

Jewish Values and Texts Relating to Energy

COEJL 4/04

I. ENERGY CONSERVATION IS AN ANCIENT MITZVAH, NOT A POST-1973 CHOICE!

A. Mitzvat Bal Tashchit (“the law that says don’t waste”) is from Deut. 20:19 – in war, don’t cut down the enemy’s trees

B. Our sages extended this law to include all kinds of unnecessary waste – smashing things in anger, etc

C. Talmud Shabbat 67b: “Rav Zutra says, “whoever covers an oil lamp or uncovers a naphtha lamp violates the law of bal tashchit” – i.e., halacha *requires* us to use the most efficient available technology!

D. Try the “mustard seed test”, from the 13th century German pietistic text, Sefer HaChinuch (529):

“*Tzadikim* / righteous people of good deeds...do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can they use all their strength to save everything possible from destruction. But the *rasha'im* / wicked are not thus; they are like demons. They rejoice in the destruction of the world, just as they destroy themselves.”

Does an SUV (or any inefficient auto) use more than a mustard seed’s worth of extra gas when you pick up the kids? Does leaving your 100-watt bulb burning when you leave the room consume more than a mustard seed’s worth of coal, and produce more than a mustard seed’s worth of the greenhouse gas CO₂? Given what we know today, what decisions make us a *tzadik* or a *rasha*?

II. SHABBAT PUTS THE WEEKLY BRAKES ON CONSUMPTION

A. However observant we each are, Shabbat is central – it’s the weekly celebration of the completion of Creation. How can we best care for Creation on that day, or on any day?

B. Traditional observance includes withdrawing from production & consumption. See below:

1. Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th century Germany, founder of ‘modern Orthodoxy’ (Judaism Eternal 2:30): “Sabbath in our time! To cease for a whole day from all business, from all work, in the frenzied hurry-scurry of our age! To close the exchanges, the workshops and the factories, to stop all railway services – great heavens! The pulse of life would stop beating and the world perish! The world perish? On the contrary, it would be saved.”

2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (1951), p. 28: “To set apart one day a week for freedom ... a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our [fellows]

and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for [our] progress than the Sabbath?”

C. Shabbat suggests that there’s something more important than producing and consuming, more sacred than “economic growth” as the end-all-and-be-all, since these things take at least some energy, and produce at least some pollution. Instead, Shabbat holds out community, learning, prayer, food, rest, music, love, and friendship as the ideal. These things are infinitely sustainable and grow-able, whereas the cars and chemicals and day-trading of the workaday week are not.

D. It goes further – we withdraw from the economic & energy-consuming rat-race not just one day a week, but also one year every seven, through the Sabbatical. And that’s not counting festivals, or the jubilee every 50 years. So more than two-sevenths of our lives, at least, should be spent away from an obsessive focus on production, consumption, and growth.

III. OUR ENERGY CONSUMPTION LEAVES TOO LITTLE FOR THE REST OF CREATION

A. Though created in the Divine Image, humans are not the purpose of creation. See Maimonides (12th C Egypt, Guide to the Perplexed, 3:13): “It should not be believed that all beings exist for the sake of humanity’s existence ... [rather] all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes.”

B. For instance, all of nature is animate in the Psalms (also part of the daily liturgy). See Psalm 104: “The Earth is satisfied by the fruit of Your works ... the trees of God are satisfied; the cedars of Lebanon, which God has planted – there birds make their nests; the house of the stork is in the fir trees. The high hills are for the wild goats; the rocks are a hiding-place for the badgers...”

C. America’s energy consumption comes mostly through fossil fuels -- coal and oil provide the vast majority of our energy, and potentially catastrophic nuclear power about 15%; renewables are only about 6% of our energy. Emissions from burning these fossil fuels include air and water pollution like sulfur dioxide (‘acid rain’), poisonous mercury, smog-forming ozone, and greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide. They endanger all of Creation, and threaten to push overstressed species over the brink. Yet the midrash teaches that “even those creatures you deem superfluous in this world – like flies, fleas, and gnats – nevertheless have their allotted task in the scheme of Creation” (Midrash, from about the 8th century – Exodus Rabbah 10:1).

D. But not all of humanity is endangering the rest of Creation; it’s disproportionately the wealthiest, most privileged among us. America has only 4.5% of the world’s population, but produces over 25% of its greenhouse gases; Japan, Europe, Canada, and Australia follow close behind with huge per-capita emissions. This is an issue of justice, as in “justice, justice, you shall pursue, in order that you may live” (Deut. 16:20). Rising seas from global warming will affect Tuvalu and Bangladesh more quickly than New York or L.A.; new vectors for tropical disease will mostly hurt those who can’t afford health care; and so on. The Torah teaches: “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor ... love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:16, 19:18).

IV. ISRAELI SECURITY, AND AMERICAN SECURITY

Oil – the #1 contributor to global warming, staple of our transportation industry, and major fuel for electricity and heating as well – is the cause of much global instability. Many of Israel's implacable enemies sit atop huge reserves of oil, so the world's oil addiction affects geo-politics, and with it Israel's safety and future. Similarly, recent U.S. military interventions have had at least a subtext of ensuring stable oil markets – a factor not only in two recent wars in Iraq, but also in the ongoing American presence in countries like Saudi Arabia, which produced most of the Al-Qaeda leadership. Weaning ourselves from oil will bring not only cleaner air and a cooler Earth, but quite likely greater peace, to both countries and regions.

V. THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

A. There exists a “robust consensus” among scientists -- including the 2000-member Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the National Academy of Sciences -- that “anthropogenic” (human-caused) climate change is a dangerous reality. Mostly, only industry-funded or partisan scientists differ.

B. Even if questions remain, Judaism (like logic!) teaches us to act warily. No law and no societal good is more important than *Pikuach Nefesh*, the saving of a life. In Deut. 22:8, we're told that “when you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof” – we submit to the extra construction expense not because someone *will* fall off the roof otherwise, but because someone *might*.

C. In conclusion, consider this ancient midrash (Qohelet Rabbah 7:13, circa 8th Century):

“God said to Adam, ‘See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are?! And all that I have created, I made for you. [But,] be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world – for if you spoil it, there is *no one after you* to repair it.’”