

Shabbat Chanukah: A Sustainable Eternal Light  
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On Yom Kippur I spoke to you about t'shuva and quoted Greta Thunberg who had just addressed the UN Climate Action Summit.

On Sukkot, I spoke to you about the effect of Climate Change in the Land of Israel. This morning I want to continue the theme. And Chanukah is the perfect time. For while the Maccabees were not worried about their carbon footprint, the story is about stretching our oil out to last longer and produce more light.

We read in the Talmud not about the menorah but about a regular, everyday oil lamp: “Mar Zutra stated, “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 taschit wanton destruction” (Shabbat 67b).

Based on this teaching, the Ben Ish Chai (Rabbi Yosef Chaim ben Eliyahu, 19<sup>th</sup> C Iraq, Torah Lishma section 76), addressed a case in which a person lit two wicks in oil for use at night. Picture a night light. The person left both wicks lit in case they woke up in the middle of the night and needed to see. To prevent waste, the Ben Ish Chai instructed the man to extinguish one wick arguing that at night, he would need less light. Keeping the second wick lit would transgress bal tashchit.

This makes me think that miracle of the Temple's menorah was really more like an advance in technology: the original menorah burned inefficiently so the Maccabees found a way to make a more efficient menorah that burned less fuel. It's like my furnace. I just had it checked and Minigasco said I should consider a high efficiency furnace.

In any case, if the Talmud teaches this in regard to a common oil house lamp, how much more so for our entire energy grid?

The example from the Talmud refers to bal taschit. Bal tashchit is wanton destruction. This prohibition is originally taught in Deuteronomy in relation to cutting down fruit trees. But it is extended to refer to any kind of wasteful destruction. Rambam writes, “not only fruit trees, anyone who destroys household goods, tears clothing, demolishes a building, ruins food deliberately, violates the prohibition of bal taschit (MT Kings 6:10).” Here we see it about wasting oil, about using more resources than necessary.

The prohibition of bal taschit is the basis for many of the Jewish environmental laws. Millennia before our culture of single use, disposable everything, Jewish laws taught us to guard our precious resources.

Now I am not suggesting that the rabbis anticipated climate change or that all Jewish law is eco-friendly. Nor do I believe that all Jewish communities are particularly careful about bal taschit. I see lots of wastefulness in the Jewish community including our own. But this principle does remind us that there is never enough to waste even if there is plenty right now.

The medieval Spanish work, the Sefer Hachinukh, explains it this way: “Mitzvah #529 The Prohibition of Wanton Destruction: The purpose of this commandment is well-known - This is the way of the pious and people of proper action... they do not destroy even a grain of mustard in the world. They are distressed by all loss and destruction; and if they can prevent it, they will prevent any destruction with all of their strength. Not so are the wicked - the brothers of the destructive spirits.”

I am struck by the picture painted by the Sefer Hachinukh. The author says that a person of faith, an observant, religious person is one who avoids being wasteful. A Jew is concerned about using our limited resources effectively, cares about the environment, sees it as their responsibility to address the critical issue of our time: climate change.

But why exactly is destruction and wastefulness prohibited? Perhaps for the rabbis it was just more practical. For example, using extra olive oil to keep the lamp lit was expensive and required unnecessary effort to make more oil. But there is more to it than that.

Beth El's Ner Tamid quotes Psalm 24 saying, “The earth is the lords and the fullness thereof laadonai haaretz umloah.” The earth belongs to God. It is not ours to destroy. In the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> C German rabbi, Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, “Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, only then do you have the right over them” (Horeb, sections 397, 398). In other words, we have no right to the world's resources unless we use them wisely.

How can we live more sustainably? You know the answers and you know the answers are many.

Some see the solution in conservation, others in new technologies. Of course, it can be both. Some solutions are simple and save us money, like having an energy audit and greening our home. Others are complicated and hard because they challenge our lifestyles like reducing air travel or red meat. Some actions like turning off extra lights has a small impact. Others like voting into office a candidate who will make this a public policy priority, has a large impact.

Whatever the mix of approaches, one thing we cannot do is say, “what can I do about it? I am just one person. What can we humans do, the problem is too big?” If we learn anything from Greta Thunberg it is to believe that one person can make a difference. If we learn anything from the Maccabees it is to never give up hope. If we learn one thing from Jewish history, it is to never doubt that a small group of people has the power to change the world (Margaret Mead). This must be our Chanukah gift to the world- to believe, to hope, to act.

On Chanukah, we celebrate the miracle of the conservation of oil. But we are taught, ein somchim al hanes we may not rely on miracles. It is up to us. To make our light eternal, it must be sustainable. Only then will we merit to be a Light unto the Nations.