

Outdoor play for all ages - it is just what the doctor (And Rabbi) ordered! Pam Hess

Why is connecting kids to nature and the outdoors so important for us all? And what does it have to do with Judaism? For me to help you understand I think I need to help you get in the right mood.

I'd like to start by asking each of you to close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and think of some of your favorite childhood memories.

Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? Let me help you a little – with some of my favorite memories. They include laughing and feeling like the bravest person on earth while sledding down the biggest scariest mountain (which of course was a tiny hill). Playing hide and seek, kick the can, or one of the many game we made up when my parents would kick me outside and tell me not to come back until it got dark (could you imagine a parent feeling comfortable saying that now?) Building a fort with my sister and discovering the importance of negotiation skills. Swimming in a pond and discovering all the other creatures who lived there and depended on the pond. Exploring the woods, or field, or stream; seeing all the colors, feeling all the textures, smelling of the seasons. For me this brings a sense of peace and wholeness.

Now try to imagine what most kids today might say when asked this same question. What are your favorite childhood memories? How do you spend your time? Ummmmmm.... Favorite memory? Outdoor memory...? Ummmm.... “I have this great game on my iPhone where I get to build and destroy worlds” or maybe “playing soccer or baseball.” Today’s kids are more connected to the app store than their local grocery store.

How many minutes a day do you think the average person below 18 spends on some kind of electronic media device every day? Raise your hand if you think it is more than 30 minutes? Keep your hand up if you think it is more than 60? More than 90? The average kid spends 2.5

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hours listening/watching music each day, almost five hours of TV and movies, three hours of Internet and video games, and just 38 minutes of old-fashioned reading, according to a new study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. That adds up to 75 hours of media every week. And that doesn't even include the hour and a half spent text messaging each day, and the half hour kids talk on the cell phone. How much time do you think they spend a day outside? The average American boy or girl spends as few as 30 minutes in unstructured outdoor play each day. Compared to 30 years ago when an average of 2.5 hours a day were spent outside.

You might be saying that is sad, but so what?

Research shows that kids who spend time outside are happier, healthier, more creative and more socially responsible. It's all true – and yet there are real reasons why kids don't spend more time outside – from over scheduled kids and parents, to less access to places to play, to less knowledge and more fear (whether real or perceived) are all causing kids to spend less and less time outside.

Richard Louv coined the term “Nature Deficit Disorder” in his book Last Child in the Woods. The term refers to the idea that people, especially children, spend less time outdoors, causing a wide range of behavioral problems.

Louv links decreased time in nature and increased time inside in front of screens to the rise in attention disorders, obesity, and depression among America's youth. He says that much of this can be healed, and altogether avoided, with the simple remedy of time in nature. He even refers to this as nature's Ritalin!

I have spent most of my life and my career trying to change this growing trend of nature deficient kids by helping kids of all ages, shapes, and sizes connect to the outdoors. I am proud my daughters would rather spend most of their time outdoors exploring rather than indoors

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watching characters on TV do it. They are great problem solvers, can sit for long periods of time exploring a log or reading a book and I am pretty sure I don't need to worry about their vitamin D levels (which is connected to spending time outside).

My most recent project is called Outdoors Rx. I helped create an easy pathway for doctors to help kids and families get outside. It is free to participate; the programs are short in length, keeping the programs easy and fun and are beginning to make a difference. Doctors are writing prescriptions for kids to get outside and play and AMC fills the prescription by providing free and accessible programs within the community. And again some of you are saying has it really come to this? And I say yes and many doctors agree. Think about the scary facts I already told you – add in the rise in childhood obesity and diabetes issues that doctors used to mostly see in adults and the steep increase in ADD and ADHD.

Research has shown that people are more likely to do something if a doctor tells them and even more likely to do it if they get an actual prescription. So we created it. Doctors are writing prescriptions for a variety of reasons to kids right in Waltham. They are writing them for kids with ADD impacts, who aren't active, who are vitamin D deficient (which sadly most in New England have), or just because they think a kid would enjoy it. Families need the help and push to reconnect with nature. Once they do and see their kids' faces light up, and want to come back they are often hooked. Remember the feelings of joy, empowerment and discovery nature did for you and can bring to all. Grab a friend, a grandchild, pet and go for a walk, play hop scotch, invent your own game or join me on an outdoors Rx program this summer or fall.

Now many people have told me throughout the years that Jews are not outdoors people, we live in the cities – that the career I have chosen isn't a very Jewish one. I think they are wrong. How can a people who spent 40 years in the desert not be considered outdoorsy?

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The Torah teaches that the human is made of the earth. In Hebrew the words for human, Adam, and earth, Adamah, are from the same root. In English, the word human is connected to humus, the fertile top layer of soil. We are made of earth and therefore learn a great deal when our bodies and minds interact with the larger web of life.

Rabbi Jill Hammer explains, “Jewish traditions provide us with a system that connects us to the earth by connecting us to the cycles of nature. The cycle of the Jewish year, like many calendrical cycles, takes note of and weaves itself into the natural seasons: Passover falling in the spring, the new year of Rosh Hashanah in the autumn, Chanukah in the winter, and so forth. One of the most important ways of tying the earth to the spirit is to fully celebrate the holidays as they pertain to the seasons and cycles of the earth.”

I read on Wilderness Torah website: “When humans are disconnected from the earth, we are not only separated from an intimate knowledge of the sources of our food, medicine, shelter, and all the things we need to sustain our lives, we are separated from our sense of human identity. This is equally true for Jews with regard to an authentic sense of Jewish identity. Jews cannot know their Jewish selves without this connection.” At a time when concern for the environment and Jewish identity are both at all time highs, there is no better time to reclaim and strengthen our connection to Judaism and inspire the next generations of Jews than to truly understand what it means to embark on Tikkun Olam.

So should our rabbis start writing prescriptions for Jewish experiences? Maybe that goes too far. Maybe not?

So I want to conclude by asking you to once again close your eyes and think of your favorite childhood memory connecting you to Judaism. Was it walking to temple holding hands with your parent or grandparent? Was it building your first sukkah? Was it sitting at the

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Passover table with your whole family? Was is welcoming in the Sabbath or holding the Havdalah candle? How many of these experiences have you recently shared with your kids or grandkids? Probably my most spiritual moment of my life was standing on top of Masada at sunrise – after climbing up in the dark – as the sun rose and the colors emerged – I knew there really must be a G-d to have created such a place of beauty and history and awe all in one – and the world was so much more than me – I knew then I wanted to give back and help others experience this feeling – and that is what I have tried to do my whole working and family life and will continue to do – both in my professional and personal life.

I found these words recently: Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass and all growing things, and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer.

I hope we are all able to experience “shlemut,” wholeness and peace in your everyday life – don’t forget: Getting outside and sharing that with those you love should be part of that everyday and so should Judaism.