

JEWISH TEACHINGS ON WATER

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Water is inextricably intertwined with life. Covering over 70% of Earth's surface, it was the original medium for the emergence of life itself. Yet despite its widespread presence, clean fresh water is rare, comprising less than 1% of the total. Humanity needs an ethic that places a high value on water.

Water - Under Threat

The world's supply of fresh water faces serious threats. As the world's population grows, water use increases, as does sewage-contaminated water, polluted agricultural runoff, and water contaminated from industrial, commercial and residential uses. Suburban sprawl is a global phenomenon, increasing polluted runoff from storm water and lacing aquifers with chemical residues.

In addition, over 880 million people lack access to clean drinking water. In a growing number of locations, lack of access to fresh water creates political instability.¹ This will only get worse. Weather pattern changes due to climate change, resulting in droughts in some parts of the world and floods in others, will create an estimated 250 million climate refugees by 2050.² Always a source of life, water will also be a source of international insecurity.

Linchpin of Society

Water remains a *sine qua non* of civilization. Try living even one day without it, and you'll soon realize the meaning of dependency. The ancient Israelites understood water's value. There are at least ten words for "rain" in biblical Hebrew, eight for "cloud," and numerous terms for springs, wells, cisterns and aqueducts.³ This vocabulary shows an acute sensitivity to the ecology of the land of Israel. Unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, there are no major river systems in the land of Israel, making it almost completely dependent on rain for drinking water and agriculture.

Israel's average rate of rainfall varies regionally because Israel contains several bioregions: the rain fed region (16-40 inches of rain per year), the pastoral region (4 to 16 inches per year), the maritime region (16-40 inches per year), and the desert region (less than 4 inches of rain per year). The Israelites, like the other peoples surrounding them, developed technologies for utilizing water: wells, cisterns⁴ for rainwater, tunnels (found at Jerusalem, Hazor and Megiddo) which allowed access to springs in wartime, aqueducts to bring water into the cities, and terrace farming to maximize the benefits of rainfall on hilly areas. The creation, control and possible destruction of these technologies were of vital concern to the Israelites, as is reflected throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Water-Centered Texts and Themes in Judaism

Judaism is rich with resources that foster an ethic for the respect and protection of water. Here are several key themes that appear throughout traditional Jewish texts.

Blessing and Covenant, and Final Promise

In Jewish theology, abundant rain is an expression of divine blessing and approval, a means of measuring Israel's commitment to the covenant, and a matrix from which life emerges.

For example, Deuteronomy 11:10-17, a source for the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, delineates the differences between Egypt and the land of Israel and how this reflects the Israelites' relationship with God. In Egypt, rivers provide unlimited water at all times, allowing for human independence from divine constraints.

But Israel is different. Rain comes from heaven under Divine scrutiny, concern and control. If the Israelites fulfill the covenant, rain will come in proper time and amount, assuring the fertility of the land. If the people do not fulfill their commitments to God, God will "shut up the skies so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce..." and the death of the community will inevitably follow. Here, ecology is interpreted theologically. The abundance or scarcity of rain is not a random natural occurrence dictated by changes in geography or climate, but a divine response to human morality. There is no "nature" separate from human concerns, and there is no "natural evil." Israel and the land of Israel are bound together in one moral community under God.⁵

In the final redemption of the Messianic age, Jewish texts eagerly anticipate that water will flow unceasingly in Israel, the deserts will be well-watered, and Israel will contain a river as constant as the Nile.⁶ Out of the Temple will flow a great deep river eastward to the Dead Sea, which will itself become fresh water. This river will be full of fish and the Judean desert will blossom with fruit trees and other creatures. This vision of the desert blooming as part of the national redemption of the people from exile created a powerful image for later Zionism; the redemption of the people and the redemption of the land are intertwined. A metaphor of the waters of redemption is found in the verses chosen to begin the *Havdalah* ceremony: "Joyfully shall you draw water from the fountains of salvation (Isaiah 12:3)."

In the Second Temple period, when the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead in the Messianic age became a common Jewish belief, dew and rain became a symbol of that resurrection. Isaiah 26:19⁷ connects resurrection to dew. Part of this verse became the text of the second blessing of the *Amidah*, the blessing for the resurrection in which rain and dew are mentioned.

Life-Source and Creation

Water also plays a key role in the Hebrew Bible's various stories of the Creation. In biblical Creation accounts, God sets limits to the chaotic, boundless primordial waters. In Genesis 1, the primordial deep (Hebrew: *tehom*) is the basic resource out of which all Creation emerges (except for humanity). Rainwater and the oceans come from the separation of the deep. Land (another resource for the emergence of life) comes out of the oceans, as do fish and birds. In Genesis 1, God orders the water to conform to God's design for Creation and the water does not

resist God's commands. In Psalm 104, the primordial water is brought under control by God, who transforms chaotic waters into peaceful streams channeled into conduits that water the land to support plant, animal and human life. In Job 38:8-11, the primordial waters are likened to a child being born from a womb. God sets limits to the waters and orders them to stay within certain boundaries.

Wash Me, Clean Me

In the rituals of the ancient Tabernacle/Temple, water figures in various purification rituals - the ordination of the priests (Exodus 29), the sacrifices (Leviticus 1-7), childbirth (Leviticus 12) the cure of skin diseases (Leviticus 13-14), bodily emissions (Leviticus 15) and purification after contact with dead animal carcasses and human corpses (Leviticus 11:24-40, Numbers 19). Water is seen as wiping impurities clean and allowing the person, almost, to be recreated or reborn.

After the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE, many of these rituals fell out of use, but Rabbinic Judaism retained the use of full-body immersion (using a *mikvah* or ritual bath) for rituals such as conversion and the purification of women after childbirth or menstruation. Hand washing as purification also became a regular ritual in Rabbinic Judaism before eating a meal, after waking from sleep, before to prayer and for the *Kohanim* (descendants of the ancient priests) prior to their pronouncing the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:23-27) over the congregation at synagogue services.

A more recent water ritual is *Tashlikh*, the earliest reference to which comes from the early 15th century. The text of Micah 7:18-20, which contains the phrase "And You will hurl (Hebrew: *ve-tashlikh*) all our sins in to the depths of the sea," is recited near a body of water on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah as a symbolic casting away of transgressions. Here again, water is an agent of purification and rebirth, renewing us for the New Year.⁸

Metaphor for Divinity

In the Hebrew Bible, water, wells, dew, rain, cisterns and fountains serve as metaphors for the divine, or divine attributes. One of the most important recurring metaphors for God, particularly in the prophetic books, is that of the Fountain of Living Waters (Hebrew: *mekor mayyim hayyim*) such as in Jeremiah 2:13f. Proverbs uses "fountain of life" as a metaphor for wisdom (Proverbs 18:4) and in the book of Amos justice is referred to as water. As previously mentioned redemption is often referred to as water and, the depths of the sea are a symbol for death in the prayer of Jonah (Jonah 2: recalling the primordial waters of Creation). In rabbinic sources, water is a metaphor for Torah because of water's necessity for life and as a transformative substance.

Conclusion and Discussion

Origin of life. Agent of cleansing, and purification. Metaphor for God. Life-source and final promise. Concern for water, rooted in the very real ecology of the Land of Israel, created a rich vocabulary in which Judaism expressed major theological and ethical ideas.

The challenge to us? Internalizing these rich teachings, interpreting them for today, and developing an ethic of water that meets the needs of the present age.

Questions for Discussion

1. **Water and Security - how to engage beyond apparent abundance?** North Americans today enjoy a level of “water security” that would have been inconceivable to ancient Israel. Based on this, what kind of ethical and theological imagery is required to increase awareness of water’s importance and to shape people’s behavior?
2. **Water and Purity** Ancient purity laws and rituals, which usually involved water, appeared in a time when the threat of infection was extremely high, compared to today. In recent years, the growth of the bottled water industry has turned the deep human fear of contamination into a multi-billion dollar industry, with negative environmental impacts. How can purity laws be interpreted today in a way that supports water conservation and protection?
3. **What water metaphors work today?** The essay describes several water-related images or metaphors that Jews have used to describe God – fountain of life, source of purification, origin and final promise, etc. Create a metaphor, or adapt one of these traditional metaphors, that you would use today to refer to the divine. Discuss the metaphors developed by members of your small group.
4. **What’s your Water Ethic?** As you consider the value of water and the need to preserve it, what would be your own personal water ethic? Write a short paragraph, no more than 3 sentences, that captures your water ethic. Consider key words, Jewish themes and potential action steps.

¹Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2005: Redefining World Security*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005); Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002).

²CARE report, “In Search of Shelter Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement,” from: <http://www.careclimatechange.org/publications/global-reports>.

³Garry A. Rensburg, “From the Desert to the Sown: Israel’s Encounter with the Land of Canaan,” in: Leonard J. Greenspoon (ed.), *The Mountains Shall Drip Wine: Jews and the Environment*, (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2009), p. 112-113; Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 317 n. 12; John Peter “Water Works” in: David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Volume 6 p. 883-893.

⁴The effectiveness of cisterns to hold water for use can be seen in the following analysis: In an area with 4 inches of rain per year, the runoff from a 1 hectare field is 403 inches of water. If 20% of this water is caught and stored it is enough water for 1 gallon of water per day for 100 people or 700 sheep.

⁵In rabbinic sources, (Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 17b) there is also direct connection made between the behavior of the Jewish people and the amount of rain that God will bring for the coming year.

⁶See Ezekiel 47 - the prophet’s vision of the restored Temple in Jerusalem

⁷This verse is part of what is called the “Isaianic Apocalypse,” Isaiah 24-27 which most scholars now date but to the early Second Temple period. See, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 346-348.

⁸One of the most important Temple rituals in which water played the preeminent role was the “Water Drawing Ceremony” (Hebrew: *Simhat Beit HaShoeivah*). According to rabbinic tradition, this ritual took place every day of Sukkot. According to modern scholarship this ceremony was intended to bring on the rains for the fertility of the land, since it was believed that Sukkot was the time at which God decided on the rainfall for the coming year. Midrashic sources also assert connections between the waters of creation, the Temple Mount and the Water Drawing Ceremony. In the traditional liturgy, the prayers for rain recited on Shemini Atzeret and for dew on the first day of Passover are rich in water imagery.