

Commentary on Deuteronomy 20:19

Name: _____

Date: _____

In the verse from Deuteronomy that you read, the Torah says not to cut down fruit trees in time of war. It is wasteful, and falls under the prohibition of *ba'al tashchit*. Many rabbis explain that this verse is REALLY telling us a lot more. According to the Talmud*, this verse shows that people are never allowed to waste fruit trees, even when it is not a time of war. In fact, according to the *Rambam* (Maimonides) **, *ba'al tashchit* prohibits us from being wasteful AT ALL!

The following story comes from the Talmud. It shows how King David was punished for being wasteful. According to the Talmud, this is an example of *Ba'al Tashchit*:

Before David became king, he spent many years running from his father-in-law, King Saul, who was very jealous of David. At one point, David was hiding and King Saul came in. The men that David was with encouraged him to kill King Saul. Instead, David cut off a piece of his coat. David later showed this piece to King Saul to prove that he did not want to kill him. If David had wanted to kill King Saul, he would have done it when he had the chance.

After King Saul's death, King David became king. King David ruled for many years. In the beginning of the Book of Kings (1:1), the text explains:

"Now King David was old, advanced in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he could not become warm."

The Talmud connects these two stories. The rabbis explain that the reason why King David could not become warm was because he had cut King Saul's coat in the cave. He was very wasteful and did not show respect for the coat:

"Then David arose and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe. R. Jose son of R. Hanina said: Whoever treats garments contemptuously will in the end derive no benefit from them; for it says, 'Now King David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he could get no heat.' (Talmud Bavli, Berakoth 62B)"

Notes:

* The Talmud is one of the most important books in Jewish law. It was written during the 5th and 6th Centuries. It contains discussions between many different rabbis. The rabbis tell stories and try to decide the law.

** *The Rambam* was a rabbi who lived in Spain during the 12th Century. He wrote many books about Judaism.

