



The Ziegler School  
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

בשביל החיים  
Walking with Life

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

# SESSION SUGGESTIONS

## UNIT 1: LIFECYCLE, COVENANT CYCLE

There are no havruta texts for this session, so that participants can read the essay and discuss it at their leisure.

After introducing yourself to the participants, and allowing them to introduce themselves to each other, you may wish to take time to outline the course as a whole. While it is clear that a lifecycle course is going to move from birth to death, we will be making some unusual stops along the way, dealing with issues (such as young adulthood, work, singlehood, ageing) which are not so often identified as being “Jewish.”

The main thrust of the essay, to be brought out in discussion, is the wider focus the author suggests – that lifecycle events are not only a matter for individuals but also a matter for God and for community. Encourage participants to refine their views on this subject.

If time permits, the group study text is a good springboard for further discussion.

## UNIT 2: BIRTH AND CONCEPTION

You might wish to allow time in this session for free discussion, since the subject is likely to touch deeply on participants’ personal experiences.

### HAVRUTA

You might wish to have the whole group work on Text 1, since there is so much in it. Every aspect of the text – literal, metaphorical – can be unpacked and considered. You could then split the class into three groups to study the other three texts, if time permits.

### GROUP STUDY

We have provided text for two blessings – one for a boy, one for a girl. (Others may be found in the RA’s *moreh derekh* if you wish to provide them.) The group can consider why these are constructed in the way that they are, and how they might want to amend them for their own/the community’s use.

If you do not wish to use the texts provided, the following are some options:

- Consider the pervading theme of infertility in the Torah (Genesis 17:15-22, 18:11-15, 21:1-7, 25:21-23, 9:31-30:22; 35:16-20). Why is infertility such a dominant idea in our early tradition? What are the lessons that we are to take from it and how do they apply to us today?
- Participants could write a prayer about any aspect of birth or conception; the prayers could be private or public
- A group activity might be to draft a birth ceremony for use in the community

Note: the essay does not deal with the demographic/population implications of having children. However, if your participants wish, you might want to conduct a short discussion on the subject.



# SESSION SUGGESTIONS

## UNIT 3: CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

### HAVRUTA

If you wish to explore the first havruta text in more depth, the material there can usefully be compared with Erik Erikson's stages of development (see eg <http://www.learningplaceonline.com/stages/organize/Erikson.htm>) and/or with Shakespeare's *Seven Ages of Man (As You Like It Act 2 Scene 7)*. There is a further opportunity to revisit the material later in the course (see the unit on Ageing).

### GROUP STUDY

The text provided is a long extract from Midrash which might take a little time to read. It is interesting to compare this with the story of Prometheus in Greek mythology. Prometheus steals the secret of fire from the gods, and is punished eternally. In this story, Akiva uses Torah – a divine secret – to redeem and repair the world.

If you do not wish to use the text, you might wish to consider:

- A deeper exploration of various types of children, based on the Haggadah archetypes;
- A deeper exploration of the turbulence of adolescence, based on *havruta* texts 3 and 4;
- An exploration of the rites of transition for children and adolescents. There used to be a 'first day of school' ceremony (see *Rituals of Childhood*, by Ivan G. Marcus, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, page 1). This could be compared to, and contrasted with, Bar and Bat Mitzvah.
- Ask participants to create a written 'charge' for children, or for adolescents, to live by – a useful exercise if there are participants who have children approaching Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

## UNIT 4: YOUNG ADULTS

This is a session that could work well as a stand-alone for young adults, in which case you might want to adapt the havruta questions. Feel free to do so.

### HAVRUTA

You might wish to tell the group doing Text 2 a little more about the characters involved. When the four groups report back, it makes sense to take the texts in order.

### GROUP STUDY

The text provided is an extract from Rabbi Ruttenberg's memoir, *Surprised by God*. You might wish to work with the book in greater depth: it is a rich source.

There are a number of alternatives for group work if you do not want to use a text:

- Ask older participants to remember back to this stage and conduct an audit: how much of that person still exists? What was their manifesto for living, then? Did they continue to live by it? Why/why not?
- Develop the first text, so that each participant can focus on the mentors of their identity;
- Explore the four paradigms of growth in the essay more deeply, using Tanakh if you wish;
- Write a prayer or a ritual for a young person going off to college.

*1 An ancient depiction of this ceremony can be found at [http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.david.juden.at/images/69\\_Keil.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.david.juden.at/kulturzeitschrift/66-70/69-keil.htm&usq=\\_\\_0E7WH0JB5Xq0YnzKJt9GNLhrg0=&h=285&w=520&sz=70&hl=en&start=6&um=1&tbnid=oEtTjef5EioM:&tbnh=72&tbnw=131&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dleipzig%2Bmahzor%26ndsp%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dfirefox-a%26channel%3Ds%26rls%3Dorg.mozilla:en-US:official%26hs%3D3dj%26sa%3DN](http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.david.juden.at/images/69_Keil.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.david.juden.at/kulturzeitschrift/66-70/69-keil.htm&usq=__0E7WH0JB5Xq0YnzKJt9GNLhrg0=&h=285&w=520&sz=70&hl=en&start=6&um=1&tbnid=oEtTjef5EioM:&tbnh=72&tbnw=131&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dleipzig%2Bmahzor%26ndsp%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dfirefox-a%26channel%3Ds%26rls%3Dorg.mozilla:en-US:official%26hs%3D3dj%26sa%3DN)*



# SESSION SUGGESTIONS

## UNIT 5: LIVING IN THE DREAM

### HAVRUTA

Participants might need a little guiding on the ‘dream’ texts – the aim here is to help them consider how they could enrich their working lives by reference to the tradition. The essay is as applicable to home workers, by the way – compartmentalization, pausing and dreaming form part of that working day as well.

### GROUP STUDY

The text provided is a reminder of what lies underneath the day-to-day reality of work and obligation. If you do not wish to use it, the following options are suggested:

- Invite participants to discuss how they might incorporate the essay’s suggestions into their daily lives;
- Invite participants to create a ‘pausing ritual’ for themselves. It need not be language – gesture and visual art can also work well here;
- Invite participants to share some of their childhood dreams – have any of them changed? Are any still the same?
- Ask participants to create a ‘work prayer’ such as the one which appears at the end of the essay.

## UNIT 6: LOVE, MARRIAGE, COMMITMENT

Be aware that you might encounter some strong feelings among participants around the idea of marriage.

### HAVRUTA

For people studying Text 1 – the aim of the questions is to stimulate a general discussion about love, its power, its influence in human relationships, so the passage can be considered outside of its immediate context in *Shir HaShirim*. People studying Text 2 might need a brief word about the context of the passage in Avot. Remind them they saw this text in Unit 4, too. A question that might arise about Text 3 is that David doesn’t obviously reciprocate, and you might want to refer people to the lament at the beginning of 2 Kings.

### GROUP STUDY

Using the Ketubah we have provided will tilt the session towards marriage rather than friendship – but we wanted to provide an opportunity for people closely to study its text.

An alternative, which could be offered at the same time, would be to consider the three questions posed at the end of the essay.

Other options are:

- Consider alternatives for enacting an exclusive relationship between people;
- Why do we not have a contract for friendship? How might such a contract look?
- Read the 7 brakhot from the wedding ceremony and discuss them/ask what the equivalent would be if Naomi and Ruth, or David and Jonathan, had written them;
- Consider a ritual for reflecting ongoing love or friendship.



# SESSION SUGGESTIONS

## UNIT 7: PARENTING

Be aware that not all participants will be parents themselves, and that there may be some strong feelings about this.

### HAVRUTA

An additional issue for the third text: given that women are exempt from time-bound commandments, you might also wish to discuss the distinction between time-bound and non-time bound.

### GROUP STUDY

We have included the Shema here so that it can be read with fresh eyes, as a parenting text. (We have not included the Hebrew, so you will need siddurim.) How many different types of, and venues for, teaching can be distinguished in this paragraph? What can we learn from it about the role of the next generation (not just biological parents)? If you wish, you could also bring some commentaries on *veshinantem* – how do its different meanings inform our understanding of the prayer, and the task of parenting?

If you do not wish to do textual work, the essay itself can be used as a springboard for any of the following activities:

- *Keva/kavvanah* – do an audit of how these are balanced (or not) for the children of the community;
- Shabbat – how does Shabbat currently work in the community, and does that need to change?
- A prayer for parents and elders – using the final paragraph of the essay as a springboard.

## UNIT 8: SINGLEHOOD

This session could likely lead to some very frank exchanges.

### HAVRUTA

It is worth listening carefully for sensitivities as the small groups study in havruta. We have chosen texts from the early part of the tradition in line with the author's suggestion, in the essay, that it is time to look for an 'alternative stream' within the tradition.

### GROUP STUDY

The text chosen focuses on the unique nature of each individual. If you do not wish to use it, consider the following:

- A web-based activity, looking at what happens if you use the search string, 'Jewish single'
- Explore further the reasons why the early tradition did not legislate for single people (The opening of Rabbi Ruttenberg's essay in Unit 4 identifies a similar 'gap' in the tradition.)
- Instigate the discussion suggested at the end of the essay with the singles in the group.



# SESSION SUGGESTIONS

## UNIT 9: HEALTH AND SELF-CARE

### HAVRUTA

There is plenty more in Rambam – if you wish to run the session using only *Hilkhot Deot* there is ample opportunity to do so. Look particularly at chs. 13 and 14.

### GROUP STUDY

The text provided is the Asher Yatzar, which bears closer examination. You may wish to bring siddurim so that participants can also study the Hebrew. The blessing recognizes the magnificent homeostasis by which our body maintains itself, that its routine functioning could come to a dangerous halt if any part of its physiology were damaged, and that God's beneficence keeps all of its systems and parts in good working order – all this in a few very concentrated words.

If you do not wish to study this text, the following options might be considered:

- Working on Rambam's recommendations, design a plan for healthy eating;
- Write a prayer for the body, singly or in a group;
- Look again at the final section of the essay and use it as the basis for a discussion about the spiritual aspects of physical practice;
- Design a 'body timetable' for your congregation – a year-long plan for physical health.

How you draw the discussion together in this session will be important. Where is your group, your synagogue, going to concentrate its energies, and how?

## UNIT 10: ILLNESS

### HAVRUTA

Text 4 is the hardest to access and you may wish to begin with this group. It is worth looking at the context of the text on the *amud* in Berakhot – it is part of a longer section.

All of the texts are likely to intersect with participants' own experience in one way or another, and you may wish to factor additional time into the session for them to share what they wish to share.

### GROUP STUDY

Psalm 23 is a text which might be more familiar to participants from its funeral context. But it is also the subject of a whole book by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (*The Lord is my Shepherd*) and worthy of examination as a text about sickness. Even though sickness is never directly mentioned, the psalm is repeatedly requested by hospital patients...why?

As an alternative to the written text, you might wish to use the musical arrangement. There is a very evocative one by Shirav (Rabbi Creditor, the author of Unit 5, is one of the singers) which is available from itunes.

If you do not wish to use Psalm 23, some alternatives would be:

- A close reading of another psalm which relates to sickness – 22, 41...
- Participants write their own *mi sheberakh*, based on the elements identified in the essay;
- Participants discuss the mitzvah of *bikkur holim* in more depth, with specific reference to the community.



# SESSION SUGGESTIONS

## UNIT 11: AGEING AND RETIREMENT

### HAVRUTA

The havruta texts provided cover various aspects of aging and retirement from the essay. You may wish to select some rather than others and have the group work together on them – the material on ageing parents is particularly likely to elicit strong responses. If you wish, there is more to the story of Rav Assi in the BT, and you might wish also to bring the relevant material from the *Shulhan Arukh* (see the relevant footnotes in the essay).

### GROUP STUDY

The physical deterioration that can take place in old age was well-known in Biblical times (eg *Kohelet* 12: 1-8). We have opted to bring here texts that focus on the mental/spiritual aspects of old age – its opportunities and its dangers. Ask participants if they seem appropriate, and how much of this part of the aging process we can have influence on. If you do not wish to use any of these texts, consider:

- A comparison of Text 1 of Unit 3 with any or all of:
  - The Sphinx riddle (<http://www.jimloy.com/puzz/sphinx0.htm>)
  - Shakespeare's 7 Ages of Man (*As You Like It Act II sc. 7*)
  - The English nursery rhyme 'Solomon Grundy' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon\\_Grundy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon_Grundy))
- A practical exercise about the way that the elderly in your community are treated. Are they appropriately recognized and honored?

## UNIT 12: LEAVING THE WORLD

You may wish to allow a little extra time for this session, since it concludes the course.

### HAVRUTA

If your havruta groups enjoy comparing texts, the texts in this session work well in conversation with each other. You could add the final paragraph of the *Amidah* as a comparison with Text 1, also, if you wish.

### GROUP STUDY

The Hebrew for both these texts can be brought from the Siddur, if you wish. The psalm distinguishes between the power of mortal, finite human beings and God. God's power is reflected in the reversal of fortune experienced by those who are impoverished, are ill or treated unjustly. Awareness of this power is captured in the second blessing of the *Amidah* and translated into the idea of returning life to the dead. Encourage participants to read both texts closely, looking for comparisons between human and divine power. How does a knowledge of Psalm 146 affect our understanding of the second paragraph of the *Amidah*? How might this affect how we experience our own lives?

If you do not wish to use a text:

- Conduct a group discussion about our understandings of death. What images of death do we carry with us (you can include imagery from books, movies, etc)? How do they affect the way we live our lives?
- Introduce the *vidui* made on the deathbed. Given the ideas in this session, how would participants write their own *vidui*?
- Participants might wish to write two notes of their own to carry, one in each pocket.
- If your group likes to meditate, the ideas in this session are an ideal springboard for an exercise in contemplation.





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