



Shabbat Table Discussions

ENGAGING CONVERSATIONS TO ENHANCE YOUR SHABBAT EXPERIENCE

www.yutorah.org/shabbattable



Yeshiva University
CENTER FOR THE JEWISH FUTURE

CONSERVATION

ISSUE #28

JUNE 2014

SIVVAN 5774

When Vanis Buckholz was seven years old, he learned about Earth Day and the concept of recycling. He starting to collect recyclable products from his neighbors' homes and bring them to a recycling center. By the time he was ten, he was collecting recyclables from all over the town on his bicycle and earning a few hundred dollars a month, 25 percent of which was donated to a charity that helps the homeless.

We live in an age where there is great awareness about conservation and one who wants to conserve has plenty of opportunities to do so. However, there are times when our desire to conserve is met with challenges.

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE

Steven packed two yogurts to eat for lunch on the camp trip. After finishing one of them, he is full and can't eat the second. He offers it to Jonathan and says, "Please eat it because otherwise it will go to waste." Jonathan doesn't really want to eat the yogurt, but he doesn't want it to go to waste. What should he do?

CASE TWO

Lisa is very particular about recycling. While on a hike with her family, they stop for lunch and Lisa is disappointed that there are no recycling bins at the picnic area, only regular trash bins. She is about to start the most difficult part of the hike and carrying all of the recyclables with her so she can recycle them later would make the hike even harder. What should she do?

CASE THREE

Shira and Kayla share a room. Shira likes to leave the air conditioner on in the summer the entire day because it takes time for the room to cool off and they are always in and out of the room. Kayla thinks that it is a waste of electricity and they should only turn it on when they are in the room. How should they resolve this conflict?

Let's Examine the Sources

When God created Adam, He charged him with taking care of the world:

And God took man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.

Bereishit 2:15

וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹקִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֵן-עֵדֶן, לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ.

בראשית ב:טו

When God created Adam, he showed him all of the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him 'See my works how beautiful and praiseworthy they are and everything that I created, I created for you. Make sure that you don't ruin and destroy my world.'

Midrash Kohelet, Chapter 7

בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר לו ראה מעשי כמה נאים ומשובחין הן וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי. תן דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי.

מדרש קהלת פרק ז'

Questions for the Table:

- 1) How does the charge in the verse in Bereishit differ from the charge presented by the Midrash?
- 2) Do you think these directives were meant specifically for Adam or for all future generations? Why?

Bal Tashchit: The Prohibition Against Destruction

In addition to our general obligation to preserve the world, there is a specific prohibition against destroying items. This prohibition is known as bal tashchit (do not destroy):

19 When you shall besiege a city a long time, in waging war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy the trees of this city by wielding an ax against them; so that you may eat of them, and you shall not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged by you? 20 Only the trees of which you know that they are not fruit trees, those you may destroy and cut down so that you may build a fence around the city that wages war against you, until it is captured.

Deuteronomy 20:19-20 (adapted from JPS Translation)

יט כִּי-תִצְוֶה אֶל-עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם
עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ, לֹא-תִשְׁחִית אֶת-עֵצֶיהָ לְגָדֹחַ
עָלֶיהָ גֵרְזֶן--כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכֵל, וְאִתּוֹ לֹא
תִכְרֹת: כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה, לְבֹא מִפְּגִיד
בְּמִצּוֹר. כִּי רַק עֵץ אֲשֶׁר-תִּדְעֶה, כִּי-לֹא-עֵץ
מֵאֲכָל הוּא--אִתּוֹ תִשְׁחִית, וְכָרַתְּ וּבְנִיתְּ
מִצּוֹר, עַל-הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ
מִלְחָמָה--עַד רְדֹתָהּ.

דברים כ:יט-כ

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think there is a prohibition against cutting down fruit trees?
- 2) Do you think the prohibition applies to items other than fruit trees?

The following two sources provide insight into these two questions:

[This prohibition] doesn't only apply to trees. Rather, anyone who breaks utensils, tears garments, destroys buildings, closes wells or wastes food in a destructive manner violates the prohibition.

Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 6:10

The foundation of this mitzvah is known and that is to teach ourselves to love that which is good and purposeful and to cling to it and through this, good will cling to us and we will distance ourselves from that which is bad and destructive. These are the ways of pious people. They love peace and are happy when [seeing] the good in people and [through that] bring people close to Judaism. They won't waste even one seed of mustard and they are bothered by any waste or destruction that they see. If they have the ability to save anything from destruction, they will try their hardest to save it.

Sefer HaChinuch no. 529

ולא האילנות בלבד, אלא כל המשבר כלים,
וקורע בגדים, והורס בנין, וסותם מעין, ומאבד
מאכלות דרך השחתה--עובר בלא-תשחית.

רמב"ם הלכות מלכים ו:י

שורש המצוה ידוע, שהוא כדי ללמד
נפשנו לאהוב הטוב והתועלת ולהדבק בו,
ומתוך כך תדבק בנו הטובה ונרחיק מכל
דבר רע ומכל דבר השחתה, וזהו דרך
החסידים ואנשי מעשה אוהבים שלום
ושמחים בטוב הבריות ומקרבים אותן
לתורה, ולא יאבדו אפילו גרגר של חרדל
בעולם, ויצר עליהם בכל אבדון והשחתה
שיראו, ואם יוכלו להציל יצילו כל דבר
מהשחית בכל כחם.

ספר החינוך, מצוה תקכט

Questions for the Table:

- 1) What do you think Rambam means when he says that it is prohibited to destroy something "in a destructive manner?" Can you give examples of destroying something in a manner that is not destructive?
- 2) When Sefer HaChinuch discusses what pious people do, is he recommending that everyone follow this approach or is he giving an example to teach a lesson?
- 3) Is throwing out food that nobody wants to eat considered destructive? Is there any benefit to waiting until it is spoiled to throw it out? Is there any benefit to eating food that one really doesn't want to eat? Is it less destructive than throwing it out?

Recycling

Recycling gives us the ability to take an item that we would have otherwise discarded and use it for something productive.

Question for the Table:

If an item, such as a plastic bottle, is not usable in its current state and can only be usable again after being destroyed and recycled, does throwing the item into ordinary trash rather than recycling constitute destroying it in a destructive manner?

The Gemara presents a situation similar to recycling:

R. Yosef said: Here is where Rebbi taught that one should not spill out water drawn from a well if others can use it.

Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 11b

אמר רב יוסף כאן שנה רבי לא ישפוך אדם מי בורו
ואחרים צריכים להם.
תלמוד בבלי יבמות יא:

Questions for the Table:

- 1) The Gemara does not reference the prohibition of bal tashchit in presenting the issue of spilling the well water. The implication is that this issue is one of general proper behavior. Should wasting the water be a violation of bal tashchit? Why or why not?
- 2) R. Elazar Flekeles, Hitorerut Teshuva 2:183, raises the following question (and doesn't provide a definitive answer): Suppose someone could prevent something from destruction, but it would take a lot of time or it would be burdensome. Should we assume that allowing the item to be destroyed is considered productive because of the benefit that the person receives from not having to waste time or energy? Or perhaps we should not factor in a person's time and energy because by saving the item from destruction, one is engaged in a mitzvah and therefore, not wasting his/her time and energy? What do you think about this question?

R. Flekeles' question seems to be the subject of a debate presented in Mishna Berurah regarding someone who has a talit that is worn out but the tzitzit strings are still usable:

When the tzitzit strings are complete and can be placed on another garment ... there are later authorities who wrote that one should untie and unravel the strings rather than cutting them off in order

במקום שהציצית הם שלמים וראויים להנתן
לבגד אחר ... יש מן האחרונים שכתבו
דיזהר להתיר הקשרים והכריכות שלהם ולא

that they aren't destroyed. Our rabbis have taught that one should not spill out water of a well if others can use it. [The author of] Chayei Adam wrote that if it is difficult or burdensome to untie them, it is permissible to cut them and one does not violate the prohibition against destroying items because one is not doing so for a destructive purpose.

Mishna Berurah 15:3

להפסיק ולקרוע אותן כדי שלא יכלה אותן וכבר אחז"ל לא ישפוך אדם מי בורו ואחרים צריכין להם והחיי אדם כתב במקום שקשה בעיניו הטרחה להתיר מותר לנתקם ואין בזה משום בל תשחית כיון שאין עושה דרך השחתה עי"ש.
משנה ברורה טו:ג

Questions for the Table:

- 1) How is the case presented by Mishna Berurah similar to case #2? How is it different?
- 2) After reading the sources, what do you think Lisa should do?

Wasting Electricity

Before there was any awareness about conservation of electricity, R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad discussed wasting oil from a lantern:

[Regarding] those who normally leave two wicks each weekday night in order to increase the light in the house and they leave the candle lit at night while they are sleeping - until the morning - because they need the light should they wake up in the middle of the night. I ruled that they must remove one of the wicks while they are sleeping because while they are sleeping they don't need a lot of light and if they leave both wicks in, they waste fuel and violate the prohibition of "you shall not destroy."

R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, Torah Lishmah no. 76

לאותם שדרכם להניח בנר ב' פתילות בכל לילה בחול כדי להרבות האורה בבית ודרכם להניח הנר דולק גם בזמן שהן ישנים עד הבוקר מפני שצריכים לאורו כאשר קמים בלילה מן המטה לאיזה צורך וקשה להם לקום בחושך והוריתי שצריכים להסיר הפתילה בעת שהם ישנים וישאר רק פתילה אחת דולקת כי בעת השינה אינם צריכים לרבות אורה ואם יהיו ב' פתילות יחד דולק השמן לאיבוד ויש בזה משום בל תשחית.
הרב יוסף חיים מבגדאד, תורה לשמה סימן עו

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Do R. Yosef Chaim's comments support Shira's argument or Kayla's argument in case #3, regarding the air conditioner?
- 2) What would you recommend to Shira and Kayla after reading R. Yosef Chaim's comments?

In today's times, there are many resources available to help our efforts to conserve. While the Torah values the concept of conservation, we must also be aware of situations that present a conflict with other values, such as our time and how our efforts impact others. By thinking ahead, we can often find ways to fulfill all of these values.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Moshe ben Maimon (also known as Rambam and Maimonides, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and continue to be studied regularly by scholars and students from all walks of Jewish life. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

Sefer HaChinuch was written anonymously and published in the 13th century. It contains discussions on the 613 commandments, providing the basic laws as well as suggesting reasons for each.

R. Elazar Flekeles (1754-1826) was a disciple of R. Yechezkel Landau. He served as the head rabbinic judge in a number of cities including Prague.

R. Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933) is known to many as "The Chafetz Chaim" after his famous work on the laws of slander. He spent most of his life in Radin, Belarus, where he established a yeshiva. He authored many works, most notably Mishna Berurah, which is considered by many to be the authoritative work on Jewish law relating to daily life.

R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (1832-1909) was an authority on Jewish law and mysticism for Jews across the Middle East. He authored numerous works on these topics.