



Canfei Nesharim

PO Box 7 • Roseland, NJ 07068 • 703-868-5356 • www.canfeinesharim.org

A Discussion Guide on Energy and its Uses

All translations are from Judaica Press unless otherwise noted.

Part I. THE ORIGINAL SOURCE OF ENERGY/LIGHT

בראשית א: ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר:

Bereshit 1:3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

According to Rashi, sunlight was the first act of creation. (The sun was created on the first day, but placed in the firmament on the fourth day (See Rashi on Bereshit 1:14 – yehi meorot birkiyah.)

When God made the covenant with Noah promising never to destroy the earth again, He not only promises no more devastation by flood; He promises:

בראשית ח: כב. עַד כָּל יְמֵי הָאָרֶץ זֶרַע וְקָצִיר וְקֹר וְחֹם וְקִיץ וְחֹרֶף וַיּוֹם וְלַיְלָה לֹא יִשָּׁבְתוּ:

Bereshit 8:22: So long as the earth exists, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."

Discussion:

- Why might the sun be the first act of creation?
- What is God promising to Noah in this text? Why is this an important promise to the future of mankind?

Part II. RITUALS USING LIGHT

As part of our rituals we light:

- Shabbat and Yom Tov candles (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim Siman 263+)
- A Havdalah flame/"torch" ("avuka") (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, Siman 298)
- Chanukah candles (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, Siman 671-676)
- Ner Tamid in synagogues (from Ner Tamid of Bet Hamikdash, see Talmud, Megillah 29a)
- Yahrzeit candle (custom)

Discussion:

- Explain the traditional purpose and use of each – how are they the same, how are they different?
- Do the laws/customs regarding their respective uses teach us something about the use of fuel resources?

Part III. IT IS WRONG TO WASTE RESOURCES (“BAL TASHCHIT”)

We derive the prohibition against wasting and unnecessary destruction from the Torah prohibition to cut down trees unnecessarily during warfare:

ספר דברים פרק כ: יט-כ

כִּי תִצּוֹר אֶל עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת עֵצָהּ לְנֹדֶחַ עָלָיו גִּרְזוֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאַתָּה לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָא מִפְּנֵיךָ בַּמִּצּוֹר: (כ) רַק עֵץ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְעַה כִּי לֹא עֵץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא אֹתוֹ תִשְׁחִית וְכָרְתָּ וּבְנִיתָ מִצּוֹר עַל הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה עַד רְדֹתָהּ: פ

Deuteronomy, 20:19-20: “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, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission. ”

The midrashic collection Kohelet Rabbah teaches us that God made us the stewards, the caretakers of the earth, in this beautiful Midrash:

קהלת רבה (וילנא) פרשה ז

א [י"ג] ראה את מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עו תו, בשעה שברא הקב"ה 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, שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריו....

Midrash Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Raba (Vilna edition), 7, Judaic Classics Library translation: “See God's work, for who can straighten out what he made crooked? (Ecclesiastes 7:13) When Hashem created Adam, He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, —See my works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I created, I created for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy my world—for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it...”

In the Talmud we find the following:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף סז/ב

אמר רב זוטרא האי מאן דמיכסי שרגא דמשחא ומגלי נפטא קעבר משום בל תשחית...

רש"י מסכת שבת דף סז עמוד ב

דמכסי שרגא דמשחא - שעושה לו כיסוי למעלה ממהר לידלק.
נפט - כשמגלין אותו האור הולך ונמשך אליו ומבעיר.

Rav Zutra says, “One who covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphta lamp, has violated bal tashchit.” (Shabbat 67b)

Rashi there explains that doing either of these things causes the fuel to burn faster and uses up more than is necessary.

The Rambam (Maimonides – 12th century) in his code of law, the Mishneh Torah, summarizes the prohibition as:

רמב"ם הלכות מלכים פרק ו הלכה י

(י) ולא האילנות בלבד, אלא כל המשבר כלים, וקורע בגדים, והורס בנין, וסותם מעין, ומאבד מאכלות דרך השחתה, עובר בלא תשחית, ואינו לוקה אלא מכת מרדות מדבריהם.

Rambam (Maimonides), Hilcot Malachim, Chapter 6, halachot 8-10

"[The Torah only forbade willful destruction.] This is the case not only with trees. Whoever smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food violates the prohibition of 'you shall not destroy...'"

ספר החינוך - מצוה תקכט

שלא להשחית אילני מאכל: ... שרש המצוה ידוע, שהוא כדי ללמד נפשנו לאהב הטוב והתועלת ולהדבק בו, ומתוך כך תדבק בנני הטובה, ונרחיק מכל דבר רע ומכל דבר השחתה, וזהו דרך החסידים ואנשי מעשה אהבים שלום ושמחים בטוב הבריות ומקרבם אותן לתורה, ולא יאבדו אפלו גרגיר של חרדל בעולם, ויצר עליהם בכל אבדון והשחתה שיראו, ואם יוכלו להציל יצילו כל דבר מהשחית בכל כחם

The Sefer Hachinuch (The Book of [Mitzvah] Education, evidently by Rabbi Pinhas haLevi of Barcelona, 16th century, translated by Charles Wengrov. Feldheim: Jerusalem, vol. 5 p. 145, mitzva #529) writes regarding the positive commandment not to wastefully destroy fruit trees (Bal Tashchit):

"The root reason for the precept is known: for it is in order to train our spirits to love what is good and beneficial and to cling to it; and as a result, good fortune will cling to us, and we will move well away from every evil thing and from every matter of destructiveness. [This is the way of the kindly men of piety and the conscientiously observant; they love peace and are happy at the good fortune of people, and bring them near the Torah.] They will not destroy even a mustard seed in the world, and they are distressed at every ruination and spoilage that they see; and if they are able to do any rescuing, they will save anything from destruction, with all their power."

And more recently, in 19th century Germany, Rabbi Shimson Raphael Hirsch wrote: Yea, "Do not destroy anything" is the first and most general call of God... God's call proclaims to you, "Do not destroy anything! Be a "mentsh"! Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, sanctified by the word of My teaching, only then are you a "mentsh" and have the right over them which I have given you as a human.... In truth, there is no one nearer to idolatry than one who can disregard the fact that things are the creatures and property of God, and who presumes also to have the right, having the might, to destroy them according to a presumptuous act of will....(Horeb, #56, translated from the original German)

Discussion:

- Do you think that the negative commandment of "bal tashchit" applies to the way you use all forms of energy? What about renewable energy? What about ritual uses?
- Which of the above text selections do you think applies the most to the issue of wasting energy? What would be the modern equivalent situation?
- What do the Sefer Hachinuch and the Shimon Raphael Hirsch selections have in common? Do you think that the way you use energy indicates something about your values? Your character? Your education?