



The Value of Water

The Festival of Sukkot reveals the Jewish people's special relationship with water.

The Mishna (Rosh Hashana 1:2) tells us that on Sukkot the world is judged for water. Interestingly, on the last day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah, the Midrash tells us there is a final sealing of the judgment for us as well. (Otzar HaMidrashim, Ruth, Eisenstein Edition p. 55) This would seem to indicate a connection between the judgment for both water and for us.

A better understanding of the importance of water can increase our appreciation for what G-d provides to us, and inspire us to take action to protect it.

Water is absolutely necessary for all life. Today, especially if we live in water-abundant areas, we all too often take water for granted. Our ancestors lived in an agrarian society whose bounty or famine was regulated by rain. Unlike them, we do not see this **direct connection between the rain that waters the crops and the food we eat** (which we often find in the grocery store). But while we don't see this connection, it is still there.

The Midrash succinctly expresses the vital importance of water by calling water "life." (Avot of Rabbi Natan 34:10) Indeed, **life as we know it would be impossible without a sufficient supply of high quality fresh water.** A lack of sufficient drinking water is recognized to be one of the leading causes of death in the world.

The Jerusalem Talmud expresses the economic peculiarity of water while reiterating its importance:

Water is cheap and wine is expensive (and yet) it is possible for the world to live without wine; it is impossible for the world to live without water (J.T. Horayot, Ch. 3, halacha 5)

Drinking water is relatively inexpensive — and it needs to be, since everyone requires it, regardless of their economic situation. However, because of its low cost, people may not fully appreciate its great value, and may waste or otherwise misuse it. The prohibition against wasting water is expressed in the following Talmudic principle:

A person should not dump out water from his pit when others are in need [of the water]. (B.T. Yevamot 39)

The Talmud also demonstrates the vital importance the Sages placed on water by ruling that everyone in the community, even orphans and scholars who are normally exempt from community taxes, are required to pay communal expenses for creating and maintaining communal water sources. (B.T. Baba Batra 8a; Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Hilchot Schanim, 6:3,7)

Rain is the main source of water in the land of Israel, replenishing the Kinneret and the underground aquifers. On Shmini Atzeret, immediately after Sukkot, we begin praying for rain in the Shemoneh Esreh. Observant Jews pray for rain three times a day during the rainy season, and in addition, there are special prayers for rain at the beginning of the rainy season and during periods of drought.

The Sages understood that the quantity, timing and location of the rainfall were linked to the **behavior of the people**, as codified in the Shema:

...if you hearken diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love the L-rd your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the early rains and the late rains... (Deut. 11:13)

The Land of Israel, it is taught, is sustained by rain at G-d's discretion, as opposed to the rest of the world which has an intermediary (Shaliach) to administer. (Taanit 10b, Job 5:10). The sages saw the vulnerability of the land of Israel to shortages of water as part of a Divine plan that would ensure the continued reliance of the people on their Creator.

Because of its precious nature, water is also a sign of redemption. The Talmud teaches that the day it rains is as great as the revival of the dead and the ingathering of the exiles. (B.T. Taanit 8b) We learn from the prophet Ezekiel that in the Messianic era, abundant healing water will flow from the Temple. Perhaps then, the land of Israel will at last arrive at a state of water abundance.

This Sukkot, may our understanding of the true value of water, our recognition of our reliance on our Creator, and our behavior toward one another bring us toward a more sustainable world.

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