



The Wisdom of Olive Oil

In Biblical and Talmudic times, olive oil, used for light, heat, fuel and food, was a very important resource for energy. Olive oil is a renewable, but limited resource. The limitations on this resource often posed problems in ancient times, just as modern limits on availability of energy resources pose a problem today. We can learn much about our relationship to energy from the traditional Jewish relationship to olive oil.¹

The Jewish tradition records a number of miracles occurring around the precious resource of olive oil. For example, the prophet Elisha performs a miracle for a poor woman by increasing her assets of oil,² and the Talmud records the miracle of vinegar burning in place of oil for the daughter of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa.³ In the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple), the oil itself had miraculous properties. The menorahs in the Beit HaMikdash were lit each evening by the Kohanim (priests). Our tradition teaches:

The ner ma'aravi (western lamp) of the menorah which the Kohanim lit in the Beit Hamikdash burned miraculously. It never went out. Every evening, when the Kohen came to kindle the flames he would find the ner ma'aravi still alight from the previous evening. He would remove the still-burning wick and oil, clean out its receptacle and then put back the burning wick and the oil. Then he would kindle all the other lamps with it.⁴

The *ner ma'aravi* (on which the *Ner Tamid* [eternal flame] of our shuls is based) was one of the daily miracles that took place in the Beit HaMikdash.⁵ It was a sign that the Shechinah, the divine presence, rested eternally on the Jewish people.

A miracle related to olive oil plays a central role in the holiday of Chanukah. The Talmud describes the miracle:

When the Greeks entered the Beit HaMikdash and defiled the oil used for lighting the menorah and the ner tamid, the Maccabees conquered them, and purified the Beit HaMikdash. They only found one cruze of oil for one day's use, but the oil lasted miraculously for eight days, to allow for the creation of more pure oil.⁶

It is interesting to note that the reason Chanukah lasted eight days was to allow for the creation of more pure olive oil which could be dedicated for use in the Temple. In the times of the Temple, it took eight days for new oil to be created and prepared. The process included taking olives from the tree, pressing them, transporting them, and preparing the oil for Temple purposes. (The oil couldn't simply be picked up from a grocery store or bought at the pump!) Because this process took time, Chanukah lasted eight days while the oil was prepared.

The miracle of Chanukah demonstrates that energy resources are limited and require time to be produced and prepared. In ancient times, people understood where their energy came from and the effort needed to develop it for use. Energy was treated as a

limited resource, which needed to be used thoughtfully and took time to be prepared (and in the case of olive oil, also required time to grow on the tree). As a result, people were careful with their energy resources. Today, we seem to have lost our connection to the source of the energy we use, and with it, our understanding that our energy resources are precious and limited.

The Torah has many lessons that help us understand the need to preserve our limited resources. One mitzvah that teaches us about our responsibility is the prohibition of "Bal Tashchit" — the prohibition against needless waste. Derived from the prohibition to cut down trees unnecessarily during warfare,⁷ *bal tashchit* is understood to embody a host of prohibitions against unnecessary destruction. The Rambam explains that the prohibition includes "not only the trees, rather whoever breaks vessels and rends garments, destroys a building and obstructs a wellspring, or wastes food in a destructive way..."⁸ is in violation of the mitzvah. The Rambam's list includes natural resources as well as the resources of the human world, to demonstrate our Torah-mandated responsibility to avoid waste and destruction of all kinds.

The requirement to avoid waste also applies to our energy use. The Talmud teaches:⁹

Rav Zutra says, "One who covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphtha lamp, has violated bal tashchit." Rashi on that section explains: Doing either of these things causes the fuel to burn faster and uses up more than is necessary.

But despite the necessities of resource management, the requirement to avoid waste is not only a practical one. There is also a spiritual element. The Sefer HaChinuch explains:

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.¹⁰

Becoming aware of the sources of our energy, and avoiding waste of all kinds, helps us to grow as human beings. At the same time, avoiding waste will help us restore our planet to a more sustainable balance. By understanding and internalizing the Torah's teachings about how we relate to our world, we can become more conscious of the limits on our resources. We can learn new ways to relate to our energy resources, and take action to address the energy and environmental challenges we face today.

Notes: 1. Canfei Nesharim expresses gratitude to Ora Sheinson, Evonne Marzouk and Judy Sheer, whose ideas formed the basis of this teaching. 2. Melachim Bet, 4:1-37 3. Ta'anit 25a 4. Shabbat 22b 5. www.ou.org/about/judaism/bhyom/hebrew/av.htm 6. Shabbat 23b 7. Devarim 20:19-20 8. Rambam, Mishna Torah, Hilchot Melachim 6:10 9. Masechet Shabbat 67b 10. Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #529