



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shoftim 5773

*Bal Tashchit: Turning our Learning into Action*¹

By Evonne Marzouk

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When I was a child, my grandmother used to cut up used sheets of paper and use the blank sides for a note pad. My husband's mother can't throw away food without wincing and blowing it a kiss. Their actions used to seem old fashioned to me—but in a world that is far overusing its resources, I have started to see the wisdom embedded in these kinds of habits.

Some people trace our grandparents' tendency to conserve back to the Depression era, but this mindset actually has deep roots in the values of Jewish tradition.

In *Parashat Shoftim*, the Torah introduces the principle of *bal tashchit*, do not destroy. While this *mitzvah* is initially raised in the narrow context of not destroying fruit trees while laying siege to an enemy city, it has a much broader significance in Jewish tradition.

Based on this text, our sages derived the *mitzvah* not to waste. As 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.² This applies to all food that is fit to be eaten, not only the fruit of trees.³ In other Jewish sources, *bal tashchit* is also extended to include prohibitions against needlessly destroying just about anything, including wasting energy,⁴ tearing clothes, squandering water and many other acts.⁵

While there are limitations to what is considered "needless" destruction, the Jewish sages reveal a high degree of sensitivity when it comes to waste. According to the 13th-century legal code, *Sefer Ha-Hinukh*, righteous Jews "do not allow the loss of even a grain of mustard, being distressed at the sight of any loss or destruction. If they can help it, they prevent any destruction with all the means at their disposal."⁶

In contrast to the sensitivity to waste expressed in Jewish sources, today we live in a very wasteful society. Many products, from bottles to shoes and even small electronics, are created to last short periods of time and soon end up in the trash. This wastefulness results in many negative consequences for us in the United States and for people around the world.

¹ This article is based on a comprehensive study of the *mitzvah* of *bal tashchit* (http://cn.jvillagenetwork.com/summoning_the_will_not_to_waste/), written for *Canfei Nesharim* and *Jewcology* by Rabbi Yonatan Neril. Jacob Schaperow contributed to this version.

² *Sifrei* on *Parashat Shoftim*.

³ Rabbi Moshe Yitzhak Forehand notes that all rabbinic authorities agree, based on this teaching, that the Torah prohibits the destruction of edible fruit, and by extension, all food. See *Birchat 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).

⁴ For more on this topic, see footnote 3 of this article: http://www.canfeinesharim.org/Energy_Longer_Article.

⁵ Learn more at http://www.canfeinesharim.org/summoning_the_will_not_to_waste/.

⁶ *Sefer Ha-Hinukh: The Book of [Mitzvah] Education*, evidently by Rabbi Pinhas haLevi of Barcelona, 16th century, translated by Charles Wengrov. Feldheim Publishers: Jerusalem, vol. 5 p. 145.

One particularly troubling modern day example of “needless destruction” is the waste of edible food. Worldwide, approximately a third of food produced for humans to eat is lost or wasted, about 1.3 billion tons each year.⁷ In 2010, 133 billion pounds, or about 30 percent of food available for human consumption in the United States, never made it into people’s stomachs.⁸ Wasted food comprises about two percent of annual energy consumption in the United States,⁹ and in general represents a waste of the resources used to produce the food, such as land, energy and water.

In many developing countries, food security is a major concern, and food losses have an impact on food security for poor people worldwide. To meet the future demands of our growing global population, we must increase food production, but we also must reduce waste.¹⁰

Reducing food waste is one area in which almost everyone can make a difference. We can be mindful about how much food we buy and finish the food that we prepare. Reducing our food waste helps reduce negative environmental impact at home and around the world.

This year, the Jewish environmental organizations Canfei Nesharim and Jewcology have organized a Year of Jewish Action on the Environment, which aims to help individuals and communities take action to reduce their energy use and food waste. Visit www.jewcology.com/action to sign up. Every two weeks, you will learn about a new action that you can take to reduce food waste and save energy.

As the high holidays approach, may our time of *teshuvah* (repentance) include a heightened appreciation of the bounty that surrounds us, and the Jewish values which teach us to preserve our precious resources. By taking action to reduce our own waste, we will ensure that our planet is healthy—and able to sustain us all.



Evonne Marzouk is the founder and Executive Director of Canfei Nesharim: Sustainable Living Inspired by Torah (www.canfeinesharim.org). She also leads the team coordinating Jewcology.com, the new web portal connecting the global Jewish environmental community, supported by the ROI community. Evonne has spoken worldwide on the Torah-environment connection. In 2009, she was selected as one of *The New York Jewish Week's* "36 under 36." Evonne served as the Legislative Assistant for COEJL in 1998-99. She lives in Silver Spring, MD with her husband and son. Evonne can be reached at evonne@canfeinesharim.org.

⁷ Global Food Losses and Food Waste: Extent, Causes and Prevention, a 2011 study conducted for the International Congress "Save Food!" at Interpack 2011, a publication of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, page v. Available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/mb060e/mb060e00.pdf>.

⁸ Economic Research Service data. "Loss-Adjusted Food Availability Documentation." See table - Estimated Food Loss in the United States, 2010." Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-availability-%28per-capita%29-data-system/loss-adjusted-food-availability-documentation.aspx#.UfKlIG1iLQ4/>.

⁹ Amanda D. Cuellar and Michael E. Webber, "Wasted Food, Wasted Energy: The Embedded Energy in Food Waste in the United States," *Environmental Science and Technology*, 2010, 44 (16), pp. 6464–6469. Available at <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/es100310d>.

¹⁰ Global Food Losses and Food Waste, page 1.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org