



The Parsha of Toldot is dedicated by Baruch and Ora Sheinson, in honor of our son, Mordechai Yaakov Sheinson.

The Sefer of Bereishis is dedicated in memory of Jacob Cohen by Marilyn and Herbert Smilowitz and family.

Parshat Toldot: Digging the Wells: The Importance of Protecting Our Natural Resources

**By Rabbi Yuval Cherlow,
(translated from the original Hebrew by Ariel Shalem)**

[Click here to see the source sheet accompanying this Dvar Torah.](#)

The limited resources of the world we live in affect wide spheres of influence. To the extent that a resource is more essential and uncompromising in its need, the more potential it has to lead to conflict and war. In this week's Torah portion, Toldot, Yitzchak (Isaac) faces conflict with the Philistines and the people of Gerar rooted in the age-old struggle surrounding the scarcity of water. [\[1\]](#)

The shepherds of Gerar claim, "The water is ours" (Gen. 26:20) [\[2\]](#) and effectively expel Yitzchak from the area of the well in contention, forcing him to find a new source of water. Contrary to this behavior, the Philistines simply fill up the wells Yitzchak used with dirt. That is to say, the desires of the Philistines to hurt Yitzchak as a result of their jealousy toward him [\[3\]](#) brought them to the place where they preferred to destroy their own ability to draw water from the wells in order to attain a political end.

The issue of water is one of the most primary issues - perhaps even the largest issue-impacting the environment and more directly and immediately influencing mankind's current quality of living. We are not merely dealing with a potential environmental crisis that threatens tomorrow's generations, but with environmental questions that have very concrete and specific ramifications in today's world. Water is the concern that requires us to directly face the undeniable and harsh realization that the world's natural resources are critically limited, and that all of creation is dependent on the existence of these natural treasures.

Our Torah portion can offer us insight as to how to deal with 's contemporary water crisis. The first teaching is the necessity to remove natural resources from the realm of destruction in times of conflict and war. The fact that the Philistines deliberately filled up the wells of Yitzchak in order to expel him from their midst reflects the dangers of war and the need to protect natural resources even in times of serious conflict. The Torah comes to place limits on our ability to respond harshly during war and forbids us from wantonly destroying fruit-bearing trees as a military tactic. [\[4\]](#) Even in the midst of struggle one must take the "day after" into consideration and understand the profound need for sustainability for both sides of the conflict.



The second narrative in our Torah describes the process of developing additional water sources. Yitzchak was forced to abandon the wells of his father, as well as some of his own wells, and continuously searched for new sources of water. [5] We too are bound by the unremitting task to develop supplementary sources of water and must avoid relying solely on what exists. There are many ways to acquire new sources of water. In , one possible solution is to gather rainwater (as opposed to letting it flow to the Mediterranean) in ways that balance the needs of the ecosystem with the human need for more water. Furthermore, we should be investing more effort in preserving an efficient maintenance of the national aqueduct, and at the same time eliminating even more than we already have the waste and negligence which accounts for much lost water. One example: rather than have an open channel from which water is lost by evaporation, we can use closed tunnels. Additionally, one of the greatest sources for increased water supply is through the purification of recycled water – something already done in 's agricultural sector. An increased investment in this technology is critical.

Although the ethics for wise and appropriate water consumption practices are not found in our Torah portion, it is nonetheless included in the general prohibition of wanton destruction (*ba'al tashchit*). Due to the direct connection between water and life, the conservation of water becomes a *halachic* obligation, deriving its source from the laws concerning the *mitzvah* “You shall not stand idly by while your brother's blood is spilt” (Lev. 19:16), as well as part of the prohibition of *ba'al tashchit*. [6] In Israel's private sector what we are speaking of could translate into a small yet significant conservation of water: turning off the faucet when not in use, watering plants and gardens only at night, using only landscaping that is appropriate for Israel's dry climate, e.g., no lawns in the desert or golf courses in Israel, water-conserving ways of car washing, and requiring efficient and minimized water tanks above toilets, and more.

On an Israeli national and industrial level, the challenge is more complex. First and foremost, there must be a government-led initiative toward proper commercial consumption and water usage, including the establishment of an appropriate price of water that would discourage the growing of products that demand exorbitant amounts of water, the management of agricultural consumption and waste of water, and the prudent use of water in the industrial sector.

The water issue in the State of Israel plays out in the international arena in two ways. On one hand, what we see in our Torah portion is also what we see in our newspaper headlines. One of our national existential struggles is our attempt to establish control over the Jordan River 's precious sources of water, which are partially found in enemy states. Geopolitically, our regional neighbors suffer from similar water problems, and the lack of water in our arid region only adds fuel to the already existing political conflagrations, thus contributing to the fears that water sources will be deliberately destroyed or poisoned or our enemies will find an additional pretext to attack the state of .

On the other hand, this could be a very fine hour for the Jewish Nation to solve this regional and global concern. 's resourcefulness has already proven to contribute many solutions to



water scarcity. Drip irrigation is an Israeli invention that caused a revolution in agriculture, [7] and boasts the largest desalinization plant in the world. [8] If would continue to invest its intellectual prowess towards this complex issue, it could not only solve its regional issues but also bring well-being to the entire globe. First, it could minimize the amount of deaths that occur each year from thirst and water contamination. It could also rehabilitate regions in the world that have exhausted their natural resources as a result of ignorant water management. Finally, it could increase the global output of food by unleashing the latent power that nature possesses.

Furthermore, could lead the way in fostering a new culture: One that promotes a sustainable relationship to water consumption and our environment. A culture that incorporates future realities in the decisions of today. A culture that consumes a more modest and humble share of the planet's limited resources. A culture where humans understand that they are the crowns of creation and hence have a responsibility to actively protect and preserve the planet. A culture that does not destroy our planet's resources out of political interests, but cultivates them in order to future world peace.

This idyllic culture and the peace that it merits is described in our prophecies concerning the end of days:

Then the lame man will skip like a gazelle and the tongue of the mute will sing glad song. For water will have broken out in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The scorched place will become a pond and the parched place- springs of water. The abode where the jackals rested will become grassland with reeds and bulrushes. (Isaiah 35:6-7)

Although this passage is allegorical, we are not allowed to ignore the literal meaning of the text. The "blossoming desert," turning into a powerhouse of developing new water sources for herself and for the whole world, is not only a metaphor for the redemption of humankind – it is the redemption itself.

Suggested Action Items:

- 1. To save water, make a commitment to turn off the faucet while brushing your teeth, between washing hands, and while lathering dishes. This small action will raise your consciousness about all your water use.**
- 2. Learn about water challenges in the land of Israel and in your local community.**
- 3. To find great actions to protect water in your home, visit <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/community/sukkos.php?page=12388>**

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[1] According to the simplest reading of the text the Philistines are a people living in the land of Gerar , however the text differentiates between the actions of the shepherds of Gerar and the actions of the Philistines.

[2] All scriptural translations have been taken from *The Stone Edition Tanach*, Mesorah Publications

[3] Gen. 26:14: "...and the Philistines envied him (Yitzchak)"

[4] Deut. 20:19: "When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down..."

[5] See Gen. 26:18-22

[6] The biological perspective, which essentially states that water equals life (and the inverse), also gives credence to our global reality where lack of water translates into conflict, war, starvation, illness and devastation.

[7] Taken from the Israel Consulate of Los Angeles website:
<http://www.israelconsulatela.org/culture/Science.asp>

[8] See <http://www.water-technology.net/projects/israel/>