

OUR JEWISH SOURCES ON: ENERGY AND ITS USES

TEXTS TO EXPLORE

THE ORIGINAL SOURCE OF ENERGY/LIGHT

1. "And God said, 'Let there be light'" (Bereshit 1:3).
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.*)

2. When God made the covenant with Noach promising never to destroy the earth again, He not only promises no more devastation by flood, he promises:
*As long as the earth endures,
Seedtime and harvest
Cold and heat
Summer and winter
Day and night
Shall not cease. (Bereshit 8:22)*

Discussion:

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

RITUALS USING LIGHT

3. 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?*

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IT IS WRONG TO WASTE RESOURCES ("BAL TASHCHIT")

4. The way we derive this from the Torah is from the prohibition to cut down trees unnecessarily during warfare:

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy ("lo tashchit") its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human, to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed, you may cut them down for constructing siege-works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced. (Devarim 20:19-20)

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

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

6. In the Talmud we find the following:

- 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.
- Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys buildings, or clogs wells, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative commandment of bal tashchit. (Kiddushin 32a)

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

Not only the trees, rather whoever breaks vessels and rents garments, destroys a building and obstructs a wellspring, or wastes food in a destructive way transgresses the mitzvah of "bal tashchit". (Hilchot Melachim 6:10)

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Bal tashchit – continued:

8. The Sefer Hachinuch (13th century Spain; explores and explains all the mitzvot found in the Torah *parasha* by *parasha*) says on Halachah #529:

The purpose of this mitzvah (bal tashchit) is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves.

9. And more recently, in 19th century Germany, Rabbi Shimon 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)

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?*