

“Do Not Destroy”

Among the ‘rules of war’ set down in Deuteronomy 20, in verses 19-20 we find an interesting directive on how to treat the trees outside a besieged town. What exactly is the point of this burst of ‘ecological compassion’ in the midst of a battlefield? And what can we learn with the help of traditional Jewish approaches to the text?

*“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... 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?**” (Deuteronomy 20:19)*

Destroying the fruit trees of an enemy’s fields was practiced in ancient warfare as a means of destroying an enemy’s resources and forcing a surrender. Yet here the Torah forbids this practice (with the exception of trees that do not produce food, see v.20).

The sentence in bold (above) has particularly intrigued commentators. The Hebrew is difficult and the translation uncertain. The above translation takes the verse as a question, as does Rashi:¹ *If trees are not (human) enemies from the besieged city, why harm them?*

Ibn Ezra,² on the other hand, renders it as a statement: *Don’t cut down the trees, for they are like human beings.* In what way can a tree be equated with a human being? In the sense of the rabbinic saying: “The life of man is only from the tree.”³ Without trees and their fruit human communities cannot survive.

The *Sefer HaHinukh*⁴ sees in this verse a teaching that urges people to avoid all unnecessary destruction and to value the things that promote human wellbeing. “This precept is designed to inculcate love of the good and beneficial.”

This view agrees with the rabbinic principle of *bal tashchit* (literally, ‘do not destroy’) which extrapolates from our Torah verse to form a general prohibition against behaviours that waste or mistreat precious God-given resources. Maimonides⁵ goes on to say:

“This is the case not only with trees. But whoever breaks utensils, tears garments, demolishes a building, stops up a well and wilfully destroys food violates the prohibition of ‘you shall not destroy...’”

Thus while the Torah teaches (in Genesis) that human beings are given dominion over the earth and are entitled to utilise its natural resources for social and economic gain, this precludes mindless destruction and exploitation that endangers the very existence of the earth and its inhabitants.

And you thought environmental movements were a modern phenomenon! •

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1. Rashi: 11th c. commentator
 2. Ibn Ezra, 12th c. commentator
 3. *Sifre*: rabbinic commentary, approx. 300 CE.
 4. *Ha-Hinukh*: 13th c. education work.
 5. Maimonides: 12th c. scholar

Sources: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1996); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Devarim* (New York, 1995). Scripture: JPS.

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