







Water in the Jewish Tradition

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project.

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- 1. Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 10a
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- 1. Dr. Jeremy Benstein, "Forgotten Language of Rain," Jerusalem Report, Fall 2005
- 2. Deuteronomy 32:1-2
- 3. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 6b
- 4. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 7b
- 5. Jeremiah 17:13
- 6. The blessing over drinking water, transliteration and translation from chabad.org

All translations are from Judaica Press unless otherwise noted.

I. Introduction

The Midrash equates water with "life."

מסכת אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא ב פרק מג

מים נקרא חיים שנאמר יצאו מים חיים (זכריה י"ד ח').

Tractate Avot d'Rabbi Natan, section two chapter 43, translation by Rabbi Neril Water is called life, as it says (Zechariah 14:8), "Water of life went out [from Jerusalem]."

Discussion Questions:

- 1. In what ways is water is equivalent to life?
- 2. What other things would you put in that category (equivalent to life) today?

II. Water in the Desert

In the desert, uncertainty about water resources inspired numerous complaints and lessons for the wandering Jews.

במדבר פרק כ פסוקים א-ח

ַנַּבָּאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵֻל כָּל הָעַדְהָ מִדְבַּר צִן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקָדֵשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקּבֵר שָׁם:

וַלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעַדָה וַיִּקָהָלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהָרֹן:

וַיָּרֶב הָעָם עם משֶה וַיּאָמְרוּ לֵאמִר וְלוּ גָוַעְנוּ בִּגְוַע אַחִינוּ לִפְנֵי יְקוָק:

וָלָמָה הַבָּאתֶם אֶת קָהַל יִקֹוַק אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לָמוּת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ וּבְעִירֵנוּ:

ְוְלָמָה הֶצֵלִיתַנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהָבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הָרֶע הַזָּה לֹא מְקוֹם זֶרַע וּתְאֵנָה וְגֶפֶן וְרְמּוֹן וּמֵיִם אַיִּן לְשְׁתּוֹת: יָבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהָּרֹן מִפְּנֵי הַקָּהָל אֶל פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹצֵד וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּרָא כְבוֹד יְלְוֶק אֲלֵיהֶם: פ וַיִּדָבֵּר יִלְוֵק אֵל מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר:

קח אֶת הַמַּטֶּה וְהַקְהֵל אֶת הָעֵדָה אַתָּה וְאַהָּרוֹ אָחִידּ וְדִבַּרְתֶּם אֶל הַסֶּלֵע לְעֵינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מֵימָיו וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מֵיִם מִן הַסֶּלַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הַעֵּדָה וְאָת בִּעִירַם:

Numbers 20:1-8

- 1. The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.
- 2. The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron.
- 3. The people quarreled with Moses, and they said, "If only we had died with the death of our brothers before the Lord.
- 4. Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord to this desert so that we and our livestock should die there?
- 5. Why have you taken us out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place; it is not a place for seeds, or for fig trees, grapevines, or pomegranate trees, and there is no water to drink.
- 6. Moses and Aaron moved away from the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell on their faces. [Then] the glory of the Lord appeared to them.
- 7. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
- 8. "Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and speak to the rock in their presence so that it will give forth its water. You shall bring forth water for them from the rock and give the congregation and their livestock to drink."

The Midrash teaches that in the merit of Miriam's song, a well appeared in the desert which accompanied the Jews wherever they went and was removed when she died.

רש"י במדבר פרק כ פסוק ב

(ב) ולא היה מים לעדה - מכאן שכל ארבעים שנה היה להם הבאר בזכות מרים:

Rashi, commentary to Numbers 20:2, based on Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 9a and Midrash Tanchuma Bamidbar 2

"...had no water" From here [we learn that] all forty years they had the well in Miriam's merit.

After almost 40 years in the desert, the Israelites sang an exultant song about their appreciation to G-d for water.

במדבר פרק כא פסוקים יז-יח

אָז יָשִׁיר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עֲלִי בְאֵר עֲנוּ לָה:

בָּאֵר חַפָּרוּהָ שָׂרִים כָּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בִּמְחֹקֵק בְּמִשְׁעֲנֹתָם וּמִמְּדְבָּר מַתָּנָה:

Numbers 21:17-18

- 17. Then Israel sang this song: "'Ascend, O well,' sing to it!
- 18. A well dug by princes, carved out by nobles of the people, through the lawgiver with their staffs, and from the desert, a gift.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. What did the Israelites learn from their experiences with water in the desert?
- 2. What are we learning from our experiences with water today?

III. Rain in the Land of Israel

The Talmud teaches that G-d personally waters the land of Israel and the rest of the world is watered by a messenger

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף י עמוד א

תנו רבנן...ארץ ישרא-ל משקה אותה הקדוש ברוך הוא בעצמו, וכל העולם כולו על ידי שליח, שנאמר +איוב ה'+ הנתן מטר על פני ארץ ושלח מים על פני חוצות.

Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 10a

The Rabbis taught: ...G-d waters the land of Israel Himself, and the rest of the world through a messenger, as it says, "Who gives rain upon the face of the land and sends water upon the face of outside places" (Job 5:10).

Thus when rain is withheld in Israel, it is because of Divine intervention in response to Israel's actions, as the second paragraph of Shema makes clear.

דברים פרק יא פסוקים יא-יז

ְוָהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַהֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּה אֶרֶץ הָרִים וּבְקָעֹת לִמְטַר הַשָּׁמַיִם תִּשְׁהֶה מָיִם: אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְלֹוֶק אֱ-לֹהֶיךְ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָה תָּמִיד עֵינֵי יְלֹוֶךְ אֱ-לֹהֶיךְ בָּה מֵרֵשִׁית הַשֶּׁנָה וְעַד אַחַרִית שָׁנָה: ס וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמֹעַ תִּשְׁמִעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹתִי אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַנָּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהְבָה אֶת יְלֹוֶךְ אֱלֹקיכֶם וּלְעָבְדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם: וְנָתַתִּי מַשֶּׁר בִּשְׁלְדְּ לִבְהָמְתָּדְּ וִאָּכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ: וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּשָׂדָּד לִבְהָמְתָּדְּ וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ:

הָשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסַרְתָּם וַצְבַדְתָּם אֱ-לֹהִים אֲחַרִים וְהִשְׁתַחַוִיתָם לָהֶם:

וַחַרָה אַף יִקֹנַק בַּכֶם וַעַצַר אָת הַשַּׁמִיִם וְלֹא יָהִיָה מַטַר וָהָאַדַמָה לֹא תָהַן אֶת יִבוּלָה וַאַבַדְהָם מְהַרָה מֵעַל הָאָרץ הַטֹבָה אֲשֶׁר יִקֹנַק נֹתֵן לָכֶם:

Deuteronomy chapter 11, verses 11-17

- 11. But the land, to which you pass to possess, is a land of mountains and valleys and absorbs water from the rains of heaven,
- 12. a land the Lord, your G-d, looks after; the eyes of Lord your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.
- 13. And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the Lord, your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,
- 14. I will give the rain of your land at its time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil.
- 15. And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be sated.
- 16. Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them.
- 17. And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. How is rain an incentive in the land of Israel to inspire us to act righteously?
- 2. What would you do for rain today?

IV. Appreciating Rain and Water

Dr. Jeremy Benstein notes that Biblical Hebrew contains at least six different words to describe liquid precipitation (geshem, matar, yoreh, malkosh, revivim, se'irim), which denote different times and intensities of rainfall. Four of them are mentioned in the following verses:

יַצֵרֹף כַּמַטָר לְקָחִי תִּזַּל כַּטַל אָמָרָתִי כִּשְׂעִירָם עֵלֵי דֵשֶׁא וְכַרְבִיבִים עַלֵי עֵשֶׂב:

Deuteronomy 32:1-2

Listen, O heavens, and I will speak! And let the earth hear the words of my mouth! My lesson will drip like rain; my word will flow like dew; like storm winds on vegetation and like raindrops on grass.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף ו עמוד ב

אמר רבי אבהו: מאימתי מברכין על הגשמים - משיצא חתן לקראת כלה. מאי מברך? אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: מודים אנחנו לך ה' א-להינו על כל טפה וטפה שהורדת לנו.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 6b

Rabbi Abahu said, "From when do we bless on the rain? From when the groom goes out toward the bride [an idiom for a large amount of rain—see Rashi]. What does one bless? Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: 'We give thanks to You, Hashem, our G-d for every single drop which you have caused to fall upon us."

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף ז עמוד ב

אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא: גדול יום הגשמים כיום שנבראו שמים וארץ, שנאמר +ישעיהו מ"ה+ הרעיפו שמים ממעל ושחקים יזלו צדק תפתח ארץ ויפרו ישע וצדקה תצמיח יחד אני ה' בראתיו. בראתים לא נאמר, א-לא בראתיו.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 7b, Artscroll and Judaica Press translation.

Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said: The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created, as the verse says (Isaiah 45:8), "Cause the heavens above to drip, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, and let salvation and righteousness be fruitful; let it cause them to sprout together; I, the Lord, have created it." 'I created them [the heavens and earth]' is not stated, but 'I created it [the rain].'

The prophet Jeremiah refers to G-d as the 'Source of Living Waters.'

ירמיהו פרק יז פסוק יג

מָקְוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל יְלוָלֶק כָּל עֹזְבֶיךָ יֵבשׁוּ יסורי וְסוּרֵי בָּאָרֶץ יִכָּתֵבוּ כִּי עַזְבוּ מִקוֹר מַיִם חַיִּים אַת יִלוַק:

Jeremiah 17:13

The Lord who is the source of the hopes of Israel, all that forsake You shall be shamed, and they who turn away from me shall be marked out on the earth that they have forsaken the source of living waters, the Lord.

The blessing over drinking water is:

ברוך אתה ה' א-לוקינו מלך העולם שהכל נהיה בדברו

Baruch atah A-donay, Elo-heinu Melech Ha'Olam shehakol nihiyah bed'varo.

Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, by Whose word all things came to be.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. How can we tell from these verses how our rabbis felt about water in rain?
- 2. How can we inspire this perspective in ourselves and our children?

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