I. Is the Tree of the Field a Person?

**Deuteronomy, 20:19-20, Judaica Press translation**

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Is the tree of the field a man, to go into the siege before you? However, a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission.

**Sifre, Deuteronomy, section 203, translation by R’ Yonatan Neril**

‘...For a person is a tree of the field’ teaches that the life of a person comes only from the tree. Rabbi Yishmael said, “From where [do we learn] that G-d is concerned about fruit of trees? Based on a logical inference from trees: just as Scripture warns you about [not destroying] a fruit-bearing tree, the fruit itself how much the more so!”
Rabbeinu Bachayei, (ben Asher ben Hava), commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19, 13th Century, Spain, translation by Rabbi Yonatan Neril

‘The commentators explain that the life of man and his food is [from] the tree of the field, as the verse says, 'for he would be taking a life as a pledge' (Deuteronomy 24:6, Artscroll translation), and therefore I command you that you should not destroy it because there is blessing in it... and it is not the actions of a wise and understanding nation to needlessly destroy something so worthy, and therefore you should not expend energy to cut down a tree of the field; rather you should protect it from destruction and damage and take benefit from it. This [is the meaning of] 'from it you will eat,' and if you destroy it you will damage and take away its benefit.”

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105 C.E., France), commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19, Artscroll Rashi translation

See now, that the word ‘Ki’ functions here in the sense of “perhaps”: Is the tree of the field perhaps a man...and don’t cut it down' (Deuteronomy 20:19).

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, (1089-1164 C.E., Spain), commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19

Torat Chayim, Deuteronomy: Ibn Ezra, p. 174

Sforno, commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19, translation by Artscroll

Sforno, commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19, translation by Artscroll

You shall not destroy its trees, wielding an axe against them. Do not destroy the tree (just) to wield an axe of destruction upon it, i.e., (for the sole purpose) of doing harm to the inhabitants of that city.
land. However, you, who are assured that you will conquer the land and settle in it, must not destroy the fruit-bearing trees.

--Because from it you shall eat. Without a doubt, you will conquer the land and (ultimately) eat from its trees, provided you do not destroy them.

--To bring under siege before you. In order that you bring the city under siege before you in a manner that they will (be forced) to give themselves over into your hand.

Discussion Questions:
1. Why does the Torah forbid cutting down fruit trees to build siege-works during a war, when it is not needless destruction but use of resources for an important purpose?
2. What does it mean that a tree is compared to a person? Compare the different views of Rashi and Rabbeinu Bachayei in their understandings. Which resonates more with you?
3. What can these sources teach us about our responsibility to trees and all natural resources?

II. Beyond Trees

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 67b, translation by Dr. Akiva Wolff based on commentary of Rashi.

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.

Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Malachim, Chapter 6, halachot 8-10

“One may not cut down fruit bearing trees outside the (besieged) city (for purposes of war) nor divert from them the water conduit, so as to make them wither, as it is stated: “you should not destroy the trees thereof.” Whoever cut them down is liable for the penalty of lashes. But this does not apply merely to the case of a siege, but in all cases. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree, in a destructive manner, is liable to lashes. But it may be cut down, if it damages other trees or causes harm to neighboring fields or because it fetches a high price. The Torah only forbade willful destruction. This is the case not only with trees. Whoever
smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food violates the prohibition of “you shall not destroy.”

Discussion Questions:
1. How far does this tree-cutting prohibition go?
2. Why do you think that the prohibition was understood to have such a broad meaning?
3. What common modern examples of societal and personal waste directly violate the spirit and law of this mitzvah?

III. The Root Reasons of Bal Tashchit


“The root reason for the precept [of Bal Tashchit/do not destroy] is known: for it is in order to train our spirits to love what is good and beneficial and to cling to it; and as a result, good fortune will cling to us, and we will move well away from every evil thing and from every matter of destructiveness. [This is the way of the kindly men of piety and the conscientiously observant; they love peace and are happy at the good fortune of people, and bring them near the Torah.] They will not destroy even a mustard seed in the world, and they are distressed at every ruination and spoilage that they see; and if they are able to do any rescuing, they will save anything from destruction, with all their power.”

Rabbi Shampshon Rafael Hirsch (19th century, Germany), Horeb, sections 397,398

[Lo tashchit, ‘do not destroy’, is] “the most comprehensive warning to human beings not to misuse the position which Gd has given them as masters of the worlds and its matter to capricious, passionate, or merely thoughtless wasteful destruction of anything on earth.” He continues in Horeb, “If …you should regard the beings beneath you as objects without rights, not perceiving Gd Who created them, and therefore desire that they feel the might of your presumptuous mood, instead of using them only as the means of wise human activity—then Gd’s call proclaims to you, “Do not destroy anything!” (bang) Be a mensch! Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, sanctified by the word of My teaching, only then are you a mensch and have the right over them which I have given you as a human...However, if you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are not a human...and have no right to the things around you. I lent them to you for wise use only; never forget that I lent them to you. As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or the smallest, you commit treachery against my world, you commit murder and robbery against my property, you sin against Me!” ...In truth, there is no one nearer to idolatry than one who can disregard the fact that all things are the creatures and property of Gd, and who then presumes to have the right, because he has the might, to destroy them according to a presumptuous act of will. Yes, that one is already serving the most powerful idols—anger, pride, and above all ego, which in its passion regards itself as the master of things.”

Shachet “is the conception of corruption, not destruction. It is the overthrow of a good condition, and the impeding of progress, and the changing into the opposite of anything which was meant to thrive and prosper...

Discussion Questions:
1. How does the moral context for this mitzvah change its meaning?
2. It may be easy to see that someone who preserves is good, but is someone who wastes “bad”? What kind of waste would make them “bad” as opposed to thoughtless or negligent?
3. Today we often think of “destruction” or “waste” as a positive economic value. For example, buying new products that wear out after a few years is good for our economy. Recognizing this, how can we understand Rabbi Hirsch’s idea of “thriving” and “prospering”?

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