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Bal Tashchit : the Jewish prohibition against needless destruction

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Summary

Bal Tashchit: The Jewish prohibition against needless destruction

Bal tashchit, a Biblical prohibition against needlessly destroying resources, is possibly the most important religious principle directly relating to the relationship between man and his environment. While the extensive environmental destruction the world has witnessed over recent history has sparked increasing interest in 'religious' responses to environmental issues, and has made the relevance of *bal tashchit* greater than ever, a clear and comprehensive description of the principle of *bal tashchit* has been lacking. Also lacking has been an analysis of how *bal tashchit* might actually be applied to current environmental problems.

Towards addressing these deficiencies, this thesis attempts to answer three basic questions: 1) what exactly is *bal tashchit*? 2) How might a principle of *bal tashchit* be applied to current environmental problems? 3) What contributions might the principle of *bal tashchit*, as analyzed and clarified in this thesis, make to the world?

In answering these questions, this thesis first examines the classic texts in the Jewish tradition from which *bal tashchit* is derived. The source-text (Deuteronomy 20:19-20) is analyzed and shown to contain important symbolism concerning the relationship between man and his environment (chapter two). The legal prohibition of *bal tashchit*, which developed from the source text, is examined from a chronological perspective before being clearly defined according to the Jewish tradition (chapter three).

Drawing from the above research as well as from modern western concepts, this thesis describes a wider and more universal principle of *bal tashchit* that can serve as an approach to the management of current environmental problems (chapters four and five). This principle places a great deal of importance on the intellectual and moral-ethical development of man, which is seen as a key factor in the proper management of the natural environment. Included in this principle is a hierarchy for the allocation of resources in a way that will avoid needless destruction, and maximize human welfare in a sustainable way.

As a theoretical approach to the management of current environmental problems, the principle of *bal tashchit* is applied to the recurring water crisis in the land of Israel, and more peripherally, to the problems of climate change and loss of biodiversity (chapter six).

The principle of *bal tashchit*, as presented in this thesis, can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between man and his physical environment, and how to live sustainably without sacrificing quality of life.