

## USY Program Bank #N105

### The Giving Tree

#### **Age Brackets:**

- USY (gr. 9 - 12)
- Kadima (gr. 5 - 8)

#### **Program Type:**

- Religion/Education

#### **Estimated Cost:**

Free

#### **Duration:**

Less than 2 hours

#### **Required attendance:**

Any Amount

#### **Description:**

This program deals with an analysis of the story The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein. Shel Silverstein was an educator, author, and illustrator who died several years ago. This program will focus on the aspect of giving to another person.

#### **Goals**

1. The USYers will have an opportunity to become familiar with the various levels of giving charity according to the Rambam.
2. The USYers will have an opportunity to understand the possible dangers that can result from creating dependence in our relationships with others.
3. The USYers will have an opportunity to discuss ways of motivating themselves to the value of mutual giving and helping.

#### **Category of Activity**

Education

#### **Age**

USY, Kadimah, Parents and USYers.

#### **Time**

70 - 90 Minutes

#### **Method**

Storytelling, Group Discussion

**Size of Group**

Up to 50 participants

**Keywords**

Happiness, Giving, Relationship, Dependence

**Place:**

Synagogue meeting room

**Preparation of Supplies and Resource Materials:**

1. A copy of the story The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein. (This story is not included in the text of this program because of copywrite issues. The book is available in bookstores and libraries. A summary of the story is found in (Attachment 1).
2. The story summary for each of the participants (Attachment 1).
3. The discussion questions for each of the participants (Attachment 2).
4. Rambam's Eight Levels of Giving (Attachment 3).

**General Preparation:**

1. The program leader should make sure that all of the printed materials are prepared before the program.
  2. If the group size is larger than 16, it is recommended that a second discussion leader be included. It is possible to bring in another educator from the synagogue staff or a senior USYer.
  3. The program leader should review the program with the additional staff members so they are familiar with it and with their specific roles.
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**The Program In Detail:**

1. The program leader should begin with a brief review of the program outline, explaining what will happen, how and when.
  2. The program leader should ask the following question: "Who is your tree?" before the story is read, so that it can serve as material for consideration during the reading.
  3. The program leader should read the story The Giving Tree to the entire group.
  4. The program leader should divide the participants into small groups for discussion.
  5. The group leaders should lead a discussion based on the questions in Attachment 2.
  6. Following the discussion on the questions, the leaders should review and discuss the Eight Levels of Giving as described by the Rambam (Attachment 3).
  7. The group leaders should ask the group to try to write a different ending to the Giving Tree story (Attachment 4).
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## **Attachment 1 - Summary of the story, The Giving Tree**

1. A tree and a young boy enjoy an idyllic relationship. The tree loved the little boy and every day the little boy would come and play. The boy would frolic with the tree. The boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy.
  2. Time passes, and a young woman joins the boy, who is now a young man, under the tree. Both leave. When the boy returns, he turns aside the tree's offer to play: The boy says: "I'm too big to climb and play." He asks the tree for money. In return, the tree offers its fruit, apples, which can be sold. The boy takes the tree's apples. And the tree was happy.
  3. The boy returns, now a man. "I'm too busy to climb trees," he says. He asks the tree for a house. The tree offers its branches and limbs so that the boy can construct a house. The boy takes them, leaving only the bare trunk. And still the tree was happy.
  4. The boy returns, a middle-aged man carrying a suitcase. "I'm too old and sad to play," he grumbles as the tree sways with joy at seeing him again. He asks the tree for a boat to take him away from there. The tree offers its trunk so the boy can fashion a boat. The boy carries away the trunk. And still the tree was happy.
  5. Now only a stump remains. When the boy returns to the tree, he is now an old man, stooped low, supported by a cane. The tree throbs with joy. "I'm too old to swing on branches... I'm too tired to climb," the old man groans. The tree apologizes for having nothing to give. The old man laments, "I don't need very much now. Just a quiet place to sit and rest." The tree offers its stump, the only thing it has left to give. Warily the old man sits down. And the tree was happy.
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## **Attachment 2 - Discussion Questions**

The first question was read at the beginning of the program before the story so that it can serve as material for consideration during the reading.

1. **Who is your "tree"? What does the tree symbolize for you?** (This question should be asked a second time in the discussion group and reacted to.)
2. **What seems to motivate people to give?**  
A possible answer may be:
  - o "When we love someone, we give to them"
  - o "I feel good when I give."

### **For the discussion leader:**

- o The question is, whether we give to another even when it doesn't do something for us?
- o The meaning of the word "V'natnu" "And they gave" in Hebrew can read from right to left or from left to right resulting in the same meaning. Commentators have noted that when one "gives" he also receives in the same fashion that he "gave." Sometimes we do something good for someone and we feel wonderful. The giving is sometimes as or more important than receiving.

3. **What kind of child was the child in the story? What are the characteristics which would best describe him?**

**Note to discussion leader:**

Many participants may perceive this child as "self-centered," "egocentric" or not a very nice child since he seems only ready to take but never willing to give. He turns to the tree only when he is in need.

4. **What is the tree's responsibility in the relationship as described in this story?**
1. Does the tree seem to behave responsibly when it gives the child all that he wants sometimes even before asking?
  2. Does the 'giver' have any responsibility for creating possible feelings of dependence?
  3. Who should place the limits on giving? The giver or the receiver? The parent or the child?
  4. The tree never once asked anything from the child in return. There was never any kind of dialogue between them relating to limits or the nature of their relationship. In a way this represents a very sad kind of relationship. In looking at the very last scene, what kind of symbolic picture do you see?

**Note to the discussion leader:**

Some answers may include: The end of the relationship is death and decay. If the context of this story was a part of the natural cycle of life, the child would turn into a tree who in turn would give to another child as happens in nature.

**Additional Suggested Questions for Discussion:**

1. When story ends, how do you feel - happy or sad? Can you explain your feeling?
2. What are some of the "human" characteristics given the tree in the story? How is the meaning of the story enhanced by giving the tree these human characteristics?
3. When do you first notice a pattern emerging in the relationship between the boy and the tree? What is intended by establishing this pattern? Throughout the story the tree refers to the other character as the "boy" even when the boy seems to age. What does that pattern reveal about the basis of their relationship?
4. Every time the boy returns, the tree asks him to join it in play; but the boy always has an excuse. What does this reveal about the boy's character?
5. Does the boy ever "grow up?" To what extent can you identify with the boy's response to the tree?
6. What does the tree gain through its relationship with the boy? What does the tree lose through this relationship?
7. Each time the boy accepts the tree's help, the author comments, "And the tree was happy." When you read this refrain what is your reaction to it? When you read it again at the end of the story, what effect does it have on you?

1. Helping a person to become self-sufficient.
2. The giver doesn't know the person receiving and the person receiving doesn't know who gave.
3. The giver knows the receiver, but the person receiving doesn't know the giver.
4. The giver doesn't know the receiver, but the person receiving knows the giver.
5. A direct donation to the hand of the needy given without being asked.
6. A direct donation of sufficient size (given after being asked).
7. A direct donation of small size, given cheerfully (after being asked).
8. A direct, small donation given grudgingly (after being asked).

**Source: Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matanot L'Aniyim 10:7-12**

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Where on this scale would you rank the tree's giving to the child?
2. The highest position on this scale is the one which speaks of helping the one in need to become self-sufficient. When considering this in light of the story, the role of the tree might have been to teach the child to become independent and not encourage dependence. It should have given the child the tools to move towards independence and not solutions to every need. As the Chinese saying goes: "It is better to teach one to fish than to give him a fish to eat."

This child seems to have become so dependent that he cannot cope with his own life problems. When he encounters life's challenges, he returns to the tree in expectations of receiving a solution from it. Finally, both reach the stage when they are together - the tree, bare of fruit, limbs and tree trunk, and the child, empty-handed, without the ability to deal with his life challenges.

The discussion leader should suggest to the participants that they try to create a different ending to this story. This ending should be based on changes that should ideally be made throughout the story. For example:

- What would happen if the child had taken more responsibility and was more involved in dealing with his life challenges?
- What would happen if the child had learned to give in return to the tree?

**Supplementary Materials:**

- **Encyclopedia Judaica for Youth CD**  
Rambam

**This program was written by SimRon Interactive Programming.**