

Rabbi Jonathan Bernhard
Torah Portion: Deuteronomy 16:18 – 21:9
Haftarah: Isaiah 51:12 – 52:12

When 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?

-Deuteronomy 20:19

I am not one to take on iconic figures in American culture but, in our day and age, Kermit the Frog is wrong: It is very easy being green. Spurred by rising awareness about the environment's fragility, we are ever more sensitive to how our lives impact the world around us.

Our response has been admirable. Styrofoam is now the quintessential source of *tumah* – of ritual impurity - in the Jewish community. We recycle, we buy locally grown organic fruits and vegetables, and our driveways and parking lots are filled with hybrid vehicles. And this response has been grounded within our sacred literature – the verse quoted above is being a favorite of Jewish environmentalists.

This is all to the good. But it overlooks Judaism's most basic response to our environmental crisis: Consume less.

Our focus in helping the environment has been almost exclusively on how we consume, but we overlook the very real danger of how much we consume. Be it oil or other raw materials, our rate of consumption of the world's resources is staggering and far exceeds the explosive population growth (which on its own could be cause for alarm).

The root of the problem lies within a worldview that inflates personal consumption far beyond the essential. Because we can buy, we do buy. The result is homes filled with stuff, shelves stuffed with things, closets filled with multiples of everything; in short, the potential for a tremendous amount of waste...a potential often fulfilled because of our desire to buy more.

But at its core, Judaism rejects such ferocious consumerism and seeks a path of self-restraint. Our lives are guided by laws that restrict what we cannot do. Our holidays are marked by a curtailment of our actions. And we are shaped by principles like "Love your neighbor as yourself" that hem in our selfishness and focus our attention on our obligations to others.

This self-restraint creates space within our materialistic culture for us to be more altruistic and less self-centered. And ideally, by adopting a goal beyond ourselves, our consumption will be guided by our real needs rather than by our desires.

Think of it this way: There is such a thing a person having too many Priuses.

Shabbat Shalom