



True Joy Through Water: Appreciate Water This Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres

Shemini Atzeres Shiur: Rain as a Blessing in Our Prayers and Actions¹

Baruch Hashem for water! Without it we could not survive.

On Shemini Atzeres, we make a special blessing for rain. We also begin mention in the Amida of Hashem as the One who “makes the wind blow and the rain descend.” What does it mean for us to pray for rain? What does our praying for rain demand of us? And what role do rain and water play in our lives?

While water is an essential force for life, it can also be destructive, as the Talmud explains in Maseces Ta’anis. It can be nourishing, as when we drink it, bathe in it, or use it to irrigate our crops. It surrounded the world when Hashem created the earth, just as it surrounds a fetus as it grows in its mother’s womb. Plants depend on water to produce energy in photosynthesis, which is why plants spring up around water.

So we pray that Hashem bring rain that nourishes our crops and fills our reservoirs. Beneficial rain. At the right times. As the Gemara in Ta’anis says, “The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created” (8b). Or as Rabbi Levi ben Chiyata said, “Without rain earth could not endure” (Bereshis Rabba, 13:3).

In particular in the semi-arid land of Israel, water is a sign of its being a ‘good land.’ As Moses explains to the Israelites, “For the Lord your Hashem is bringing you to a good land, a land with brooks of water, fountains and depths...” (Devarim 8:7).

Hashem’s power is manifest in rain. The Gemara discusses why the Mishna’s mention of rain in the second blessing of the Amida is phrased as ‘the power of rain’ and not just as ‘rain’ (Ta’anis 2a). The Sages explain, based on a comparison between word usages in three verses², that rain comes down with power and reflects the power of Hashem. The Midrash quotes Rabbi Hoshaiyah as saying, “The power involved in making rain is as formidable as that of all of the works of creation” (Bereshis Raba 13:4).

Quite a statement about rain’s power—comparing it to everything that exists in creation! Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz continues in this vein, explaining that “the ‘power of Hashem is revealed especially in rain, both in the power of the rain, and also in the well-defined and controlled way in which it falls, for power and definition are characteristics of might.” He continues, “Today we have the means to measure the force of rainfall, and it is estimated that the energy freed in any large rainstorm exceeds that of an atomic bomb.”³ Rain is powerful. It is a tremendous force Hashem has put into the world.

While rain can be nourishing and positive, it can also be destructive, when it comes down in too great a quantity or at the wrong times. The Tanakh teaches in a few places how Hashem can send destructive rain, which is a sign of Hashem’s anger. The Mishna states that “if after Nissan rain falls, it is considered a curse,” (Ta’anis 1:7) as is learned from the prophet Shmuel calling to Hashem to send rain after Nissan to punish the people (I Samuel 12:17).

¹ Special thanks to Jonathan Neril, who prepared this shiur for Canfei Nesharim.

² See Ta’anis 2a and Job 5:9, Isaiah 40:28, and Psalms 65:7

³ Commentary to Steinsaltz edition of Masecet Ta’anis, p. 11



After Nissan, rain falling can cause wheat—a staple in Israel-- to rot in the field. One rainstorm at the wrong time of year or in too great a quantity can ruin an entire season's crop. Such an occurrence can produce food shortages and famine, as it did in biblical times, and as it still does today in many places in Africa. Living in cities and getting our food from supermarkets, we in the West can forget how delicate the natural world is, and how shocks to the natural balance can have serious effects on life on the planet.

In the generation of the flood, Hashem brought rainwaters on the generation of Noah to punish them for going against Hashem's will. The verse states, "Now the Flood was [upon the earth]" (Bereshis 7:2). Rashi explains,⁴ "But when He brought them [the rains] down, He brought them down with mercy, so that if they [the people] would repent, they [the rains] would be rains of blessing. When they did not repent, they became a flood." We understand that there is a connection between how people act and the rains that come into the world.

Both with the generation of the flood and the Israelites in the time of Shmuel, Hashem brought destructive rain to punish the people for how they acted. Today, however, there is another aspect to the people-Hashem-rain equation. While in the past Hashem brought rains according to people's actions, today our actions can affect the rains that Hashem brings into the world. In short, we affect how rain affects us.

Let's look at a few ways in which human actions on a local, regional, and global scale affect the rain that Hashem sends to us.

When we daven for rain, we hope that it will fill the rivers and reservoirs with clean water that we can drink. But with increasing urbanization in the world, land that once soaked up rainwater is being covered in pavement, which prevents absorption of the water. Think about how much rainwater in our city actually seeps into the earth, versus how much goes into gutters, storm drains, and then out to sea. Impacting large urban areas like Los Angeles, Phoenix and Atlanta, this new reality is also quite pronounced in Israel. As the *Israel Environment Bulletin* notes, "By 2020, the population is expected to reach some 8.4 million [people] and population density may reach 858 people per square kilometer north of Beersheba. By 2020, floor space per person in Israel is expected to reach 40 meters per person – double that [of] today."⁵ Some talk of the emergence of Nashkelon, a continuous urban settlement from Nahariya to Ashkelon stretching tens of miles from north to south. More people and larger houses for people translates into urban growth paving over much of the coastal plain. Doing so impacts the ground's ability to absorb rainwater into the coastal aquifer, an important source of Israel's water.

More pavement means less rainwater gets absorbed into the ground. In Israel, it means that more water goes into the salty oceans, and the fresh groundwater aquifers, needed for drinking water, go unfilled. Here in the United States, it means that water has to travel through dirty streets, picking up trash and chemicals, before making its way to our local rivers.

It's a bit contradictory to pray for beneficial rain and then pave over the land that would soak up the rain. As you know, we are specifically praying for rain in the land of Israel. We say, 'Hashem, please bring us rain,' and Hashem does, but the rains descend on the central part of Israel with a significant amount of land paved so that a good part of the rains flow to the sea in drainage ditches and do not soak into the soil. Israel needs the ground to absorb this rain for its many uses; the ocean already has enough water!

We also affect the rain Hashem brings by polluting the rainwater. In Israel, water pollution has until recently been widely ignored. As Shoshana Gabbay, editor of the *Israel Environment Bulletin*, writes, "With the exception of the upper Jordan River and its tributaries, the prognosis for Israel's rivers has long been gloomy: a slow and painful death. Whether as a result of industrial discharge, municipal sewage, overpumping or general abuse - rivers have either dried up or become sewage conduits. Tel Aviv's Yarkon, Haifa's Kishon, Ashdod's Lachish, Emek Hefer's Alexander, Lod's Ayalon, Jerusalem's Soreq - these and other rivers are plagued by the same disease: pollution."⁶

⁴ Based on the Midrash Hane'elam and the Zohar Chadash 28a

⁵ "Open Space in Israel" *Israel Environment Bulletin*, vol. 29, Sept. 2005 http://environment.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/Articals/9-13_1.pdf

⁶ "Restoring Israel's Rivers," 2002, online at http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/1/Restoring%20Israel-s%20Rivers

She discusses ways in which rivers in Israel are starting to be cleaned up, a very positive sign of increasing environmental consciousness in Israel. Clean water is essential to healthy living, and clean rivers are key to an ecological healthy Israel.

In addition to these direct effects, by changing the climate, we may be changing the way some rains come down and bringing destructive rains on ourselves. Rain that once nourished us can end up harming us. 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' and raises temperatures in the oceans. According to a number of scientists, warmer oceans may be making hurricanes more intense and destructive, because hurricanes extract heat from the

oceans at depths up to 100 meters.⁷ That is, more heat in the oceans means more heat that tropical storms draw up in creating energy in hurricanes. Examples of this not only may include Hurricane Katrina over New Orleans and other hurricanes over Florida and the Gulf Coast, but also more intense typhoon seasons in East Asia.

As I suggested before, it's a bit hypocritical to pray for rain and then alter our own global climate and sea temperatures so that hurricanes become more intense. We say, 'Hashem, please bring us rain,' and Hashem does, by sending a moderate tropical storm towards Florida or China, which gains great intensity possibly due to warmer waters, and ends up tearing apart the crops and homes we wanted it to help.

Climate change may alter rain patterns in other ways, too. Global climate models project that climate change may increase precipitation by seven to fifteen percent at high latitudes, causing stronger and potentially more destructive storms in those areas. Climate change may decrease precipitation at mid- and low-altitudes, contributing to more severe regional droughts.⁸

There are a number of steps we can take so as not to thwart Hashem's blessing of rain. For one, we can try to conserve water. Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz gives a number of helpful tips in his piece on water use and Jewish sources⁹:

- A low flow toilet alone can save several thousand gallons of water annually.
- When doing dishes by hand, try not to use the faucet (or the sprayer) as a power washer.
- Consider filling the sink or a dishtub with water, washing the dishes and then gently rinsing them off.
- Consider taking shorter showers.
- Look into low flow shower heads.
- Save and reuse the cold water wasted while waiting for the hot water to arrive.

Another action we can take relates to concrete and groundwater. If you are planning to build a house with a driveway, try using pervious concrete instead of regular concrete. The former allows rainwater to seep into the ground, instead of running off into drainage ditches and then the ocean. For example, if Israelis did this on a large scale, the coastal aquifer would receive more rainwater.

In addition, home size impacts how much land is covered by non-permeable materials. As noted above, Israelis are following the American model and choosing to build and live in larger and larger homes. Were people to choose more modest-sized dwellings, the land would be less congested with buildings and freer to receive the rainwater Hashem sends down.

⁷ Note that this is still a matter of scientific debate. Supporting the point made are Mann, M. E., and K. A. Emanuel, 2006: "Atlantic hurricane trends linked to climate change." *EOS*, **87**, 233-244. They state that "Anthropogenic [human-caused] factors are likely responsible for long-term trends in tropical Atlantic warmth and tropical cyclone activity." Online at ftp://texmex.mit.edu/pub/emanuel/PAPERS/EOS_mann_emanuel_2006.pdf. Also see forthcoming article in *Journal of Risk Analysis* by Ken Bogen of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and "Changes in Tropical Cyclone Number, Duration, and Intensity in a Warming Environment" Webster et al, 9-16-05, *Science*, online at <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/309/5742/1844>.

⁸ "Drought and Climate Change," 2006, National Drought Mitigation Center. Online at <http://drought.unl.edu/whatis/cchange.htm>

⁹ "Water Conservation and Halacha: An Unorthodox Approach." Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz. *Compendium of Sources on Halakha and the Environment*. Canfei Nesharim, 2005.

Praying for beneficial rain and then changing the climate is like praying for health while eating junk food, or like praying for a train to arrive and then derailling the tracks. We're essentially acting against our own best interests. The evil inclination wants us to think big and do little. To pray for a lot and then undermine our own prayers.

It is relatively effortless to utter a five-minute prayer for beneficial rain. It requires significantly more effort to live a life that does not transform beneficial showers into destructive storms. Our prayers for beneficial rain are extremely important, and our actions should be consistent with the emphasis of our prayers. Our actions should not undermine the desirable rains and relationship with Hashem we want for ourselves and our children. So, pray intensely for rain, and try to do your utmost to ensure that if Hashem blesses us with good rain, it can reach the soil and plants that need it, gently and in the right quantities.

One of the challenges of living a Torah life is being consistent. Moshe commands the Jewish people to "Be wholehearted with the Lord, your Hashem" (Deuteronomy: 18:13). The Ramban understands this to be a positive mitzvah.¹⁰ Rav Shimson Rafael Hirsch comments on this verse that "We must not detach ourselves from Hashem with even the smallest fiber of our lives; we must be with Hashem in our entirety."

What we are asking of Hashem in our prayer should be consistent with what we are doing in the world through our actions. This Shemini Atzeres, let's take on protecting the rains that we ask for, and the blessing of water that Hashem generously and continuously provides.

¹⁰ See his commentary to this verse and to Genesis 17:1