Toward a Wiser Use of Energy

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project.

Outline of Sources:

a) Energy and Bal Tashchit:
   1. Talmud, Shabbat 67b
   2. Rabbi Yosef Chaim ben Eliyahu
b) The Air in Jerusalem in the Times of the Temple
   1. Talmud, Bava Kama 82b, + Rashi's commentary
   2. Mishna Tamid 29a and Talmud p. 29b
   3. Tractate Yoma 39b, and Rashi's commentary
c) Shabbat, Fire, and Energy
   1. Exodus 35:2
   2. Rabbi Samphson Rafael Hirsch, commentary to Exodus 35:3
d) Solar Energy
   1. Lubavitcher Rebbe

I. Energy Bal Tashchit (Do Not Destroy)

ב) ארץ ישראל וה空气: 

א) בまで נופל: יљ רגנש בפ’ במלכיה שלמה קפמן.
ב) מקומם

The following ancient Jewish sources teach that care for the environment is a mitzvah.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 67b, translation by Dr. Akiva Wolff

Mar Zutra said, “One who covers an oil lamp [causing the flame to burn inefficiently] or uncovers a kerosene lamp [allowing the fuel to evaporate faster] violates the prohibition of bal tashchit.”
Rabbi Yosef Chaim ben Eliyahu, *Torah Lishma*, section 76, (the Ben Ish Chai, a major halakhic authority of 19th century Iraq). Translation by Rabbi Yonatan Neril.

**Question:** There are people whose practice is to light seven lights before Shabbat evening [Friday night] and leave a great quantity of oil in them so that they will stay lit into the evening of Shabbat day [Saturday night]. They do the same as well on holidays. Is there a basis in Jewish law or a hint at such a practice in the teachings of the Sages? Let the teacher instruct us for righteousness and his merit will be from Heaven.

**Answer:** Concerning the seven [lights] there is a basis of a hint in the holy books, but I did not find a basis or hint in the holy books for leaving a great quantity of oil in order that they will be lit for the entire Shabbat day into the evening [of Saturday night]. And I say that this practice is not commendable, and needs to be stopped, since it transgresses Bal Tashchit [do not destroy] since how will a light amidst light be helpful?! The only place where it is appropriate for a light in the day is in synagogues, due to the honor of the synagogue, and not because one needs the light there, and so too for memorial lights for those who have departed. But [not so] lighting a lamp in one's home on Shabbat where the Shabbat lamp is for enjoying the light. During the day there is no enjoyment of the light [of this lamp]--why should one light it? And the Talmud in Tractate Shabbat p. 67 says, “One who covers an oil lamp or uncovers a kerosene lamp violates the prohibition of bal tashchit.”

And based on this passage of the Talmud I taught to those people whose practice during weeknights is to place two wicks in an [oil] lamp in order to increase the light in the house. There practice is to leave the lamp lit also during the time they are asleep, until the morning, since they need the light when they get up in the night from bed for whatever purpose, and it is difficult for them to get up in darkness. I instructed that they need to remove a wick at the time they are sleeping and leave just one wick lit, since at the time they are sleeping they do not need the increased light, and if there would be two wicks lit together the oil would go to waste, and there is here a violation of Bal Tashchit, as it says [in the Talmud] “one who covers an oil lamp or uncovers a kerosene lamp..” And there should be peace, and G-d, the Master of Legions, should help me.

**Discussion questions:**
1. We see that unnecessary energy use is considered a violation of Bal Tashchit. How does this apply to our energy use today?
2. Does is change things that the energy resource is far away and not seen/owned by us?
3. How could we apply these teachings to today’s energy use on Shabbat?

---

**II. The Air in Jerusalem in the Times of the Temple**

ממשנהTamid, 2:3, translation from Judaic Classics Library:

They [the priests] then began to take up the logs to lay the fire. Were all kinds of wood suitable for the fire? All kinds of wood were suitable for the fire except vine and olive wood. What they mostly used, however, were boughs of fig trees and of nut trees and of oil trees.

**Talmud, Tamid 29b**, translation adapted from Judaic Classics Library translation. Why were these excepted? — R. Papa said: Because they have knots; R. Aha b. Jacob said:

---

1 The Ben Ish Chai seems to be writing in a community whose homes were built to provide natural lighting from the sun.
2 This translation is of the word ‘kitrei.’ Other rabbis, including Rabeinu Gershon below, had a different word here in their
Because of the settlement of the Land of Israel.

Rabeinu Gershom to Tractate Tamid p. 29b, translation by Yonatan Neril
What is the reason? Is it not because they are ash producing? It is that they make too much smoke.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Kama, p. 82b, translation by Yonatan Neril
Ten things were said in Jerusalem: One cannot make [large] ovens in the city...because of smoke.

Rashi to Tractate Bava Kama, p. 82b, translation by Yonatan Neril
'Kutra'—smoke which blackens walls, which is an ugly thing.

Mishna, Tractate Baba Batra, p. 25a, translation by Dr. Akiva Wolff
Carcasses, graveyards and tanneries (which are all sources of noxious odors) must be distanced from the city at least 50 cubits...

Discussion questions:
1. What can we learn from these teachings? Can they be applied to the energy situation in Israel today?
2. Although these rules are not legally binding outside of Israel, what can we learn from them regarding other cities? What does a cleaner city say to its inhabitants and visitors?

III. Shabbat, Fire, and Energy

Exodus, chapter 35, verses 1-2, Judaica Press translation
Moses called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: "These are the things that the Lord commanded to make. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the Lord; whoever performs work thereon [on this day] shall be put to death. You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day."

Rabeinu Bachya, commentary to Exodus 35:2 in Torah Commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, translated and annotated by Eliyahu Munk, Lamda Publishers, Brooklyn, NY, 2003
"...Making fire is an appropriate example of basic human activity seeing that most of the principal activities we

manuscript--'kitmei'--which translates as 'ash-producing.'
are engaged in cannot be performed satisfactorily if one were not able or allowed to make fire. This is the reason that the sages instituted the benediction over fire during the havdala ritual at the end of the Sabbath to signify that this crucial activity (as well as other activities) which was prohibited on the Sabbath is once again permitted. Fire, i.e. light, was the first of the activities G’d engaged in when creating the universe (Genesis 1:2).”

Rabbi Samphson Raphael Hirsh to Exodus 35:3 p. 670-1
"You shall kindle no fire..." On the one hand, kindling fire in itself is not a productive, creative, but primarily, rather a destructive activity. But on the other hand, the ability to produce fire artificially is just that which first gave Man his true mastery over the materials of the world. Only by means of fire can he create his tools, can he analytically and synthetically probe into the inner nature of things...On Shabbat the cessation of work is the belief and acknowledgment that the ability to 'master matter,' the creative productive power that Man has, is lent to him by God, and is only to be used in His service....The idea of Shabbat is to be understood, not so much as laying our world at the Feet of God, but as laying our relation to our world at His Feet.”

Discussion questions:
1. Why is the use of fire prohibited on Shabbat?
2. How is this prohibition similar and different from our use of electricity today?
3. What can it teach us about our use of energy today?

IV. Solar Energy

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (The Lubavitcher Rebbe), 1981:
“Very soon, the entire country should switch, first of all, to energy that can be generated from the sun's rays in the [US] south, which should be supplied to the entire country.”

Discussion question:
1. Why do you think the Lubavitcher Rebbe recommended the use of solar energy?

Jewcology.com is a new web portal for the global Jewish environmental community. Source sheets developed as part of the Jewcology project are sponsored by Teva Ivri. Thanks to the ROI community for their generous support, which made the Jewcology project possible.

---