

Sermon for 1st day Rosh HaShanah - 5768
By Rabbi Ethan Seidel

L'shanah Tovah! Thank God, we are here again, at the beginning these Days of Awe, alive and well as a community. I want to start today with a memory that's still fresh in my mind - a story from our congregational trip to Israel last month.

One day, in the middle of the trip - we were up north, near Tiberius - we went for a donkey ride. Many of us, especially the kids on the trip had a lot of fun riding their donkeys. As for me... well, I enjoyed myself too - I don't often get to ride animals in the course of my work, and I like a little novelty now and again. But, to be honest, I could easily have found a place to ride a donkey in America had I wanted to. And the fact that I had never even considered planning such an activity for myself or my family here in the States gives you a feeling for how much I was interested in donkey riding.

But the the setting, the context of this ride, I found powerful, and troubling. Recall, it was then, as it still is, the dry season in the land of Israel. As is typical for Israel, it had not rained since Pesach, and was not expected to rain again until Sukkot, a few weeks from now. Six months without a drop of precipitation. The land was incredibly dry. On our bus ride up to Mr. Arbel, on our way to the donkey stable, we passed 3 separate wildfires burning out of control in the countryside. Our guides called the fires into the local fire department, but there was nothing they could do - the ground was simply too dry, and there wasn't enough water to put all the fires out.

When we got to on the top of the mountain, as we stood waiting to climb onto our donkeys, we could see one of these fires a mile away to the east of us in the valley. A very strong wind was blowing the fire in our direction. We were not in any immediate danger, but we couldn't help but feel anxious about the fire coming towards us. It was nature at its most destructive and out of control, and it wasn't so far away. The smoke was blowing right into our faces.

The extreme dryness of the countryside struck me again as we began our little donkey ride. We rode our donkeys on a little dirt road that ran between two fields choked with thorns. I don't know why, but thorns in Israel always seem bigger and scarier than those around here. The Israeli thorns are taller, and they've got huge prickly collars. And at this time of year, they are also completely desiccated, which makes them seem even sharper. These thorns underscored, just like the wildfires we saw, the frightening side of Israel's yearly dry season.

As I've noted in past years, the Holiday cycle we begin today is really all about water. In ancient times, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, as important as they were, were really only the warm-up holidays for Sukkot, and the prayer for rain. We Americans are living in a place and time and socio-economic class for which drought is but a minor nuisance. Most of us are easily able to pay the extra dollars for groceries after a season of drought. We can easily forget how crucial rain was, and is, in other societies. For us, nowadays, Sukkot is a time of pure celebration, a time to sit in our sukkah and thank God for blessings. For our *ancestors*, Sukkot, was also a celebration, but it was a celebration mixed with fear. The question at the back of their mind was always: would there be enough rain this season to renew the earth, to enable the farmers to keep the populace from starving.

Nowadays, the character of these holidays has changed in another way. Nowadays, it's not the physical rain that we are so desperate for - we - at least we here in America have enough

water, and we can irrigate, and so Sukkot is not a “high holiday”. We’re ok with the rain. Nowadays it’s the *spiritual* renewal that we have trouble bringing about. Now we realize that it’s a different kind of watering for which we need God’s help. Today, we ask God to water our souls, to give us the spiritual nourishment we need to grow.

There is a lovely paragraph from the daily prayers to this effect - if you’ll turn to page 26 in your mahzor and we’ll take a look at it together. Page 26. I’m talking about the paragraph that it is customary to say after putting on the tallit. You see after the first paragraph, you have the “Prayer when putting on the Tallit.” As you may know, many people, after saying this blessing, wrap their tallit over their heads and stand for a moment. You may have wondered: “What are these people doing when they’re standing there wrapped in the tallit?” I for one am saying this next paragraph - I want to look at the first two lines with you.

By the way, these lines are taken from Psalm 36.

How precious is your loving-kindness, O God

חַמֵּה יִקָּר חֶסֶדְךָ אֱלֹהִים

May people take shelter in the shadow of your wings.

וּבְנֵי אָדָם בְּצֶל כְּנָפֶיךָ יִחְסְיוּ:

Notice how I put that last sentence in the form of a prayer - “May people take shelter”. Often the future tense in the siddur should be translated that way. Even if in the original Psalm this verse might have been a prophesy of the future - “People *will* take shelter” - when you put a Psalm in the siddur, I think it more likely to express a hope or a prayer, than to be a confident description of what’s to come. So far so good. Now come the verses applicable to my theme today:

May they satisfy themselves with the rich fare of your house.

ט וְיִרְוּ מִדְּשֵׁן בֵּיתְךָ

But “yirviyun” actually means more than “satisfy” - it also has the connotation of giving water.

And water is explicitly mentioned in the second part of this verse:

And from the stream of Your delights, may You water them.

וְנַחַל עֲדָנֶיךָ תִּשְׁקֵם:

Now, lest you think that we’re talking about physical water, the next verse elaborates:

For with You, is the source of life

י כִּי-עִמָּךְ מְקוֹר חַיִּים

In your light do we see light.

בְּאוֹרְךָ נִרְאָה-אוֹר

Hey, how did we get to light all of the sudden? We were talking about water, weren’t we?

Apparently, it was not of *physical* water, but of some kind of spiritual sustenance this psalm was speaking.

I love these verses. When I wrap myself in my tallit each morning and I say this prayer, I think about God’s love enveloping me, watering me, giving me the strength to do God’s will. For a brief moment each morning, with my tallit wrapped around me, anything seems possible.

In a way, the putting on of the tallit at the beginning of each day is a bit like Rosh HaShanah at the beginning of each year. We have a whole day - well two days, really - to feel well-watered. We devote time at the start of the year to our own spiritual needs, to our quest for God’s rain to enrich our souls. We pray we have a sense of God’s love watering us.

But all this talk of water leaves me a bit, well, thirsty. And I’m left with the question: What brings water? How can I get that sense of connection to God today, and tomorrow, and throughout the year? This is the question I want to address this morning.

As many of you know, I have been studying, recently, the talmudic tractate “Ta’anit”, which means “fast” - in the sense of “going without food”. In ancient times, one common method of imploring God for rain was by fasting: the thought was that through the act of depriving oneself of food, one showed oneself to be truly penitent, and thus deserving of rain. Much of this tractate deals with the laws of fasting: exactly how late should the rains be before the community ordains a fast? And what prayers should be said to accompany such a fast?

Those technical questions towards the beginning of this tractate are of less inherent interest to me than the stories that are retold in chapter 3 of Ta’anit. These stories are often bizarre, and at the same time, weirdly relevant to our own times. In particular, I want to share with you today a few stories from a collection of 14 stories around a single theme. That theme is: What happens when the great Rabbi of the day ordains a fast, and it doesn’t help? The rains don’t come, despite the holy Rabbi’s prayers and the community’s penitence? Later this year, in the spring, I’ll be teaching a course on Sunday nights during which we will be able study these stories in detail. For now, let me tell just a few of the shorter stories, and relate them to the issues we still wrestle with today. What happens when we want to feel God’s rain, when we want to be inspired to become better human beings, and we show up in shul and say all the right prayers, yet no rain, no inspiration is forthcoming?

The first story in this series of stories is simple, but it sets the tone (24a):

Once Rabbi Yehuda N’si’a decreed a fast, he begged mercy from heaven, but no rains came. He exclaimed: “What a gulf there is between the prophet Samuel (who even brought rain in the *dry* season) and me. Woe to the generation stuck with such leaders. Woe to the one who must live through such times!” His spirits fell, and *then* the rains came.

This simple story makes several points. For one, prayers by themselves don’t bring rain. In fact, even fasting and prayers *together*, don’t bring rain. You can come to shul for the very beginning of davenning on Rosh HaShanah, and stay all the way through Adon Olam, and that guarantees you nothing. Not that I would want to discourage such devotion - incidentally, we begin at 8:30AM tomorrow, as we did today. So what *is* crucial for bringing rain? A sense of your own inadequacy. You think *you* can bring rain? If you *do* think you can bring rain, you probably cannot. Only the person who acknowledges the frustrating limits of their own powers, has any real power when it comes to deriving sustenance from God. Abject humility is the first prerequisite.

This theme is also central to Rosh Hashanah. Today we build up God’s greatness, which is not all that different from recognizing our own smallness. Today we remember that we are not God, that we are not self-sufficient. Maybe we can take care of our needs for water more independently than we used to. But we are still every bit as dependent upon God’s help as we ever were to live good lives. We remind ourselves that we are not entirely in control; we try to be humble, knowing that such humility is necessary to receive healing rain from God for our parched souls. We hope that by honestly examining our own actions, by fearlessly confronting our inadequacies, we may merit help from God. We cannot do it alone.

This point is also made by the second word in all of our brachot. Baruch *atah* adonai. Blessed are *you* our Lord. If the bracha omitted that second word “atah”, there would be no grammatical problem - Baruch Adonai would just be: Blessed is our Lord. The “atah” is there to

remind us: we are not God. We are dependent creatures. More independent in many important ways than we used to be, granted, but still, ultimately, dependent on God. If you think you can act for good in this world without God, you're fooling yourself. You can do good, but you are just the conduit - the blessings come through you, from their primary source, our Creator. Realizing this, remembering this, is what ultimately brings rain and uplifts the soul.

Here's another fasting story (ibid); it's the fourth of the 14 stories I mentioned above:

Once Rav came to a certain place and declared a fast, but no rains came. However, when the person who happened to be leading the davenning was repeating the Amidah, and he said "Mashiv HaRu'ach", and the winds started to blow, and then he said "Morid HaGashem" and the rains started. So Rav said to him: "What do you do??" The guy answered: I teach kids - both poor and rich alike - those who can't afford don't pay anything. And I have this fish pond, so any kid who gives me trouble, I bribe him with fish, and befriend him until I can convince him to come and study.

This sweet little story is one of many similar tales. Lots of miracles are described in Ta'anit, not all about bringing rain, and most of the miracles are accounted for, like this one, by good deeds. Often the miracles are performed by ordinary folk, and the sage who is *unable* to do the miracle is left to ask the question of the ordinary guy who just brought the miracle: "What do you do??" Meaning, "What good deeds of yours enabled you to bring this miracle? Rav, the sage who decreed the fast in this story, was one of the two leading sages of his generation. However, this story tells us, those who bring good deeds to the table are able to renew a community in a way that the most learned Torah Scholar cannot.

As a teacher, and a parent, I also like the flexibility of the teacher in this story. Occasional bribery to get kids started doing the right thing - absolutely, if that's what it takes.

So we must ask ourselves at this time of year: What mitzvahs are we bringing to the table, as we pray, hoping for some healing rain from God? How have we conducted ourselves in our home lives, in our professional lives? Are there things we've been doing for the larger community that give us standing before God? None of this is, of course, to excuse you from Torah Study. I'm sure you know me, and our tradition well enough to know I can't give you a free pass on study. But if study doesn't lead to action - well don't expect much today from God.

Wow, that's a bit harsh. Must you really be filled with good deeds as this story said, and totally abase yourself, as the first story said, to get any rain at all? Here are two stories (24b) which balance that severity of the first two stories. These are numbers 7 and 8 in the series of 14:

Story 1) The great sage Rava happens upon a town in need of water. Rava declares a fast and - no rain comes. He tells people: Go to bed hungry. The next morning Rava asks what dreams they've dreamt, and when a local sage relates a very favorable dream, Rava says: Aha, *now*, the time is fortuitous for prayer. They pray, and rain arrives.

That was story 1. Story 2 is a little more involved:

Story 2) Rava gets in big trouble with King Sapur of Persia - If you want to know exactly what bad thing Rava did, come to my Sunday night course this spring. Anyway, the King wants to go after Rava, but the King's mother intervenes. She says to her son, the king: "Don't mess with the Jews, son - whatever they ask from their God, He gives them"

“Mom, what are you talking about??”

“Son, when they pray for rain, they get rain.”

“Mom, that’s only because they pray for rain in the rainy season. Let them try for rain now, in Tammuz, and see if any rain comes!”

So the King’s mother sends for Rava and tells him to pray for rain.

Rava prays for rain, but none comes.

However, Rava sensing that his life might be on the line if he can’t bring rain, doesn’t give up. He tries to shame God using a verse from Psalms (44:2) which reads: “O God, our ears have heard our ancestors tell of all you did in ancient times,”. To which Rava adds: but our eyes have never seen it. *That* nasty crack indeed results in torrential rain. But that’s not the end of the story. Rava’s dad then appears to him in a dream (I love the symmetry in this story) and says: “Is there anyone who troubles heaven as much as you do? You might want to sleep in a different bed tonight.” Rava changes his bed, and the next day, he finds that his usual bed has been slashed.

How’s that for a strange story! Apparently, what’s happening at the end of the story is that God has gotten mad at being asked for rain in the dry season, and God sends some demon flunkies to terrorize Rava for asking for rain at an inappropriate time. Rava barely escapes with his life.

What’s striking is the similar message in the two stories. Sometimes rain doesn’t come simply because the time isn’t right for rain. In the first story, Rava had to wait until a dream informed him that the time was right. In the second story, Rava asked for rain when he shouldn’t have. He got rain, but at great cost.

Either way, the message is clear - it’s not always in our power to bring the healing waters. Sometimes God is distant, and that’s just the way it is. It’s not always because we haven’t done enough good deeds, and it’s not because we are not humble enough - God is just distant. It’s a frightening thought. But an important one, especially at this time of year. It’s not all up to you and your prayers. Sometimes the time is not right, and there is nothing we can do but accept that fact.

Which leads me into story 11 (25a) about R’ Hama bar Hanina: He declared a fast, but no rain came. People complained to him: “Ya know, when R’ Yehosua ben Levi declared a fast, *he* brought rain. To which R’ Hama bar Hanina replies: But I’m me, and that was him. Now, I’ll skip to the end of the story, when still no rain has come. R’ Hama, frustrated, calls out to heaven: “How hard is the face of heaven!” At which point, the rain comes.

I see this as a story about truth telling. R’ Hama is good at it, and it brings him close to God. When people say: “You can’t bring rain like the last Rabbi”, he admits it. And at the end of the story, he acknowledges another bitter truth: sometimes the face of heaven is hard. And it is those admissions that bring the healing rain.

Facing the truth is no small part of our job as penitents. The hard truth about our own inadequacies, the hard truth about God’s inaccessibility. But without facing those hard truths, we are even farther removed from God.

Which brings me to the final story (25b). This one’s short, involving two famous Rabbis, R’ Eliezer and his pupil, R’ Akiva. R’ Eliezer prayed hard for rain, and none came. R’ Akiva barely got one sentence out of his mouth, and down came the rain. There was murmuring in the academy - the pupil was answered before the teacher!?! A voice comes down from heaven and says: it’s not that Akiva is any greater than Eliezer - it’s that Akiva is forbearing, and Eliezer is not.

Forbearance. Patience. The ability to suck it up, and move on. Taking what life gives you and not whining about it. These are not qualities easy to come by, not qualities many of us have in great measure, not qualities highly esteemed in the general culture. However, forbearance is one of the most highly esteemed personality traits in the Talmud.

Of course there is irony in all this. What is it that brings help, healing water, in a moment of desperation? Acceptance, calm, an ability to live with the hard knocks. What brings help then, is the readiness to live without help, without the certainty of God's presence in our lives. Which seems ironic almost to the point of absurdity. If you want help, be sure not to expect it. But such is life.

One final, silly and absurd story from a little earlier in masechet Ta'anit (23b). It's about two Rabbis, R' Mani who was apparently a bit of a whiner, and R' Mani's teacher, the wonder worker, R' Yitzhak b. Elyashiv. The tale begins with R' Mani complaining to his teacher:

"R' Yitzhak: The rich folk of my father-in-law's house are really making my life miserable."

At which point R' Yitzhak offers a prayer:

"May they become poor!"

A short while later:

"But R' Yitzhak, now that they're poor, they're constantly pressing me for money."

"So, may they become rich again!"

And they did. And the a short while later:

"R' Yitzhak, my wife isn't as good looking as she once was."

"What's her name, my son?"

"Hannah."

"May Hannah become beautiful!"

A short while later:

"R' Yitzhak, she's so good looking now, she lords it over me."

"If so, may Hannah return to her former ugliness!"

Some time later, two other students of R' Yitzhak's come with their own request:

"R' Yitzhak, do you think you could say a prayer so we could become really wise?"

"My sons, I used to have that power, but I have released it."

Ouch. Once again we are reminded that we are not God. Even if we had God-like powers, the Talmud suggests, we might find that we'd soon relinquish them. We might come to realize that it's not so much our job to bring rain, as it is to learn to live with the rain we've been given. Note the name of R' Mani's wife in this story: Hannah. Hannah means "grace". R' Mani hasn't the ability to appreciate the grace he's been given. He's looking for more, when grace is right in front of him.

Speaking of being cognizant of the gifts that have been given us, I think of Hagar in today's reading. Hagar, who only finds the water after she's given up hope. Hagar, for whom no fancy miracle is necessary - no water is miraculously created to rescue her and her child in the Torah portion. God merely opens her eyes, so that she sees the water that was there all the time.

May God open our eyes this year to the beauty and blessings surrounding us. May God send parents a renewed appreciation for our children, whether they fulfill our dreams for them or not. May God send children a similar revelation about their parents. May God help us appreciate the blessings of our mates, and help us be forbearing in the face of their weaknesses. May God help all of us in this community appreciate the contributions each of us makes to the good of all; may God help us reconcile ourselves with each others eccentricities. And finally,

may this community have patience. Patience if the Rabbi can't always bring the miraculous healing rain all of us need; patience as we seek to be better servants of God in the year to come. And patience when we ourselves don't feel the rain we need to replenish our souls.

Shanah Tovah