# Limmud wrap-up

It is tempting to dismiss the ethical writings of our ancient sages as out of date and inapplicable in the 21st Century. But this is why Judaism encourages us to learn with others rather than alone, as it is through discussion with others that our eyes are opened to new perspectives. And following the JECO-organised panel discussion at the recent LimmudOz in Melbourne, it occurred to me how eery it is that edicts made hundreds of year ago are still so relevant today.

The question put to our panel was whether the declaration by the Sefer HaChinuch (13th century) that “righteous Jews should not waste even a grain of mustard” was relevant in our current era of material abundance. Is it permissible to use resources to save time? Our speakers, Rabbi Shamir Caplan, Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black, Keren Harel-Gordon and Grant Blashki considered this question from every possibly viewpoint and in doing so provided a great example of how much can be fitted into a single hour if you are careful not to waste one minute.

What struck me in the course of the discussion was that the instruction to avoid waste of material resources is actually more important now than ever before despite, or perhaps because, of these times of abundance. As Grant so succinctly put it, “In biblical times we were so excited when we landed a bit of free oil for our Menorah, but now each person in Australia uses enough energy to emit 27 tonnes of greenhouse gas per year”. In the past we were careful not to waste because couldn’t afford to, or because there was simply not enough to create waste. Now that food, electricity etc is so cheap and plentiful we can waste whilst hardly being aware that we are doing so (at least in affluent Western societies). We need awareness of our place in the world and of the nature around us in order to ensure we only take what we need. Keren highlighted our responsibility to nurture that awareness, or “wonder” in our children or students so that they take nothing for granted and treat the world with respect – and this must be viewed as a religious as well as general responsibility. For most of us today, in Melbourne, the only physical labour involved in obtaining food is getting to the supermarket, and very often that is by car and so it not too laborious. If we had to plant all our own food we would feel a natural sense of wonder at seeing the first shoot or the first fruit, an appreciation when we produce enough to feed our family. So we must find other ways to nurture that wonder, the connection nature. Jonathan suggested using the Hebrew date occasionally as that is tied in with the cycles of the moon – a natural phenomenon. Or even to say a blessing over what could easily be taken for granted such as having a hot shower (few people appreciate the wonder of hot water flowing into their homes).

So returning to the question of whether saving time justifies waste of material resources, Shamir told the story of Choni HaMaagel who lived two thousand years ago when there were no modern time-saving gadgets, and when the life-span was short. He found time to plant a carob tree and to nurture it in order that the next generation would benefit. He certainly would not have lived long enough to gain personally but he understood his responsibility to spend some of the time he was given on this world to ensure those who came after him would be provided for. Perhaps we should all learn from him and consider whether we are helping future generations to live in a world as plentiful as ours, or whether our time-saving actions might be having a long-term detrimental effect. A notable example that came up more than once was the heavy use of single-use goods, such as disposable crockery and tablecloths, throughout the Jewish community – an issue which we feel needs to be urgently addressed.

We recorded the discussion in full so please follow this link if you wish to hear more of the fascinating discussion.