

Parshat Haazinu- May Good Rain Down on Us

Wednesday, October 2, 2024



Dear Friends,

This year, we enter Rosh Hashana in a state of trepidation. The words of *Unetaneh Tokef* drape this year's events in new liturgical darkness and will, no doubt, be hard to recite. We are not the same people we were one year ago. The world is not the same on this #362 day of the war. And we come to the machzor, the Rosh Hashana prayerbook, wondering who will be written in the Book of Life and whose names will not appear. Rabbi Sacks invokes what we hope prayer will accomplish: "As we say in our prayers on the High Holy Days: 'Prayer, penitence, and charity avert the evil decree.' There is no decree that cannot be revoked."

At the same time, the fact that we pray in community enlarges the soul of each of us. We reach out beyond our own troubles and joys and, in song, touch some chord of heaven. We take comfort in singing together, in the familiar rituals, and in seeing people we may not have seen for a while. We rejoice in our families and in our friends and celebrate another Jewish year together.

To help us enter the day with heightened sense of newness and not only with heightened alert, here are seven questions to discuss at your Yom Tov table:


- What new person entered my life who has made a real difference?
 - What new charity did I give to or volunteer with that felt truly worthwhile?
 - What new book did I read that I couldn't put down this year?
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- What new Jewish idea has had an impact on me?
- What new development in my family am I particularly proud of?
- What new role can I have at home, school, or work that will enhance my sense of purpose?
- What new small action can I take each day to help me flourish?

Wishing us all a year of victory and healing, joy and meaning, health and vitality.

Erica

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May Good Rain Down on Us

In these tense days of red alerts in Israel, we worry about rockets showering on us from the sky. But in our Torah portion for this week, what rains down from the sky does not destroy, it nourishes and grows us.

Parshat Haazinu contains Moses' spiritually and emotionally evocative song, poetically describing God's relationship with the Israelites. Moses opens *Haazinu* comparing Torah to rain: "Let my teaching drop as rain, My words descend like dew, Like showers on new grass, Like abundant rain on tender plants" (Deut. 32:2). This vivid metaphor stimulates the *Midrashic* imagination. The *Sifrei Deuteronomy*, a collection of Midrash dating back to the 3rd century, provides multiple interpretations that elucidate the connection between teachings and water, students and seedlings. Each insight deepens our understanding of the dynamic interplay between Torah and character.

Metaphors, according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, do not just reflect thought, but shape thought. We make sense of and interact in the world based on metaphors. Metaphors are also important for developing character. They facilitate understanding of abstract values and virtues, promote creative and reflective thinking, and build emotional and moral imagination. Since they are open to interpretation, they also allow for multiple explanations and inspire personal connections.

A series of connections in the Midrash creatively conjure up inspirational imagery about the benefits of Torah to personal development: "Just as rain is life for the world, so, words of Torah;" "Just as showers raise the grass and make it flourish, so, words of Torah raise their disciples and make them flourish;" "Just as showers descend upon the grass and beautify and preen it, so, words of Torah beautify and preen their disciples." Just as

water nourishes, Torah cultivates character.

Taking the metaphor even further, this Midrash distinguishes between waters' impact on different types of plants. "Just as showers fall upon plants and make them grow, some green, some red, some black, some white, so the words of Torah produce teachers, worthy individuals, Sages, the righteous, and the pious." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gleans an essential lesson concerning individual differences from this teaching: "The Torah is compared to rain precisely to emphasize that its most important effect is to make each of us grow into what we could become. We are not all the same, nor does Torah seek uniformity" ("Let My Teaching Drop as Rain," *Covenant & Conversation*).

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, quoted in *Beshem Omro*, extends the metaphor and distinguishes not just between the different plants but between different types of water. Heavier rain helps certain plants, while others need the lighter dew to help them grow. So too, different types of Torah teachings need to be matched appropriately to the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual capacities of the individual learner.

But water also has the power to destroy. This is an all too real reality for those in the hazardous path of Hurricane Helene. One opinion in the Midrash accounts for this perilous potential. The opening Hebrew word of the aforementioned verse is *ya'arof*, which is translated here as "drop," but also has a Biblical connotation of breaking or killing (as in Deut. 21:4). The Midrash suggests that only if Torah is learned with the right intentions does it provide life. Otherwise, it contains destructive capabilities. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, quoting his teacher Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, notes that water only has the capacity to grow whatever is already latent in the ground. It could help yield fruits or vegetables, or poisonous mushrooms. For someone with underlying positive potential, Torah can help foster moral and religious growth.

Perhaps most resonant during the Ten Days of Repentance, both water and Torah have the power of atonement. The Hebrew word for "showers" in the verse is *se'irim*, which is the same word used to connote sacrificial he-goats. The Midrash draws the connection: "Just as *se'irim* (he-goats) are brought for transgressions and atone for them, so, words of Torah." The lesson is more than just wordplay, but an extension of the metaphor. Immersion in water is a symbol of spiritual cleansing. Immersing ourselves in Moses' teachings during this period of repentance provides purification, healing, and transformation.

Character Challenge: What kindness can you rain down on someone to counter hate and war?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, zt”l: “Torah is a commentary on life, and life is a commentary on Torah. Together they constitute a conversation, each shedding light on the other. Torah is a book not only to be read but to be lived. One of the things that gives us the courage and wisdom to chart our way through the wilderness of life is knowing that we are not alone, that God goes before us in a pillar of cloud and fire, signaling the way. The way He does so for us is through the words of Torah, to which every Jewish life is a commentary, and each of us has our own annotation to write” (Introduction to Genesis, *Covenant & Conversation*).



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