

# Weekly Teaching

August 25, 2017

*When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, **do not destroy** its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.* (Deut. 20:19-20)

Our Torah addresses the “Rules of War” and sets limits on what our spiritual ancestors could, and could not do.

For example, a “scorched earth” policy is specifically prohibited by God. And, one cannot destroy the source of sustenance of the enemy city.

In rabbinic tradition, the principle of “Do Not Destroy” is known as *Bal Tashchit*.

The *Halacha* (Jewish Law) is that there is a general prohibition against the destruction, or wasting, of anything potentially useful or necessary to sustain life.

Moses Maimonides stated in regard to *Bal Tashchit*:

- Not only does this apply to trees, but also whoever breaks vessels, tears garments, destroys a building, blocks a well and/or destructively wastes food. Such a person transgresses the command of “do not destroy.” This law of *Bal Tashchit* exemplifies a basic principle of Torah, and so it is understood broadly.

The Talmud, reflecting on the legal principle of *Bal Tashchit*, taught:

- Whoever covers or uncovers an oil lamp, and causes it to burn fuel inefficiently, transgresses the law of *Bal Tashchit*.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* noted in regard to *Bal Tashchit*:

- The purpose of this mitzvah is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves.

When we pursue effective actions by which we can better safeguard the beauty and abundance of our world, this is an expression of our own dedication to living a righteous life.

A well-known rabbinic legend tells the story that when God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden, he said to him:

- See My works; how good and praiseworthy they are? All that I have created, I have made for you. But, be mindful that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it.

Joyce Kilmer likewise poetically wrote:

*I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.*

*A tree whose hungry mouth is prest  
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;*

*A tree that looks at God all day,  
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;*

*A tree that may in Summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair;*

*Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
Who intimately lives with rain.*

*Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.*

Judaism teaches us that humanity is spiritually charged to both utilize the land, but also to safeguard it.

When considering the challenges of modern day environmental concerns, we accept and equally address both concerns: utilization and safe-guarding.

The founder of modern Orthodox Judaism, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, wrote:

- The same regard which you show to man you must also demonstrate to every lower creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, and to the world of plants and animals... regard all living things as God's property. Destroy none; abuse none; waste nothing; employ all things wisely... Look upon all creatures as servants in the household of creation.

The mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* is to limit waste and diligently pursue the proper maintenance of our world.

May God give us the strength and discipline to succeed in this endeavor, for this world of ours is the only one that God will gift us.

Shabbat Shalom,

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