

SHOFTIM- 5773

Rabbi Aharon Ziegler

My wife, Libby and, I just returned from a week of touring the northern parts of our beautiful country. I particularly enjoyed seeing the greenery and topography of our Land together with its flowers and trees. Opening now my Chumash to parashat Shoftim the first pasuk I came to, (20:19) reads: “when you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it [referring to a Milchemet Reshut-and not a war of Mitzvah for survival] *LO TASH’CHIT ET EITZA* [do not destroy its trees], *KI MIMENU TOCHEIL*[-for from it you will eat] *VE’OTO LOH YICH’ROT* [and you shall not cut it down] *KI ha-ADAM EITZ HA’SADAH* [translation of this varies between Rashi and Ibn Ezra]. Wow! The Torah is concerned about the environment, ecology and about trees.

Chazal extended this idea even further by stating that *anything we destroy unnecessarily is a violation of Lo Tash’chit.* [Bava Kama 91b].

R’ Avraham Ibn-Ezra understands the phrase [*KI haADAM EITZ haSADEH*] to mean that human beings depend upon trees to live. We eat their produce. Cutting down a tree is, therefore forbidden, as it would deny the human being food for life.

Rashi understands the phrase differently. For Rashi, “*KI haADAM* “ should be read as a rhetorical question. “Is a tree a person with the ability to protect itself? Is the tree of the field a person, that it should enter the siege before you?”

A basic difference emerges between Ibn Ezra and Rashi. For Ibn Ezra, the tree is saved because of the human being; without fruit trees it would be more difficult for people to find food. From the perspective of Rashi, the tree is saved for the tree’s sake alone, without an ulterior motive. Human beings can protect themselves; trees cannot. The Torah, therefore, comes forth offering a Mitzvah that protects the trees.

Chazal, [Ta’anit 5b] express many parables to demonstrate our concern for trees. One of the most famous and popular is the story of a traveler in the desert. Walking for days, he becomes weary and tired, when suddenly he comes upon a tree. He eats from its fruit, rests in the shade and drinks from the small brook at its roots.

Upon rising the next day, the traveler turns to the tree to offer thanks. “Tree oh Tree, how can I bless you? With fruit that gives sustenance? With branches that give shade? With water that quenches thirst? You have all of this!!” The traveler then turns and looks to the tree and says, “I have only one blessing. May that which comes from you be as beautiful as you are.”

This story has become a classic in blessing others with all that is good. In our daily Birchot HaShachar we recite from Mishna [Shabbat 127a], EILU DEVARIM - “These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world. Trees and human beings interface as trees provide us with metaphors that teach us much about life. Appreciating trees is appreciating human life.

Walking through a park one Shabbat afternoon I met a friendly little girl who greeted everyone she saw with a warm “Shabbat Shalom”. She then turned to a nearby tree, embraced it and said “Shabbat Shalom, Tree.”