

Caring About the Environment: Two Jewish Lenses

There are a number of places to draw an environmental ethic from in our Jewish tradition, but one of the central places is in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 which introduces the mitzvah of "*bal tashchit*." As you read the source text, then the Mishneh Torah's explanation of the larger context of the mitzvah, think about how the ideas presented fit into your own, personal environmental ethic.

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

(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 (כי) trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? (20) Only trees that 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.

דברים כ':י"ט-כ'

(יט) כִּי־תָצוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצֶיהָ לְנֶדֶחַ עָלֶיהָ גֵרְוֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבֹא מִפְּגִיעַ בַּמָּצוֹר: (כ) רַק עֵץ אֲשֶׁר־תִּלְעַע כִּי־לֹא־עֵץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא אֵתוֹ תִשְׁחִית וְכָרְתָּ וּבְנִית מִצּוֹר עַל־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עוֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה עַד רִדְתָּהּ: (פ)

Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 6:10

(10) And not only regarding trees, but even one who destructively breaks vessels or rips up clothing or tears down a building or seals up a spring or wastes food violates the negative commandment of "Do not destroy".

משנה תורה, הלכות מלכים ומלחמות

ו':י'

(י) וְלֹא הָאֵילָנוֹת בַּלְבַּד. אֲלֵא כָּל הַמְשָׁבֵר כְּלִים. וְקוֹרֵעַ בְּגָדִים. וְהוֹרֵס בְּנֵינָן. וְסוֹתֵם מַעֲיָן. וְמַאֲבֵד מֵאֲכָלוֹת דְּרָדָה הַשְּׁחָתָה. עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תִשְׁחִית.

Rashi was a prominent scholar from northern France who wrote in the latter half of the 11th century. Amongst his many accomplishments, Rashi is noted for his extensive commentary on the Torah.

Rashi on Deuteronomy 20:19:3

(3) "Ki" (כי) has here the meaning of "perhaps." 'Perhaps the tree in the field is a human, to be included in your siege, and suffer famine and thirst along with the city's inhabitants? Why must you destroy it?'

רש"י על דברים כ"י"ט:ג'

(ג) כי האדם עץ השדה. הרי כי משמש בלשון די'למא, ש'מא האדם עץ השדה להכנס בתוך המצור מפניו להתגר ב'סורי ר'עב וצ'מא כ'אנשי העיר? ל'מה ת'שחיתנו?!

Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi, who wrote a respected meta-commentary on Rashi, explains that while you might want to make a violent example of a person who escapes a siege in order to ensure people don't leave the city and the siege is effective, this logic cannot possibly apply to trees, leaving no reason to destroy them.

What sort of environmental ethic is Rashi presenting?

How does Rashi understand this section of Deuteronomy envisioning the relationship between humans and the natural world around us?

Rashi recognizes some inherent value to the trees which compels us to preserve them, even if it might be helpful in the siege campaign. How do we recognize the inherent value of nature in our environmental ethics and policy.

Ibn Ezra, was a noted commentator who lived in Moorish Spain in the 11th and 12th centuries. As you read Ibn Ezra's comments, consider where he thinks the animus for the environmentalism of *bal taschit* comes from.

Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 20:19:1

‘You may eat of them, but do not cut them down, for human is a tree of the field’ (i.e., the life of man depends on the trees of the field). A similar construction appears in “for it is taking a life in pawn” [Deuteronomy 24:6], which clearly means “it is taking the means of a person’s livelihood in pawn”. The phrase ‘but do not cut them down’ is conceptually tied to the phrase ‘to come before you in the siege,’ to wit: You may not destroy fruit-bearing trees, which are a source of life to mankind, but you may eat of their fruit; you are forbidden to destroy them so that the besieged city will surrender before you. The subsequent phrase ‘cut to build up siegeworks’ is proof that this is the correct interpretation.

אבן עזרא על דברים כ':י"ט:א'

כי ממנו תאכל ואותו לא תכרות כי האדם עץ השדה והטעם כי חיי בן אדם הוא עץ השדה וכמוהו כי נפש הוא חובל כי חיי נפש הוא חובל ואותו לא תכרות דבק עם לבא מפניך במצור הנה לא תשחית עץ פרי שהוא חיים לבן אדם רק מותר שתאכל ממנו ואסור לך להשחיתו כדי שתבא העיר מפניך במצור והעד על זה הפירוש שהוא נכון שאמר וכתוב ובנית מצור

The other text Ibn Ezra refers to when he quotes "for it is taking a life in pawn", which is surrounded by other commandments on how to create just economic conditions.

Deuteronomy 24:6

(6) A handmill or an upper millstone shall not be taken in pawn, for that would be taking someone’s life in pawn.

דברים כ"ד:ו'

(ו) לא־יִחַבֵּל רַחֲמִים וְרֶכֶב פִּי־נֶפֶשׁ הוּא חֲבֵל:
(ס)

What sort of environmental ethic is Ibn Ezra presenting?

How does Ibn Ezra understand this section of Deuteronomy envisioning the relationship between humans and the natural world around us?

Ibn Ezra here recognizes the importance and role of natural resources in human wellbeing and claims that we must protect and care for our environment because, at least in part, of the role the environment plays in ensuring human wellbeing. How does this vision of an environmental ethic compare to Rashi’s understanding? Which do you find more compelling?

Right now, the Environmental Protection Agency is in the process of repealing the Clean Power Plan. Established in 2015, the Clean Power Plan (CPP) provides the first-ever national limits on carbon pollution from power plants, and aims to reduce emissions to 32% below 2005 levels by 2030. The Clean Power Plan has the potential to develop a clean energy economy, create new jobs, and reduce health risks from carbon pollution.

Consider the importance of the Clean Power Plan from an environmental ethic rooted in Rashi's understanding of *bal tashchit*. Climate change is already having effects on our natural world, and is going to cause staggering loss of biodiversity. Even if warming is contained to two degrees Celsius, [one study has estimated that one in six species will become extinct due to the effects of climate change](#). We know in order to stop this fate we need to take decisive action now. [A draft Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report found it would take unprecedented action to avoid more than 1.5 degrees Celsius warming](#), the new warming goal adopted during the Paris Accords.

We also can understand the importance of the Clean Power Plan from the ethic Ibn Ezra presents. [The CPP was estimated to stop 3,600 premature deaths, 1,700 heart attacks, 90,000 asthma attacks and 300,000 missed days of work or school every year](#) by winding down power generation from coal-fired plants, which are [built disproportionately in poor neighborhoods and communities of color](#). Preventing pollution is critical for human wellbeing, especially for already vulnerable communities. We also know climate change, a direct consequence of burning fossil fuels, [will disproportionately affect the poor and vulnerable](#).

Whether you understand your environmental ethic as stemming from a commitment to humans, as Ibn Ezra did when analyzing the *mitzvah* of *bal tashchit*, an understanding of an inherent value of nature, as Rashi pointed to in his analysis, some synthesis of the two frames, or another ethic altogether, you can act on your environmental ethic by [commenting on the proposed Clean Power Plan repeal through the RAC's action alert](#).

Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Jonah Baskin