



Summoning the Will Not to Waste

By Rabbi Yonatan Neril¹

The commandment of Bal Tashchit-- do not destroy or waste-- has long been considered central to a Jewish environmental ethic. Indeed, Rabbi Norman Lamm understands it to be “the biblical norm which most directly addresses itself to the ecological situation.”² What is the basis for the commandment not to waste? We will explore what Bal Tashchit is, how it applies to food, and how it relates to our lives.

The Torah teaches:

“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.”
(Deuteronomy 20:19-20)³

From these verses we can see that a Jewish army is forbidden from cutting down fruit trees in war. Yet the rabbis of the Talmud (200 C.E.--500 C.E.) understood this as communicating a general prohibition against needless destruction. According to our sages, this mitzvah concerns not destroying directly or indirectly anything that may be of use to people. Our sources teach that it applies to wasting energy, clothing, water, money, and more.⁴

Beyond the letter of the law, Bal Tashchit is a warning for how we are to relate to the world. Rabbi Sampson Rafael Hirsch taught that it is “the most comprehensive warning to human beings not to misuse the position which G-d has given them as masters of the world and its matter through capricious, passionate, or merely thoughtless wasteful destruction of anything on earth.”⁵ So this is a big Jewish mitzvah, this commandment not to waste or destroy.

One type of waste that’s rampant in our society is the waste of food. According to a 2011 study commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Roughly one third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year — approximately 1.3 billion tons — gets lost or wasted.”⁶ In the United States, less than three percent of this waste is recovered and recycled.⁷ While some of this food waste was inedible, part of it was good food discarded by satiated diners or edible leftovers thrown away from the refrigerator.

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² “Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology” in Faith and Doubt, by Rabbi Norman Lamm, 2006, KTAV Publishing House: Jersey City, NJ. Rabbi Lamm is former chancellor of Yeshiva University.

³ Judaica Press translation

⁴ For more on Bal Tashchit of energy, see the Jewcology article on energy.

⁵ Commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19

⁶ The study, *Global Food Losses and Food Waste*, was commissioned by FAO from the Swedish Institute for Food and Biotechnology (SIK). Online at http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ags/publications/GFL_web.pdf

⁷ “Basic Information about Food Waste,” US EPA, online at <http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserves/materials/organics/food/fd-basic.htm>

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Ishmael taught: if the Torah warns us not to destroy fruit trees, then we should be even more careful about not destroying the fruit itself.⁸ This applies to all food that is fit to be eaten, and not only the fruit of trees.⁹

Wasted food is a waste of money, energy and water, and causes environmental impacts. This disposal of food costs about one billion dollars annually in the United States.¹⁰ In garbage dumps, this decomposing food waste produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Fossil fuels, water, and land are all required to produce food, and in the case of meat, exceptional amounts. One study examined the energy embedded in wasted food--from agriculture, transportation, processing, food sales, storage, and preparation. It concluded that this energy “represents approximately 2% of annual energy consumption in the United States.”¹¹

By not wasting food, we can produce ecological, social, financial and spiritual benefits.

Food waste occurs at many stages, including on farms, in transport, and at stores and restaurants. In terms of food consumption at home, buying and preparing too much food and letting the leftovers in one’s fridge go to waste is a possible violation of Bal Tashchit. One practical action is to be mindful about how much food we buy and put in our refrigerators, and finishing the food that does get refrigerated. For example, try going for a week without any of the food in your fridge going bad.

The verses that introduce this mitzvah describe a war against an external enemy. But the rabbis make clear that the real battle to be waged is within ourselves, against a human tendency to be wasteful. By strengthening our ability to avoid waste, we become holier, stronger people. This strength can help us approach other spiritual and environmental challenges. May the changes we make in our own lives ripple outward to our families, our community, and our planet.

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⁸ Sifrei (a halachic Midrash), end of Parshat Shoftim

⁹ Rabbi Moshe Yitzhak Forehand notes that all rabbinic authorities agree, based on this teaching, that it is forbidden from the Torah to destroy edible fruit, and by extension, all food. See [Bircat Hashem](#), Jerusalem, 2000, p. 211 He cites the views of R' Shmuel Heller in Kuntras Cavod Melachim, p. 5a, Rabbi Moshe Aaron Poleyeff in Orach Mesharim section 29 subsection 4, and that of Shut Mahari Esad (Yoreh De'ah section 164).

¹⁰ “Waste Not, Want Not,” A joint publication of the US Environmental Protection Agency and the USDA, online at http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserve/materials/organics/pubs/wast_not.pdf

¹¹ “Wasted Food, Wasted Energy: The Embedded Energy in Food Waste in the United States,” Amanda D. Cuellar, Center for International Energy and Environmental Policy, The University of Texas at Austin, and Michael E. Webber, Mechanical Engineering, Center for International Energy and Environmental Policy, The University of Texas at Austin. *Environ. Sci. Technol.*, 2010, 44 (16), pp 6464–6469