



Water Consciousness

by Jonathan Neril

This week's Torah portion, Chukat, is can be viewed as a narrative about the Jewish people and water. *Mayim* (water in Hebrew) is mentioned twenty-two times. The portion begins with G-d's command to mix water with the ashes of a red cow for purification. Next, Miriam dies, and the well which provided the Israelites with water (based on Miriam's merit) disappears.¹ The Jewish people quarrel with Moses, kvetching, "There is no water to drink!"² Moses and Aaron then strike the rock and G-d brings forth water. Next, Moses asks the Edomites to pass through their land, with a promise not to drink their water,³ or alternately, to buy it from them.⁴ Then the Jewish people travel by way of the Sea of Reeds (where G-d had split the sea for them) and on their desert journey complain again about lacking water. They arrive in modern-day Jordan and sing an exultant song about their appreciation to G-d for water. Finally, the Torah portion ends with them encamped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River.

What is G-d teaching us through the Torah's water narrative? The Jews' experiences with water in the desert can be understood as a spiritual training to cultivate appreciation for G-d's goodness. G-d takes the essential tangible resource of water (without which we cannot live for more than a few days) and gives it to us in an environment where we do not have it. We learn to appreciate water and to know Who really provides it through the process described here of taking water for granted, losing it and then being given it by G-d. In an ultimate sense, water does not nourish us. G-d does. Water is one of the chief means by which G-d provides life to us every day. The see-saw experience of having water and then losing it is the means to develop the spiritual muscles of appreciating G-d.

¹ Rashi on Bamidbar 20:2, Ta'anit 9a

² Bamidbar 20:3

³ As per Targum Onkeles (Israel, 2nd century) to 20:17

⁴ As per Rashi (France, 11th century) to 20:17

Yet, always being on the positive side of having water leads a person to take it for granted. Today, piped water is incredibly convenient; it relieves us from shlepping our water from streams and cisterns to our homes. Today, people in the West tend to lack an appreciation of where water comes from, and they end up wasting and polluting it. Where appreciation ends, misuse begins.

That explains how much of the western and southeastern United States could experience water scarcity and need government agencies to call for conservation.⁵ Or how we could lose sight of how much energy goes into bringing every gallon to our faucet. In many areas of the United States and the world, electricity-producing generators power pumps that raise water hundreds or even over a thousand feet from the underground aquifer to the water tanks at the top of local mountain ranges, so that gravity can then take it to our homes.⁶ That is, if we use 230 gallons of water a day, we are raising almost 2,000 pounds in weight every day up the vertical height of a 60 story skyscraper. Over an entire lifetime, this is a lot of energy used and a lot of carbon put into the atmosphere. Thus misusing water is also wasting energy and unnecessarily causing global climate change.⁷ Scientists predict that climate change is likely to cause sea levels to rise, impacting sandbars like Long Beach Island and New Jersey, and islands like Manhattan, as well as causing more intense storms and floods.⁸

Environmental problems are not problems of the environment. They are not problems of air pollution or global warming or species extinction or water scarcity. Those are merely symptoms. As long as we only treat the symptoms, the problems will continue popping up and getting bigger. Henry David Thoreau said, “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.”⁹ Today we generally hack at the branches: in many counties we spend significant amounts on

⁵ Andrew Gumbel, “The wrath of 2007: America's great drought,” *The Independent* (UK) June 11, 2007, available online at

<http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article2643033.ece>

⁶ For example, such is the water-delivery method in parts of Essex County, New Jersey. Figures based on personal conversation with Verona Water Officer, July 2007.

⁷ The story is told of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement in Europe, who was known as being meticulous about ritual hand washing. Once during his travels, his students noticed that he only used the minimum amount of water required to wash his hands. When asked about it, he said the water used for hand washing was carried on the back of a maid after being laboriously drawn from the well on the bottom of the hill. He taught his students, “One should not observe the most stringent level for a mitzvah upon someone else’s shoulders.” (see *Condemnium* p. 46 and fn there) I might apply this to water use today, where it may come on the shoulders of other people and future generations.

⁸ “Vulnerability of New Jersey's Coastal Habitats to Sea Level Rise,” Dr. Richard G. Lathrop and Aaron Love of the Center for Remote Sensing and Spatial Analysis of Rutgers University, online at <http://www.crssa.rutgers.edu/projects/coastal/sealevel/index.html#see>

⁹ In Walden and Other Writings by Henry David Thoreau, Bantam Books: New York, 1981

wastewater treatment and desalinization plants to produce more usable water, and in some states we enact Draconian measures like water rationing when the aquifer just gets too low.¹⁰

Environmental problems at their root are spiritual problems—they stem from a lack of awareness of the Source of all Existence. Once we come to that awareness, we can address environmental problems in very different ways, i.e. from their roots. Since beneath every environmental problem is a spiritual problem, awaiting every environmental problem is a spiritual solution. Drop a stone in the pond and the ripples will reach far beyond you.

How can we become aware of the true source of our water in practical ways? The spiritual training involving water was effective in the desert, but how can Jews in a more water abundant region come to such an appreciation? I want to suggest five things, from easy to more involved:

1) Easy: Connect to the physical source of the water you drink. Go to that source and sit by it, like Jacob and Moses did. Listen to the water. Think about how most of your body is comprised of it. Try this every year or every month and see what happens.

2) Still not demanding a lot: Contemplate your monthly water bill, remembering that each drop is given to you as a gift. If you use close to 230 gallons a day, like the average person in the United States does, think about key areas where you could reduce the amount you use. 3) More involved: Connect this physical substance to its spiritual source, which is the Creator of the Universe. Before and after you drink water or any liquid, say the blessing on it. The blessing begins with the word ‘baruch,’ which is related to ‘bereicha,’ pool, since G-d is like an infinite pool.

4) Still more involved: Another gateway to water awareness is the Jewish ritual *netilat yadai'im*, washing hands with water for purity. By using a vessel to pour water over our hands when arising in the morning and before eating bread, we can connect to the purifying potential of water.

5) For the truly committed: Take a few concrete steps toward water conservation. Install low-flow faucets and toilets. Hook up a grey water system to water your lawn with sink water. For more information and how-to, see: <http://www.instructables.com/id/Water-Recycler-Grey-Water/>

In conclusion, the Torah is a blueprint for spiritual living on this planet. It enables us to transform our daily, mundane ways into holy acts. If we can preserve our connection to G-d’s sustaining power in our world of great abundance, we can transform our lives and the world in holy ways. This is

¹⁰ Abby Goodnough, “Florida is Slow to See the Need to Save Water,” *The New York Times*, online at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/19/us/19florida.html?_r=1&ref=environment&oref=slogin

our challenge, and in light of mounting global environmental issues, what I might also call a revelatory moment in our history. The great Sage of Talmudic times, Rabbi Tarfon, teaches that “The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great and the Master is pressing.”¹¹ I might add: the climate is changing, the seas are rising, the glaciers are melting. We can address environmental issues at their roots if we live according to the Torah’s call. And when we get at the roots, we’re going to deal with many of the branches as well. When we finally embrace this path as a people and shine it to the world, our spiritual problems masquerading as environmental problems will make their way down the drain.

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