

Water: A Drash for Sukkos
By Akiva Wolff

The Jewish people have a special relationship with water, which is especially evidenced during the Festival of Sukkos. The Mishna¹ tells us that on Sukkos the world is judged for water. Interestingly, on the last day of Sukkos, Hoshana Rabbah, the Midrash tells us there is a final sealing of the judgement for us as well². This would seem to indicate a connection between the judgement for both water and for us. What is the connection between the two?

The importance of water

Water is absolutely necessary for all life. Because of its ubiquitous nature, we all too often take water for granted, especially if we live in water-abundant areas. The following sources, with accompanying explanation, indicate how our sages well understood the vital importance of water.

The Torah refers to God as the 'Source of Living Waters'³. The midrash succinctly expresses the vital importance of water:

Water is called life⁴

Indeed, life as we know it would be impossible without a sufficient supply of high quality fresh water. A human fetus is about 90% water, a newborn is 70% and an adult is almost 60% water. A lack of sufficient drinking water is recognized to be the leading cause of death in the world⁵. The Jerusalem Talmud expresses the economic peculiarity of water while reiterating its importance:

Water is cheap and wine is expensive (and yet) it is possible for the world to live without wine; it is impossible for the world to live without water⁶

Drinking water is relatively inexpensive – and it needs to be, since everyone requires it, regardless of their economic situation. Because water is inexpensive, people may not fully appreciate its great value, and may waste or otherwise misuse it. On the other hand, it is impossible to live without water; whereas it is possible to live without other things of a higher economic value such as wine⁷.

¹ Rosh Hashana 1:2

² Otzar HaMidrashim, Ruth, Eisenstein Edition p. 55

³ Jeremiah 2:12, 17:13

⁴ Avot of Rabbi Natan 34:10

⁵ For example, see: United Nations Environmental Program, *Global State of the Environment Report 1997*, Executive Summary, Overview of Regional Status and Trends, p. 2

⁶ Talmud Yerushalmi, Horayot, Chapter 3, halacha 5

⁷ It is interesting to note that economists such as John Law and Adam Smith, in the 17th century, pointed out the same paradox, which became known in economic parlance as the “paradox of value”. The classic example they used was the comparison of water and diamonds (see “Essay on a Land Bank” by John Law and “An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations” by Adam Smith)

The Babylonian Talmud demonstrates the vital importance the sages placed in maintaining the supply of water:

*Everyone in a community, even the orphans and the scholars that are normally exempted from community taxes, are required to pay their share of creating and maintaining water sources for the community*⁸.

The consequences of not having water of sufficient quality is expressed in the following midrash:

*‘By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept’ (Psalm 137:1). Why did the Jewish people cry by the rivers of Babylon? Rabbi Yochanan said, “The Euphrates (river) killed more of them than the wicked Nebuchadnezzar did. When the Jews lived in the land of Israel, they drank only rainwater, freshwater and springwater. When they were exiled to Babylon, they drank the (polluted) water of the Euphrates, and many of them died”*⁹.

Water pollution is an old problem. This midrash describes the disastrous effects that were well recognized thousands of years ago. Because water is so important, it must not be wasted. The prohibition against wasting water expressed in the following Talmudic principle:

*A person should not dump out water from his pit when others are in need [of the water]*¹⁰.

The importance of rainfall

On Shmini Atzeret, immediately after Sukkos, we begin praying for rain in the Shemoneh Esreh. The sages understood that rainfall came directly from the Creator as expressed in the following Talmudic statement:

*Rabbi Yochanan said, the keys to three things were kept in the hand of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and not given over to an intermediary [nature*¹¹*]. They are, the key to rain, the key to childbirth and the key to the revival of the dead*¹².

Observant Jews pray for rain three times a day during the rainy season, and in addition, there are special prayers for rain at the beginning of the rainy season and during periods of drought. The sages also understood that the quantity, timing and location of the rainfall were linked to the ethical behavior of the people. We find this clearly expressed throughout the Jewish sources, as the illustrated in the following examples.

⁸ Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra 8a. and Maimonides Hilchos Schanim 6:3,7

⁹ Midrash Shocher Tov 137

¹⁰ Talmud Bavli Yevamos 39

¹¹ see commentary of Hirsch on Deuteronomy, pg 186 “rain... these He has not handed over to his angels, the mechanical laws of nature”.

¹² Talmud Bavli Ta’anit 2a

The first example comes from the Torah and is part of the “Shma” which is recited by observant Jews at least twice each day:

*Now it shall come to pass, if you hearken diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, **that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the early rains and the late rains...**pay heed lest your hearts turn and you serve other G-d and worship them and G-d's anger will rage against you and He will shut up the Heavens and **there will be no rain**¹³*

The second example comes also from the Torah

*If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments, and do them; then **I will give you rain in due season**, and the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will give its fruit...and you will dwell securely in your land. And I will give peace in the land...¹⁴*

A portion of the Talmud, including a significant part of an entire tractate (Ta'anit), discusses the importance of rainfall and the order of prescribed prayers and acts of repentance in relation to the rainfall, as well as praises of the greatness of rainfall. The Talmud states that the day it rains is as great as¹⁵:

- Rav Avahu - The revival of the dead
- Rav Yehuda - The day the Torah was given; Rava says even greater than the day the Torah was given
- Rav Chama bar Rav Chanina - Like the day the heavens and earth were created
- Rabbi Yitzchak - Even a coin in the pocket is blessed by it
- Rabbi Yochanan - Like the ingathering of the exiles

Conclusions

There is a special relationship between the people of Israel, the land of Israel and water. As our sources show, the judgment on water, which takes place on Sukkos, is very much a judgment on the people and the land. The sages saw the vulnerability of the land of Israel to shortages of water as part of a Divine plan that would ensure the continued reliance of the people on their Creator.

We learn from Yechezkel that in the Messianic era, healing water will flow from the Temple and Israel will at last arrive at a state of no water shortage:

And He took me to the entrance of the House (Temple), and behold, water was coming forth... He said to me: these waters are going out... to the desert plain, and they will reach the sea - the polluted waters of the sea- And the waters will be healed. All the

¹³ Deuteronomy 11:13

¹⁴ Leviticus 26:3-6

¹⁵ T.B. Ta'anit

living things that swarm there - As soon as these streams reach them they will live; however many they may be. For when these waters reach there they will be healed and they will live; ...And by the stream there shall spring up, on its banks, upon each side, all manner of fruit trees, whose leaves shall not wither neither shall their fruit cease; it will ripen anew month by month; for its waters come forth from the sanctuary...¹⁶.