



The Environment

Texts

Genesis 1:15

The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it (*le-avdah ul-shamrah*).

Leviticus 25:23

...for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

Deuteronomy 20:19

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the

ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Of trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down

Avot deRabbi Nathan 31b

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai taught: If you have a sapling in your hand and you hear that the Messiah is coming, stay and complete your planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.

Midrash Kohelet Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 7:13

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the garden of Eden and said: 'Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.'

Rabbi Abraham ben Moses (1186 – 1237)

In order to serve God, one needs access to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-decorated meadows, majestic mountains, flowing rivers... For all these are essential to the spiritual development of even the holiest people.

Activities

- **Bal Tashchit Study Session**
- **The Green Menorah Covenant**
- **How to Be a Better Friend**

Participants Text

Mitzvah: *Bal Tashchit*

Study Texts:

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

Shabbat 67b (Babylonian Talmud)

Hilkhot Melakhim 6:10 (Maimonides)

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8,10, Mourning 14:24 Maimonides

Text 1: When, in your war against a city, you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees (*lo tashchit et-etzah*), wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed. (*Deuteronomy* 20:19-20) \

Text 2: Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit* (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:10)

Text 3: It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city, nor may a water channel be deflected from them so that they wither. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree is flogged. This penalty is imposed not only for cutting it down during a siege; whenever a fruit-yielding tree is cut down with destructive intent, flogging is incurred. It may be cut down, however, if it causes damage to other trees or to a field belonging to another man or if its value for other purposes is greater. The law forbids only wanton destruction... Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command "you must not destroy." Such a person is not flogged, but is administered a disciplinary beating imposed by the rabbis. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8,10)

Text 4: One should be trained not to be destructive. When you bury a person, do not waste garments by burying them in the grave. It is better to give them to the poor than to cast them to worms and moths. Anyone who buries the dead in an expensive garment violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit*. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Mourning 14:24)

Text 5: R. Zutra said: He who covers an oil lamp [*mashcha*] or uncovers a naphtha lamp [*nafta*] infringes the prohibition of wasteful destruction [*bal tashchit*]. (*B.T. Shabbat* 67b)

Hevruta Questions

1. What is the literal meaning of *bal tashchit*?
2. What was the scenario first envisioned by the Torah?
3. How was the principle of *bal tashchit* expanded by rabbinic authorities? (Texts 2-4)
4. How does Maimonides (Rambam) set limits on the concept of *bal tashchit*?
5. At the opening of text 4, Maimonides makes a pedagogical point. What is it?
6. (Text 5): What is Rav Zutra's concern?

General discussion questions:

What are some theological implications of this mitzvah?

What are some practical/ethical implications for us today in observing this mitzvah?

What actions can we take within our synagogue communities to promote our observance of bal tashchit?

Leader's Guide

Mitzvah: *Bal Tashchit* Study Session

Study Texts:

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

Hilkhot Melakhim 6:10 (Maimonides)

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8,10, Mourning 14:24 Maimonides

Leader: *We will break up into small groups to study some texts about the mitzvah of bal tashchit – willful destruction. These texts show a gradual development of the Jewish attitude towards protecting our environment.*

Text 1: When, in your war against a city, you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees (*lo tashchit et-etzah*), wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed. (*Deuteronomy* 20:19-20)

Text 2: Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit* (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:10)

Text 3: It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city, nor may a water channel be deflected from them so that they wither. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree is flogged. This penalty is imposed not only for cutting it down during a siege; whenever a fruit-yielding tree is cut down with destructive intent, flogging is incurred. It may be cut down, however, if it causes damage to other trees or to a field belonging to another man or if its value for other purposes is greater. The law forbids only wanton destruction... Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command "you must not destroy." Such a person is not flogged, but is administered a disciplinary beating imposed by the rabbis. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8,10)

Text 4: One should be trained not to be destructive. When you bury a person, do not waste garments by burying them in the grave. It is better to give them to the poor than to cast them to worms and moths. Anyone who buries the dead in an expensive garment violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit*. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Mourning 14:24)

Text #5: R. Zutra said: He who covers an oil lamp [*mashcha*] or uncovers a naphtha lamp [*nafta*] infringes the prohibition of wasteful destruction [*bal tashchit*]. (*B.T. Shabbat* 67b)

Leader: As we study these texts, discuss the following questions:

1. What is the literal meaning of *bal tashchit*?

- Do not destroy: (Deut 20:19 *Lo tashchit et etzah*: you must not destroy its trees)

2. What was the scenario first envisioned by the Torah?

- The cutting down of *fruit* trees (presumably with some kind of ax) during wartime.
- Non fruit bearing trees can be cut down for purpose of the siege.

3. How was the principle of *bal tashchit* expanded by rabbinic authorities? Texts 2-4

- if stringent principles apply during wartime (when under great strain) how much more when not during war
- destruction can take many forms, not just by ax, but by diverting water so that trees will wither and die
- by analogy, other things of value cannot be destroyed (e.g. household goods, clothing, demolishing a building, stopping up a spring, or destruction of foodstuffs)
- anything, whether God or man-made, needs to be protected

3. How does Maimonides (Rambam) set limits on the concept of *bal tashchit*?

- The law does not refer to all destruction, but specifically to *wanton* destruction – there are exceptions to when trees can be cut down.

4. At the opening of text 4, Maimonides makes a pedagogical point. What is it?

- A person can be trained to be ethical.

5. (Text 5): What is Rav Zutra's concern?

- Certain types of activity regarding candle lighting can contribute to *bal tashchit*: covering an olive oil lamp (*mashcha'*), or uncovering a petroleum-based lamp (*nafta'*) can cause the lamp to burn with unnecessary speed – and therefore not get as much use out of it as would be desirable.

General discussion questions:

What are some theological implications of this mitzvah?

- everything we own belongs to God
- we are partners in creation (Genesis 2:15: The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to plant it and protect it – *l'avdah ul'shamrah*) and must take our roles as steward of the earth seriously

What are some *practical/ethical* implications for us today in observing this mitzvah?

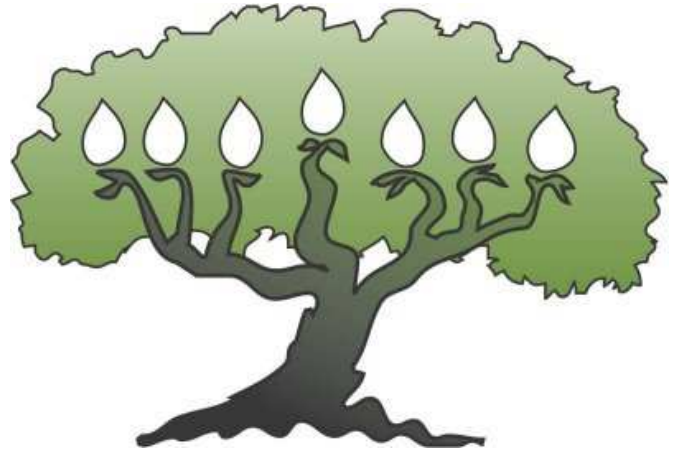
- moderation in eating and drinking is a Jewish value (Rambam)
- when planning *semachot*, we should be mindful of excessive consumption in food, decorations, etc.
- we need to be concerned about wasteful use of energy and its sources

Actions:

What actions can we take within our synagogue communities to promote our observance of bal tashchit?

- start a synagogue green committee: discuss energy consumption, recycling, the use of styrofoam and paper products
- start a group of concerned parents about scaling down bnai mitzvah celebrations and weddings
- promote the use of the FJMC Shabbat Eco-Candles
- promote the Green Menorah initiative

The Eight Days of Hanukkah Eight Actions to Heal the Earth through the Green Menorah Covenant



There are three levels of wisdom through which Hanukkah invites us to address the planetary dangers of the global climate crisis, what some of us call "global scorching" because "warming" seems so pleasant, so comforting.

We can encode these teachings into actions we take to heal the earth, one for each of the eight days of Hanukkah.

- The Talmud's legend about using one day's oil to meet eight days' needs: a reminder that if we have the courage to change our life-styles to conserve energy, it will sustain us.
- The vision of Zechariah (whose prophetic passages we read on Shabbat Hanukkah) that the Temple Menorah was itself a living being, uniting the world of "nature" and "humanity" – for it was not only fashioned in the shape of a Tree of Light, as Torah teaches, but was flanked by two olive trees that fed olive oil directly into it.
- The memory that a community of "the powerless" can overcome a great empire, giving us courage to face our modern corporate empires of Oil and Coal when they defile our most sacred Temple: Earth itself. And the reminder (again from Zechariah) that we triumph "Not by might and not by power but by My Spirit [b'ruchi -- or, "My breath," "My wind!"]", says YHWH, the Infinite Breath of Life."

We are taught not only to light the menorah, but to publicize the miracle, to turn our individual actions outward for the rest of the world to see and to be inspired by.

So this Hanukkah, participate in the Green Menorah Covenant for taking action – personal, communal, and political – to heal the earth from the global climate crisis.

After lighting your menorah each evening, dedicate yourself to making the changes in your life that will allow our limited sources of energy to last for as long as they're needed, and with minimal impact on our climate.

No single action will solve the global climate crisis, just as no one of us alone can make enough of a difference. Yet, if we act on as many of the areas below as possible, and act together, a seemingly small group of people can overcome a seemingly intractable crisis. We can, as in days of old, turn this time of darkness into one of light.

Day 1: Personal/Household: Call your electric-power utility to switch to wind-powered electricity. (For each home, 100% wind-power reduces CO2 emissions the same as not driving 20,000 miles in one year.)

Day 2: Synagogue, Hillel, or JCC: Urge your congregation or community building to switch to wind-powered electricity.

Day 3: Your network of friends, IM buddies, and members of civic or professional groups you belong to: Connect with people like newspaper editors, real-estate developers, architects, bankers, etc. to urge them to strengthen the green factor in all their decisions, speeches, and actions.

Day 4: Automobile: If possible, choose today or one other day a week to not use your car at all. Other days, lessen driving. Shop on-line. Cluster errands. Carpool. Don't idle engine beyond 20 seconds.

Day 5: Workplace or College: Urge the top officials to arrange an energy audit. Check with utility company about getting one free or at low-cost.

Day 6: Town/City: Urge town/city officials to require greening of buildings through ordinances and executive orders. Creating change is often easier on the local level!

Day 7: State: Urge state representatives to reduce subsidies for highways, increase them for mass transit.

Day 8: National: Urge your congressmen to strengthen and environmental initiatives.

Make our planet's Hanukkah a happy one!

Adapted from Rabbis Arthur Waskow & Jeff Sultar

<http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1315>



How To Be A Better Friend...

Avoid products that damage the environment

Don't buy products made from endangered plants or animals. Avoid items that have been grown in areas of tropical deforestation. Limit your consumption of fast-food that is sold in disposable containers. Cut back on your use of throw-aways and over-packaged items.

Preserve resources by using less energy Invest in energy-efficient appliances and low-watt fluorescent light bulbs. Install insulation, weather stripping, caulking, and storm windows. Keep your thermostat down or your air conditioning off during the workday and while you are asleep. Turn lights and appliances off when you are not using them. Run your dishwasher only when it is full and turn it off before the drying cycle.

Reduce, reuse, and recycle

Pack lunches in reusable containers rather than paper or plastic. Use glasses or mugs rather than disposable cups. Take your own bags to the grocery store. Buy products in bulk. Use cloth napkins and towels instead of paper products. Reuse glass and plastic containers. Give old clothing, furniture and other household items to charities. Compost food and yard wastes. Recycle used oil. Participate fully in your community's recycling program. Buy products made of recycled materials.

Conserve water

Install water-efficient showerheads and toilets. Fix leaking toilets and dripping faucets. Take short showers instead of baths. Collect rainwater for houseplants. Don't over-water your lawn. Put a "pistol" grip on your outdoor hose for tasks like washing your car.

Use public transportation

Better yet, bike or walk if possible! Use public transportation or carpool rather than driving your own car. If you must drive, use a fuel efficient car. Drive at a consistent, moderate speed (it saves fuel.) Have your car's emissions inspected regularly. Keep your car's tires properly inflated.

Support organized efforts to protect the environment

Write letters addressing specific issues to legislators and newspaper editors. Attend rallies and public meetings. Join and volunteer time to environmental organizations like Friends of the Earth!

Coordinate local environment action campaigns

Initiate a city, school, or work-place recycling program. Plan a community clean-up drive. Lead a neighborhood campaign to convert an empty lot into a park.

Teach others about the environment

Talk to your family and friends. Discuss your concerns with co-workers. Speak to school children. Make presentations for clubs, churches, and civic groups.

Vote for politicians committed to environmental protection

Research local, as well as national, politicians' positions on environmental issues. Get the League of Conservation Voters' Environmental Score-card to see how your representatives voted in Congress.

Publicize your findings so that others may also make informed choices. If you're not satisfied with the choices, run for office yourself!

Notice the world around you

Last, but certainly not least...spend time learning about and enjoying your community's natural environment. Set up a bird feeder in your yard. Learn the names of the trees and flowers growing around your house or apartment. Take a walk early in the morning before anyone else is awake. Notice everything, protect what is vulnerable, and leave only your footsteps behind you.

For more information, write or call:

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