAMED: LIMMUD-LEARNING; LASHON TOV-GOOD SPEECH.

LIMMUD-LEARNING

1- Word. There is an interesting etymology in this word, whose root is also the name of the letter lamed. The teacher may want to briefly refer to the idea that each Hebrew letter has many levels of meaning, sometimes conveyed in its shape. The Etymological dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, based on the commentaries or Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh describes the letter and meaning of Lamed: He first defines the verb: 'learn for practical use and ethical behavior,' which as follows actually reflects the basic premise of this lesson, as I see it. It is also the root of the words both to learn and to teach, or habituate. Finally he brings the well known meaning of the letter as an ox goad, to guide or direct.

2- Questions. What is the value of learning? (possible responses- so you know what to do, so you know the right or best way to do something. It saves the time of trial and error, and the pain or embarrassment or destruction of doing something wrong.) What is the best way to learn-school, friends, experience, books? Is there a difference between Torah learning and other forms of learning?

3-Sources. There is much Rabbinic discussion about the value of learning. (You might even want to point out the Jewish value of learning in a secular context, ie, the disproportion of Jewish Nobel prize winners, stressing of course that it is not a question of just being smart, but of taking learning seriously.) First of all, a Torah scholar is called a Talmid Chacham, a wise student or a student of wisdom. This shows that learning in Judaism is a life-long activity. And of course there is the teaching: The study of Torah is equal to all the Mitzvot. Also, as in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, chapter 4- Eizeh hu Chacham, ha'lomed mikol Adam..Who his wise? One who

learns from everyone. On the other hand, it is important to bring in the saying: 'Lo HaMidrash ha'ikar, elah ha'maaseh,' the learning is not the main thing but the doing. How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? Students are usually delighted by the ingenuity of the famous Talmudic debate: 'for years, the Rabbis argued about whether learning was greater or whether the fulfillment of the commandments was greater, and finally they came to a resolution: 'Great is learning, for it leads to right action.' The teacher could also reference the Midrash about the four species each representing the single or combined values of learning and doing. This could lead also to the observation that some people are more cut out for learning and others for doing, and this is why we need community and chavrutah. Regarding the question about the difference between Torah and other subjects, the most obvious concept is that while other subjects may be interesting or necessary to accomplish something else, Torah study is a mitzvah in and of itself, even when it does not lead to any practical application.

4-Follow up. What did you learn about the mitzvah of learning Torah that you didn't know before? One valuable outcome should be: As important as it is to learn Torah, both in process and accomplishment, the primary value of the learning is its application. Therefore, people should be praised and encouraged for whatever good they can do. In other words, from a Jewish perspective, both introverts and extroverts need and compliment each other.

LASHON TOV-GOOD SPEECH.

1- word. The word Lashon in Hebrew means both tongue and language. Ask the students about the connection. Tov was discussed in 'Gratitude' but a long discussion can be about definitions of good and bad when it comes to speech, because many have heard the term Lashon HaRah-bad speech.

2- Questions: Much food for thought here. I would suggest acting out or having the students act out phrases or sentences that express Lashon Tov or opposite. However, it is much more challenging to come up with Lashon Tov. In fact, I think it would be extremely valuable to discuss why this is harder. I will explain my reason in part 4. Complimenting or praising is of course a good example. Asking politely for something rather than abruptly is another. Then it would be good to ask if it is the words themselves that define the

statement as Lashon Tov, or what else qualifies the language, either as an amplification of the good or as a contradiction. Here are some obvious examples: You did that xxxxx really well, might be a compliment, but what kind of tone or body language accompanies it that might detract or contribute to that being a compliment. (Hugging, clapping, smiling, as a compliment; sarcastic tone, surprise, as a criticism.) See also if students can express and tell the difference between statements of humility (I couldn't /didn't do it all myself,' or of self-deprecation- I mess up everything.) The children should have plenty examples to bring up.

3- Torah sources. There is an abundance of Torah teachings and examples of good speech. Many of the great leaders in the Torah defended their people even challenging G-d in the process: Avraham defended Sodom, Yosef defended his brothers by saying that even though you meant me harm, G-d brought the outcome to good. Moshe defended the Israelites after the Golden Calf by saying that If you destroy them, then erase me from your book. Esther risked her life to defend her people before Ahashverosh, etc. The Talmud too has much discussion about good and bad speech. There is a famous story about honoring parents where one man gives his parents dry bread and water. Surprisingly, the Talmud criticizes the first and praises the second man. What was the difference? The first one said, 'just keep quiet and eat, while the second one said something like: 'Father, I apologize for this meager fare. I would like so much to give you more; you deserve a feast.' The Hassidic masters are also replete with teachings about the power of speech, both for good or bad. Every word makes an impact on higher realms, creating angels. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev tried to defend the Jewish people by pointing out their good qualities, even if they might be sinning. For example, he once saw a man greasing his wagon while he was wearing Tefillin. Some people who saw him said, 'How dare he wear Tefillin while greasing his wheels,' but Reb Levi Yitzchak said: 'G-d, how precious are your people. Even when they are taking care of their wagons and horses, they want to be connected to you.' Once he even told a dying man that he would share his portion in the world to come. When his students asked him why, he said, 'It is worth giving up my portion in the world to come to make a fellow Jew feel better even for a few minutes!' A key point in this discussion is the rabbinical principle, 'the measure of good is greater than the measure of bad.' In our context this means that if it is so destructive

to just say something hurtful to another person, how much more does one accomplish by saying something helpful.

4- Follow up. Have the students really stretch their thinking. Have them or you, come up with statements that take notice of the effect on the listeners, even if the speaker didn't mean it consciously. If they are using email, show them how the written word can be interpreted in many ways, and the listener can understand it differently than the writer might have meant. At this point, role playing might also be valuable. Have the students say how other people's words affect them, either positively or negatively, and how those same words could be changed. Returning to my opening question of why it is so much more difficult to convey positive words to another than negative words, to me the answer is obvious, though it would be more valuable to elicit the following observation from the students themselves. Negative statements are usually 'knee jerk' instinctive responses rather than carefully thought out ones. In other words, Lashon Tov is usually proactive rather than reactive. However, if a person works consciously at speaking good, it can become an innate skill like bike riding. As it is written in Sefer Hachinuch, 'Adam Nifal al pi Pe'ulotav,'- A person is influenced by their behavior.'

If the students truly internalize this awareness, their whole life could improve for the better, not to mention the lives of those around them.