



## HIGH HOLIDAYS

Shemini Atzeret

For a Blessing and Not for a Curse:  
Las Vegas, Hurricanes and the Blessing for Rain

October 12, 2017

## FOR A BLESSING AND NOT FOR A CURSE: LAS VEGAS, HURRICANES AND THE BLESSING FOR RAIN

### ABSTRACT

The rain prayer of Shemini Atzeret seems more relevant than ever.

What are we to say when a lone gunman at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino took aim at a crowd of 22,000 people at a country music festival, killing at last count 59 and injuring more than 520 others, in the largest mass shooting in USA history?!

And this, following the devastation wreaked by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, pummeling Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean Islands

And all this is happening in the High Holiday season – spanning the days as move from Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur into Sukkot...

Following the devastation wreaked by the natural winds and rains of Harvey, Irma and Maria, and the ones rained upon innocent lives by a maniac gunman in Las Vegas, what more prescient words are appropriate today than the ones we will be uttering in the upcoming *geshem* prayer for rain:

*For a blessing and not for a curse.*

*For life and not for death.*

*For plenty and not for scarcity.*

As a new year is born and new spiritual forces blow into existence, it's no wonder that we're in need of a special prayer to ensure that these winds are harnessed for blessing only.

We are meant to learn from everything we see and hear. What lessons does this prayer teach us? One lesson can be derived from events that took place 40 years ago today, when the Rebbe suffered a massive heart attack, which ended up serving as a springboard for unprecedented growth.

When faced with foreboding clouds and threatening winds, we turn them into nurturing and nourishing rain.

Because we were created to be rainmakers.

## 1. Rains of Destruction

The last few months have been harrowing.

Raging rains and howling winds have been wreaking havoc and upheaval. Many of us are wondering how are we to make sense of the relentless devastation we have witnessed in the past two months.

First came Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria – one storm greater than the other – pummeling Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean Islands, killing scores and uprooting tens of thousands.

Then, just last week, the massacre in Las Vegas. What are we to say when a lone gunman at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino took aim at a crowd of 22,000 people at a country music festival, killing at last count 59 and injuring more than 520 others, in the largest mass shooting in USA history?!

And all this is happening in the High Holiday season – spanning the days as we move from Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur into Sukkot.

## 2. Rains of Blessing

But just as we are still reeling from these ruinous winds and rains, we are about to perform an annual ritual, one of the most important of the year, related directly to rains and winds – beseeching G-d to send us rains of blessing and not curse!

In a few moments, during the repetition of the Musaf Amidah on Shemini Atzeret, the chazzan, the cantor, will recite one of the most solemn prayers of the year – *T'fillat Geshem*, the Rain Prayer – an annual prayer said on Shemini Atzeret to inaugurate the mention of rain in the Amidah prayer:

*Mashiv Haruach Umorid Hageshem* – “He causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.”

In this dramatic and hallowed Rain Prayer – sung in a solemn High Holiday style melody – we declare that the rains should be:

*For a blessing and not for a curse.*

*For life and not for death.*

*For plenty and not for scarcity.*

In the wake of the destruction that has recently rained down upon us – from the powerful hurricanes unloading their torrential waters on our cities, to the brutal shootings raining steel bullets upon innocents – I cannot think of a better prayer to be said at this time.

Following the devastation wreaked by the natural winds and rains of Harvey, Irma and Maria, and the ones

rained upon vulnerable lives by a maniac gunman in Las Vegas, what more prescient words are appropriate today than the ones we will be uttering in the upcoming *geshem* prayer for rain.

We beseech G-d that enough is enough. That he should send us the rains

*For a blessing and not for a curse.*

*For life and not for death.*

*For plenty and not for scarcity.*

The rain prayer of Shemini Atzeret seems more relevant than ever.

As such, allow me to extend our blessings and prayers to all those who have suffered in the latest catastrophes.

Our hearts and souls go out to the innocent victims of the Las Vegas massacre. As well as those lost in the recent hurricanes. May their families be consoled and find the strength to rebuild and thrive.

Going forward may they only experience blessed and life-bearing rains.

May G-d bless all of His children with healing and life, and may He usher in the day when all weapons will be turned into farming implements speedily in our day.

### 3. How to Deal with Cursed Rains

But the big question remains: How are we to cope with the destructive rains in our lives?

The rain prayer for a blessing and not for a curse, for life and not for death, is certainly a consolation. But does it also offer us a formula to grow through the “curse” or the “death”?

The answer, my friends, is yes. The rain prayer includes lessons and tools to deal with any challenge in life.

Judaism does not believe in coincidence. The fact that we pray today for the blessing of positive rain, means that within the holy words of this timeless prayer also lays the antidote to the negative and profane storms, be they hurricane winds raining down and devastating communities, or thunderous bullets raining down upon humanity from the 32nd floor of a hotel.

But before we get into the details, it is vital to mention that we are not looking to explain tragedy, which is beyond our human capacity to understand or fathom.

As Jews, we know that there is no answer to such great heartbreak, only a response of even greater light.

On Yom Tov, on Shemini Atzeret, when we begin the most joyous festival of the year – the culmination of

Sukkot and bridge to Simchat Torah – it is our responsibility to rise to the occasion and show the world what it means to be divine.

No one should ever have to face loss and grief, but difficulties have the power to bring out the best in us like nothing else.

In other words: We do not try to comprehend why bad things happen to good people. We seek not the “why” but the “what” – what can we do about it? How can we not be broken by loss? How can we forge ahead and not just survive, but thrive and grow through the process?

The rain prayer offers us lessons and helps us find direction.

#### 4. Hurricane Season, Holiday Season

It is no coincidence that hurricane season arrives always with the Jewish holiday season.

Who do hurricanes take place in the High Holiday season – September and October?

From a meteorological point of view, this season offers just the right ingredients for a perfect storm. Tropical cyclones in the Atlantic Basin are most numerous during late summer and early autumn because that is the time of year when the two most important ingredients needed for their formation – warm ocean waters (80 degrees or higher) and weak vertical wind shear (little change in wind direction and/or speed with height) – are most prevalent<sup>1</sup>.

From a weatherman’s perspective, the holiday season is when the perfect balance between warm water and weak wind allows for storms to brew, develop, and grow.

From a Jewish perspective, the year is beginning anew. Energies are percolating. Prayers are electrifying. Spiritual forces are erupting.

It’s no coincidence that the hurricanes in the physical world are reflecting the ethereal winds of change in the spiritual worlds.

As the world is experiencing a new birthing, everything hangs in the balance. And it is the human being – you and I, and every person on earth – who was created as a partner with G-d to tip the scales and bring blessings to the world by refining our lives and our corner of the universe.

As Maimonides writes<sup>2</sup>: “A person must see himself and the world as equally balanced on two ends of the scale; by doing one good deed, he tips the scale and brings for himself and the entire world redemption and

<sup>1</sup> <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/weather/whur5.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4.

salvation.”

And this is the deeper meaning of the rain prayer:

Rain signifies the flow of material blessings from the spiritual realm to this physical world. But like all great blessings, the rain needs to be harnessed and channeled to serve as a blessing lest it flood and destroy.

Our actions have the power to ensure that the rains fall as blessings and not G-d forbid, the opposite.

Furthermore: Even when the rains fall in destructive ways, we have the power to turn these curses into blessings. By allowing the challenge to bring out our best – by rising to the occasion and revealing our better angels, our nobility and virtue – as we have witnessed time and again the selfless behavior of so many to save and help even perfect strangers in the recent tragedies.

As a new year is born and new spiritual forces blow into existence, it's no wonder that we're in need of a special prayer to ensure that these winds are harnessed for blessing only.

## 5. Two Types of Rainfall

Let's look a bit closer at the *geshem*/rain prayer will be reciting shortly and see how this message is hinted to in these poetic words, composed by the famous paytan, Rabbi Elazar HaKallir (who lived about 1300 years ago), relevant today as ever:

The prayer commences with introducing the angel of rain

Af-Bri is designated as the name of the angel of rain,  
Who overcasts [the sky], covering it with clouds, emptying them and causing rain to fall,  
Water with which to crown the earth with herbage,  
Let it not be held back for our neglected debts (sins).  
In the merit of the faithful [Patriarchs], protect [Israel] who prays for rain.

*Af-Bri* – the name of the angel of rain – connotes two styles of rainfall:

*Af* means “anger,” referring to torrential flood-provoking rainfall. *Bri* denotes “health,” describing the gentle rain which is beneficial to humanity and to the environment in general

The prayer then continues with a poem in an alphabetical acrostic, each line beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, invoking the memory of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron and the twelve tribes – the sacrifices they made relating to water, and the miracles that were shown to them in connection with water, entreating G-d to favor us with the blessings of water in their sake.

The rain prayer than concludes:

For You are the Lord our G-d, who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.

For a blessing and not for a curse. (Amen)

For life and not for death. (Amen)

For plenty and not for scarcity. (Amen)

## 6. Storms that Make Things Grow; Storms that...

This rain prayer makes it clear that we pray not only for its benefits, but also to ensure that the rain comes to us in a blessed form.

Rain and water, which is fundamental to our sustenance, symbolize the cycles of life and all its blessings.

But like all blessings, we need to direct and regulate its flow, to ensure that the rain showers us with blessings.

We thus pray for the rains with the emphasis that we draw the rain not from the *Af* and anger of the *Af-Bri* angel of rain, but from the *Bri*, the healthy rains of blessings. *For a blessing and not for a curse.*

The prayer makes it clear that we pray not only for the benefits of rain, but also to ensure that the rain comes to us in a blessed form.

The same, and much more so, is true for us humans:

Starting with creation on Rosh Hashanah, continuing with the holiest day of Yom Kippur, dancing with the celebrating of Sukkot, culminating with the celebration of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, the holidays remind us that, as with rain, so is it with the lives we live.

Human beings are embedded with Free Will. If rain could be a blessing or a curse, a facilitator of life or an instrument of death, a generator of plenty or a miser of scarcity, how much more so the human being!

We have been gifted with life. Today we pray and commit to a life that will always be a blessing, never a curse; forever a source of more life, never, ever causing death; eternally giving and sharing plenty, never a source of scarcity.

Our best and most effective response and solution to the rains of destruction is to attack not only its symptoms, but its cause: through selfless acts of goodness, we destroy and transform evil at its root.

Our response to Las Vegas – or Harvey, Irma and Maria – is to overflow any curse with our blessings, flood any death-maker with our life-making, blow away any scarcity by generating plenty.

Our greatest response to tragedy – to destructive rains – is to declare louder than ever that we humans are agents of blessings. We are here to shower blessings upon the world. We were created to be rainmakers. To bring healthy families into the world. We were born to being love to whomever we meet.

*Tefilat Geshem*, the Prayer for Rain is a prayer we ask of G-d. But it is also a prayer G-d asks of us. Imagine G-d saying: You, Man, Adam, created in My image, please, I beg you, use that image for blessing, life, and plenty.

Surely we will answer G-d's prayer. And He will answer ours.

## 7. 40 Years

One tremendous lesson in channeling pain toward growth can be learned from an event that happened 40 years ago tonight.

On the eve of Shemini Atzeret 1977/5738 the Lubavitcher Rebbe suffered a killer heart attack. Any man, even a young one, would have been debilitated at the least from such an attack. Let alone a man at age 76!

But not the Rebbe. Not only did he survive, but he actually went on to grow and expand his activities and that of the Chabad movement in new and unprecedented ways. It's no exaggeration to say that the Rebbe's output – his talks and teachings, his campaigns and initiatives – more than doubled in the years following the heat attack!

From whence such strength? Obviously, a Rebbe has powers far beyond our own. Yet, the Rebbe's acceleration and growth offers us all tremendous lessons in dealing with adversity.

One peek into the source of the Rebbe's fortitude can perhaps be gleaned from a dialogue that took place at the time between the Rebbe and his doctor:

Once, when the doctor was taking his blood, the Rebbe asked him: "What is it that draws the blood from the veins? The needle itself or the vacuum of the syringe?" The doctor answered that it was the vacuum. "That reminds me of a troubled man who once came to see me," the Rebbe said to his secretary, who was standing nearby. "He complained that he was 'empty' and unfit for anything. I told him that, in fact, the opposite was true -- that an empty vessel can draw in with much greater intensity than a vessel that is full, so he is actually in an excellent position to commit much good and holiness."

It was a holiday, a day that the Rebbe traditionally delivered a joyful sermon. "Since I will not be able to speak," he said to his secretary, "I ask you to repeat what I just said. Just as the vacuum draws in more forcefully than something that is filled, at the gathering tonight, even though the person usually sitting in my chair will be absent, the holiday spirit should not be dampened. On the contrary – the vacuum will evoke all good things from Heaven."



The lesson to us is clear and powerful:

A vacuum can debilitate or empower.

Even when we experience setbacks and losses, we don't allow them to bring us down. On the contrary we use their negative energy as a catalyst to motivate and thrust us forward with even more intensity.

Bad rains drive us to create a greater surge of good rains.

When faced with foreboding clouds and threatening winds, we turn them into nurturing and nourishing rain.

Because we were created to be rainmakers.

## 8. Yizkor

Before the rain prayer in *musaf* we will be saying Yizkor.

As we are about to say the Yizkor prayer, remembering our loved ones, it is worthwhile to remember what we are remembering:

We are remembering that as the Jewish People our job is to pray for the world, for positive energy, for healthy rainstorms that will water the fields and wash away the tears of heartbreak, and blow away those that wish to harm G-d's children.

We are remembering that just like our forefathers and foremothers went through fire and water to sanctify G-d's name, sacrificing everything just to bring us into this world, we promise to do the same.

We are remembering the blood of generations spilled like water. And this memory solidifies our commitment to abolish such evil forever with our Torah, Divine Service, and Righteous Acts – the tree pillars that hold up the universe.

We are remembering the Creator of All, Who puts us here on earth to make all of existence heavenly.

We are remembering to make it rain – rain with goodness, kindness, and G-dliness.

We remember that at all times we are rainmakers – empowered to turn everything into blessed rains and rains of blessings, showering upon each and every one of us only goodness and beauty, all in the best of health.

*As Tefilat Geshem concludes: For a blessing and not for a curse. (Amen) For life and not for death. (Amen) For plenty and not for scarcity. (Amen)*

Chag Sameach and Gut Yom Tov!

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