

Bal Taschit

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Content Areas: Environment, LGBT history

Grades: 4th -12th grade

Objective: This lesson was designed to help students understand the many ways that we can fulfill the mitzvah of Bal Taschit- Do not destroy. The lesson explores this through environmental concerns and values that help humans to protect each other.

Note: The following lesson consists of Jewish texts and facts to share with students, followed by questions for class discussion.

The Talmudic law *bal tashchit* ("do not destroy") is the most predominant Jewish precept cited in Jewish writings on the environment.

Bal Tashchit is an idea developed from a Biblical prohibition against cutting down fruit bearing trees during war: "When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down". (Deuteronomy 20:19)

For Discussion: Why wouldn't one want to cut down a fruit tree during a siege?

"Have dominion over the fish of the sea..." Rabbi Hanina said, "If humanity merits it, they will have dominion; while if they do not merit it, they shall descend." (Midrash, Genesis Rabbah 8:12)

For Discussion: How do we merit being worthy of having dominion?

"Are trees like people that they can run away from an advancing army and take refuge in the town? Of course not – they are innocent bystanders. Therefore don't involve them in your conflicts, and don't cut them down." (Rashi)

For Discussion: Are only trees innocent bystanders? Can other entities not be able to run away and hide within the city walls?

Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit*, do not waste or destroy. (Kiddushin 32a)

For Discussion: Who might do things like this, and why?

Jews are often described as people of the book. Our books, Torahs and other texts are so holy that in fact we cannot throw them away if they have the name of G-d in them; they have to be buried in a Geniza, a repository of Jewish texts that contain the name of G-d.

For Discussion: Why would we bury a book like we would a person?

One of the earliest forms of persecution in the Holocaust was the control, censorship, and destruction of certain books and artwork. In 1933, in one particularly violent moment of intimidation and violence, Nazi youth burned the entire library of Magnus Hirschfeld, the gay Jewish founder of Berlin's Institute of Sexology.



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For Discussion: Why would Judaism create laws that protect things, trees, household goods, etc., in addition to the laws that protect people?

On this Shabbat Chayei Sarah the synagogue observes Transgender Remembrance Shabbat, remembering all who have suffered from anti-transgender violence. We look at how all G-d's creations are *B'tzelem Elohim*, or in the image of G!d.

For Discussion: Do you think the precept of *bal tashchit* applies, or can be applied to all of G-d's creations, including humans?

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