

A Muse: Shoftim 2008

“When in your war against a city you have 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? Only trees which you know do not yield fruit 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”. (Deuteronomy 20: 19-20)

Many Jewishly committed environmentalists latch on to these uniquely worded verses as a means of finding textual precedence for addressing environmental concerns. Admittedly they are correct however there are other interpretations of these verses which point away from environmental concerns and focuses on man’s needs. As you will see these approaches tend to place man at center stage rather than the concerns of the environment.

The soldier in need of wood in order to build “bulwarks” against the city may do so only with those trees that are not fruit bearing. This Biblical injunction can be understood either as an ethical imperative or as a utilitarian need. Man ought to relate kindly towards these trees because from them he benefits from their fruit. Rashi underscores the ethical imperative by comparing the tree to the man one is confronting as his enemy by framing the text rhetorically: Is the tree of the field a man that it should be besieged by you, and be punished with privations of hunger and thirst? From a utilitarian point of view the soldier may need the tree for sustenance during war and thus it would benefit him to preserve these fruit bearing trees.

Another utilitarian view different from the above and unique was expressed by Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, better known as the Rashba, the thirteenth century Spanish scholar: According to him, the fruit bearing trees distant from the “urban warfare” shouldn’t be cut down because it provides sustenance; however those trees found near the proximity of the city under siege can be cut down because “haadam who etz hasadeh” they may serve as a place of “cover” for the enemy. The Rashba’s

understanding of the text is unusual in that he doesn't see the cutting down of the trees as a means of building a "bulwark" (matzor), but as a means of clearing fields in order to avoid enemies using the trees as a means of carrying out counter-offensives. Sound familiar?

An alternative interpretation to the text are those who see the "etz Hasadeh" as more of an analogy to man. The Talmud Bavli, Taanit 7:a maintains that if a Talmud scholar is reasonable from him should you learn (as one would eat from a fruit tree); and if not he should be avoided (as a tree that isn't fruit bearing may be cut down).

Anthropomorphism dominated the interpretation of text. Everything was created to suit man. Thus there doesn't seem to be anything unusual or even immoral when we hold that the world and all of its creations were created in order to satisfy man's needs. There were Torah scholars who genuinely believed that not only were there ecological concerns based on utilitarian needs of the planet; but that nature in and of itself had its own purpose totally detached from man. Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi, a student of the Rambam subscribed to the belief that the Torah was committed to pure ecology, this however we will deal with next time around.