

Should We Care? A Halachic Overview on Environmental Stewardship

By Deborah Coopersmith

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist, lecturer, philosopher, and poet, once said, “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children” [1]. Today, that ‘borrowed’ world is faced with a multitude of ecological problems. There are ongoing crises of natural resource depletion such as air, soil and water pollution, as well as a loss of biodiversity and ocean acidification. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, sea levels will rise by at least two feet by 2100 because of global warming. This will lead to large expanses of Florida and other coastal areas becoming submerged under water by the end of the century [2]. The World Wide Fund for Nature reports that the rapid decline of biodiversity is between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate [3]. The World Health Organization, an UN institution, study found that ninety percent of children breathe in toxic air [4]. This matter should be of concern because the world is being destroyed. The future of Earth is jeopardized by living recklessly. The great innovations of today save so much time, but people’s health and futures pay for them. For example, being around technology around the clock leads to lead, mercury and arsenic exposure. These toxic chemicals can seep into the ground and enter the water supply or escape into the atmosphere, which affects the health of everyone nearby.

Humans should care about this issue, but should Jews from a halachic perspective? Is there a halachic commitment to ensure a world for the next generation?

The Torah, on multiple occasions, commanded Jews to protect the quality of their environment. When *Bene Yisrael* were building the *Mishkan*, a house for G-d, Moshe specifies that it must be built out of acacia-wood—a non-fruit bearing tree. In *Shemot Rabbah*, Chazal questioned why it had to be acacia-wood. They propose that “G-d taught us a lesson for subsequent generations, that if a man seeks to build his home of lumber from a fruit tree, say to him, if the King of Kings, the Lord blessed be He, who owns everything, when he commanded that His tabernacle be built He commanded that it be built from a non-

fruit tree, you should certainly do the same!” Hashem and the Chachamim understood the importance of preserving the environment and conserving resources. In a similar vein, In *Kohelet Rabbah* it states, “when the Lord created Adam He showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, ‘Pay attention to my creations — see how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. All that I have created I have created for you. Take heed that you do not damage or destroy my world, for if you damage it there is no one who will repair the damage after you.’” There is a high degree of sensitivity towards conservation and waste that is present throughout Chazal’s understanding of Torah.

The Torah also teaches the importance of not wasting natural resources. The *misvah* of *bal tashchit* is a perfect example of a prohibition against the misuse of resources. In Deuteronomy (20:19-20), God emphatically declares, “When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Is the tree of the field a man, to go into the siege before you? However, a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down, etc.” Despite the circumstances, it is forbidden to destroy fruit trees during wartime. Chazal take the prohibition a step further through the usage of a *kal ve’chomer* and understand that if a Jew is forbidden to cut down fruit trees in such an extreme situation, it can be presumed to apply readily to daily life.

According to the Gemara, *bal tashchit* also includes the prohibition to waste burning oil or fuel [5]. Rabbi Yishmael, an *Amora*, infers that if the Torah warned against destroying fruit trees, then all must also be careful to not destroy the fruit itself [6].

Throughout the ages, many Rabbis maintained that being wasteful with any resources that benefit humans is a Torah prohibition. Rambam expounds on *bal tashchit* and writes that one is forbidden to “smash household goods, rip clothing, demolish a building, dam a spring, or destroy food.” In regards to trees, Rambam writes:

It is forbidden to cut down fruit trees outside the

city and it is forbidden to dam their irrigation trenches in order that they wither, as it is written “thou shalt not destroy the tree”; anyone who so does is subject to lashes. This does not only refer to a siege; instead, anyone who cuts down a fruit tree in a wasteful manner is subject to lashes.

However, the tree may be felled if it is damaging another tree, if it is damaging a field or if its financial value is great; the Torah only prohibited (felling in) a wasteful manner [7].

Rambam is very clear that any wanton destruction of resources is off limits and anyone who does this will be punished severely. He believes it’s *asur me de’orayta*, a prohibition from the Torah and thus, is an infringement punishable by lashes. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch interprets *bal tashchit* to be “the most comprehensive warning to human beings not to misuse the position which God has given them as masters of the world and its matter through capricious, passionate, or merely thoughtless wasteful destruction of anything on earth.” He writes more of this in his book Horeb:

Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, sanctified by the word of My teaching, only then are you a mensch and have the right over them which I have given you as a human . . . However, if you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are not a human . . . and have no right to the things around you. . . As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or the smallest, you commit treachery against My world . . . In truth, there is no one nearer to idolatry than one who can disregard the fact that all things are the creatures and property of G-d, and who then presumes to have the right, because he has the might, to destroy them according to a presumptuous act of will.

He explicitly states that one who is careless and takes advantage of what is around him is almost like he is committing *avodah zara*, idol worship. By comparing wastefulness to a cardinal sin, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is demonstrating the importance of conserving and being mindful of the effect of our actions.

There is also a *misvah* to take care of one’s body—*venishmartem me’od lenafshotechem* [8]. In the Sefer Hachinuch it states that one may not cause danger to himself because Hashem gave him the nefesh which

resides within his body. In efforts to protect one’s nefesh, one is obligated to protect his or her body. Rabbi Moshe Aaron Poleyeff argues that overeating is a double transgression, as it violates both *bal tashchit* and *venishmartem me’od lenafshotechem*, through wasting food and causing harm to one’s body. Rambam states, “keeping the body healthy and whole is part of the ways of Hashem, as one cannot understand the Will of Hashem if one is sick. Therefore, one must be careful to distance himself from things that ruin the body. . . and not do anything that cause harm to it [9].” Thus, one must be careful about spending too much time in ozone depleted areas, smoking, and breathing in toxic air. Nowadays, it is hard to avoid these situations because they are so prevalent in the world. There has been a tremendous loss of resources due to carelessness and that is causing Jews to be breaking, albeit not purposely, the commandment.

Most Rabbis and Talmudic scholars take a strong stance of preserving resources and protecting the environment. The author of the Sefer HaChinuch declared that *Tsadikim* “do not allow the loss of even a grain of mustard, being distressed at the sight of any loss or destruction. If they can help it, they prevent any destruction with all the means at their disposal.”

Rabbi Moshe Yitzhak Forehand announced that all rabbinic authorities agree that it is forbidden from the Torah to destroy edible fruit [10].

Today we are living in age where there is a vast amount of waste. Food is thrown away to a despicable degree. According to a 2014 EPA study, the United States throws out more than thirty-eight million tons of food every year. Thirty-eight million tons is equivalent to 104 Empire State Buildings. When the food decomposes it produces methane, a greenhouse gas that is detrimental to the atmosphere. However, it is not just the food that is wasted. Water, land, nutrients and fossil fuels were all used to produce the food. A six-ounce steak requires 674 gallons of water and a salad costs twenty-one gallons [11]. By wasting food, we misuse an unconscionable amount of resources and squander time and money that could be directed towards more important objectives.

People have a responsibility to the environment. They must conserve it because it is not theirs to keep, but rather, to give to their children. We must prevent the misuse and overuse of natural resources, and

decimation of biodiversity. The *misvot of bal tashchit* and *venishmartem me'od lenafshotechem* clearly define our stance on protecting the environment. It is a human and Jewish duty to come up with solutions to ecological problems that are plaguing the world.

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- [5] *Shabbat* 67b
- [6] *Sifrei* at the end of Parshat *Shoftim*
- [7] *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 6:8-10
- [8] *Devarim* 4:15
- [9] *Hilchot De'ot* 4:1
- [10] He cited Rabbi Shmuel Heller in Kuntret Kevod Melachim 5a, Rabbi Moshe Aaron Poleyeff in Orach Meisharim 29:4, and Rabbi Yehudah Aszod in She'eilot u-Teshuvot Mahari Aszod, Yoreh De'ah
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