

Waste Minimization, *Bal Tashchit* and Beyond

By Risa Alyson Strauss

Waste Minimization

Canadians produce more than 31 million tons of waste annually – that's 2.7 kilograms per person per day! Over 75% of that waste is sent to landfills where it collects and slowly breaks down, producing greenhouse gases such as methane and carbon dioxide, and leeching potentially dangerous substances into our groundwater system.¹

REDUCING the amount of waste produced in the first place is the most efficient way of conserving natural resources and protecting our environment.

Bal Tashchit

Even though over-consumption and waste production are relatively recent environmental issues, Judaism has been tackling these problems since Talmudic times!

The Jewish law of *Bal Tashchit*, which prohibits us from being wasteful or unnecessarily destructive, is rooted in the Biblical commandment to not destroy fruit-bearing trees while laying siege to a city:

יט כִּי-תִצּוֹר אֶל-עִיר זְמַיִם רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ
לְתַפְּסָהּ, לֹא-תִשְׁחִית אֶת-עֵצֶיהָ לְגָדִיחַ עָלֶיךָ
גִּרְזֹן--כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכְל, וְאַתָּה לֹא תִכְרֹת: כִּי
הָאָדָם עַץ הַשָּׂדֶה, לִבְאֵ מִפְּנֵיךָ בַּמְצוֹר.

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 the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? *Dvarim* (Deuteronomy) 20:19

The Talmudic rabbis understood these verses as a prohibition against any type of willful destruction and expanded this injunction into the general law of *Bal Tashchit*, which disallows wasteful or destructive behaviour. We are instructed by the rabbis to not use more than what we need, to not needlessly destroy anything, to not use something of greater value when something of lesser value will suffice, and to not use something in a way that it was not meant to be used (which would increase the likelihood of it being broken or destroyed).

For example, according to the Babylonian Talmud, Rav Hisda, when passing through prickly shrubs and plants, would lift his robes so as not to tear them:

¹ Waste Reduction Week Canada, "Too Good to Waste: School Resource Kit," (www.wrwcanada.com: 2004), p. 4.

R. Hisda whenever he had to walk between thorns and thistles used to lift up his garments saying that whereas for the body [if injured] nature will produce a healing, for garments [if torn] nature could bring no cure. (*Baba Kamma* 91b)

Similarly, Rav Zutra discouraged others from wasting resources, stating:

One who covers an oil lamp [so that it burns less efficiently], or uncovers a naphtha lamp [so that it burns less efficiently], breaks the rule against needless waste [derived from Deuteronomy 20:19]. (*Shabbat* 67b)

After the completion of the Talmud, rabbinical scholars continued to reflect on and develop the principle of waste reduction. In *Hilkhot Melakhim*, Maimonides wrote:

Whenever someone destroys a useful artifact, or rips clothing, demolishes a building, plugs up a spring, or senselessly destroys food, it violates the negative mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit*. Such actions are disgraceful. (6:10)

In *Sefer HaChinuch*, a righteous person is identified as one who adheres absolutely to the law of *Bal Tashchit*:

Righteous people do not destroy even a mustard seed in the world and they are distressed at every ruination and spoilage they see; and if they are able to do any rescuing, they will save anything from destruction, with all of their power. (*Sefer HaChinuch: D'varim* 20:19 number 529)

Reducing the amount of waste we produce is a core Jewish environmental value. Tracing the development of *Bal Tashchit* from its Biblical origin through its later Rabbinic interpretations, clearly illustrates a strong push in Jewish texts and teachings towards waste reduction and resource conservation.

And Beyond...

Our communities, emphasizing convenience, are producing more waste than ever before – we have become a “disposable” society! Now is the time to be highlighting, developing, adopting, and teaching the core Jewish environmental value of not being wasteful. Imagine if the mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* was practiced universally! Imagine if it was practiced in your country...your community...your workplace...your school...or even just your home.

It is up to each of us as individuals, communities, schools, and businesses to consider what we are throwing away and how we are impacting our natural world.

So, what can we do to promote waste reduction and help protect our environment? Start by practicing the 3Rs (REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE,) in your everyday life!

By the age of six months, the average Canadian has consumed the same amount of resources that the average person in the developing world consumes in a lifetime.²

² Recycling Council of Ontario, cited in Waste Reduction Week Canada, “Too Good to Waste: School Resource Kit,” (www.wrwcana.com: 2004), p. 6.

RECYCLING and REUSING items that you were unable to REDUCE, helps conserve resources and ease pollution resulting from the manufacturing process.

REDUCING the amount of waste produced in the first place is the most effective way of conserving resources and protecting our natural world. When you make choices that eliminate the production of waste, you do not need to worry about recycling or reusing that item later!

The following suggestions form the basis of the **Ontario EcoSchools Waste Minimization Guidelines**³ and can be adopted by teachers and students alike to help fulfill the mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* in our schools:

REDUCE

- **paper use** by photocopying on both sides of the paper whenever possible
- **paper use** by purchasing printers that can print on both sides of the paper
- **paper use** by using a sibling list when sending printed information home to arents or by using electronic methods (i.e. e-mail and website)
- **food-related waste** by implementing a waste-free lunch system

REUSE

- **paper** by using scrap paper for rough work and art projects
- **mugs, glasses, plates, and utensils** by avoiding using disposable dishes as much as possible (including in the teacher's lounge)
- **furniture and equipment** by advertizing unwanted items internally within the school board

RECYCLE

- **all paper products** using a paper recycling system in all offices and classrooms
- **cans and containers** using a container recycling system in strategic locations through the school
- **photocopier toner bottles and printer cartridges** by collecting empty containers and cartridges according to the procedures outlined by the companies that recycle these products.

By educating our students that waste reduction and resource conservation are fundamental Jewish ethics, we can inspire them to make changes in their own lives, and to grow in their roles as responsible stewards of Creation.

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³ Ontario EcoSchools, "Waste Minimization Guidelines," (www.yorku.ca/ecoschl/resources.asp).