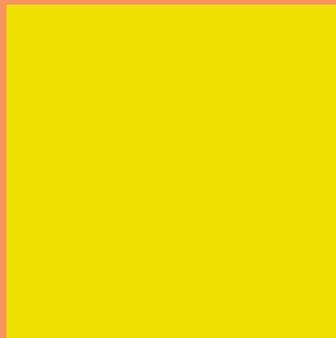


3



ENCOUNTER WITH THE
ENVIRONMENT: SOCIAL AND
ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

MODULE THREE

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ENVIRONMENT: SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

3.1 A STORY



Figure 3.1
The Video Clip

The video shows a conflict at school. Ariella is a Jewish girl who learns through the evening news about forest fires in Australia. To satisfy her hunger for more information, she sneaks to the computer at night. Her research reveals an avalanche of ecological crises, while the mysterious words *'bal tashchit'* reflects in her eyes.

At school she hears terrible news: the city council and the school board have decided to cut down a piece of the forest nearby. For years now there has been a shortage of parking spaces. Ariella decides to contest this decision, and she starts a protest movement. However, her movement soon starts dividing people up. What started out of noble intentions, threatens to escalate into full blown conflict. What is the role of the mysterious words *bal tashchit* in all this?

3.2 POLARIZATION AND CLIMATE PROTESTS

People have differing opinions on many subjects. A difference of opinion is inherent to communication and is not problematic in itself. Even in our society there are subjects on which (groups of) people have different opinions. It only becomes problematic when these different opinions and views lead to violence.

We can speak of polarization when differences between opposing groups keep increasing. The two groups face each other as **'opposites'**. An excessive polarization process can also be described as an **us vs. them** kind of thinking. In this way groups of people are placed diametrically opposite each other. Of course, polarization is not always negative. Differing, even conflicting views challenge our thinking and keep a society alive and dynamic. It does become problematic when only radical points of view are heard, and the moderate voices in the debate disappear.

Polarization is different from conflict. In both cases there are two sides standing on opposite sides of each other. But in the case of conflict, both the people that have an issue and the issue itself are easier to identify. One person thinks this, the other person thinks that. This makes it easier to find a good, rational solution. The parties involved are more inclined to accept the solution. In the case of polarization, the issues are often more abstract, and it is harder to identify the people that are on opposite sides.

Many scientists agree that the climate is rapidly changing. These changes, including global warming, could lead to a world out of balance, with serious consequences for humans and animals. Because of this, scientists are increasingly sounding the alarm. Society, too, is increasingly calling for changes that would better protect the environment. But not everyone is convinced of the negative consequences of climate change, or is willing to implement the desired changes. Thus, two camps, two poles, quickly emerge around a theme. The growing frustrations lead to a strong 'us vs. them' mentality. We can understand the climate protests as an expression of these frustrations.

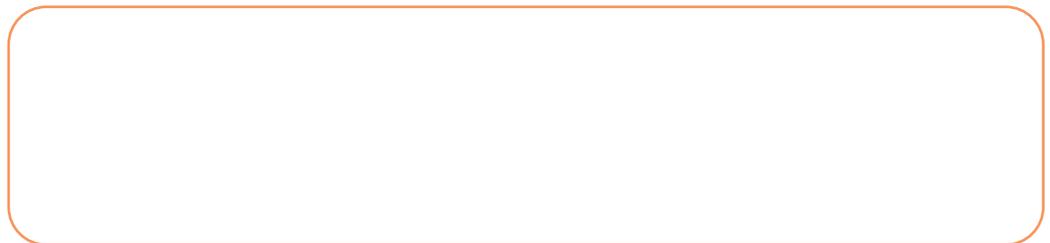
The theme polarization offers the opportunity to reflect on the climate debate and climate protests. When do protests go too far? Do protests lead to more polarization? Is protest always the right way to come to solutions? In what follows you are invited to reflect on those questions.

ASSIGNMENT. Watch the video clip. The story shows us how Ariella, frustrated with her school's decision to cut down a piece of forest, starts a protest group. Answer the following (sub)questions.

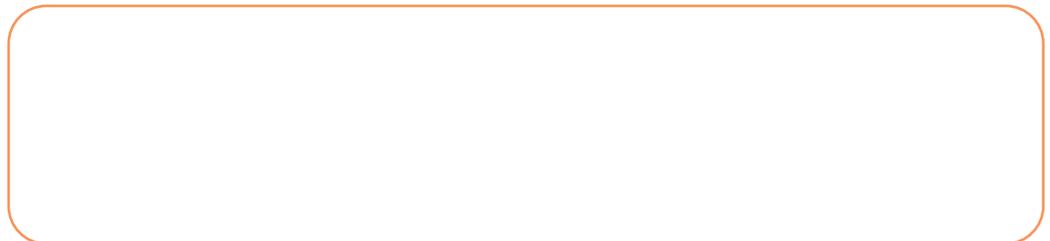
1. What is your opinion about the story?



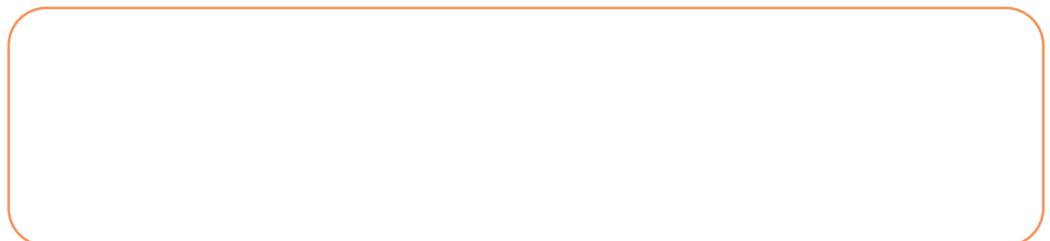
1.1. Was Ariella right to protest?



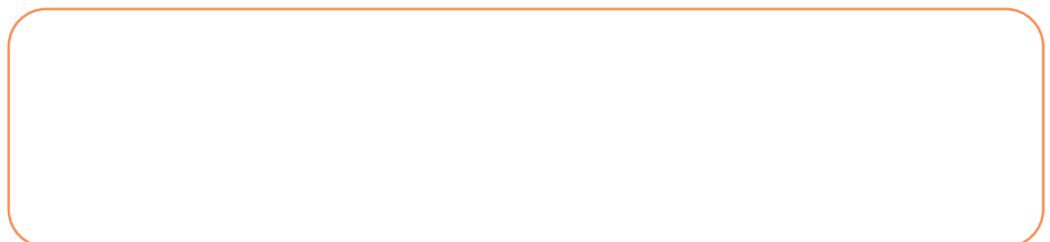
1.2. Is protesting a good way to draw attention to a problem? Would you join in the protest?



1.3. What actions is Ariella taking, or does she intend to take?



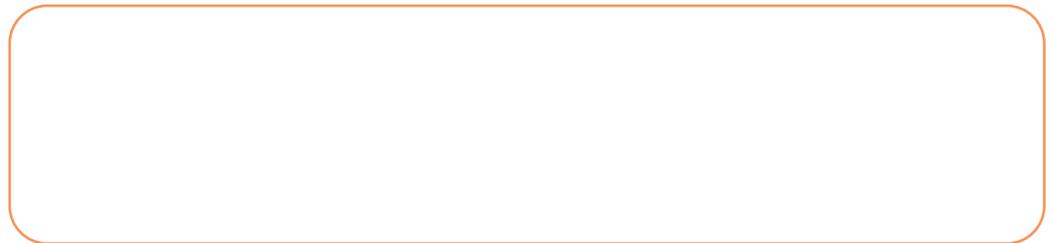
1.4. How does Ariella's environment react to her actions?



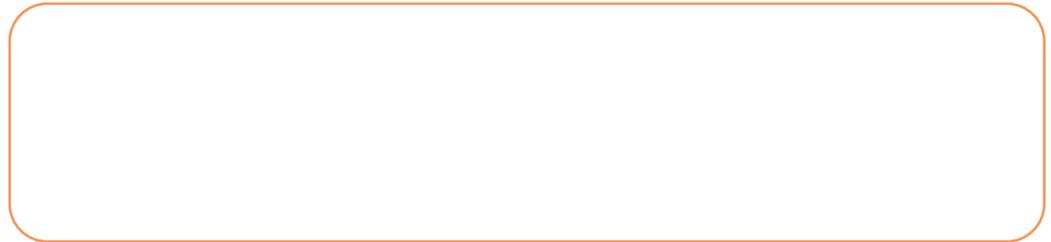
2. Ariella searches for 'ecological disasters' online. Look up the term 'ecological disaster'. Explain the meaning in your own words. What examples of ecological disasters do you recognize in the story (on Ariella's computer screen)? Are you worried about these things in real life? What is your opinion about the story? What do you remember?



3. Does Ariella participate in a 'us vs. them' kind of thinking?



3.2. Does the story show us a conflict, or polarization? Argue your position.



3.3 The school director invites Ariella and Levi for a conversation. Can a dialogue help solve an 'us vs. them' thinking? How?

3.4. How can we envision depolarization? Can you give examples of possible solutions?

3.5. Do you think it is possible to take action without polarizing? What could such a non-polarizing protest look like?



Figure 3.2
The Video Clip

3.3 BAL TASHCHIT

While Ariella searches for ecological disasters on the internet, we see two words reflected in her eyes: *bal tashchit*. The words *bal tashchit* refer to a prohibition from the Book of Deuteronomy. We speak of a prohibition in the case of a 'negative mitzvah': a mitzvah or commandment that prohibits certain behavior.

Bal *tashchit* means '**do not destroy**'. The Biblical Hebrew root sh.h.t. [destroy], *schachat*, is synonymous with the word *kilkul*, which means 'spoil' or 'corrupt'. Modern Hebrew translates sh.h.t. to: spoil, hurt, waste; destroy; sin; corrupt; murder.

The word 'destroy' should be understood in a broad sense, and is closely related to the notion of 'waste'!

ASSIGNMENT. Read the following passage. Then answer the questions.

3.3.1 BAL TASHCHIT - DEUT. 20:19-20

[19] When, in making war against a town in order to capture it, you lay siege to it for a long time, you are not to destroy its trees, cutting them down with an axe. You can eat their fruit, so don't cut them down. After all, are the trees in the field human beings, so that you have to besiege them too?

[20] However, if you know that certain trees provide no food, you may destroy them and cut them down, in order to build siege-works against the town making war with you, until it falls.

Mark in this passage the sentence that contains the bal tashhit prohibition.

Write down what you don't understand in this passage. Which sentence, expression, or term is unclear?

What is the passage about? Try to write down the essence as concisely as possible.



Figure 3.3
Source: © Gustavo Cruz /
Pexels

3.4 HOW TO INTERPRET? KAL V'HOMER!

The Tanakh's meanings are not always obvious. The Tanakh originated in a world that is very different from the present one. This makes understanding and interpreting difficult. But the Tanakh is still rich in meaning. Rabbis have developed various techniques to interpret and decipher all those meanings. Those techniques are like keys that open the lock of the Tanakh.

One of those interpretation keys is ***kal v'homer***. That literally means: **'from difficult to easy'**. In the Tanakh we often find commandments in very specific situations. *Kal v'homer* shows us how we can deduce something from a less probable situation for a more probable situation. Or in other words: what does a specific case tell us about how to behave in general?

The biblical prohibition *bal tashchit* forbids, in times of war, to cut down fruit trees to gather wood for a siege. Rabbis started to apply the prohibition in a broader sense, making it applicable to all kinds of useful materials, objects, and resources for humans, and even to the human body. That movement, from an exceptional, specific situation to a general one, is *kal v'homer*.



Figure 3.4
Source: © Delphotostock /
Adobe Stock

ASSIGNMENT. Answer the following questions.

What does bal taschit mean? Can you link it to other words?

Explain the kal v'homer principle using your own words.

Read the following Talmud passage. How does the Babylonian Talmud apply the kal v'homer principle?

**THE
BABYLONIAN TALMUD
– KIDDUSHIN 32A**

Whoever breaks vessels or rips up garments, destroys a building, stops up a fountain, or ruins food is guilty of violating the prohibition of bal tashchit.

Apply the kal v'homer principle to your own life. In what ways do we pollute or destroy? And can we do something about them?

3.5 PROFIT OR SUSTAINABILITY?

Passages from the Tanakh can be interpreted in different ways. This is also the case with the *bal tashchit* principle. So far we saw how rabbis mainly applied the principle to the notion of 'profit'. Profit is another term for utility or benefit. The question is: what yields the most benefit, the most profit? This requires a kind of calculation. According to this perspective, we have to protect what brings us the most benefit.

Not all rabbis agree with this interpretation. Nowadays more and more Jewish thinkers are trying to reconcile the *bal tashchit* principle with the concept of sustainability.

Sustainability means that things remain productive, healthy and diverse for a long time. This means that we use up resources to meet our needs, without taking away the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

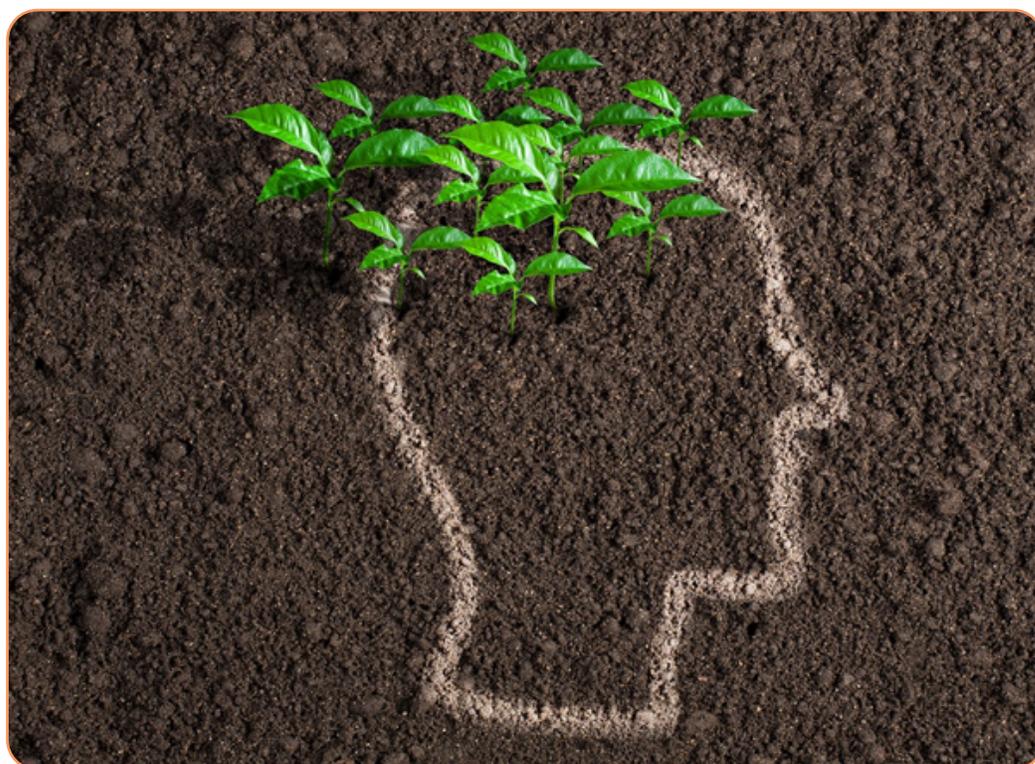


Figure 3.5
Source: © Andrey Kuzmin
Adobe Stock

ASSIGNMENT. Read the article below by Rabbi David Seidenberg. Afterwards, solve the questions following the article.

“What seems to have been missed in past rabbinic interpretation of bal tashchit is that the rule given in the Torah is both literally and fundamentally about sustainability – about what sustains you.”

[...]

However, if we incorporate the spirit of the Torah, we can go far beyond such utilitarian measurements. The Torah after all doesn't just protect the trees when it says, “Is the tree of the field a person, to come before you in the siege?” It ascribes a kind of subjectivity to them.

More than this, the deepest Torah guidance is that we must respect the sources of life. That spirit is expressed in so many ways – including not just in bal tashchit, but also burying the blood/soul of a wild animal one has slaughtered, never eating blood, which represents the life force, and never combining milk, the source of life, with meat. Life – all life – is the purpose of Creation.

Indicates terms, phrases, and sentences that are unclear. Look up the meaning of ambiguous words, or ask the teacher or facilitator to clarify them.

What is Rabbi David Seidenberg's criticism of the previous bal tashchit interpretation? Explain using your own words.

Rabbi David Seidenberg states that the deepest guideline of the Torah is that we must 'respect all life'. What do you understand by 'respecting life'? In what way do you try to show respect to nature?

3.6 GLOSSARY

Consumption

Consumption refers to the using up of resources.

Ecosystem

An ecosystem is another word for a community of life, in which a collection of species or organisms interact with each other, and their environment. Ecosystem are part of the overall natural environment. Well-known examples of ecosystems are forests, lakes, rivers, and so on.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity is an abstract term. A possible synonym is 'personality'. In general, it refers to the whole of personal opinions, emotions, points of view, or tastes. David Seidenberg, as seen in this module, uses the term to suggest a similarity between humans and nature, as both are elements of Creation.

3.8 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

1 INT LIVING ROOM NIGHT

We see a family sitting in their living room. They're watching TV. There is a news reporting on the wildfires in Australia. We zoom in on the girl's face looking intrigued.

Father: Wait, is it THAT late? It's time for bed, Ariella.

Ariella (indignant): Wait, what? No! It was just getting interesting!

Mother: You've already stayed up later than usual. You've got school tomorrow!

Father (spurring on): Come on!

2 INT ROOM NIGHT

Ariella goes to her room. She is laying in bed, with her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. After a while she gets up and walks to the door. She opens the door carefully and enters the hall. It's dark; everyone has gone to bed. She stealthily walks through the hall. She enters another door.

3 INT COMPUTER ROOM NIGHT

Ariella takes a seat behind a computer. She starts looking up things like 'climate change' and 'climate crises'. The camera zooms in on her eyes while we see images mirrored in them, getting bigger, all of them depicting environmental disasters and climate strikes. Through the images, the words 'bal taschit' pop up.

Teacher: Ariella, wake up!

The background scene changes to that of a classroom. Ariella, who was dozing off, suddenly jumps upright. The class is laughing. One boy, Levi, looks concerned.

Ariella: I'm sorry! I wasn't sleeping!

Teacher: I understand the classes can be boring, but try to stay awake either way.

Ariella: I will! Sorry!

The school bell rings.

Teacher: All right, time for a break!

4 EXT PLAY GROUND DAY

The kids walk out of class, unto the playground.

Levi: How come you're so tired, Ariella?

Ariella: I've been up all night. There was a news reporting on those fires in Australia and...

The conversation becomes muted while we overhear another conversation taking place.

Student A: Well, that's a shame, do they HAVE to cut down the trees?

Ariella overhears the conversation.

Ariella: Huh? Sorry, what are you guys talking about?

Student A: They are planning on cutting down a part of the forest next to school.

Ariella: Why? How do you know this?

Student B: There's a problem with the lack of parking space. My dad's on the school board. They're working with the city council to find a solution.

Ariella: And they decided to cut down trees?

Student B: I guess so...

Ariella: Well, we can't let that happen. I have an idea...

5 EXT SCHOOL ENTRANCE DAY

A couple of days pass. Levi arrives at school. There's a group of students, all holding up signs. He recognizes Ariella, standing in front of the group, holding a petition. Everyone in the group is wearing green badges.

Levi: What's going on here?

Ariella: We're protesting! After hearing about the school's plans I've decided to take matters into my own hands. I've made a petition! And look, already ten people signed up!

Levi: Oh. So what are you going to do with this?

Ariella: Send it to the principal. And we already made some plans for if he doesn't want to listen.

Levi: Like what?

Ariella: He'll be sure to get the message if it's painted on the school walls... We got other things planned as well, but I can only tell you after you signed up and got your green badge. You wouldn't want a red one, would you? Here you go.

Ariella holds up the petition in front of Levi.

Levi (hesitant): Uhm... I don't know...

Ariella: What's wrong? As a Jew you're supposed to know how important this is!

Levi: What does that mean?

Ariella: Oh, come on, the Tanakh clearly forbids the destruction and waste of nature. There is literally a command called bal taschit. Do you even know what that means?

Principal: I do!

Ariella and Levi turn around in surprise. They see a man in a suit sizing them up.

Principal: Shalom!

Ariella and Levi: Shalom!

Ariella: I apologize, I didn't see you.

Principal: I have an idea: why don't you two join me in my office? Let's talk about this little revolution!

Ariella: Okay...

Principal (turning to the group): All right, everyone! Time to get to your classrooms!

6 INT PRINCIPAL OFFICE DAY

The principal enters the school building, followed by Levi and Ariella.

Principal: Take a seat. You two had quite the interesting discussion going on. Ariella, would you like to tell me what's going on?

Ariella: We heard about the school's plans to cut down the trees. As Jewish people, we can't let that happen. It's forbidden.

Principal: Oh yes, you mentioned the famous bal taschit-command. What can you tell me about it?

Ariella: It's a command from the Book of Genesis that means: 'You shall not destroy'. It's a negative command because it prohibits you from doing something. In this case, it prohibits the school from carelessly destroying the forest.

Principal: I see. Well, this might ease your mind: the school board and city council have agreed to create a new bus stop. No trees will be cut down.

Ariella: Oh, well, that's goo -

Principal: But that's not the important issue I want to talk about. Why were some students wearing green badges, and did others get red ones?

Ariella: So that we know who's on our side...

Principal: Why did you need to create sides?

Ariella: Because the bal taschit-command is absolute! It's pretty simple! I've read a lot about it.

Principal: Have you read the Torah-passage in which you can find the command?

Ariella doesn't respond. She never did. The principal opens one of the slides of his desk and grabs the bible out of it.

Principal: "When, in making war against a town in order to capture it, you lay siege to it for a long time, you are not to destroy its trees, cutting them down with an axe. You can eat their fruit, so don't cut them down. After all, are the trees in the field human beings, so that you have to besiege them too?"

Levi: So it's about not cutting down fruit trees in times of war, as long as they are still useful!

Ariella: But then why did I find the command being applied to other situations?

Principal: Because the Tanakh can mean many things, and we can discuss these different meanings. Discussion and interpretation is the way we learn! So protesting can be a good way to raise concerns, and ask important questions loud and clear, but let's not turn on each other just yet.

Ariella: Okay... I'll talk to the others. I'm sorry. But the trees are safe?

Principal: They definitely are. If not, I would just replant them in my office!

They all laugh. Levi and Ariella are visibly relieved.

Principal: All right, let's get to class, you two. I'll speak to the teacher. Chop chop!

Ariella looks up at those last two words.

Principal: I don't mean that literally!

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