

DO NOT DESTROY

Bal Tashhit

¹⁹When 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 trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? ²⁰Only 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.

19 בַּיַּחְצוֹר אֶל-עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם
עָלֶיהָ לְחַפְּשָׁהּ לֹא-תִשְׁחִית אֶת-עֵצֶיהָ
לְנֹדָח עָלֶיהָ גְּרוֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאֶתוֹ
לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבַא
מִפְּנֵיהֶ בְּמִצּוֹר: ²⁰ רַק עֵץ אֲשֶׁר-תֵּדַע
כִּי-לֹא-עֵץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא אֶתוֹ תִּשְׁחִית
וְכָרְתָּ וּבְנִיתָ מִצּוֹר עַל-הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר-הוּא
עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה עַד רִדְתָּה: פ

שָׁחַת

Niph. I. to be marred or spoiled by rotting, Jo. 15. 7.
—II. to be corrupted, morally, Ge. 6. 11, 12.—III.
to be laid waste, Ex. 8. 20. Pi. שָׁחַת (§ 14. rem. 1).
—I. to destroy, ruin, e. g. land, persons; metaph.
of compassion, Am. 1. 11, of wisdom, Eze. 28. 17,
of a covenant, prob. to corrupt, pervert, Mal. 2. 8.—
II. to act corruptly, wickedly. Hiph. I. i. q. Pi.
No. I.—II. to corrupt, pervert, as one's way, actions.
Hoph. to be corrupted, spoiled.

The reason for this law is implied in the rhetorical question: "Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?" It is abominable to attack the defenseless, and a growing tree yielding fruits that sustain life is an acute example of vitality and innocence.

The rabbis explain this passage as the source for the prohibition of any wanton destruction, extending bal tashhit—the principle of "you must not destroy"—to include every situation and interpreting "fruit tree" as symbolic of any useful object. The obligation to preserve property appears in the Torah as one of the rules of war, to remind us that even in the most extreme case of violence we—as God's co-partners in Creation—are responsible for the protection of the earth.

The rabbis applied this principle of bal tashhit in numerous specific cases reflecting four areas of concern:

1. A general prohibition against being wasteful. For example, they felt that one should not adjust a lamp to burn too quickly, for this would be wasteful of the fuel (Shabbat 67b).

2. Excessive wastefulness. Even when commanded by the Torah to destroy, we are warned not to exceed what is commanded. Thus while one should tear one's garment when hearing of a death in the immediate family, one should not tear the garment too much because that would be bal tashhit (Bava Kama 91b). Another case involved Rav Huna, who wanted to see if his son would become angry so he tore a silk purse in front of the son. The rabbis questioned this act because of bal tashhit, but Rav Huna answered that he had been careful to tear it on the seam (Kiddushin 32a).

3. Bizayon ha-okhel—spoiling (literally, "demeaning") food. This area was singled out for special attention. For example, one is not allowed to throw bread nor is one allowed to pass a cup full of liquid over bread; in both cases the bread could be ruined (Berakhot 50b). Bread especially received attention, since traditionally it represents the essence of all food.

4. A general concern for the environment. The following two verses illustrate this concern: "I will not drive them out before you in a single year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply to your hurt. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you have increased and possess the land" (Exodus 23:29-30). The Talmud tells us that tanneries, cemeteries, and places for threshing grain were situated forty cubits outside the walls of Jerusalem so as to protect the environment.

It was common practice in ancient warfare to destroy the enemy's fruit trees and fields. This weakened its economic potential and hampered its ability to fight again in the near future. It may also have been intended to pressure besieged cities into surrendering before they suffered such long-term damage. ³⁵ Deuteronomy forbids destroying trees for such purposes. An exception is made in the case of military necessity: non-fruit-bearing trees may be felled for the purpose of constructing siegeworks.
you must not destroy its trees Rabbis expanded this rule into a broad prohibition, not limited to wartime, of destroying anything useful, such as vessels, clothing, buildings, springs, or food. The prohibition is termed *bal tashhit*, from the phrase of *lo' tashhit*, "you must not destroy."³⁷
Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? The syntax of the Hebrew is difficult and the translation uncertain. This translation suggests that trees are unable to protect themselves by taking refuge within the city, or that they are not like human enemies that they should have to take refuge. This is essentially a "humanitarian" rather than utilitarian reason for the prohibition.³⁸

DR. JEFFREY TISAN JPS TORAH COMMENTARY DEUTERONOMY

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STRASFIELD

Psalm 27

David's

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Yah, you are my Light, my Savior,
Whom need I dread?
Yah, With You as my strong Protector
Who can make me panic?
When hateful bullies gang up on me,
Wanting to harass me,
To oppress and terrorize me,
They are the ones
Who stumble and fall.

Even if a gang surrounds me
My heart is not weakened.
If a battle is joined around me
My trust in You is firm.
Only one thing do I ask of You, Yah,
Just this alone do I seek:
I want to be at home with You, Yah,
All the days of my life.
I want to delight in seeing You,
When I come to visit You
In Your Temple.

You hide me in Your Succah
On an foul day.
You conceal me unseen in Your tent
And also raise me beyond
Anyone's reach.
And now, as You have held
My head high,
Despite the presence
Of my powerful foes,
I prepare to celebrate and thrill,
Singing and making music

To You, Yah!

Listen, Yah, to the sound of my cry
And, being kind, answer me.
My heart has said:
I turn to seek You,
Your Presence is what I beg for.
Don't hide Your Face from me.
Don't just put me down,
You, who have been my helper
Don't abandon me, don't forsake me,
God, my support.
Though father and mother have left me
You, Yah, will hold me securely.

Please teach me Your way
And guide me on the straight path.
Discourage those who defame me.
False witnesses stood up against me,
Belching out violence.
Don't let me become
The victim of my foes.

[I would not have survived]
If I had not hoped that I would yet see
Yah's goodness fully alive on Earth.

So friend, you too, hope to Yah.
Be sturdy!
And make strong your heart!
And most of all ---keep hoping to Yah.

אַחַת שְׂאֲלֹתַי מֵאַתּוֹתָּהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ
שִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית יְהוָה כֹּל יְמֵי חַיִּי לְחַזוֹת בְּנִעֻם יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ:

Ahat sha'alti me'et adonay otah avakesh, shivti beveyt adonay
kol yemey hayay lahzot beno'am adonay ulevaker beheychalo.

COMMENTARY. We say this psalm every day from the first of Elul through Hoshanah Rabah. The rabbis doubtless chose it to accompany us through every phase of the fall holiday season because it encompasses such a range of powerful emotions. Identifying with the experience of the speaker can help us to be in touch with our fears of abandonment, our need for security, our yearning for joyful religious experience, our need for guidance from God, or our steadying commitment to never lose hope. Above all, we experience the psalmist's vulnerability. Feeling that it is possible to be hidden and secure within God's presence, the speaker also knows, by contrast, the terrible fear that God can hide the divine countenance and seem utterly unavailable. The psalm delicately balances these two kinds of hiddenness, as it tries to find a metaphoric "level path," the right way of walking in a difficult, dangerous world. The psalm ends by urging that we seek out God, clinging to hope in the return of God's presence.

H.L.

PSALM 27/ELUL

KOL HANESHMAH: LIMOT HOL
DAILY PRAYER BOOK
[RECONSTRUCTIONIST]

HERBERT LEVINE

RABBI DAVID A. ZEITSCH

KAVANAH. Throughout history it has been true that sometimes good people suffer through no fault of their own. The psalmist is not so naive as to be unaware of this reality. How can there be shelter in the midst of swarming enemies? With physical protection unlikely, the shelter invoked here provides not physical but spiritual succor. The psalmist seeks the calm and bliss that come from an awareness of the divine made manifest in the workings of the human heart. With this sense of a greatness that transcends physical peril, enemies' violence causes no fear, and slanderers can do little damage. Living directed to the divine gives us the power not to avoid mortal danger, but to transcend our fear of it.

D.A.T.

[13] He said to them: Go out and discern which is the proper way to which a man should cling. Rabbi Eliezer says: A good eye. Rabbi Yehoshua says: A good friend. Rabbi Yose says: A good neighbor. Rabbi Shimon says: One who considers the outcome of a deed. Rabbi Elazar says: A good heart. He [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] said to them: I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach for your words, for your words are included in his words.

13. אמר להם .. He said to them. Rabban Yochanan to his disciples.

[14] He said to them: Go out and discern which is the evil path from which a man should distance himself. Rabbi Eliezer says: An evil eye. Rabbi Yehoshua says: A wicked friend. Rabbi Yose says: A wicked neighbor. Rabbi Shimon says: One who borrows and does not repay; one who borrows from man is like one who borrows from the Omnipresent, as it is said: 'The wicked one borrows and does not repay, but the Righteous One is gracious and gives' (Psalms 37:21). Rabbi Elazar said: A wicked heart. He [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] said to them: I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach to your words for your words are included in his words.

Comment that identifies the speaker in verse 13.

PIRKEI AVOT
SAYINGS OF
OUR FATHERS

2:13 - 14

[יג] אמר להם: צאו וראו איזו היא דרך טובה שידיבק בה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר: עין טובה. רבי יהושע אומר: חבר טוב. רבי יוסי אומר: שכן טוב. רבי שמעון אומר: הרוצה את הנולד. רבי אלעזר אומר: לב טוב. אמר להם: רוצה אני את דברי אלעזר בן ערך מדבריהם, שבכלל דבריו דבריהם.

[יד] אמר להם: צאו וראו איזו היא דרך רעה שיתרחק ממנה האדם. רבי אליעזר אומר: עין רעה. רבי יהושע אומר: חבר רע. רבי יוסי אומר: שכן רע. רבי שמעון אומר: הלוח ואינו משלם. אחר הלוח מן האדם בלוח מן המקום, שנאמר: "לוח רשע ולא ישלם, וצדיק חונן ונותן." רבי אלעזר אומר: לב רע. אמר להם: רוצה אני את דברי אלעזר בן ערך מדבריהם, שבכלל דבריו דבריהם.