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A meaningful New Year for our time

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This Sunday evening and during the day Monday, wish the trees you see a “Happy New Year.” That is because Sunday night marks the beginning of Tu B’Shevat, better known as “the New Year for Trees.”

It is a great deal more than that, however.

As is often the case in the Talmud, when “the New Year for Trees” falls out is the subject of a debate between the academies of Shammai and Hillel. Beit Shammai puts it at the first of Shevat, while Beit Hillel prefers the 15th. We follow Beit Hillel because the winter rains in Israel are almost at an end by the 15th. As the outside temperature warms, the trees begin producing the vital nutrients required to bear fruit. First to put forth its bounty is Israel’s answer to the groundhog: the almond tree, which begins to bloom around Tu B’Shevat, signaling the coming of spring.

Around 400 years ago, the mystic-minded rabbis of Safed added a new custom to the day. They instituted the Tu B’Shevat seder. In their kabbalistic view of things, trees represented the Tree of Life (Etz Chaim) itself. Through their seder, they hoped to encourage blessings to flow from the Tree of Life into the world, thereby repairing it (tikkun olam).

Our world is desperately in need of all kinds of tikkun, all kinds of repairing, and that includes the trees, and all other ecological and environmental issues.

According to a 2017 Climate Science Special Report by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, global warming, if it remains unchecked, will cause “potentially large and irreversible” damage to the planet, thereby threatening all life on Earth. The war on trees is a serious contributing factor. Planned deforestation, coupled with ever-intensifying forest fires, according to the report, are taking their toll on the environment. It is estimated that deforestation alone is responsible for 20 percent of the carbon emissions in the world today, significantly contributing to global warming. The continued growth of carbon emissions, the CSSR concluded, could “lead to an atmospheric concentration not experienced in tens to hundreds of millions of years.”

This brings us back to Sunday night and Monday.

Because “New Year” implies that there is a whole year to follow, to mark Tu B’Shevat as a day onto itself misses the point. If our world needs tikkun, reducing carbon emissions in every way we can is a goal we must work on from one “Year of Trees” to the next.

The Torah understood that even if we do not. “Environmental protection” may be a modern term, but what most people do not realize is that it is a serious component of Torah legislation. Part of the problem, of course, is that unless a person knows how to read it, the Torah is just words. Few of us know how to read it. To really read it, we often have to be able to read between the lines.

For example, bible-thumpers from time immemorial like to cite Genesis 1:26, which states that we humans “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” They also cite Psalm 115:16, which states, “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but He has given the earth to humankind.”

Read plainly, it would seem we can do whatever we want with our world, and that is how they interpret it. Not so, said the great medieval commentator and grammarian Abraham ibn Ezra:

“The ignorant have compared man’s rule over the earth with God’s rule over the heavens. This is not right, for God rules over everything. The meaning of ‘He has given the earth to humankind’ is that man is God’s ‘pakeed’ over the earth and must do everything according to God’s word.” Pakeed, which means steward or caretaker, is a specific term, referring to a commission for a specific task. That task, Ibn Ezra says, is found in Genesis 2:15: “And the Lord God took the human, and put him into the Garden of Eden to work it and to watch over it.”

Torah legislation supports Ibn Ezra. For example, Moses set out the rules of war. As often noted in my columns, one of those rules is a prohibition against destroying food-bearing trees. (See Deuteronomy 20:19-20.) Reading between the lines, the real prohibition in those two verses is against destroying anything of use to humankind or to anything else. These verses created the category of law known as bal tashchit (“do not destroy,” often referred to as wanton destruction).

A 14th century rabbi, Aharon Halevy of Barcelona, described this commandment in his Sefer Ha-Chinuch, the Book of Education, in which he provides readers with the legal interpretations and moral justifications for the Torah’s commandments:

“This is meant to instill in us the love for that which is good and beneficial, and to hold fast to it; by this means, good will fill our souls and we will keep far from all that is evil or destructive. This is the way of the pious and those of good deeds: They love peace, rejoice in that which is of benefit to people and brings them to Torah; not even a grain of mustard do they destroy, and are grieved by any destruction they may see. If it is possible to save anything that is being spoiled, they spare no effort to do so.” (See Sefer Ha-Chinuch 529:2.)

The Jerusalem Talmud also weighs in, albeit in its own way: “It is forbidden to live in a town in which there is no garden or greenery.” It follows that it is equally forbidden to destroy those gardens and greenery for no halachically valid reason. (See JT Kiddushin 4:12.)

The principle of bal tashchit includes not burning fuels of any kind with abandon—neither non-replenishing fossil fuels nor naturally replenishing vegetable ones. (See BT Shabbat 67b.)

The Torah’s laws, as interpreted by the sages, require us to protect against air pollution, odor pollution, water pollution, and even noise pollution. Many of these laws are expounded on in Chapter 2 of BT Bava Batra. Thus, BT Bava Batra 18a (citing a mishnah on 20b) prohibits a person from opening a bakery or a dyer's workshop under another person's storehouse because of the smoke, or from housing cattle there because of the smell.

Another mishnah (on 24b) deals with airborne pollution. Businesses that pollute the air in some way must be placed at a safe distance away from a town because of the harm from the pollutants they produce. For the same reason, it says, a person cannot even open such an enterprise on his own property unless there is a safe amount of clear space all around, and as long as it is at a safe distance from the property of others.

Odor pollution is the subject of a mishnah at 25a, which requires that noxious odor-producing establishments must also be located a safe distance away from nearby towns. A debate of sorts ensues as to which side outside the town is meant. The mishnah prefers the east side of the town, because the odor-carrying winds usually come from the west. Rabbi Akiva would allow such an establishment to be set up in any direction except the west, for the same reason.

There are laws that protect against noise pollution, as well. At 21a, for example, it is made clear that people living nearby can block someone from establishing a business near them because of the noise it would create, although an exception is made for small school.

These are not laws created today. They are laws created 2,000 and 3,000 years ago, long before the invention of the term “environmental protection” and long before anyone heard of global warming.

So seriously does Judaism take its environmental concerns that there is even a blessing to be recited when one sees the first trees bud and the first flowers bloom in the spring: “Blessed are You, O Lord our God, who omitted nothing from His world, but Who created within it good creatures and beautiful trees for people to enjoy.” There are other blessings with similar themes, as well.

On Sunday night and Monday, Tu B’Shevat 5780, wish all the trees you see a happy new year, especially the food-bearing ones, which gave us the laws of bal tashchit in the first place. Then, for the rest of the “year of trees,” consider what bal tashchit really means and what we are required to do about it.