

Dear Rabbi Fried,

Is there a source in the Torah for being environmentally conscious? Do you feel we should be drilling for oil in Alaska? We are doing research for a summer project for religious school and appreciate your help.

Megan K. & Landon W.

Dear Megan and Landon,

The Torah says that “in times of war, when we lay siege upon a city to conquer it, we are not permitted to cut down fruit trees to aid us in combat. Only a tree which offers no food can we cut down”, (Devarim/Deut. 20:19-20). We learn from this, that not only are we not allowed to cut down trees which bear fruit, but anything in the world which provides benefit is forbidden to be destroyed for no reason. An early commentary, the *Sefer Hachinuch* (who elaborates on and explains all 613 mitzvos, #529) says we should learn from this mitzvah to deeply appreciate all of G-d’s gifts in this world. He says that the righteous have trained themselves, by way of this mitzvah, to delight in all the world’s treasures and be pained by the unnecessary destruction of even a mustard seed. They go out of their way to protect and save any and all things in the world from destruction, unlike the wicked who wantonly destroy anything and everything in their ways and don’t care the least.

One of the great founders of Torah education in America in the 1930’s and 40’s, R’ Shraga Feivel Mendelovitz, was once walking with a group of students through the forest, when one of them absentmindedly pulled a leaf off a tree. The Rabbi was aghast and nearly was overtaken by tremors. He said, the entire world is G-d’s symphony, and every leaf and blade of grass is an instrument in that great symphony. To pull off a leaf for no reason is to minimize the music! This fits the Medrash which relates: “When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first man Adam, He took him around and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him; ‘see My works, how pleasant and beautiful they are, make sure that you do not ruin and destroy My world’...” (*Koheles Rabba* 91:13; *Mesilas Yesharim* ch.1). Although the Medrash means not to destroy the world spiritually, it means physically as well.

For this reason, I personally am a big believer in recycling, as it fits into the Torah perspective of protecting the world. It’s no accident that Rabbi Moshe Gafni, an MK for UTJ, the ultra-orthodox party in the Knesset, was recently voted the most environmentally-concerned MK.

The Israeli parliament recently passed a number of very powerful laws to protect the environment, putting severe penalties upon polluters. They laudably forbade the future use of the common 2-handled plastic bags in stores, and stores need to begin providing only biodegradable bags, which will need to be purchased by the customers, not just given out.

We have, however, guidelines for the above prohibition. For example, the Talmud says that if there would be a greater financial loss to protect a fruit tree than its potential benefit, we would be allowed to uproot it.

The United States is currently foregoing drilling for ten billion proven barrels of oil, located on .01% of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. It has currently chosen, at the behest of environmentalists, to send the money for those billions of barrels of oil to foreign supporters of international terrorism, our enemies, rather than disturb several herds of moose!

In the Torah outlook, we need to keep everything in perspective. It’s important to always look at the big picture, and not miss the forest for the trees. Good luck on your project!