

Title: The Creation Stories – Bereshit 1-2

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Age Group: Years 6-9

Format: Lesson Plan

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Description: Lesson 1 of Torah Bekiut, a course designed to give students a basic grounding in some of the key Torah texts and to engage students with vital moral, interpersonal and religious issues in order to transform Bible study into a relevant activity and the Torah itself into a source of meaning.

Introduction

All cultures tell stories about the origin of the world - from ancient mythology through to modern science. The surprising thing about the Torah is that it tells not one story, but two. The first story is contained in Bereshit chapter 1 and describes the orderly, schematic creation of the world over seven days. In this story, human beings are created last, in the image of God, as the zenith of nature. The whole world is at their disposal and they are commanded to exploit it, rule it and subdue it. The second story, presented in chapter 2, focuses on the experiences of the first human being who is created from dust and placed in the Garden of Eden in order to tend it and watch over it. Humanity is part of nature and is given the responsibility of caring for the environment.

The creation stories present two educational opportunities: 1. to explore the idea that the Torah is a multi-layered, pluralistic text that tells more than one story and presents more than one idea; and 2. to discuss the two stories as contemporary models for our relationship with nature and the environment.

Learning outcomes

Students will

- Understand that there are two creation stories and that the Torah is a pluralistic text
- Read the two creation stories and discern the differences between them
- Interpret them as models of different ecological attitudes and discuss these models
- Become aware of the importance of paying attention to details when searching for meaning in the Torah

Lesson plan

1. Why do people tell stories about where they come from?

The teacher opens by telling the class that every culture and people tells stories in an attempt to explain their origins. S/he asks the students if they have examples of stories that explain people's origins, either from mythology, literature, films, science fiction, comics etc., or from their own lives. The stories can refer to the origins of the

entire world, of a specific society or of individuals (eg. the myth that storks bring new babies). Next the teacher asks the class to brainstorm possible motivations for telling such stories: why is it so important to people to know where they come from?

2. How many creation stories would you expect there to be?

The teacher asks the students: how many creation stories would you expect there to be among any given group of people? The obvious answer is one, but the surprise is that in the Torah there are two creation stories. How can that be? Don't the two stories contradict each other? Why tell two stories when people are looking for one good explanation of where they came from? The remainder of the session will be dedicated to finding out the answer to these questions.

3. Studying the text

To work out why the Torah tells two creation stories, we have to know the differences between them.

The teacher divides the students into *hevrutot* (small learning groups of 2 or 3). Each *hevruta* receives a task sheet:

Task Sheet

Read Bereshit chapters 1 and 2

Where does the first story finish and the second story begin?

An important subject of the creation stories is human beings' relationship with nature. What is each story trying to teach us about how we ought to relate to nature?

Find three differences between the stories in this area.

4. Feedback and focusing the issues

The teacher asks each *hevruta* to report their findings: the three differences between the stories that they managed to find. S/he notes them on the board in two columns headed "Chapter One" and "Chapter Two". At this stage, any differences the students have noticed should be written up, with very little criticism or analysis (unless they have simply misread or misunderstood the text).

The teacher proceeds to draw the students' attention to some key points, as follows. Once the students have located the appropriate verses, A volunteer is asked to read them out. Using leading questions, the teacher focuses the class on the key difference between the two stories, and the implications for our relationship with nature. These differences can be added to the table the teacher has drawn on the board.

Here are the three key issues, together with a summary of the differences between the stories. The goal here is to encourage the students to draw out the differences and their implications for themselves and not to spoon-feed them the information, which is intended for the teacher.

1:26 vs. 2:15 - What is the role of the human being in each story?

In chapter one the human beings are commanded by God to rule over the earth and to utilise its resources for their own benefit, whereas their role in chapter two is to till and to tend the Garden.

1:28 vs. 2:18-20 - How are human beings supposed to relate to animals?

In chapter one, God commands the human beings to rule over all the other animals (note: but not to eat them! - the first human beings were vegetarians - see verses 29-30). What might this mean? Perhaps to domesticate and use them for his or her benefit. In chapter two, God creates the animals as potential companions for the human being. He relates to them as individuals (as equals?) and gives them names.

1:27 vs. 2:7- What is the first human being made of in each story?

Chapter one tells us that human beings were created in the “image of God”, whereas in chapter two the first human being is created from dust, and the second from the flesh of the first. Creation in the image of God implies that human beings are proud, commanding and powerful, holding themselves above the natural world. Creation from dust indicates humility and frailty, and suggests that human beings are very much part of nature.

5. Concluding discussion

The teacher asks the students to sum up what each of the two stories seems to be teaching us, in the light of all the differences noted above. Chapter one seems to demand of human beings to dominate nature and use it for our own benefit. Chapter two encourages us to see ourselves as part of nature and to take responsibility for caring for our environment.

Which story appeals more to the students? Which one provides a better guide for living our lives?

In light of their answers, and returning to the original question, the teacher asks the class why the Torah tells us two creation stories? What do we gain by having both stories in front of us?

Three possible answers:

1. Different answers are right for different times: for primitive hunter-gatherers it was good to try to dominate nature in order to survive. This resulted in the invention of agriculture and paved the way for the whole of human civilisation. In our time, on the other hand, we have to be sensitive to nature and make every effort to look after the environment. Thus the Torah provides us with a model for every circumstance and leaves the final decision up to us.

2. Neither answer is complete; rather they complement each other. If human beings were to follow the model presented in chapter two, creativity and the advance of civilisation would be impossible. If we follow the model of chapter one (as we seem to be doing), we will very soon destroy our environment and ultimately ourselves.

The truth is somewhere in the middle and each model must be balanced against the other.

3. The fact that the Torah tells two different stories puts the ball in our court. The Torah does not tell us unequivocally what to think, but presents a rich range of possibilities and ideas. We are the ones who are responsible for interpreting the Torah, weighing up these ideas and making decisions for ourselves. The Torah not only teaches us the ideas it contains, but also promotes the value of discussion and critical thinking.