



THE JEWISH OBSESSION WITH RAIN

What unique message can we derive from the unique Sukkos focus on rainfall?

The Theme of the Holiday

This week I came to understand why the holiday of Sukkos is referred to as the “Time of Rejoicing.” As a rabbi, I’m just so happy Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are already behind us!

So let’s talk about this holiday, this “Time of Rejoicing,” a little bit.

The holiday of Sukkos focuses on water. First of all, the Arba Minim, the so called “Four Species” of palm branch, citron, myrtle and willow that we use on Sukkos, all require a lot of water to grow. The Talmud (Tractate Taanis 2:2) says, “The Arba Minim are there to ask G-d for rain. Just as the Arba Minim cannot exist without water, so too can the world cannot exist without water.”

Another side to Sukkos is “Simchas Beis Hashoeiva,” meaning, “the Celebration of the Water-Drawing.” When the Temple stood, our ancestors in Jerusalem would visit a wellspring called Maayan Hashiloach. There, they would draw a liter of water, bring it to the Temple and pour the water over the altar at the time the Tamid sacrifice was offered in the morning.

The drawing of the water was done amidst elaborate celebration in which the entire Jewish nation participated, much like a modern-day parade. They would dance the entire night away, and towards the morning they would all parade en masse to Maayan Hashiloach, draw the water and walk back to the Temple.

The entire ceremony was called “Simchas Beis Hashoeiva” because it centered around the water drawing.

The third side of Sukkos relating to water is the new additional prayer said on Simchas Torah, when in the amidah we add the words "...He causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall..." beginning the seasonal prayers for rain.

But what is this Jewish obsession with rain?

Climate-wise, it's true that the geographic region of the Holy Land always lacks rain, which has always been serious problem, but to focus an entire holiday on rain seems to be overdoing it a bit. Additionally, halachah, Jewish law, tells us that rain decides whether our sukkos or kosher or not: If rain can seep through the schach, the sukkah is deemed kosher for use. But if rain cannot seep through, the sukkah is not fit for holiday usage. But what's so unique about rain?

Who Controls the Weather

When we contemplate what nature is all about, we notice an interesting phenomenon: nature's laws are set, predictable and not subject to changes of time and place. For example, the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening—and that's not contingent on man's actions. It has nothing to do with whether people are good or evil: the sun will always shine. In other words, man's actions have no part or influence over nature's laws.

As such, it's easy for a person to be convinced that his or her actions have no bearing on nature. Seemingly, nature is independent, not contingent on a higher entity.

But that's precisely why G-d showed us signs and miracles in Egypt that shattered nature: the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea and the like to remind us that nature is subservient to its Creator. As a result, G-d shows His strength from time to time and brings about miracles like the Six-Day War, the Entebbe raid, the Gulf War etc. —to show the world that Someone, with a capital "S", is running the show.

Such occurrences happen very infrequently; throughout the year, nature's laws are stable and not contingent on how ethical man is—or isn't. Even in Treblinka, when the worst crimes against humanity were committed, nature didn't stop functioning entirely or even partially.

However, in spite of science's tremendous advances in pretty much every realm of human existence, there is one thing scientists have not been able to conquer: the weather.

To this day, scientists are not able to determine or predict future

weather conditions precisely. They still are unable to predict what the weather will be like in a year from now in any given location, or even a month from now. They can hardly accurately predict what the weather will be like in the next couple of days.

And not only can we not predict weather conditions, we cannot change them and we certainly cannot control them. Science hasn't been able to determine what controls weather conditions, leaving us totally helpless in this realm.

Thus, rain represents the supernatural: the unpredictable side of the laws of nature.

The Jews and the Rain

Consequently, the Torah tells us that there is a direct correlation between man's behavior and reward and punishment in regards to... rain.

We see this idea in the second chapter of the Shma, where it says, "...Take care lest your heart be lured away and you turn astray and worship alien gods...and He will close the heavens so that there will be no rain..." In another verse in the Torah, Leviticus 23:3-4, G-d tells us, "If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, I will give your rains in their time..." G-d doesn't warn us that if we worship alien gods the sun will no longer rise or the seasons will not change. Instead, He says there will be no rain, because rain is the only thing in our physical world that's subject to change and contingent upon something more spiritual.

This correlation explains how the Talmud (Tractate Taanis 2:1) says that three "keys" are in G-d's hands and not given to messenger, the first being rain. This hasn't changed since G-d created the world—even now, no one has the "key" to the correct "recipe" for rain.

And just as there are differences in nature's laws, so too there are differences between the Jewish nations and the world's nations.

The nations of the world are compared to the sun: they depend on nature and as a result are governed by the laws of nature. And because they are governed by the laws of nature, if an army overpowers them, they will cease to exist. That's just the way of the world—the laws of nature.

In contrast, no one has been able to understand the secret of ongoing Jewish existence. Many sociologists and researchers have tried to

understand what keeps and maintains us as a nation. There are those who try to keep tabs on us and there are those who try to get rid of us, G-d-forbid, but neither are able to actualize their goals.

We are the “rain” of the world, a supernatural phenomenon, under no one’s domination and control. That is why it is impossible to foretell what the condition of the Jewish nation will be like in fifty years from now.

And this, my friends, is the secret of the prayers for rain. Two things demonstrate G-d’s presence in the world: rain, and Jews. Therefore, when we pray for rain, we pray not only for the physical rain, but for something higher. We have in mind the Jewish nation.

May we be granted a rainy year, replete with blessing, a year with much water and abundant success.