

Parenting in the Parsha

שופטים Disposable

כִּי־תִצּוֹר אֶל־עִיר יְגִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עִלֶּיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצֶיהָ לְנֹדֶחַ עָלֶיהָ גִּרְזֵן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאֵתוּ לֹא תִקְרָת

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.

שרש המצוה ידוע, שהוא כדי ללמד נפשנו לאהב הטוב והתועלת ולהדבק בו, ומתוך כך תדבק בנו הטובה, ונרחיק מכל דבר רע ומכל דבר השחתה, וזהו דרך החסידים ואנשי מעשה אוהבים שלום ושמחים בטוב הבריות ומקרבים אותן לתורה, ולא יאבדו אפילו גרגיר של חרדל בעולם, ויצר עליהם בכל אבדון והשחתה שיראו, ואם יוכלו להציל יצילו כל דבר מהשחית בכל כחם

The root of this commandment is well-known - it is in order to teach our souls to love good and benefit and to cling to it. And through this, good clings to us and we will distance [ourselves] from all bad and destructive things. And this is the way of the pious and people of [proper] action - they love peace and are happy for the good of the creatures and bring them close to Torah, and they do not destroy even a grain of mustard in the world. And they are distressed by all loss and destruction that they see; and if they can prevent it, they will prevent any destruction with all of their strength.

- Sefer Hachinuch

If everything is disposable or recyclable, how does that make us feel about ourselves and each other?

- Jonathan Miles

We live in a disposable society. We use disposable plates, disposable cookware, disposable cups and flatware, and just about everything imaginable. In truth, even the non-disposable aspects of our consumer lives are, by and large, disposable when compared to life only a few decades back. Our cars are disposable, with a large percentage of people leasing, rather than buying their automobiles. Our appliances and electronics are disposable, cheaper to replace than repair when broken, and in need of frequent replacement even when not broken due to their near-immediate obsolescence. We are all aware that the ever-more disposable nature of our consumer society strains our natural resources and our ability as a society to deal with the copious amount of waste we produce constantly. What we don't consider is how our disposable society affects our view of people and relationships.

I once had the pleasure of listening to the great Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski regale an audience of young adults at a Shabbos lunch. There, Rabbi Twerski shared with them the treasure of a special fountain pen that he had received as a *bar-mitzvah* gift. He told how he kept the pen for years, how he treasured and valued that pen, and how when the pen broke he actually brought it in for repair. Rabbi Twerski contrasted his sentimental attachment to his pen with the indifference we feel toward the throw-away ball-point pens that most of us use daily. Rabbi Twerski also pointed out how, when he was young, there were television repair shops where people would go to fix their non-working TV sets. Today, those shops no longer exist, driven out of business by the reality that it is cheaper to replace than to repair.

So what? Aren't we better off being able to replace our consumer products with even better ones? No, said Rabbi Twerski. The problem, he explained is that the way that we treat objects affects the way that we treat people. It is a profound and frightening insight into an underlying cause for much of the social ills in our world. If our objects are disposable, easily cast off and discarded in favor of the newer, the better, and the improved, then by extension the people in our lives and our relationships are also disposable in favor of the newer, the better, the improved. Our disposable world doesn't just clog our landfills, it clogs our divorce courts and *batei din* as well.

Prior generations who developed attachments to their possessions and saw those objects as worth repairing when they broke also developed attachments to their relationships and saw them as worth repairing when they were broken. Those same people who valued their property did not simply discard it when they perceived that something new and better had come, and they equally didn't dispose of the people in their lives when they thought someone new and better had come along. How does our relationship with our material goods affect our relationship with people? Does our tendency to discard our possessions make us more inclined to discard our relationships? The *Sefer Hachinuch* says it does. He sees the prohibition of *bal tashchis* as a broad, sweeping perspective on the world and on people. The underlying principle of the *mitzvah* in the *Chinuch's* understanding is that those who are good distance themselves from destruction and ruin and embrace preservation and sustaining of all things and all people.

How do we raise children against the disposable tide of society? First, be conscious of your own relationship with your material possessions. Don't be flippant about disposing of your broken or damaged items and don't rush to discard the old in order to upgrade to the new. Second, help guide your children's relationships with their possessions as well. Don't indulge their whim to always have the latest and greatest if the old stuff they have is still good. Don't rush to buy them something new when they get bored with the old. Teach them to cherish and value the objects they have and they will learn to cherish and value the people and relationships in their lives.

*Good Shabbos,
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