

Cityfront: Bagging the plastic

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It seems that the majority of Israelis have no idea that the innocent-looking plastic bags in which they carry home their groceries pose a serious danger to the environment.

Plastic bags make up over one-quarter of the total volume of landfill in Israel, according to Knesset Internal Affairs and Environment Committee member Dov Kheinin (Hadash). In light of this alarming statistic, Israel is starting to take action to reduce the excessive consumption of plastic bags, as many other countries have done over the past decade.

A few months ago, Kheinin and fellow MK Estherina Tartman (Israel Beiteinu) introduced a bill that would require store owners to charge customers NIS 1 per bag. The fee aims to deter shoppers from using plastic bags and to seek instead more environmentally friendly alternatives, such as reusable or paper sacks.

This bill is based on a successful precedent in Ireland, where its population of four million was consuming 1.5 billion plastic bags per year.

In 2002, the Irish government introduced the "PlasTax," a charge of 15 Eurocents per bag. As a result, plastic bag consumption plummeted by 95 percent, according to 2005 figures.

With its population of almost 6.5 million, Israel consumes five billion plastic bags per year - approximately 14 million bags per day.

The Irish model is not the only one that has proven to reduce plastic bag consumption. In 2003, the Australian Retailers Association adopted a Code of Practice for the Management of Plastic Carry Bags. The code encourages retailers to voluntarily reduce their distribution of lightweight plastic bags.

Subsequently, supermarkets began selling and encouraging the use of reusable "Green" bags, while other retailers reverted to recyclable paper bags. Within two years, supermarkets were issuing 45% fewer plastic bags and 90% of small- to medium-sized retailers had reduced their bag distribution.

Other countries have employed a different approach. In 2003, South Africa banned the free distribution of plastic shopping bags thinner than 30 microns (30 millionths of a meter), as will China this year.

Kheinin hopes his law, if passed, will encourage people to choose alternative means of carrying their groceries. The option he recommends is the Green bag. Compared to regular plastic shopping bags, the Green bag is more durable and can hold many more items, and is therefore more likely to be reused.

When asked why Israel is attempting to introduce a bag fee as opposed to other approaches, Kheinin says: "We don't want to reinvent the wheel. [The Irish method] has really proven itself... The other option is to ban plastic bags altogether. We decided to begin with a less drastic [alternative]."

He believes that by hitting consumers' wallets, a per-bag fee will prove the most effective in changing their behavior. "The most important thing to understand is we don't want people to pay more. The economic [means] is only the tool to make people move on to better solutions," he explains.

The bill is currently in its first reading in the Knesset. According to Kheinin, most MKs have expressed support for the legislation, though there has been "no real debate" as yet.

If the law is passed, the fee will be introduced gradually to ensure that the public understands its intentions, adds Kheinin.

But not everybody is confident about the effectiveness of the proposed law. Batya Malichi, a board member of the Eco-Judaism Project (EJP), which seeks to raise awareness of the connection between Judaism and the environment, is skeptical of how enforceable the law will be. "Are [government agencies] going to go into every single shop in Israel and make sure people are charging [for each plastic bag]?" she questions.

The EJP recently held a community awareness day at Kfar Saba's Arim Mall. Malichi spoke to Sharon-area residents, who, she says, all knew about the bill and were doubtful it would pass.

However, she adds: "People knew immediately that if [something] affects your pocketbook, then it changes behavior." In that sense, the law sounds like a great idea, she says.

Yehuda Olander, manager of the Sharon District Regional Division for the Quality of the Environment, attributes Israel's lack of progress on environment preservation to its constant occupation with survival. "Survival here is not only talking about the environment, it's talking about security," he explains. "Ten to 20 years ago, when the rest of the world began caring for the environment, Israel was focused on surviving as a country.

"But it works to Israel's advantage," Olander continues. Through other countries' successes and failures, Israel can learn how to be more environmentally responsible.

"[Israelis] come back from Europe and [other parts of the world] and say 'Wow, look what they have done - how they recycle and how they avoid traveling too much in their cars.'"

Because plastic bags are free, people happily take an unlimited number, particularly at the supermarket, he explains. They have no idea of the detriment their consumption causes to the environment, he adds.

"What Israel needs is education and explanation," Olander says, suggesting schools and television campaigns as the most effective mediums for educating the public.

"Children have a big influence on their families," he says. "Simply by teaching children in school that plastic bags are bad for the environment, we can reach the wider public. Not only will children grow up with better environmental consciousness, but they will also go home to their parents and tell them not to take as many bags when they do the shopping."

Even though people in Israel are starting to become aware of the damage caused by using plastic bags, says Malichi, they often feel powerless to help. "If you use just one fewer bag, you're already helping the situation. If you reuse a plastic bag, you're already helping the situation. Anything that delays that bag from reaching the landfill is a plus," she encourages.

Despite the prospective obstacles, Malichi and Olander are both optimistic that Israel will achieve a shift in environmental consciousness.

"I've been using these Green bags for a year now. In the beginning I was the only one. Now I see there are more people [using them] and people come up and ask me where I bought the bag," says Malichi.

"I think some people don't want to go out of their way to find a solution, but if we bring the solution closer to them [by having vendors sell reusable bags] they'll be willing to use it."

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