

SEPTEMBER 5, 2016

## Parashat Shoftim

### The Jewish Value of Protecting the Earth

You shall not destroy the trees (Deuteronomy 20:19)

לא תשחית את עצה (דברים כ:ט)

Last month, Greenpeace Israel activists stormed a Knesset committee meeting discussing Israel's Hadera coal-fired electrical plant, holding a bright yellow poster, which featured the dusty face of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Minister Yuval Steinitz in an Israel Electric Corporation hardhat, that read in Hebrew, "Steinitz, don't work for C-O-A-L," the [Jerusalem Post reported](#). The protesters hoped to pressure the government to close Israel's coal-burning plant in favor of natural gas, a far more environmentally friendly alternative. While the committee was considering installing scrubbers on the plant, just a day prior, the Environmental Protection Ministry published a report advocating disabling the units entirely and replacing them with natural gas installations. Though the government must balance the need to ensure Israel's energy production without interruption, there is broad consensus in Israel about the importance of protecting the environment, minimizing coal use, and finding clean energy alternatives. This is because environmentalism isn't just good public policy; it's also an important Jewish value.

We find the earliest, and perhaps most famous source in Jewish literature for the importance of environmentalism in Parashat Shoftim. Describing a military campaign to lay siege on a city, Moses commands the people that, "you shall not destroy the trees by wielding an axe against them; you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down; for is the tree of the field [a] man that it should be besieged by you?" (20:19) Known as the prohibition of "*bal tashchit*," the Sages expanded this injunction to prohibit unnecessary and unjustified waste. [Dr. Yael Shemesh of Bar Ilan University](#) draws a contrast between two diametric worldviews among environmental activists: the anthropocentric view, which places man at the center, and the biocentric worldview, which places nature at the center. She notes that while most religious sources favor an anthropocentric view, which obligates man to serve as a steward for the environment and, "demands that mankind manage the earth's resources with wisdom, thrift, love and responsibility," some resources point to a more biocentric, or "deep ecology" perspective, placing significance on the earth and its resources. For example, Maimonides writes (*Guide the Perplexed*, III Chapter 13) that, "one should not assume that everything in existence is due to the presence of man; Rather, the other elements in existence have a purpose of their own, and not for another reason." Dr. Shemesh notes that the prohibition to fell fruit trees found in our parashah represents "a clear example of a biblical ecological teaching that greatly influenced the ecological worldview of post-biblical Judaism."

Today's modern state of Israel has continued this Jewish tradition of environmental stewardship, as it boasts a wide variety of green organizations, including the 60-year-old Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel and the Arava Institute. These groups work to preserve the country's ecosystem, educate the public and promote a greener Israel. However, the Jewish state's efforts to protect and promote the environment reach far beyond her borders. In an era of booming populations, shrinking resources and environmental degradation, Israel leads the world in such critical fields as solar power generation and seawater desalination. As nations struggle to make the best use of their resources, Israel's cutting edge technologies promise to improve the health and living standards of hundreds of millions across the globe, while making industry more efficient and minimizing the environmental impact of human activities. As we see from our parashah, these efforts represent not just a human value, but a Jewish one as well. ■

## Leadership with Accountability

**Our hands have not shed this blood (Deuteronomy 21:7)**

**יְדִינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ אֶת הַדָּם הַזֶּה (דְּבָרִים כ"ז)**

On a Friday morning in early July, Palestinian terrorists opened fire on the Mark family of Otniel as they drove along the Route 60 road outside of Hebron, instantly killing Rabbi Miki Mark, gravely injuring his wife Chavi, and causing the car to spin out of control and overturn. According to the [Times of Israel](#), “In the moments after...[the attack], a local Palestinian couple helped the surviving members of his family escape the overturned vehicle and administered first aid until first responders arrived at the scene. ‘At first I thought it was an accident. I opened the door, which was difficult because the car was overturned,’ the Palestinian man, a resident of Hebron, told Israel’s Channel 2. ‘The girl was inside the car screaming, ‘They’re killing us,’ so I just kept telling her not to be afraid and that everything would be fine.’ After he managed to pry one of the doors open, the man, who wasn’t named in the report, said he pulled 14-year-old Tehila from the wrecked car. He said his wife, who is a medical doctor, worked to stanch the bleeding from the teen’s abdominal wound while he called an ambulance to the scene. ‘She was telling them in English, ‘Do not be afraid, we are here to help you.’” The man said he then pulled 15-year-old Pedaya out of the car, and attempted to calm him. ‘I took the boy and I hugged him, I gave him some water and applied iodine, and just kept telling him that everything was going to be fine,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t matter to me if it was an accident or a terror attack, it’s irrelevant. These are people, children, who need help, and if I can help, I will help them.’”

The final passage in Parashat Shoftim describes the ceremony of the *eglah arufah* – the “Decapitated Calf” ceremony performed by the elders of a city. Moses describes a situation in which an unidentified victim is found murdered on the road in an uninhabited area. He instructs the elders of the closest city to “bring down the heifer unto a rough valley... and shall break the heifer’s neck there in the valley... And all the elders of that city...shall wash their hands over the heifer...And they shall speak and say: ‘Our hands have not shed this blood’...” (21:4-7) Rashi asks the obvious question: Do we really believe that the elders of a city had a hand in the murder of an unknown traveler? Why are they declaring that their hands “have not shed this blood”? Is that not obvious? Rashi (on verse 7) explains that in their declaration they also imply that, “We have not seen him, nor allowed him to depart without food and without an escort.” In other words, the elders must also declare that they did not create a situation which would allow a poor impoverished traveler to travel alone and hungry on a dangerous journey. Rather, local leaders must instead take the necessary measures to insure the well-being and safety of all who pass through the gates of their city.

Rashi’s comment conveys a critical message about the obligations and responsibilities of political leaders. When a person is killed on the road, they can only absolve themselves if they actively worked to create a situation that would have prevented the death. Otherwise, they too are culpable. Moses’ notion of leadership with accountability is especially relevant if the leadership actively created the atmosphere that led to the murder, in which case, society must hold the leaders culpable for the environment that led to murder. Tragically, this is precisely the atmosphere fostered by the rhetoric and incitement of the Palestinian Authority.

Last month, the very same Palestinian who rescued the Mark children and saved Chavi Mark’s life, was dismissed from his public service job in the Palestinian Authority, according to [The Times of Israel](#). Writing on Facebook, Yochai Damari, the head of Har Hebron Regional Council, said that the man is now unemployed due to Palestinian opposition to his actions and should be assisted by Israel. “I met with him and he asked me to help remove any obstacle preventing him from receiving a work permit,” Instead of extolling a Palestinian who did the right thing and helped an Israeli family in dire need after suffering a brutal terrorist attack, the Palestinian Authority has ostracized him and fired him from his position. While local Jewish authorities are now working to secure work permits in Israel for the man and his wife, the PA is sending its citizens a clear message: actions of violence and murder against Jews will be praised and lauded, while perpetrators of peace, assistance and mutual coexistence will be ostracized, distanced and shamed. The world must hold the PA accountable for the atmosphere of hatred and incitement it continues to foster. ■

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