



CAN AWE INSPIRE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION?

PREP FOR THE SESSION

Overview

This resource explores **Nature-Connection** through the value of **Awe**.

At-a-Glance:

This resource facilitates nature connection through independent reflection and group discussion. It introduces participants to the power of cultivating presence and awareness when in relationship with the natural world. It engages with the value of awe, and explores both how that value is strengthened, and why it might not always be simple to do. Through a wide variety of Jewish sources, learners will explore the wisdom and revelations attained through nature-based experiences. It ends by encouraging learners to consider how these experiences might inspire and/or ground environmental action.



Time Estimate:
50-55 minutes



Materials Needed:

- Paper
- Pens, pencils, and/or markers for writing or drawing
- For variations on the Sit-Spot activity, [click here](#).



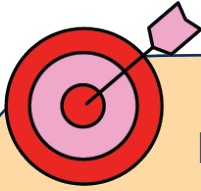
Best Uses:

- Outdoors (but can be modified for an indoor setting)
- Contemplative groups



This resource was created as part of M²'s Values in Action Environment Fellowship, generously supported by Micah Philanthropies. For a full list of Fellows in the inaugural Fellowship cohort, [click here](#).

LET'S GET STARTED



FRAME THE ISSUE

Read the following for context:

From climate change to species extinction to plastics pollution, it is abundantly clear that our earth is in a state of crisis and that this moment demands measured and meaningful action to ensure a sustainable world for all creatures.

Respected environmental thinktanks and non-profits, such as [Project Drawdown](#) and the [David Suzuki Foundation](#), outline clear actions that we as individuals can take, whether it be through lifestyle changes or engaging in advocacy work. And, for many, a list of “shoulds” is not enough to inspire sustained behavioral shifts that align with environmental stewardship.

What *does* in fact shift behavior? Is it in the mind, the heart, through actions, awareness, learning? What inspires children and young adults to participate in ecological conservation, to think about the implications of their consumer decisions, and minimize the environmental footprint in their lives?

Facilitator prompts the group:

- What inspires you when it comes to conservation efforts and concern for the environment?
- What holds you back?

Continue reading:

According to world-renowned environmental educator, [David Sobel](#), the experiences that are most formative to prompt ecological conservation efforts, **are those that facilitate a deep sense of nature-connection.**

10 min





Facilitator prompts the group:

- Why do you think this is true?
- Share, in partners, a memory of a meaningful experience in nature.

Afterwards, ask a few participants to share their memories with the group. Invite participants to consider the following questions: (These are thought questions to carry you through the exploration. If time is limited, read them, but don't answer together.)

- Why is this memory meaningful for you?
- Did this experience help to shape who you are today? Did it shape your relationship to the natural world?
- How would your behaviors today be different if you did *not* have this experience? How would your behaviors today be different if you had more of these kinds of experiences?



EXPLORE THE VALUE/ACTIVITY

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: SIT SPOT (5-10 minutes)

A Sit Spot is a place in nature where one sits and observes. Often, people return to a sit spot multiple times over the course of a season/year to observe changes in plants, animal life, bird song, sun and shadows, temperature, etc.

Even a single Sit Spot can help to cultivate a sense of wonder of the natural world.

Instruct participants to find a quiet place to sit individually.

- In an outdoor setting, Sit Spots can happen in fields, forests, parks, even parking lots! Indoors, participants can make observations out a window, or even by looking closely at a natural object, such as a pinecone, piece of bark, leaves, etc. If outdoors, make sure to set boundaries around how far participants can travel to find their Sit Spot location.

Have participants sit in silence for 5-10 minutes and focus on making observations of the natural world. Invite participants to record their observations as drawings or text. Let them know when and how they will be called back together (for example, with a song or bird call).

Facilitator prompts the group:

- What was hard about that process?

Note for facilitator: For variations on Sit-Spot Activities, [click here](#).

ACTIVITY DEBRIEF (5-15 minutes)

Facilitator prompts the group:

Either in partners or as a group, process the participants' Sit Spot experiences through the following questions:

- What thoughts and questions came up for you during your Sit Spot?
- How much "nature" were you able to observe during your Sit Spot?
- How do you feel following your Sit Spot?
- How do you think it would affect you to do a Sit Spot daily? In the same place? What would prevent you from doing so?

15 min





ANCHOR IN JEWISH WISDOM

Ground the group discussion in Jewish values by sharing the following teaching and discussion questions:

According to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (born 1943), a quintessential element of what it means to be Jewish is to hold awe and wonder for the natural world. He writes,

To be a Jew means to wake up and to keep your eyes open to the many beautiful, mysterious, and holy things that happen all around us every day.

- Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *Honey from the Rock*

- Do you agree that awareness and awe of the natural world is an element of Jewish identity? Why or why not?

Facilitator shares the following teaching with participants and asks the questions below:

According to Midrash Kohelet Rabbah:

Upon creating the first human beings, God guided them around the Garden of Eden, saying; "Look at my creations! See how beautiful and perfect they are! I created everything for you. Make sure you don't ruin or destroy my world. If you do, there will be no one after you to fix it."

- Midrash Kohelet Rabbah (7:13)

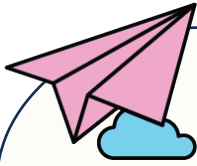


Facilitator prompts the group:

- Why do you think the first humans were commanded to "look" at God's creation?
- How might observing the natural world help ensure that humans will not ruin or destroy the world?
- Do you think nature connection is necessary for mobilizing environmental and climate action? Why or why not?

10 min





PROMPT ACTION



Facilitator prompts the group:

If awareness and awe are necessary (or at least helpful) to inspire environmental stewardship, consider taking one of the following actions to continue cultivating nature-connection. Review the list below, and together with a *havruta*, partner discuss 1-2 that you find intriguing.

- Find a Sit Spot that is close to home and commit to making it a regular part of your practice
- Share daily nature observations and mysteries with a friend or family member
- Join a local hiking (or bird watching, mushroom foraging, etc.) group
- Discover a local shinrin-yoku (Japanese forest bathing) group and participate in one of their programs
- Download an app (such as Seek or Merlin Bird ID) that will encourage you to learn more about your local plant and animal species.

Commit to trying one of these - or come up with your own - in the next week and see how you feel. Check in with your *havruta* partner to see if they've followed through.

5 min





CLOSE WITH INTENTION

5 min



The conversation we just had explored the concept of nature connection as a way to experience awe in one's life. Through independent reflection and discussion it introduced learners to the power of cultivating awareness and awe in relation to the natural world, and considered why it might not always be simple to do. It ended with a series of steps to encourage learners to consider how these experiences might inspire environmental action.



Facilitator prompts the group:

- When I came into the discussion today, I understood "awe" to mean ... now I understand that it also means ...