



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMINI ATZERET 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 5, 2015
Shemini Atzeret

**What's In The Forecast?
Rain, Rain, Rain**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5776*

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What's In The Forecast?

ABSTRACT

The intricacies of rain can wet your palate and drench your soul.

An average of approximately 121,000 cubic miles of rain falls every year on planet Earth. Close to four-fifths of that falls over the oceans, while one-fifth falls onto land.

There is an arid dry country in Africa whose currency is named "rain" due to its scarcity. When it rains there is doesn't poor.

There is a mountain in Hawaii where it rains like 350 days a year.

The question is: Why do we pray for rain on Shemini Atzeret? What's the connection?

When was the first rainstorm in history?

What can rain teach us about life?

Are we all droplets in a bucket or are we something more?

The Talmud compares the rain day to the ingathering of exiles and Jewish unity. In this sermon you will find out why.

Two stories, one about rainmaking and one about fishing after fresh rain will have you laying down your umbrella forever and grabbing life by the rains.

WHAT'S IN THE FORECAST? RAIN, RAIN, RAIN THE FIRST RAINSTORM IN HISTORY

1. Holy Umbrella (Joke)

Two men of Chelm went out for a walk, when suddenly it began to rain.

"Quick," said one. "Open your umbrella."

"It won't help," said his friend. "My umbrella is full of holes."

"Then why did you bring it?"

"I didn't think it would rain!"

2. Rain Forecast

The intricacies of rain can wet your palate and drench your soul.

An average of approximately 121,000 cubic miles of rain falls every year on planet Earth. Close to four-fifths of that falls over the oceans, while one-fifth falls onto land.

Mount Wai'ale'ale, often spelled Waialeale in English, is a shield volcano and the second highest point on the island of Kaua'i in the Hawaiian Islands. Its name literally means, "rippling water" or "overflowing water."

The mountain, at an elevation of 5,148 feet, averages more than 452 inches of rain a year since 1912 (that's like 38 feet!), with a record 683 inches in 1982; its summit is one of the rainiest spots on earth.

Contrast this with Botswana.

The Republic of Botswana is a landlocked country just north of South Africa and one of the most rainless places on earth. As a matter of fact, its money is called "pula." Pula literally means "rain." Rain is very scarce in Botswana - home to much of the Kalahari Desert - and it is therefore so valuable and such a blessing that its money has been named after this prized commodity.

When it rains in Botswana is doesn't poor.

In Botswana, the slangy expression for making money, "make it rain," is literally true.

We often take rain for granted. As Jews, we endeavor to take nothing for granted, and to remember and understand how everything is a blessing from on high. Nothing more so than rain, which quenches the thirsts of lands and moistens the lips of earth.

3. Rain Day Like Gathering Exiles

Why am I discussing rain?

Because all rain begins on this day, Shemini Atzeret, when the rainfall of the year is designated from above.

We therefore say today the primary prayer for rain: the cantor's repetition of the Musaf service begins with *Teffilat Geshem*, the Prayer for Rain – the source of all blessings.

The Talmud¹ says something very interesting about this day, the "Rain Day," which at first glance seems quite baffling:

R. Yochanan said: The day on which rain falls is as great as the day of the ingathering of the exiles, as it says: Return, O Lord, our captivity like rivulets in arid land.² Rivulets, refers to rain, as it says: And the depths of the sea appeared.³

What is the possible connection between the Redemption, when all the exiles shall be gathered together and the day of rain?

Additionally, these rains are called *gevurat ha'geshamim*,⁴ "Powers of the Rains." It seems, at first flush, to be a confusing title. *Gevurah*, meaning "strength," "power," or "discipline," refers to restraint and limitation, to the ability of holding back and channeling energy.

¹ Taanit 8b.

² Pslams 126:4.

³ II Samuel 22:16.

⁴ See Likkutei Torah, Shemini Atzeret 92d; Bracha 96b.

Gevurah's counterpart on the other hand, known as *chessed*, "kindness," is all about transmitting, flowing and energizing, not about restraining and disciplining.

Wouldn't then free-flowing rain be a form of *chessed*, "kindness," not *gevurah*? Rain is all about sustaining, providing sustenance and giving life. Rain is not about discipline; rain is about energy. Why then are the rains called rains of *gevurah* and not rains of *chessed*?⁵

Another confusing thing in general is the connection between Shemini Atzeret and rain. Why is rain a central theme of this day, culminating the holiday season – following Sukkot, Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah?

And finally: What connection does this have with Simchat Torah? Why do we celebrate Simchat Torah on Shemini Atzeret⁶ and not on Shavuot, when the Torah was given.

To answer these questions, let us go back to the first rain in the history of the world.

4. The World's First Rain

The Bible tells us that all floras – from the trees and flowers to the grasses and herbs – were created on the third day of creation. Yet, the verses in Genesis tell us that nothing grew until the sixth day. The reason nothing grew, was *because the Lord God had not brought rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil.*⁷

Without rain, nothing grows. Thus, we see, that though there definitely was a body of water, as the second verse in the Torah clearly states ("the spirit of God hovered upon the waters"), there nevertheless was no rainwater.

⁵ See the discourse Gadol Yom Hageshamim, Simchat Torah 5673 (printed in Sefer Hamamarim 5672-76 p. 198ff.)

⁶ Which in Israel is also Simchat Torah.

⁷ Genesis 2:5. See also Rashi ad loc, quoting Chulin 60b.

Without rainwater, all the flora that was created on the third day remained at the surface but did not sprout up from it to grow and bloom. Why? Because there was no rain until the human being was created on the sixth day.

Only on the sixth day, when it was time to create, Adam, the human being, do we read about rain and growth:

And a mist ascended from the earth and watered the entire surface of the ground. And the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from the east, and He placed there the man whom He had formed. And the Lord God caused to sprout from the ground every tree pleasant to see and good to eat, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. And a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden...⁸

Rashi⁹ quotes the Midrash to explain this process of *mist ascending*:

Concerning the creation of man, He brought up the deep and watered the clouds to soak the earth, and man was created; like the baker, who puts water into the flour and afterwards kneads the dough. Here too, "He watered," and afterwards, "He formed."¹⁰

5. The Difference Between Water and Rain

The Rabbi of a town was about to set out for a journey to his Rebbe in a distant town. His friends and colleagues asked him, "Aren't there enough Rabbis here? Why make the big trip?"

He explained using a parable. Fishermen often say a good time to fish is just after the rain, since the fish come up from the water's depths to seek out the fresh droplets of rainwater. Now, why would they do that?

⁸Genesis 2:6-10.

⁹Ibid 6.

¹⁰Exodus Rabbah 30:113. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 5.

They live in water and have access to water all the time! Yet, there is a difference. The rainwater is fresh and invigorating.

This man felt that the esteemed Rebbe to whom he was traveling to at a great distance offered more refreshing water for his soul.

The biggest difference between water and rain is that waters are created by God from on high and flow down below. Rain on the other hand begins from below, with the evaporation of the waters below, with *a mist ascended from the earth* and only after, *and watered the entire surface of the ground*.

All water is a great blessing. But rainwater is new, fresh and invigorating.

To create man, God caused the mist to ascend from below, gather in rain clouds¹¹, that gathered precipitation then combusted out and it rained upon the earth. The moistened earth, like water hitting flour, was than formed into the form of the human being.

But why this whole process? Why does growth require the evaporation of moisture, forming of clouds, bursting of energy, and rainfall down below? Why not simply create bodies of water without this elaborate process? And why is this new form of energy only created on the sixth day, with man, and not earlier with the other creations?

6. A Drop of Infinity

Another major difference between a body of water and rain is the detail. Every body of water, from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, from a small lake to a great ocean, is just that - a large collection of water.

Rain on the other hand falls in drops. It consists of many standalone tiny misty drops evaporating and coalescing upward from earth and its seas, gathering together in a cloud, and falling back down on earth drop

¹¹ See Genesis Rabbah 13. See also Sukkah 12a (Tosafot

after drop, maintaining the individual detail and unique contribution of each rain drop. Indeed, if rain were to fall like a deluge, not drop by drop, it would flood and destroy the fields.

The mystics teach that it is precisely this individuality of each raindrop that gave rain its name *gevurot ha'geshamim* and not simply the energy of *chessed*:

Gevurah and only *gevurah* divides and breaks down the unfettered flow of *chessed*, creating the detail and definition of rain and its individual drops. *Chessed* alone creates homogenous bodies of water, waterfalls that flow endlessly, which are wonderful, but only *gevurah* distills and harnesses the flow into raindrops, which allows rain to nurture and create real growth.

Meted and measured energy, individualistic and tailored to the earth it is meant to sustain, must come from *gevurah*, a place of definition and droplets.

Rain was created on the sixth day with man and it is symbolized by and indicative of man's process to innovate and create.

Rain begins from moisture below, evaporating, gathering in a cloud, and falling rain back down onto earth.

Rain represents man's work; our moistening below creates rain from on high.

This is also expressed in the name of this day Shemini Atzeret: The word *atzeret* means to gather, or to assemble.¹² The raindrops assemble and gather in the clouds, their collective weight causing the clouds to burst and the rains to pour.

7. Poetry in Motion

This also explains the poetic order of the holidays:

After the individualistic moisturizing and refining that we do on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, with our work evaporating upward to heaven – we then culminate the holiday season with

¹² See Likkutei Torah *ibid*.

Shemini Atzeret, when all those individual efforts – those drops – gather and assemble, *atzeret*, and their weight bursts forth, causing bountiful blessings of rain to fall upon earth, feeding life and making things blossom and grow.

This is also why we celebrate and dance with the Torah now and not on Shavuot.

Shavuot, the first tablets were given from on high, akin to the body of water created in the first day of creation. The second set of tablets were given on Yom Kippur, as a result of Moses' efforts from below to gain God's forgiveness, which we recreate every Yom Kippur through our introspection, prayer and teshuva, accounting for and refining our lives – akin to the rain that results from the mist that rises from our work below.

And only after we have refined ourselves from below – and have absorbed and internalized the experience drop by drop – can we truly dance and celebrate with the Torah, which is all about man transforming earth and making its soil grow by watering it with the living waters of the Divine Torah. Thus Simchat Torah comes on Shemini Atzeret, not on Shavuot, only after Yom Kippur and the giving of the second tablets.

8. Unifying Rainfall

Now we can also understand why the Talmud compares the Day of Rains to the day of the ingathering of the exiles:

Rain is about gathering (*atzeret*) details and directing them (*gevurah* within *chessed*) to nurture the earth and make things grow.

That is precisely the meaning and blessing of the “ingathering of the exiles,” *kibbutz goliyut*:

“Exile” (*galut*) refers to the physical and spiritual displacement of the Jewish people, and specifically relevant to us now – the diaspora that began after the Second Temple was destroyed nearly 2000 years ago.

More generally – “exile” is the psychological dissonance that results from any disconnection we experience, the dichotomy between mind and heart, between our behavior and our ideals, or between what we do and who we are.

The “ingathering of the exiles” refers to the time of our redemption when after years upon years of our work below in integrating our lives, all the dispersed souls, and all forms of fragmentation, will be reassembled and reconnected as one.

Thus, *The day on which rain falls is as great as the day of the ingathering of the exiles*: The blessing of rainfall is the power generated by our efforts below, and the power of gathering together drop after drop of water, and joining them into one nurturing force that sustains life.

We are born into this world, Jews dispersed throughout the many lands of earth, each another heavenly droplet of moisture here on earth, trying to till our individual soil and make it grow.

With our individual efforts our moisture, our mist (and mysticism) ascends on high and we gather together (*atzeret*) in a cloud; then when it bursts and it rains we realize the purpose for our dispersion throughout the many lands, a seemingly fragmented people spread out and seemingly disconnected:

On Shemini Atzeret, the Day of Rains, we realize that we were never truly dispersed; we were merely a rainstorm in the making. To the novice it may seem as if every rain drop is independent and even separated from its fellow, but to the gardens and forests and orchards and vineyards being watered it is clear that every raindrop is part of the same tempest, a thunderous and lightening bolt of a rainstorm.

Kibbutz goliyut, the ingathering of the exiles, is when every individual raindrop is gathered together (*atzeret*) and it remembers that it is part of one redeeming and redemptive rain.

As the prophet Isaiah so beautifully states:

And it shall come to pass on that day, that the Lord shall gather from the flood of the river to the stream of Egypt, and you shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel. And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great shofar shall be sounded, and those lost in the land of Assyria and those exiled in the land of Egypt shall come and they shall prostrate themselves before the Lord on the holy mount in Jerusalem.¹³

One by one – drop by drop.

9. Take Life By The Rains (Story)

A group of chassidim once came to R. Yisrael of Ruzhin, complaining of a drought that was jeopardizing their crops and their livestock. R. Yisrael led them through shaded paths in the nearby forest until he came upon a particular tree. He motioned to the chassidim to sit and said:

“When there was a drought in the time of the Baal Shem Tov, he would bring his chassidim to this tree, sing a melody, share a teaching, and rain would come.

“A generation later, when there was a drought, my grandfather the Maggid of Mezritch would also bring his followers to this tree. He would tell them this story of the Baal Shem Tov and say, ‘Although I no longer remember the teaching, this is the melody the Baal Shem would sing.’ And after he sang the melody, rain came down.

“As for me,” R. Yisrael concluded, “I know neither the melody nor the teaching. But I do know the story. May relating the story bring rain.”

Reb Yisrael and his chassidim had barely emerged from the forest before the first thunder bursts were heard.¹⁴

¹³ Isaiah 27:12-13.

¹⁴ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/78664/jewish/Chapter-6-To-Be-A-Rebbe.htm.

10. Rain Supreme (Joke)

A newcomer to Seattle arrives on a rainy day. She gets up the next day and it's still raining. It also rains the day after that, and the day after that. She goes out to lunch and sees a young kid and out of despair asks, "Hey, kid, does it ever stop raining around here?"

The kid says, "How should I know? I'm only 6."

11. Lessons From Rain (Conclusion)

Perhaps sometimes rain causes us to despair. But that's only if we focus on the superficialities of rain. Just imagine if it never rained... Thanks to Shemini Atzeret that will never happen; our prayers ensure that the rains – *geshem*, root word of *gashmiyut*, *physicality* – never cease.

On this Shemini Atzeret, as we pray for rain and recite *mashiv ha'ruach u'morid ha'geshem*, "Who orchestrates the winds and releases the rains," there are two simple yet profound lessons that we may all learn from rain:

Lesson 1:

Rain starts with moisture down below, which then evaporates, ascending on high, gathering together until bursting and pouring back down below.

The more moisture we create here on earth, the more righteousness and life we perpetuate, the more elevation of the mist and the mystical there will be, and thus the more gathering of precipitation, and thus the greater the raining of blessings upon us from on high.

Lesson 2:

Rain is not one big blob, but a bunch of (seemingly) tiny droplets pouring down in humble unison.

We often think that we have to do the big thing, the massive achievement, the dramatic event, create infinitely sized energy. *Gevurot ha'geshamim*, the individual and defined droplets of rain, teach us that to water the earth and make things grow, all you need is a tiny little drop, which you will then surely unite with another tiny little drop, and another and another, until the most luscious and ripe orchard sprouts from the heretofore barren earth. The little droplets of light and sustenance are often a greater blessing than a waterfall of uncontrollable and unsustainable deluge.

As we read *mashiv haruach u'morid hageshem*, "Who orchestrates the winds and releases the rains," we could also read it *mashiv haruach* – who answers the *ruach*, spirit – *u'morid hageshem* – and lowers the *gashmiyut*, the material blessings.

When our *ruach*, our spirits and spirituality is in the right place, the result is a rainfall of material, physical, and tangible blessings.

Good Yom Tov!