



## The Blessing of Rain

By Jonathan Neril on the Torah portion of Bechukotai

Praying for rain is a key part of the spiritual life of a Jew. For almost half of the year, our daily prayers include praise of G-d as the One who “makes the wind blow and the rain descend” and a request that G-d will “give dew and rain for a blessing on the face of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> A special blessing for rain appears in the liturgy of the holiday of *Shemini Atzeret*, at the beginning of Israel's rainy season. We pray that the Divine bring beneficial rain, which falls at the right time to nourish our crops and fills our reservoirs. As the Talmud says, “The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created.”<sup>2</sup>

But it is not enough to just pray for rain. The Torah teaches that our actions impact the rain as well. At the beginning of this week’s Torah portion, Bechukotai, we read that rainfall is a function of our doing G-d's will. If Israel keeps the Torah, G-d says, “I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit... you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land, and I will grant peace in the Land.”<sup>3</sup> This promise of abundant rains and prosperity is followed by a warning that, should Israel ignore the Torah, G-d will “make your skies like iron-” cease all rains and bring drought, according to the Midrash.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the fact that we specifically ask that the rain be “for a blessing” acknowledges that too much rain is just as dangerous as not enough. In a number of instances in the *Tanakh*, G-d sent rain that was a curse, not a blessing. The Flood came to punish the generation for transgressing G-d’s will. Rashi explains that the rains of blessing only became a destructive flood when the people refused to repent.<sup>5</sup> In the time of the prophet Samuel, G-d brought thunder and rain to chastise the people.<sup>6</sup>

For centuries it was a core principle of Jewish faith that living in line with G-d’s will brings the blessing of healthy rains and crops. With a modern scientific understanding that human actions affect the quality and quantity of the rain, the warning of Bechukotai warrants our attention. We must reawaken the awareness that our actions impact the entire planet.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation adapted from Artscroll Siddur.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 8b, Artscroll translation.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 26:4-6. All translations of verses from the Torah are from *Judaica Press*, available at [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)

<sup>4</sup> Torah Kohanim 26:28, as cited by Rashi to Leviticus 26:19. Ramban (Nachmanides) on Lev. 24:4 discusses how beneficial rain improves human health and increases produce. He calls this blessing of the rains “the greatest of all blessings.”

<sup>5</sup> Based on the Midrash Hane’elam and the Zohar Chadash 28a. Translation by Artscroll Rashi Chumash

<sup>6</sup> I Samuel 12:17-18

The effect of industrialized society on rain through pollutants has been well-known for decades- we have all heard of acid rain. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our impact on the rain is becoming even more pronounced. A consensus of scientists states that human-caused climate change is increasing storm intensity and raising the seas. By burning fossil fuels in our cars, homes, factories, and planes, we are increasing the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere. This causes a greenhouse effect, which alters the climate. Global climate models project that climate change may increase precipitation by 7-15% at high latitudes, causing stronger and potentially more destructive storms in those areas. Climate change may decrease precipitation at mid- and low-altitudes, where the bulk of farmland lies, contributing to more severe regional droughts.<sup>7</sup>

We not only affect how rain comes down, but also how that rain affects the land when it does fall. With increasing urbanization in the world, land that once soaked up rainwater is being covered in pavement, which prevents the rainwater from replenishing underground aquifers (also referred to as “groundwater” or “the water table”). Aquifers directly provide more than one-third of drinking water in America, and contribute, in some part, to all drinking water sources.<sup>8</sup> In some places, like Florida, aquifers provide 100% of the drinking water as well as the majority of clean water for industrial and agricultural use.<sup>9</sup> When rainwater is prevented from replenishing the water table, one of our most necessary resources-- clean drinking water-- is compromised.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the amount of U.S. land covered by sprawling urban development increased by 50% during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Increased building covers the land with impervious paving, which prevents the land from absorbing rains back into the water table. Unabsorbed rainwater becomes runoff, flowing through drainage systems (or causing floods when drains and sewers are overburdened), picking up pollutants along the way, which are then dumped into lakes, streams and oceans. Atlanta, which was struck by a major drought in 2007, leads American cities in lost rainwater, with up to *132.8 billion* gallons lost per year.<sup>11</sup> The volume of water lost in the United States each year would provide tens of millions of people their annual water needs.

Impacting large urban areas like Los Angeles, Phoenix and Toronto,<sup>12</sup> this new reality is also quite pronounced in Israel. In a matter of decades, a near-continuous urban settlement will stretch from the northern

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<sup>7</sup> “Drought and Climate Change,” 2006, U.S. National Drought Mitigation Center. Online at [drought.unl.edu/whatis/cchange.htm](http://drought.unl.edu/whatis/cchange.htm)

<sup>8</sup> “Paving our way to water shortages: How sprawl aggravates drought,” available at <http://www.arroyoseco.org/S.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See the report on Florida's aquifers at <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/guide/aquifers.html>

<sup>10</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Inventory. cited in the previously referenced article, “Paving our Way”

<sup>11</sup> Co-operative study cited on <http://www.arroyoseco.org/S.htm>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, a series on Toronto's urban sprawl, available online at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/series/sprawl/>

coast to the southern coast, from Nahariya to Tel Aviv to Ashkelon to Gaza.<sup>13</sup> Another urban belt extends for miles from north, south, and east of Jerusalem. Travel to any population center in Israel today and you will see the massive infrastructure work being done on roads and highways, adding more impervious paving to a land that is already living at the edge of a water crisis. Israel's water resources are so limited (and disputed) that we cannot afford to deprive the coastal and mountain aquifers of precious rainwater.

Today we have an unbelievably complex understanding of how the earth's systems work, and how we impact them. In viewing the connection between humans and the environment through scientific analysis and statistics, we must be careful not to forget the true lesson of Bechukotai-- G-d has created the world in such a way that, when we contradict G-d's will by living out of balance, our lives are thrown out of balance in response. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Ashlag, a leading kabbalist of the twentieth century, wrote that G-d established the laws of nature in the world, and a person or society that transgresses one of these laws will be punished by means of nature. He likens nature to a judge G-d established to punish those who violate the laws of nature.<sup>14</sup> We see from this that we cannot ignore the connection between our actions and the physical conditions which surround us.<sup>15</sup> Scientific explanations of storm patterns, aquifer absorption and rain toxicity should not obscure the influence of the Infinite One. Rather, they reveal to us the true greatness of Divine wisdom, and confirm that we really are obligated to live in balance with and be stewards G-d's Creation, as the Torah requires.

Praying for beneficial rain and then ignoring the problems of global warming and unchecked urban development is like praying for good health and then continuing to eat poorly and smoke a pack of cigarettes a day. We are acting against our own expressed interests when we excessively burn fossil fuels and contribute to unchecked urban expansion.

Our prayers for beneficial rain are extremely important, and our actions should be consistent with the emphasis of our prayers. We must live as earnestly as we pray. Praying for rain is a beginning, but we must follow through by acting on the awareness that we now contribute to bringing either rains of blessing or

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<sup>13</sup> See "Open Space in Israel," *Israel Environment Bulletin*, vol. 29, Sept. 2005, available online at [http://environment.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/Articals/9-13\\_1.pdf](http://environment.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/Articals/9-13_1.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> From "The Need for Caution in the Laws of Nature," (in Hebrew) in Matan Torah, publisher Da'at Ohr HaGanuz, year unknown, p. 96-99. In Gematria (a mystical numbering system), the letters of the word 'hateva' (the nature), add up to the same amount (86) as G-d's name that connotes judgement—Elokim. Rabbi Ashlag teaches that this implies that the laws of G-d can be called by the name 'commandments of nature.' He does not write about transgressing the 'laws of nature' in the context of ecological issues, but in the context of an individual isolating themselves from society. The application of Rabbi Ashlag's teachings here to ecology, a discipline that developed after Rabbi Ashlag lived, is by the author of this dvar Torah and not by Rabbi Ashlag himself. I would like to thank Rabbi Adam Perlman for pointing me to this source and teaching the linkage to environmental issues.

<sup>15</sup> In this vein, the emphasis of Bechukotai on the linkage between keeping the Torah and beneficial rains is different than Rav Ashlag's understanding of a connection between proper action and 'the laws of nature.' Nevertheless, a similarity does exist in both the Torah portion's and Rav Ashlag's emphasis on the relation between human action and what happens in the natural world around us.

destructive storms and water shortages. By doing so, we can give our children the gift of a world that is blessed, as G-d promises, with rains of abundance, prosperity and peace.

### **Practical Suggestions for More Consistent Living:**

When G-d provides us with water, we can try to use it wisely: <sup>16</sup>

1. Consider switching to a low flow toilet, which alone can annually save several thousand gallons of water per household.
2. Consider filling the sink or a dishtub with water, washing the dishes and then gently rinsing them off, rather than leaving the water running the whole time. Brush teeth with the water off.
3. Look into low flow shower heads, and think about taking shorter showers.
4. If you are planning to build a house with a driveway, use pervious paving materials<sup>17</sup> or alternative paving solutions that incorporate plants into the pavement. Advocate for your town to take up green alternatives to regular concrete and asphalt paving. See [arroyoseco.org/S.htm](http://arroyoseco.org/S.htm) and [forsea.org/pugetsoundbook/erosion.html](http://forsea.org/pugetsoundbook/erosion.html) for more ideas.
5. Use products and services from companies that promote low greenhouse gas emissions, water conservation, and conscientious waste management.

*Rabbi Yonatan Neril is the founder and director of Jewish Eco Seminars and the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development. He holds an MA and BA from Stanford University and engaged in Jewish learning for seven years at multiple institutions of Jewish studies in Israel. He lives with his wife and son in Jerusalem.*

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<sup>16</sup> The following suggestions are taken from Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz, “Water Conservation and Halacha: An Unorthodox Approach.” *Compendium of Sources on Halakha and the Environment*. Canfei Nesharim, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> An example is the Ekopaver by Airostone (<http://www.airostone.com/>) [this is intended as an example, not a specific endorsement]. More information is available at <http://www.concretenetwork.com/pervious/>