



Torah Reflections: Conversations on the Weekly Parsha
Parshat Shoftim 5784: Preserving the Good

Integrating Torah into one's life through reflection and conversation can be an incredibly fun and engaging experience. It's a journey of discovery, where ancient wisdom and timeless teachings come to life in our daily experiences. Through reflection, we have the opportunity to dive deep into the rich tapestry of Torah, extracting profound insights and lessons that resonate with our modern lives. The joy lies in the 'aha' moments, those instances when a Torah verse or story suddenly connects with our personal challenges, aspirations, and values. And when we engage in conversations about Torah with others, it becomes an interactive exploration, where diverse perspectives and interpretations enhance our understanding. These dialogues often spark excitement and intellectual curiosity, making the learning process both enjoyable and fulfilling. Torah becomes a vibrant and dynamic part of our lives, offering not just guidance but also a source of endless fascination, connection, and growth.

NOTE: Don't feel obligated to go through every source or answer all the questions—unless you want to. Even one source, or one question will give you plenty of material for discussion and meditation. Enjoy this!

Some thoughts from the parsha

In this week's Torah portion (Deuteronomy 20:19-20), we are introduced to the prohibition against cutting down fruit trees during a siege. Even in the context of war, a situation where destruction often seems inevitable, even necessary, the Torah commands the Jewish people to spare fruit trees, as their fruit sustains life.

The Rambam (Maimonides) explains in *Hilchot Melachim* 6:8 that this prohibition is against needless destruction. If a tree's removal is necessary for survival or to prevent harm, such as when it interferes with other trees or essential resources, then its destruction is permitted. However, wanton destruction, for no constructive reason, is prohibited. Here we have an example of a Torah commandment that does not apply per se to Noahides, but where the ethical principle should be intuitive to any spiritually-sensitive person.

The Torah's question, "Is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged of you?" highlights a crucial insight. During times of war, people might fall into the cognitive trap of treating everything in the environment as a potential enemy. The Siftei Chachamim, referencing the Chizkuni, expands on this, explaining that this verse prevents the error of viewing trees as combatants. Trees, especially fruit-bearing ones, are not adversaries but vital sources of sustenance, even during conflict.

The Sefer HaChinuch adds a deeper layer to this mitzvah. Beyond its practical application, the Chinuch, like Rambam, sees this command as teaching a fundamental ethical principle: the need to distance oneself from acts of destruction. This mitzvah cultivates in us a love of goodness, which the Chinuch defines as the desire to preserve and maintain all that benefits humanity. This approach teaches us to value and protect what sustains life and promotes human flourishing. By focusing on the good, we avoid the mindset that allows for unnecessary harm or damage to G-d's creation.

This ethos of preserving goodness extends beyond nature and reflects a broader moral responsibility. The Sefer HaChinuch emphasizes that humans are meant to be constructive, not destructive. Just as we are commanded to preserve fruit trees, we are urged to seek the good in all areas of life, including



Torah Reflections: Conversations on the Weekly Parsha
Parshat Shoftim 5784: Preserving the Good

our relationships, communities, and environment. This mitzvah fosters a mindset of care, respect, and responsibility for all that sustains human life and contributes to the collective good.

The Torah seeks to instill in us an appreciation for all of G-d's creation. By following this commandment, we not only avoid destructive behaviors but also learn to cultivate a deeper connection to the world around us, recognizing the sacredness in the everyday elements of life.

Ultimately, the lesson of this mitzvah is that humanity's dominion over the world is not absolute; it is tempered by the obligation to protect, preserve, and appreciate the resources we are given. As G-d instructed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, our task is to "replenish the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28), but with the caution not to destroy it needlessly, as expressed in the Midrash (*Koheles Rabbah* 7:13). If we destroy the world, no one will be left to repair it.

Now, reflect upon the following questions

1. The Sefer HaChinuch teaches us to distance ourselves from acts of destruction and instead focus on the good. How does this idea resonate with the choices we make in our everyday lives, especially in our interactions with others and the environment?
2. How do you understand the connection between preserving fruit trees and the broader ethical principle of protecting what benefits humanity? In what ways can this mitzvah influence our approach to modern issues like environmental conservation and sustainability?
3. The Sefer HaChinuch emphasizes the value of goodness and maintaining what sustains life. How can this teaching inspire us to seek out and preserve goodness in our personal relationships, communities, and the world at large?
4. How might the Torah's commandment to avoid needless destruction challenge our cultural assumptions about consumption, waste, and the use of resources? What steps can we take to align our lives more closely with this value of preservation?
5. In the context of war, where destruction might seem justified, the Torah sets limits by protecting fruit trees. What does this teach us about maintaining moral boundaries even in challenging or extreme situations? How can we apply this principle in our daily decision-making processes?

Shabbat Shalom!