

Carbon Footprints in Halacha

by Rabbi Natan Levy, Head of Jewish Responsibility Unit LSJS

With world leaders gathering in Copenhagen this week to forge an agreement on climate change, let us explore the halacha in connection with carbon emissions. Does the Torah forbid us to drive people carriers and fly to Israel? Jewish environmental ethics focus on the law of *Ba'al Tashchit*, the injunction not to waste. This Biblical precept (Deuteronomy 20:19-20) forbids the cutting down of fruit trees in the midst of siege warfare.

Maimonides expands *Ba'al Tashchit* to include wanton destruction of any object. If one could confidently link driving one's car to flooding in Bangladesh, perhaps this might fall under the rubric of forbidden destruction. However, the Talmud (Shabbat 129a) relates that the Rabbis destroyed furniture to light a fire, and this was not considered wasteful. This is not because *Ba'al Tashchit* ceased to be applicable, but because there is a higher value in not causing destruction to oneself through undue hardship. If that trip to Israel has a purpose, then it can no longer be termed wanton destruction. However, perhaps even with a good reason, bringing floods to Bangladesh for the sake of holiday excursions might be forbidden, were such a link to be proved.

Maimonides (*Nizke Mamon* 13) states that one who throws rubbish into a public road must pay damages if someone falls and injures themselves on the refuse. If we equate carbon to refuse (both by-products of useful enterprise), then emissions, and any injury they may cause, remain perpetually the responsibility of the emitter. However, unlike a passerby slipping on a particular bag of rubbish, it is impossible to say that my particular car fumes caused a certain measurable degree of damage to the Arctic shoreline; there are just too many variables involved.

Perhaps the closest analogy in halachic literature to carbon emissions is second-hand cigarette smoke. This is a substance that causes proven, yet undefined, damage to an undetermined amount of innocents. For this reason, R. Moshe Feinstein forbids smoking in public places due to health risks. (*Iggrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat* 11:8).

Carbon gases cause considerable negative effects. The World Health Organization reported 300,000 deaths globally in 2008 attributed to climate change and we are obligated to reduce our carbon emissions wherever possible.



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