

Jewish Values Related to Water

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Water, specifically rain, is an important part of Jewish belief and ritual. Rain is believed to be a foundation of the world. Raining in the proper seasons is God's way of giving blessing. With this in mind, we pray for rain (or dew) daily in the Amidah in the proper season according to the land of Israel.

Importance of Rain: Mayim = Chayim

“Three things are of equal importance: Earth, Humans, and Rain... without Earth, there is no rain, and without rain, the Earth cannot endure, and without either, humanity cannot exist.” Midrash Genesis Rabbah 13:3

Mayim (water) is Chayim- (life)

“Rabbi Tanhum Ben Chaya taught: The sending of rain is an event greater than the giving of the Torah. The Torah was a joy for Israel only, but rain gives joy to the entire world including animals and birds. For as it is said: ‘You take care of the east and irrigate it.’” Midrash Psalms 117, based on Psalm 65:10

Rain as sustenance, *Shefa* (Divine Abundance) and God's Judgment

As noted above, rain in the proper seasons is God's form of offering blessing towards humans, animals and the Earth, providing that which is needed for survival. However, withholding rain or bringing rain at the wrong time is viewed as a curse, and is a direct consequence of inappropriate human behavior (such as serving false gods.) Jewish tradition teaches that our actions have a direct impact on the rain we receive and consequently on the health of our planet.

“I will grant you rains in their seasons, so that the Earth shall yield its produce and trees of the field their fruit... You will eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.” Leviticus 26:4-5

“I will grant the rain for your land in season... you will eat and be satisfied. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is giving to you.”
Deuteronomy 11:13 –17

“On account of three things does rain fall: for the sake of the land, for the sake of God's loving kindness and for the sake of God's corrective trials. All three are mentioned in these verses: ‘God loads the clouds with moisture, scatters lightening clouds, causing each of them to happen to God's land, whether as a plague or as a blessing.’” Talmud Taanit 3:3, based on Job 37:11, 13

Rain in Israel, the Focus of Our Prayers

Rain in Israel has always been central to Jewish prayer and practice. Beginning on Shemini Atzeret and continuing until Pesach, Jews around the world pray for rain in Israel three times daily during the Amidah prayer. (Some communities pray for dew the rest of the year.) These prayers remind us of our ties to our homeland and of our role in the three-way relationship which includes humanity, God and the Earth.

Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Water, a Match Made in Heaven

The holidays of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret quickly follow Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and they are often overlooked and under-celebrated. These holidays celebrate the culmination of the agricultural year, the corresponding Jewish holiday cycle, and mark the beginning of winter. Just as we want to spend most of our time indoors, as days are getting shorter and temperatures are getting colder in the Northern Hemisphere, we are forced back outside into our Sukkah, to shake the Lulav, and celebrate food, harvest, community and water. Culminating the entire holiday cycle is Shemini Atzeret, where we offer a prayer for rain and begin the winter prayers for rain in the Amidah.

Lulav, an Ancient Rainstick

Shaking the Four Species including the Lulav (palm branch) along with the Hadas (willow), Aravot (myrtle) and Etrog (citron) is an important part of the Sukkot ritual. Many interpretations exist as to the meaning of these symbols, but two stand out as having direct significance. First, the lulav, a branch of the date palm tree, is a desert plant, a symbol of agricultural success in the desert. The growth of this tree would not have been possible without the properly-timed rains in the desert. Interestingly, long before the Israelites inhabited Eretz Yisrael, the date palm branch was rumored to have been used by cultures throughout Africa and the Middle East in a variety of rituals for rain, human and earthly fertility.

Hadas, the Jordan River Lover

The Hadas, willow branch, is another symbol of the deep ties to water inherent in the Sukkot symbols. Willow is a tree which requires a great deal of water to thrive. In Israel it grows only in the Jordan River Valley and along the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee.) These branches serve as a reminder that like the willow tree, we are dependent on an abundance of water for survival. It motivates us to give thanks for the gift of rivers and waterways such as the Jordan.

Shemini Atzeret, The World is Judged for Rain

The holiday of Shemini Atzeret marks the end of the agricultural and festival seasons and a transition into winter. In the Talmud, it is also understood as the day on which the world's rainfall for the next year is determined. This holiday and its central ritual, the annual prayer for rain (link) while assuming a minor role in modern times, was extremely important in an agricultural society. Conducted during the Musaf service, this special blessing asks God, for the sake of our ancestors, not to withhold rain and water. In addition to this prayer, Shemini Atzeret marks the transition in the Amidah from prayer for dew to praying for rain in the land of Israel.

Simchat Beit Hashoevah, Temple Water Libations

“Whoever has not seen the rejoicing of the Beit Hashoevah has never seen rejoicing in his life.”

Mishnah Sukkah 5:1

Simchat Beit Hashoevah, the water libation ceremony, was a Temple service not to be missed. It was based around a joyous parade in which the Israelites marched to the Temple, drawing the water from Jerusalem's spring, and then pouring it on the sacrificial altar. Mishnah Sukka 4: 9-10

The Levites played their musical instruments throughout the Temple. Giant oil lamps lit the night sky - the light was so bright it could be seen from every hill in Jerusalem. The people danced and prayed in celebration of water and life. Notably, the first mention of Biblical recycling is related to this holiday. According to the Talmud, on this day the priests received new clothes and the used undergarments of the priests were used as the wicks in the lamps. Water libations, recycled wicks, what a Biblical eco-celebration!

Jewish Values Related to Pollution Prevention

Pollution Prevention

Pollution prevention has long been a concern of urban planners. Ancient Jews were no exception. The Mishnah, edited around 1800 years ago, makes clear indications as to how to treat communal resources. Interestingly, specific mention is made as to where to locate polluters, to have the least effect on people.

“All carcasses, cemeteries and tanneries must be kept at fifty cubits’ distance from a town. A tannery can only be set up on the east side of town [because the east wind is gentle and will not carry the fumes to town].”

Mishnah Baba Batra 2:9

“One is forbidden from gaining a livelihood at the expense of another's health.”
Rabbi Isaac Sheshet, Responsa 196, (14th Century)