**Bal Taschit** – Not Destroying/Being Wasteful

*The term bal tashchit means “do not destroy,” and is derived from Dt. 20.19 :*

*Dt. 20.19* – When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, **you must not destroy** its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? (20) Only trees which you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.

*The implication of this text is that war is a necessary human activity – an evil that society creates from time to time (if it assumed that war was not necessary, it would surely forbid the cutting down of any trees for siege engines!). Since war is therefore necessary, and siege engines are necessary in war, Torah allows the chopping down of trees for their construction, but not trees that can serve other purposes, such as providing fruit.*

*Ps. 24.1* – The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein.”

*Psalm 24 as the theological basis for this mitzvah; ultimately everything belongs to God.*

*Gen*. 1.27 – And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (28) God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master [subdue] it; and rule [have dominion over] the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

*Dt. 20.19-20**as a limitor to Genesis 1.28 where God commands the first human beings to “fill the earth and master it.”*

*Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888, Germany) – lo taschit, “do not destroy” is “the most comprehensive warning to human beings not to misuse the position which G-d has given them as masters of the world and its matter through capricious, passionate, or merely thoughtless wasteful destruction of anything on earth.”*

*If we are not allowed to needlessly destroy the natural environment in a time of war – when resources are scarce and the primary focus is on ending the battle as quickly as possible – how much more should we be aware of bal tashchit when we are not at war and can make informed choices. For example, if we have to build a home (or, in the more realistic case for most people of redecorating a home), we have the time to make an informed choice about which wood we can use. Hence the mitzvah of bal tashchit developed from a war-time prohibition against needless waste to a prohibition that covers every aspect of our lives. In almost everything we do, we have a negative effect on the natural world. This mitzvah asks us to consider whether or not that effect was wasteful and in typical rabbinic fashion we can determine this by looking at examples of behavior that are considered to be wasteful and then applying those examples to our own lives.  
Talmud contains a number of anecdotes and ruling that relate to bal tashchit.*

*Shabbat* 140b – R. Hisda also said: When one can eat barley bread but eat wheaten bread he violates “thou shalt not destroy.” R. Papa said: When one can drink beer but drink wine, he violates “thou shalt not destroy.”

*Wheat bread is considered inferior to barley bread, but it is also less wasteful. One who could get by on eating corn, but insisted on eating wheat (a rarer item), or one who could drink mead, but drank wine, also infringes on prohibition of Bal Tashchit.*

*Shabbat* 67b – Rav Zutra says: One who covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphtha lamp has violated *bal taschit*.

*By rabbinic law, bal taschit principle understood to include other forms of senseless damage or waste. Talmud applies principle to prevent the wasting of lamp oil [R. Zutra said: He who covers an oil lamp or uncovers a naphtha [lamp] infringes the prohibition of wasteful destruction (bal taschit). (Shabbat 67b; derived from Deut. XX, 19, because these cause the lamp to burn with unnecessary speed.)*

*Baba Kama* 91b – But R. Eleazar said: I heard that he who rends [his garments] too much for a dead person transgresses the command “Thou shalt not destroy.”

*Even he mitzvah of kriah (tearing an item of clothing in mourning) is subject to bal tashchit – Talmud tells us that tearing silk garments would violate the prohibition unless the tear is in the seam (where its repair could be made unnoticed).*

There are further examples, in Talmud, regarding this mitzvah: Shabbat 67b - the tearing of clothing, Baba Kama 91b - the chopping up of furniture for firewood, Chullin 7b - the killing of animals, etc.

Rabbeinu Yeruchim (1280-1350, Spain) – rails against wasting water when others are in need.

Rabbi Moshe Aaron Poleyeff (1888-1967, Europe and U.S.) wrote that overeating may be a double transgression of bal tashchit – firt by wasting food, and second by harming one’s body.

Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky (contemporary, Israel), considers taking more food than one can eat at a buffet to be bal taschit.

What would be the implications in our day? If you can live perfectly well in a 2000 sf house, then to insist on a McMansion might be *bal* *taschit*. How about the downsizing that so many of us are doing?

*Bava Kama* 91b -- It is said that whenever Rav Hisda had to walk between thorns and thistles, he would lift up his garment and rip his skin rather than his clothing, since nature would cure his skin but not his clothes.

*Ok, this guy seems more than a bit exreme!*

*Still Rav Chisda is not alone in considering the resources that go into our clothes – before Rabban Gamaliel was buried, the dead were often abandoned because they could not provide for the luxurious clothing that they were buried in. However, Rabban Gamaliel insisted that inexpensive linen garments be used for his funeral (Ketubot 8b) and the custom has been followed ever since. However, it is uncertain whether or not Rabban Gamaliel’s request relates to bal tashchit or his efforts to not be elitist in expecting more deference for himself.*

Maimonides (1135-1204, Spain) – a Jew is forbidden to “smash household goods, tear clothes, demolish a building, stop up a spring, or destroy articles of food. (*Mishna Torah*)

*Ta’anit* 22a – Some of the good things which Rav Huna used to do: Every Shabbat eve he would send a messenger to the market who would buy up all the perishable vegetables which the gardeners had been unable to sell. These would then be thrown into the river. “Surely he should have given them to the poor?” [it is asked]. “No,” came the rejoinder, “they would then get used to getting it free and would not come to buy in the future.” “Perhaps he should feed them to the animals?” “It seems that Rav Huna holds that it is not permissible to feed food fit for human consumption to animals.” “Perhaps he should not have bought them at all?” “No – if nobody would pay them, then the gardeners would produce less in the future.”

*This passage is challenging and may well espouse an economic point of view that many of us find objectionable. Nonetheless, it illustrates that there is an essential economic aspect to bal tashchit. One might assume that buying all the perishable vegetables and throwing them into the river would be a complete violation of bal tashchit. It isn’t considered a violation, though, because if the food were not dumped, there would be a reduced demand and people’s livelihoods, and therefore potentially health, would be threatened. Remarkably, then, while many contemporary authors abhor the concept of dumping grain at sea because of its wastage, Talmud seems to suggest that it is not only acceptable, but necessary, and not a contravention of bal tashchit.*

The question that has challenged rabbis throughout the generations is the determination of what is wasteful and what is necessary for human survival (and therefore not wasteful).

Dt. 20.19 text seems to sympathise with the trees, asking the reader to consider that they cannot flee war like soldiers. However, this also provides us with a challenge – should we have more sympathy for a fruit tree than a tree that doesn’t provide fruit? Could it not also be said that trees that do not produce fruit are not able to withdraw into the besieged city? It seems, then, that the mitzvah of bal tashchit weighs up the aspects of waste and also functionality – during the siege the army will need to eat in order to remain strong.

If we are not allowed to needlessly destroy the natural environment in a time of war – when resources are scarce and the primary focus is on ending the battle as quickly as possible – how much more should we be aware of bal tashchit when we are not at war and can make informed choices. For example, if we have to build a home (or, in the more realistic case for most people of redecorating a home), we have the time to make an informed choice about which wood we can use. Hence the mitzvah of bal tashchit developed from a war-time prohibition against needless waste to a prohibition that covers every aspect of our lives. In almost everything we do, we have a negative effect on the natural world. This mitzvah asks us to consider whether or not that effect was wasteful and in typical rabbinic fashion we can determine this by looking at examples of behaviour that are considered to be wasteful and then applying those examples to our own lives.  
 But it’s often complicated. Rav Papa says that one who drinks wine instead of beer is guilty of violating bal tashchit. There is Talmudic suggestion that this may be incorrect, since the human body is part of the natural world and therefore should be treated as well as possible. Thus, while wine may be more wasteful than beer, wine may also be better for the body than beer. Then what . . .?

Rav Chisda and Rav Papa clearly see bal tashchit as a prohibition against luxuries, whereas other opinions suggest that some luxuries benefit us. In a simplistic way, we might compare an expensive meal with a take-away. The expensive meal probably uses more resources but might have a wider variety of foodstuffs and therefore give the person eating it greater mineral and vitamin intake than a cheap (probably treif!) burger. Since God created every human being, we also must not waste the gift of our body by poisoning it – instead we should give it what it needs to function properly.

Some contemporary authors follow the reasoning of Rav Chisda and Rav Papa and suggest that an omnivorous diet (one that includes meat) is wasteful and should be prohibited, since an omnivorous diet uses five times as much grain, over ten times as much water, over 15 times as much land and over 20 times as much energy as compared with a vegan diet. The issue of bal tashchit and food, then, is an issue of what is luxurious and what the body actually needs.

There is a related narrative (Kiddushin 32a) in which Rav Huna tears one of his son’s silks to test his anger. Talmud asks whether Rav Huna violated bal tashchit and concludes that he didn’t because he tore the silk at the seam. It seems obvious, then, that bal tashchit can be applied not only to our food but also to our clothing and that we should ensure not to damage clothing unnecessarily for fear of wasting the resources that were used to make that clothing.

Bal tashchit even applies to sources of energy, as we read (Shabbat 67b) that Mar Zutra says that whoever covers an oil lamp or who uncovers a naptha lamp transgresses bal tashchit since these acts cause the lamp to burn with unnecessary speed. Energy efficiency, then, is obviously relevant in terms of bal tashchit.

Economics clearly also plays a factor in bal tashchit, though. While Rabbi Chanina claimed (Bava Kama 91b) that the early death of his son was due to the fact that the boy had chopped down a fig tree, it is also said (ibid.) that it is forbidden to cut down a fruit tree for its wood if the tree is worth more for its fruit. Bal tashchit for the Rabbis of the Talmud, then, wasn’t just about stopping needless destruction, but about stopping destruction that was wasteful. In other words, if the value of the tree’s fruit exceeds that of the tree’s wood, it is forbidden to cut it down. However, if the value of the wood is higher than the fruit, it can be chopped down and bal tashchit will not have been violated.

The concept of waste as the Rabbis understood it, then, carried an economic aspect – needless waste seems to have been understood as something wasteful to natural and to human society.  
 Thus to take examples from Kiddushin 32a, someone who breaks a vessel or rips clothes not only wastes the resources that went into it, but impoverish the person who owns it economically. Similarly, someone who clogs up a fountain not only diverts the natural flow of water but also impoverishes those who would draw water from that fountain (cf. Pesachim 56a). Someone who destroys food not only wastes the food resources but also costs the owner of the food money (even if that owner is the person who destroys the food itself (cf. Berachot 52b)). This last example is particularly relevant to our contemporary society where food is wasted continually.

The economic consideration of destroying something that we ourselves own may be two-fold – firstly it reminds us that if we buy something and waste it, someone else could have bought it and made use of it. Secondly, though, we are taught to remember that we actually own nothing – all we have is loaned to us by God and to destroy it without using it carries an implicit message that we do not care for God’s gifts.

In the Middle Ages, authors such as Maimonides continued to understand the economic necessity of negatively affecting the natural world, hence he wrote that if a fruit-bearing tree is cut down with destructive intent, then the person should be flogged. However, if it has greater value cut down than being allowed to remain, it may be cut down. He adds (Mishneh Torah, Book of Judges, Laws of Kings and War 6: 8-10 ) ‘the Torah only forbids wanton destruction.’ Other authors from the same time, such as the Sefer HaChinuch, suggest that the mitzvah of bal tashchit extends even to the destruction of a ‘grain of mustard’ in order to ‘love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it.’ Destruction, it claims (Deuteronomy 20:19 #529, 530), is evil. It suggests that the wasting of anything that could potentially be useful is a contravention of bal tashchit. Years later, Samson Raphael Hirsch picks up on this theme when he writes (Horeb #56) that ‘if you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are not a human but an animal 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!’

Whether or not one can put a market value on ecology/environmental concern is a difficult issue to address. The wastage of food by supermarkets in order to maintain high prices may be considered wasteful or it may be considered acceptable if the overall intention is financial viability for all. As with most things, it is the intention that is a clear element in the determination of bal tashchit. If someone chops down a fruit tree recklessly, they are guilty, but if they cut it down because the wood is worth more than the fruit, in other words, if they cut it down to be responsible financially, then they are certainly allowed to do so.

Two avenues seem to have developed regarding the mitzvah of bal tashchit in rabbinic commentaries. Some suggest that the destruction of anything in nature is an abhorrence toward God’s creation and therefore to be abhorred. In one opinion (e.g. that of Rashi) the trees have a life of their own and are not a means to our ends. In another opinion (e.g. that of Ibn Ezra) we should not destroy when we would essentially be harming ourselves. Either way, the modern mantra of ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ does not come close to the all-encompassing mitzvah that is bal tashchit and it is perhaps not an understatement to say that almost everyone in contemporary society is guilty of transgressing this mitzvah in its traditional sense, either with our inefficient cars and homes, with the manner in which our food reaches our plates or with the manner in which our clothes are made and our luxuries are built.

Perhaps it is best to consider the thoughts of Rabbi Judah, who said in the name of Rav (Shabbat 77b) that ‘of all that the Holy Blessed One created in God’s world, not one thing did God create in vain.’ What this means is that in every way in which we negatively affect the world around us, we should consider that it was God who created it, God who set us amongst that creation, and God who wants us to exist within that creation with as little impact as possible. Thus, the mitzvah of bal tashchit is strictly a prohibition against any wasteful negative effect on the natural environment that could not have been avoided due to the importance of the maintenance of human society.

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2011 – study commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. – roughtly 1/3 of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year (approx. 1.3 billion tons) gets lost or wasted; in the U.S., less then 3% of this waste was recovered and recycled

Bal Taschit as an environmental principle. Some relevant Jewish organizations:

Shomrei Adamah (Guardians of the Earth) – 1988

COEJL – the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life – 1993

Also, in contemporary times, the celebration of Tu B’Shevat has become a focus for Jewish environmentalism.