



Keeping Judaism Alive Past and Present through Takanot and Tshuvot

Submitted by: *Zane Altman*

Subject Area: Jewish Living & Identity

Target Age Group: 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th Grades

Lesson Objectives:

1. To see how historical Jewish communities have worked to keep Judaism alive.
2. To better understand how we have chosen to live as Jews in the modern world.

Materials:

- Copies of a Tshuvah from your specific movement
- Copies of a Supreme Court case and Opinion, from appendix
- Copies of a front page of U.S. Constitution, from appendix

Supplies:

- One pen/pencil per student
- One sheet of paper per student

ACTIVITY PLAN:

SET INDUCTION

Split the kids into small groups. Have a print of the first page of the Constitution on each table. Have the following discussion in these small groups:

- What is the core document that serves law in the United States?
The Constitution
- When was that written?
1787
- What are some of the laws in the Constitution?
- The Constitution has some laws that are we still followed today and some that are not followed by Americans at all anymore
- Why would things in the Constitution need to be changed?
It is out of date, or we have come to believe different things
- How does the Constitution get changed and by whom?



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- One way is when the Supreme Court makes a ruling
- What in Judaism can we relate to the Constitution?
The Talmud
 - When something in the Talmud/Constitution needs to be reexamined, who does that?
For Reform Jews the Central Conference of American Rabbis is the group that looks at it and in the United States the Supreme Court looks at cases that bring these types of issues to them.
 - If we draw parallels between the Talmud and the Constitution, then we can see the parallel between cases brought to the Supreme Court (which essentially say, here is a problem or contradiction that needs to be addressed) and what Jews call Takanot (also, the recognition that a problem exists) and then we can draw another parallel between the Opinions handed down by Supreme Court Justices and the Tshuvah handed down by the rabbis as solutions or decisions or discussions on said problems or inconsistencies.
 - Explain the example of the Supreme Court and the given Opinion for Brown v. Board of Education
 - Show the piece of a Supreme Court Opinion for Brown v. Board of Education as well as a piece of a Tshuvah, compare, contrast, if group is advanced enough have them guess which is the Opinion and which is the Tshuvah.
 - Mention that the term *responsa* is Latin for “answer” and refers to the same process, but in this lesson we will use the context appropriate terminology: Takanot and Tshuvot.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

- **Discuss the concept of laws developed since the Talmuds were completed.** Make students come up with things that did not exist when the Talmuds were written that do exist today, things that we, as Jews, would have to contemplate our modern use of...
- **Make sure to continuously distinguish** between Takanah (plural: Takanot) as the problem or identification of an issue, and the Tshuvah (plural: Tshuvot) as the ensuing discussion, possible opinions and ultimate decision.



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● **Use any example you want**, or this is one you can use: Talk about how there were no cars when the Talmud was written, but today very observant Jews have decided that they will not drive their cars because although cars did not exist, they chose to follow the rule of not creating fire on Shabbat and they have expanded that to not creating a spark on Shabbat. To make a car start there has to be a spark that then gets everything else going. Orthodox Tshuvah disallows Orthodox Jews from driving a car on Shabbat under normal circumstances.

● **Have the students come up with other modern examples.**

More examples if they need help:

1) **Genetically Modified Organisms**

- The Takanah Scientists have found that when splicing genes from a jellyfish with that of a peanut, the peanut becomes significantly hardier and is resistant to many agricultural diseases.
- The Tshuvah The question that this begs, is since a jellyfish is traif [make sure they all know what traif means] does that genetic splicing then make that new-peanut traif as well?

2) **Breaking Shabbat to Save a Life**

- The Takanah If using a car on Shabbat would save someone's life, but Orthodox Tshuvah says they may not use a car on Shabbat, should they break their keeping of the Sabbath in order to save that life or should they keep Shabbat and let that person die?
- The Tshuvah Orthodox Tshuvah says in the case of a life or death situation or in the case of someone who is extremely ill or hurt, the Orthodox Jew is not only *not* allowed to keep Shabbat, but she/he is also *required* to break Shabbat in order to save the life (or what be it). There are also degrees to which one can try to lessen their breaking of the Sabbath so long as it doesn't change the affect on saving the life, i.e., taking a taxi cab with the sick person instead of driving one's own car with the sick person.

● **Let's look back at some of the most important Takanot and Shuvot** that came out of Germany and Eastern Europe Jewry, or Ashkenazi Jewry, prior to say the late 18th century. The most important rulings that came out of this region and period were written or decided by Gershom ben Judah, who we also call



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Rabbenu. This term Rabbenu refers to the Rabbi's Rabbi. Discuss this concept by saying like "the Doctor's Doctor," this will show how respected and admired Rabbenu was as a Jewish Intellectual.

● 2 Very Important Decisions

1) End of Polygamy Ask students if they know what polygamy is, if they don't then make them figure out the definition, have them break it down, ask them to think of other words that have the prefix poly-, so identify poly [many or multiple] and discuss that in relation to mono [one or single]. The root "gamy" is of Greek origin and means "marriage." Then talk about what polygamy is and how people living like this are very often [make sure to say that this is NOT always the case, just more often than not] put into negative roles. Polygamy tends to leave women in powerless and subjugated positions [because traditionally polygamy occurs in the case of one man and multiple women, not vice-versa]. Anyhow, Judaism was fully accepting of polygamy until about 800 years ago. Think of biblical characters that practiced polygamy. Why might polygamy have been a useful tool in a society 2000 years ago? More recently, during the time of Rabbenu, he was able to observe and rationalize the need and ability to outlaw polygamy. So, if polygamy is outlawed, what is left? Monogamy. So, Gershom ben Judah identified the problem, the Takanah, of polygamy, and with his colleagues he penned the Tshuvah that officially stated that polygamy was not longer necessary or allowed for Jews.

2) Equal Treatment of Returning Converts Ask if kids remember any reasons why Sephardic Jews converted away from Judaism. Get them to bring up the *conversos*, the Jews who made it look to others like they had converted in order to avoid being murdered, but they really continued to be Jewish in the privacy of their own homes. Ask the kids what they would do if families who were *conversos* decided once it was safe to be Jewish to try to come back to the Jewish community? Do the kids think that they would accept them or would they turn them away? The second of the two very important Takanot that Rabbenu made a Tshuvah about was that Jews who had decided to convert to other religions, when given the choice to either convert or die, were to be treated kindly and if they chose to return to Judaism and the Jewish community when it was safe to do so. He also said that they were to be fully welcomed and accepted as any



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other Jew. Ask the kids why they suppose this was such an important Tshuvah, what does this say about the Jewish communities at that time?

● Quick Review to Check for Evidence of Understanding

Ask students to define/identify/answer these words/people/answers before going on:

1) **Ask:** What in Judaism can we compare to the United States Constitution?

Talmud

2) **Ask:** How as Americans do we have the Constitution amended, who does it and how?

Supreme Court, through cases and Opinions

3) **Ask:** How do we as modern Jews go about amending our “Constitution”?

URJ: Central Conference of American Rabbis

USCJ: Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards
Both through Takanot and Tshuvot

4) **Define:** Takanah, Takanot, Tshuvah, Tshuvot

5) **Ask for One Example of:**

-A Supreme Court case and the Opinion that followed

-An Orthodox Jewish Takanah and the Tshuvah that followed

-A Reform/Conservative Jewish Takanah and the Tshuvah that followed

8) **Ask:** Who was the person that wrote the two most important Takanot/Shuvot to come out of Ashkenazi Jewry before the late 18th century?

Gershom ben Judah

9) **Ask:** What was he also called and what does that mean?

Rabbenu, the rabbi's rabbi

10) **Ask:** What were those two very important Takanah/Shuvot?

End of Polygamy and Equal Treatment of Returning Converts

CONCLUSION:

**NOW LET'S APPLY THIS TO THE WAY THAT WE AS MODERN JEWS MAKE
DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO LIVE OUR LIVES**



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- **As modern Jews today** we practice a less formal version of identifying Takanah and deciding Tshuvah in our own lives all the time. Let's look at Shabbat as an example.

- **As modern Jews we look for the underlying reasons for doing things.** Explain the idea of Kavanah or intention; you can use the example of a vegetarian keeping kosher. If the person intends to be a vegetarian and therefore, by default, also keeps kosher, then keeping kosher is not her/his intention, or Kavanah, it just kind of happens, which means that the person shouldn't say they keep kosher, because that is not her/his Kavanah it just happens to be a by product of that person's real intention, or Kavanah, which is to be a vegetarian.

- **Ask what the Kavanah is** behind what the Talmud outlines as the way one should keep Shabbat? Have them write down their reasons, which may include taking a break from the rest of your life, slowing down, spending time with family and friends, etc. Ask each student to rank the value of these reasons behind keeping Shabbat on a 1 to 5 scale, write the number next to the reason (5 means that they think there is a lot of value in the reasons behind keeping Shabbat and 1 means that they think there is no value in that particular Kavanah). Before moving on make sure that every student writes at least one 4 or 5 next to at least one of the listed Kavanot.

- **Now ask the students to each identify** something that interferes with or contradicts keeping Shabbat. Write these down. Examples can include sports games, family vacations, birthday parties, school dances, standardized testing, etc. Tell them that they have just identified Takanot

- **Ask students to look at these activities** in relation to the Kavanah of keeping Shabbat. Have each student explain how they do or don't think that doing these activities fit with the reason behind keeping Shabbat.

- **Have them look at the items that contradict** or interfere with the Kavanot that have 4s and 5s written next to them. Ask each of them how they will choose to take part or not to take part in said activity that contradicts or interferes with



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the Kavanah behind keeping Shabbat that they believe has a lot of value. Tell them that they have just decided Shuvot.

● **Tell the students that they just followed in the footsteps of Rabbenu.** Ask what Rabbenu's real name is. Tell them that a very important part of being a modern Jew is taking the responsibility to identify Takanot and decide Shuvot in our own lives on a regular basis.

● **Congratulate them on a job well done.**

Why do you think God makes Leah fertile and Rachel infertile?

What love triangle does this remind you of ?

Is Laban's deception ethical? Why or why not?

How do you think Jacob felt?

Where else have we seen similar deception?

What would you do if you were in Jacob's place?

What would you do if you were in Leah's place?

What would you do if you were in Rachel's place?

Collage Station #3

Make a picture of something you liked or disliked from the story. (Jacob marrying Leah or Rachel, working hard etc.) Show whether you agree with the actions taken in your design.

How might you rewrite the story of Jacob's marriage? You can rewrite it in poetry or paragraph form (and tape it to your design).

Constitution Links:

[Page 1 of the U.S. Constitution](#)

[Page 2 of the U.S. Constitution](#)

[Page 3 of the U.S. Constitution](#)

[Page 4 of the U.S. Constitution](#)



Chidush חידוש
Sweetening Jewish Education

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