

Bechukotai
Rabbi Arinna Moon
May 16, 2009

A sunny day, according to the rabbis, is one of earth's pleasures that are akin to the bliss of the world to come. Here in Cheyenne, the warm sunny days are treasured because they compare so favorably to the cold, windy days of winter. I imagine there are times at least some of us have wished that all days would be sunny days. But not to be overlooked is that fact that this climate is very dry and the little rainfall we get is crucial to sustain our farms, livestock, businesses and homes. The rain is really just as important to our well being as the sun is. In this week's Torah portion, God sends us rain as a blessing. Let's take a deeper look at what this blessing means for us today.

Our Israelite ancestors were very connected to the land, to the seasons and to nature. Wealth was calculated in flocks and herds. Time was measured by the waxing and waning of the moon. Festivals centered around the harvests and life was lived in harmony with the earth. God provided a bountiful crop when the people were faithful to the covenant and likewise they were punished by drought and famine when they strayed from God's commandments. This simple formulation provided meaning and connectedness in the community and to nature.

Today the story is very different. If we want to eat meat, we go to the store and buy an unidentifiable package with no thought as to the process of how the animal was killed. When we need to schedule an event, we reach for our blackberries. If our gardens are dry, we turn on the hose for an unlimited supply of water. There is an enormous disconnect between our daily habits and the natural world.

Jewish liturgical tradition provides a bridge between the life of our ancestors and our present reality. On Shemini Atzeret, we say a special prayer for rain to water the crops and fill the reservoirs. For the six months following, our daily prayers include praise to God who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall. According to the Talmud, "The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created" (Ta'anit 8b). But rain is not something that just happens. The Talmud teaches us that our actions have an impact on the rainfall. In Bechukotai, we read that rainfall is a function of our doing God's will. If Israel keeps the Torah, God says, "I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit... you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land, and I will grant peace in the Land." Conversely, God will bring a curse on the people for not obeying and ignoring the Torah. Lev. 26:19-20 says, "I will make your skies like iron and your earth like copper so that your strength shall be spent to no purpose. Your land shall not yield its produce nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit."

It is so easy to simply write off these words, because after all, how many of us actually believe that our good or bad behavior really influences the rainfall? But let's reconsider this. Our actions in regards to the environment really do have a determination on what happens not only to the availability of water but to the actual quality and quantity of rain. The Israeli organization, Canfei Nesharim, meaning on the wings of eagles, is dedicated to building a better world for our children, by learning and acting on the wisdom of our Jewish tradition to protect the environment. They offer the following information.

The effect of industrialized society on rain through pollutants has been well-known for decades – we have all heard of acid rain. In the 21st century, our impact on rain is becoming even more pronounced. A consensus of scientists states that human-caused climate change is increasing storm intensity and raising the seas. By burning fossil fuels in our cars, homes, factories, and planes, we are increasing the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere. This causes a greenhouse effect, which alters the climate. Global climate models project that climate change may increase precipitation by 7-15% at high latitudes, causing stronger and potentially more destructive storms in those areas. Climate change may decrease precipitation at mid and low altitudes, where the bulk of farmland lies, contributing to more severe regional droughts.

We not only affect how rain comes down, but also how that rain affects the land when it does fall. With increasing urbanization in the world, land that once soaked up rainwater is being covered in pavement, which prevents the rainwater from replenishing underground aquifers. Aquifers directly provide more than one-third of drinking water in America, and contribute, in some part, to all drinking water sources. In some places, like Florida, aquifers provide 100% of the drinking water as well as the majority of clean water for industrial and agricultural use. When rainwater is prevented from replenishing the water table, one of our most necessary resources – clean drinking water – is compromised.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the amount of land covered by sprawling urban development increased by 50% during the 1980's and 1990's. Increased building covers the land with impervious paving, which prevents the land from absorbing rains back into the water table. Unabsorbed rainwater becomes runoff, flowing through drainage systems (or causing floods when drains and sewers are overburdened), picking up pollutants along the way, which are then dumped into lakes, streams, and oceans.

Today we have an unbelievably complex understanding of how the earth's systems work, and how we impact them. In viewing the connection between humans and the environment through scientific analysis and statistics, we must be careful not to forget the true lesson of Bechukotai – God has created the world in such a way that, when we contradict God's will by living out of balance, our lives are thrown out of balance in response. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Ashlag, a leading kabbalist of the twentieth century, wrote that God established the laws of nature in the world, and a person or society that transgresses one of these laws will be punished by means of nature. He likens nature to a judge God established to punish those who violate the laws of nature.

We see from this that we cannot ignore the connection between our actions and the physical conditions which surround us. Scientific explanations of storm patterns, aquifer absorption, and rain toxicity should not obscure the influence of the Infinite One. Rather, they reveal to us the true greatness of Divine wisdom, and confirm that we really are obligated to live in balance with and be stewards of God's Creation, as the Torah requires.

Praying for beneficial rain and then ignoring the problems of global warming and unchecked urban development is like praying for good health and then continuing to eat poorly and smoke a pack of cigarettes a day. We are acting against our own expressed interests when we excessively burn fossil fuels and contribute to unchecked urban expansion. Some suggestions for addressing the problem include switching to low flow toilets and shower heads, turning off the faucet when washing dishes or brushing teeth

rather than letting the water run, and using products and services from companies that promote low greenhouse gas emissions, water conservation, and conscientious waste management.

Our prayers for beneficial rain are extremely important, and our actions should be consistent with the emphasis of our prayers. We must live as earnestly as we pray. Praying for rain is a beginning, but we must follow through by acting on the awareness that we now contribute to bringing either rains of blessing or destructive storms and water shortages. By doing so, we can give our children the gift of a world that is blessed, as God promises, with rains of abundance, prosperity, and peace.