

Shlom Bayyit

How To Be An Environmental Mensch



We've heard it from AI and the scientific community. The polar bears in the Arctic are drowning, The Great Barrier Reef is being stressed, disease-causing parasites are no longer controlled by winter chills, hurricanes like Katrina will continue to wreak havoc.....and it's "very likely" our fault.

At our recent Scholar in Residence Program, David Harris, Executive Director of the AJC (American Jewish Committee) eloquently made the Jewish connection and left us with a charge. His organization is determined to become one of the first Jewish non-profits with green certification for its national offices.

He encourages all Jews and especially American Jews to follow suit. Conserve energy! It is good for the environment, it is an important way to support Israel, (we need to become less dependent on foreign oil supplies) and it is consistent with our Judaism. Way before modern day advocates addressed environmental issues and the catchy phrase "Going Green" was coined, our sacred texts had much to say and a great deal of wisdom to impart about Jews and their relationship to nature.

Among the numerous guidelines to live in harmony with our environment a predominant one comes from Deuteronomy 20: 19 -20

"When in your war against a city and you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its fruit bearing trees.... You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down..."

Open to many interpretations, this precept that we should not irresponsibly damage or destroy the environment, has come to be known as *Bal Taschit*. The Talmud extends this to include a general prohibition of waste and even stresses fuel efficiency. According to 19th Century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, "We are to regard things as God's property and use them with a sense of responsibility for wise human purposes. Destroy nothing! Waste nothing!"

How can each of us be more observant of

Bal Taschit? How can we take action, promote awareness, empower ourselves, our families, and make a difference? We offer a few practical suggestions:

- **Use compact fluorescent bulbs** – replacing just one frequently used light bulb will make a difference
- **Properly inflate your tires** – it will reduce carbon dioxide emissions and save you money
- **Use recycled paper** – purchase only printed paper that posts the notice 100% recycled
- **Adjust your thermostat** – in winter, lower the temperature 2 degrees; in summer raise it 2 degrees
- **Take shorter showers/** install low-flow showerheads – showers account for 2/3 of all water heating costs
- **Buy local produce** – it takes less fuel to bring it to market
- **Buy products that are minimally packaged** – plastic production produces greenhouse gases and creates garbage
- **Purchase a fuel efficient car** or, better still, a hybrid car – fossil fuels are non-renewable and polluting
- **Plant a tree** – they remove carbon dioxide from our atmosphere and clean our air
- **Unplug un-used electronics** – even turned off appliances use energy
- **Eat more vegetables** – they're more energy efficient to grow than raising animals like cows
- **Reduce, Recycle, Reuse**

The classic midrash from Ecclesiastes, Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

"God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam, "See my works, how good and praiseworthy they are? And all that I have created, I made for you. Take care that you do not spoil and destroy My world – for if you damage it, there is no one after you to repair it"

has today become an urgent Jewish moral imperative. We are a people with a mission, *Tikkun Olum*, to repair the world. In this spirit, to be a light unto the nations, we must also care for our environment.