



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

## *True Joy: Through Water<sup>1</sup>*

On Sukkos, we celebrate water through the Simchas Beis Hashoeva (Celebration of the Water Drawing Ceremony). It is said that anyone who has not participated in this celebration has not known true joy. (Sukka 51a).

The Gemarrah discusses this concept along with other examples of great things that existed. (51b) Four things are cited as all the glory of their time:

- The Beis Hamikdash for grandeur,
- Jerusalem for “tiferet”
- Simchat Beis Hashoeva for “true joy,” and
- the Synagogue in Alexandria (later mentioned in the Gemarrah) for the honor of Israel.

An examination of the Simchas Beis Hashoeva ceremony yields an interesting comparison to the Ritual Bath (Mikvah). The amount of water used for the ceremonial procedure of the water libation (drawing of the water) in the time of the Beis Hamikdash is 3 logim. This is also the maximum amount of “drawn” water permitted for a Mikvah (ritual bath).

The Mikvah symbolizes throughout Jewish tradition the concept of redemption, repentance and re-birth. It is of significance that during the time of Sukkos when we are coming to the end of a period of more intense focus on the repentance process, the water is a focus of our ritual tradition.<sup>2</sup>

### **Praying for Water**

In the days of the Gemarrah, praying for water was seen as directly related to praying to Hashem for sustenance. The Gemarrah teaches that rain is one of the three responsibilities which Hashem himself administers. (Taanis 2a) Further, the Land of Israel, it is taught, is sustained by rain at Hashem’s discretion, as opposed to the rest of the world which has an intermediary (Shaliach) to administer. (Taanis 10b, Iyov 5:10).

Our ancestors lived in an agrarian society whose bounty or famine were regulated by rain. We currently live in an industrial society where we do not see the direct connect between the food and the land it comes from and even less so the rain that waters the crops. This disconnect keeps us from understanding our own reliance on nature. But while we don’t see this connection, it is still there.

Water is what our ancestors survived on. We survive on water as well, however we find that the connection between us and water to be very weak today. When it rains we seek shelter, but we should be blessing the rain, because it is what feeds the crops which are harvested and we find in the grocery store.

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Noah Aronin, Ora Sheinson and Shai Spetgang for their help preparing this shiur.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting note: in Gemarra’s (Sukkah 51b) description of Simchat Beis Hashoeva, what was burned to illuminate the Beis Hamikdash Azara (courtyard) was the used clothing of the Cohanim. This exemplifies two ideas. One that the clothing used in the Temple service had a certain level of holiness/importance therefore it could not just be disposed of in the usual manner. Secondly, as a result of the elevated status of the clothing it was important to make sure it was used for another holy purpose. The burning of the clothing for illumination in the Beis Hamikdash courtyard was an acceptable re-use of holy material. Further, this idea of assuring appropriate re-use of resources is also referenced elsewhere in the Gemarrah, Shabbat 105b: "Rabbi Shimon b. Elazar says in the name of Hilfa bar Agra, who said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri: 'A person who tears his clothes in anger or who breaks his vessels in anger or who throws away money in anger should be in your eyes like a worshipper of avodah zarah'." The re-use of clothing of the Cohanim for the holy worship of Hashem is a shining example of worshipping Hashem by respecting the resources we were given to manage.



Our daily prayers are full of references to the land, the agricultural cycle and the need for rain. A better understanding of the connection between nature and our personal lives and what we say in our davening can increase our appreciation for what Hashem has provided to us to manage.

### **The Cycle of Water in Davening**

Water is so important in our tradition that our davening about it changes in a cyclical manner to reflect the varying agricultural cycle. In the winter, after the crops have been planted, the need for significant amounts of water is great. Too little water and there will be no harvest, too much water and the seeds will wash away. Therefore, on Shemini Atzeres we have a special tefillah where all of Bnai Yisrael congregate in shuls around the world and entreat G-d for rain. We compare and connect our forefathers and sages with water, and we ask for rain in their merit.

As a further daily reminder of the need for rain, on 7 Cheshvan (in the diaspora, December 6) we change a line in Shemonei Esrei to denote our request for rain in Israel. This change is in the Blessing for a good agricultural year (Mevarech Hashanim).<sup>3</sup>

When we reach Pesach, we recognize the continued need for water during the traditional dry season in Israel, but also the sensitivity of the crops. We therefore no longer pray for rain as heavy rains would ruin the crops at this time of year, but we request dew. Dew is an important source for water in semi-arid region such as the one in which the Biblical Land of Israel is located.

And if this is not enough, the reminder of our need to serve Hashem in order to merit rain is repeated twice daily in the Shema: “And it will come to pass that if you continually hearken to My commandments that I command you today, to love Hashem, your G-d, and to serve Him, with all your heart and will all your soul – then I will provide rain for your land in its proper time, the early and late rains....”<sup>4</sup>

### **Good Rain and Bad Rain**

When we daven, we don't just daven that Hashem should send rain, we daven that Hashem should send good rain, in the right amount, at the right time.

The Gemara in Masechet Ta'anis 4a, notes that the Jewish people asked that Hashem “should come to them as rain” (Hoshea 6:3). The Gemara says that Hashem responded that the request was not appropriate as sometimes rain is desirable and sometimes rain is not desirable.

At the end of tefillas geshem, we daven that the rain should be for a blessing and not for a curse, for life and not for death, for plenty and not for famine.

We have seen many examples in the past several years of what happens when we have too much, or too little rain – both can be a curse. Of course, too little rain can be a curse: as we have seen with the recent ten year drought in Africa; Israel, which has suffered the longest drought it has known in 100 years, and had to buy water from Turkey; in the US, two large rivers have been diverted because of lack of water in populated areas (near Chicago, and in California). [Here mention what is most appropriate to your area regarding a recent drought and local recommended actions, such as restrictions on watering the lawn or washing cars.]

But too much rain can also be a curse. For example, mudslides in California 2005, 2006; Flooding in Boston and Washington, DC in 2006; Hurricane Katrina, [mention what is most appropriate to your area regarding recent local flooding – streets not passable, basements flooded, etc.].

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Tu Bishvat, which occurs in mid-winter in Israel, 15 Shevat, is the point by which our Sages say that most of the rain has fallen for the season. (Talmud Rosh Hashanna 14a)

<sup>4</sup> Scherman, Rabbi Nosson, ed. Complete Artscroll Siddur 1984, p.93.) Second paragraph of Shema Leviticus 26:3-19

All natural events, especially rain, can either be for a blessing or curse. We know that rain is critical for life. Therefore, we make sure to daven for the right kind of rain, in the right time.

### **Water in the Land of Israel**

The importance of rain in the Land of Israel cannot be overemphasized. The sages of the Talmud knew that all processes on the earth are intertwined, both physical and spiritual. Physically, we see that water-flow of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Babylon informed the rabbinical decisions related to the prayers for rain.<sup>5</sup> Babylonian *Amora Rav* (3rd cent. CE) said, "Rain in the west is strongly testified by the Euphrates." The storm tracks that contribute to the Land of Israel's rain continue northeastward to the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. This long-distance correlation informed the sages of the Babylonian Talmud (B.T.) of the approximate level of seasonal rainfall in northern Israel. If this were at a low level, they would decree that the Jewish population of Babylon would say certain prayers in an effort to increase the rainfall in Israel.

Throughout the Torah we find examples of drought as the driving force of population movement throughout the Middle East, and water as a gathering point for events and happenings. Avraham, for example, was forced to go down to Mitzraim to seek food during a time of drought. Eliezer, Avraham's manservant found Yitzchak's wife next to a well. Yaakov was forced to go down to Egypt also during a time of drought.

It is no wonder that the sages of the Talmud also stated that Israel is sustained by rainwater. (B.T. Talmud Ta'anis 10a). Even today, the State of Israel is dependent upon rain. Sixty percent of Israel's water is supplied by the Sea of Galilee through an underground pipeline that stretches for nearly half of the country's length supplying water to its residents. Forty percent of Israel's water needs are drawn from underground aquifers, both the coastal and mountain aquifers.<sup>6</sup>

Rainwater replenishes all the drinking water sources of the State of Israel. In the Sea of Galilee, which supplies most of Israel's water needs, there is a long human-placed rod with a red line. This red line is an indicator of the minimum amount of water that is needed to sustain the country over the long dry season. In recent years, this red line has been exceeded many times. This is a testament to the overdrawn of Israel's main water resource.<sup>7</sup>

Israel's other source of water, which is recharged by rainwater, is the aquifer system. There are two main aquifers; the coastal aquifer and the mountain aquifer. They too are being overdrawn. The affect on the coastal aquifer is saltwater intrusion. As a result, one day the coastal aquifer will no longer be usable for drinking water, due to its possible future salt water content. The overdrawn of the mountain aquifer reduces the underground pressures on the freshwater side and causes the ground to literally sink in the area above the aquifer. This is currently happening in sections of the mountain aquifer. It is essential that the catchment basin for these sources remain unaffected and unhindered by physical obstacles such as concrete and tar. The primary result of pouring concrete and tar on the catchment area is poorer water quality entering an already overburdened aquifer system. Previously, water would enter from all areas above the aquifer, today and in the future, if current policies are maintained and more and more of the catchment basin will be covered over, the water quality will continue to diminish.

### **The State of Our Water**

Today, our water is imperiled and depleted worldwide. Global water use increased six-fold during the 20th Century, more than twice the rate of population growth.<sup>8</sup> More than half of the world's major rivers are seriously depleted and polluted. In the United States, more than a third (39%) of streams and rivers are impaired by pollution or habitat degradation, and an additional 8% are threatened.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Brodsky, Harold, ed. *Land and Community: Geography in Jewish Studies*, pp 42, citing B.T. Tractate *Shabbat* 65b"

<sup>6</sup> Guided tour of Israel's water resources, Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, Spring 1998

<sup>7</sup> Collins, Liat. Jerusalem Post. January 7, 2000. PA3

<sup>8</sup> See UN-Water fact sheet at <http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/factsheet.html>

<sup>9</sup> National Water Quality Inventory Report, U.S. EPA, 2000

In Israel, when a bridge collapsed during the Maccabiah games, several athletes died from exposure to water in the Yarkon River which had a high level of contamination of bacteria and pollutants and not from the trauma associated with falling. (July 14, 1997) Approximately 1/3 of the aquifers (soil saturated 100% with water) in Israel are polluted. Aquifers are crucial because they provide long term storage of drinking water.

In the developing world, the situation is more dire. In the year 2000, 1.1 billion people still did not have access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people lacked access to basic sanitation.<sup>10</sup> Two-thirds of the world's population are likely to face water stress by 2025, a result of climate change, uncontrolled urbanization, unplanned water withdrawal and inappropriate water policies. Shortage of water also means shortage of food, as 80% of our water consumption is applied for irrigating crops.

### **What can we do to protect our water?**

Water is a precious gift from Hashem, and we can show our appreciation by safeguarding its use and preventing waste. Moreover, the mitzvah of Bal Taschis (do not destroy) calls us to use our resources wisely.

*Anyone who smashes household goods, tears clothing, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or wastes articles of food in a destructive manner, is in violation of the command "you shall not destroy"...*

(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings, Ch. 6 Laws 8-10)

What can you do to appreciate water and prevent waste?

- Check for leaky faucets and toilet tanks – these waste thousands of gallons a year, costing you money, and wasting water. If your toilet runs, fix it – it can waste a tremendous amount of water.
- Use a water efficient spray nozzle for the shower – the result is the same or better water pressure and a much lower water bill.
- Save water in your lawn and garden. In Jerusalem today, vegetation and public gardens are watered through the Israeli invention called drip irrigation that provides drops of water directly to the roots, thereby not losing significant amounts of water to evaporation. This is in direct contrast to open sprinkler systems throughout the world. Israeli agricultural methods of watering also include watering their crops at night to decrease the amount of water lost to evaporation.
- Eliminate or reduce toxic chemicals from your household
- Reduce water consumption - consider water and energy efficient appliances.
- Don't buy bottled water. If you feel that your drinking water is not safe, filter your water.<sup>11</sup>

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch writes in Horeb, 279-80: "Do not destroy anything" is the first and most general call of God, which comes to you, man...God's call proclaims "only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes...do you have the right over them which I have given you. As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or smallest, you commit treachery against My world, you commit murder and robbery against My property, you sin against Me."

It is time for us to consider whether we are using Hashem's resources wisely, and what we can do to protect those resources for ourselves and our children. This Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres, let's go beyond just davening for rain. Let's show our appreciation of Hashem's blessings by protecting this basic and essential resource.

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<sup>10</sup> See note 7.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about the health questions and environmental effects surrounding bottled water, visit <http://canfeinesharim.org/newsletter.shtml> and see the August 1, 2006 issue.