

Created in the Image of God: A lesson plan for children and teenagers

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The following lesson plan was originally written to provide a program on human rights and human rights abuses for students who were too young to view the film "Ghosts of Abu Ghraib" during the *Spotlight on Torture* week in October 2007. The age range goes from elementary through high school. The portion for younger students (elementary school students) focuses more on dealing with conflict and respect for others, even in hard situations, while the section for middle and high school students is more directly related on the issues related to torture and abuse. We hope it will continue to be used in all communities discussing U.S.-sponsored torture and the importance of human rights.

For younger students:

Goals:

- Learn the term *tzelem Elohim* (image of God) and its connection to the Creation story.
- Explore the connection between *tzelem Elohim* and human rights
- Reflect on the implications of *tzelem Elohim* theology for people you don't like or you disagree with.

Materials:

- 8-1/2" by 11" sheet with Genesis 1:26-27 in Hebrew and English on one side, very simple outline of a head and shoulders on the other.
- Small sheets of pretty paper.
- Colored pens.
- Tape.
- A blackboard or butcher paper and pen.

1. Hand out paper with Genesis passage on it. Read aloud in Hebrew and English. Have the students who know some Hebrew find the phrase *tzelem Elohim* (in v. 27) and help every student circle it.
2. Ask everyone to close their eyes and look within. Where is *tzelem Elohim* within yourself? Is it in a particular place in your body? What does it feel like? How might another person see *tzelem Elohim* within you? Take a quiet moment and feel the tselem in yourself, then open your eyes.
3. Hand out small pieces of pretty paper and ask each person to copy the word *ELOHIM* from the Torah text onto their paper. They can decorate it a bit with colored pens if you want. When they are finished, ask each person to tape the paper to some part of their body where they feel the *tzelem* is

(or, if this seems too literal and physical, have them tape the paper to their foreheads...) When finished, ask everyone to mill about in silence for about one minute, looking at each person and trying to see *tzelem Elohim* in that person.

4. Ask the group the following questions and record their answers on the blackboard:

-- What happens to *tzelem Elohim* when you hit a person?

-- ... when you let a person go hungry?

-- ... when you put a person in prison? (For this last one, ask further, "Does it matter if the person did something wrong?")

-- Are there some things that you can't do to another person even if they did something wrong? (If students don't come up with these, you can prompt for violence, starvation, humiliation...)

5. Take this list and ask the group to rephrase each item in positive language. E.g. "freedom from violence, meeting basic physical needs, dignity..." We might say that these are "human rights." They come from the teaching that every person, by virtue of being human and bearing the divine image, has to be treated with respect.

6. Ask the students to each privately think of the worst person they know or know of, someone they really do not like, do not think is a good person. Turn the text paper over to the outline of a human head. Don't write the name of the person you are thinking of or say it aloud! (That would be terrible *lashon ha-ra!*) But just think about that person's face. Take the *ELOHIM* sticker from your own forehead or body and stick it to that outline of a head. Think quietly: Does that person bear *tzelem Elohim*? Are there things that you can't do to that person, no matter how bad you think he or she is? Are there things you must do for him or her? Does this person have human rights? Reminding students not to reveal any information about the particular person they are thinking of, ask for responses to this question.

For high school students:

Goals:

-- To consider ethical questions about torture and formulate a personal position.

-- To become acquainted with the work of Rabbis for Human Rights-North America against torture.

Materials:

-- Copies for each student of "Six Questions to Clarify Your Position Regarding US-Sponsored Torture" (see: http://www.rhr-na.org/clarify_your_position_on_torture)

-- Copies for each student of the "Jewish Statement Against Torture" (see: <http://www.rhr-na.org/torture/statement>)

-- Copies of RHR-NA anti-torture brochure (Available at the RHR-NA website and from the office. See: http://www.rhr-na.org/files/rhr_brochure.pdf)

-- An egg timer.

1. Speed-dating about torture. Divide the class in half and have students form two lines facing one another. Set the timer for six minutes (or have a timekeeper keep time in six-minute increments.) Have students bring their copies of "Is This Statement for You?" Each pair will have six minutes to discuss the first question. Partners don't have to come to agreement, but they should help each other answer the question. When the timer rings, students should take a moment to thank their *hevruta* partners and mark their sheet with their own answer to the question they have just discussed. When this is done (one minute or so at max) have one line move one to the left and the last person in line partner with the person at the end of the other line and go on to question two. Repeat this pattern until students have discussed all six questions with a different partner each time and marked their page.

2. Give the students a copy of the "Jewish Statement Against Torture" and ask them to review it. Do they feel comfortable signing it? Why or why not? Take some comments from the students. If they are comfortable, ask them to sign the statement and submit it to RHR-NA. If they are not comfortable, ask them what they would need for a statement about torture to say.