

Parshat Noah

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Mashiv Ha'ruach U'morid Hageshem: “Thou who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall”. Just nine days ago, we collectively recited *Tifilat Geshem*, the Prayer for Rain, during the Shemini Atzeret Musaf Amidah. This distinctive petition to G-d for heavenly precipitation began our current obligation of reciting this simple yet powerful declaration as a part of every subsequent Amidah until the 1st day of Pesach next April. This seasonal activity could be viewed as the Jewish liturgical equivalent of Daylight Savings Time. Instead of requesting more daylight during the day, we fervently acknowledge G-d as the source of all rain, making for an interesting contrast in its own right.

What is remarkable to me is the timing of *Tefilat Geshem* in relation to Parshat Noah, which usually occurs within a couple of weeks after Shemini Atzeret. The apparent linkage here is to the rains from Heaven itself, which is the better known of the two primary elements of the Flood (the other being “the fountains of the great deep”). But this begs the question: what is the intended meaning of this connection? One straightforward possibility centers on the comparison of the Jewish life-cycle calendar with Israel’s meteorological standard. The rabbis established the calendar with a view to the climate and Israel’s agricultural needs. Their rainy season usually commences shortly after the harvest festivals of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, and generally ends prior to Pesach. Life in Israel, then and now, has always depended on rain, especially its farming industry, where success relies heavily on abundant moisture received during this season. Our sages perceived this as a natural bridge to re-engage our spiritual connection to G-d and the importance of His Presence in both our daily lives

and our seasonal, year-round activities. The 2nd portion of the Sh'ma exemplifies this: “If you earnestly heed the mitzvot I give you this day, to love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and soul, then I will favor your land with rain at the proper season, in autumn and in spring.”

A second likelihood requires a bit more digging. In *Tefilat Geshem*, we ask G-d to remember us fondly and send us rain at this time of the year. We repeatedly invoke the metaphor that equates water, or in this case, rain, as a source of life: we need it to survive, not just to grow and prosper. However, this introduces a curious paradox within the Story of the Great Flood: G-d decided to eradicate all life on earth using the one substance that all life on earth cannot do without: water. And this was accomplished not by holding it back and inducing a devastating drought, but by opening all of the heavenly floodgates and submerging the planet over a 40 day span.

Why this dichotomy? G-d could have certainly inflicted this universal calamity through other means. Firestorms could have quickly engulfed the world, killing off all life in a near instant. Unrelenting famine and raging plagues affecting all animals and vegetation could have been set in motion. Even large meteor strikes could occur, causing immediate destruction and horrific, climate-altering aftereffects. But G-d settled on inundating the globe with water as the method of destruction. The corrupt generation during the time of Noah, no matter how evil they really were, saw water as symbolic of life and living, making it difficult for them to comprehend that it could be the medium for their collective deaths as well. Precious water was crucial for their survival; however, man not only depended on G-d to provide it through the falling rain, but in the time of Noah, they began to conceitedly expect its arrival like clockwork. It soon became less and less a gift from Heaven, and more an object that was sinfully taken for granted. G-d determined that the suitable punishment for that immoral generation was to perish by an immense torrent of the same, life-giving water. It's the

ultimate example of two well-known clichés: “be careful of what you ask for” and “too much of a good thing”.

What about the tie back to *Tefilat Geshem*? Two distinct points come to mind to help support the connection. The first deals with managing our expectations and appreciating our responsibilities in what God provides us. This teaches us to be more self-aware of our true needs and wants, and is echoed with the two, alternating refrains of the prayer: “do not withhold water” and “grant the gift of water”. The first offers our repeated yet polite plea not to refuse us water to sustain our basic needs: this is both obvious and practical. The subsequent refrain reminds us that gifts, especially divine, life-altering ones, are to be construed as a sign of love and admiration from the benefactor. They are not to be taken lightly or to be taken advantage of, and that there is a bond of trust and understanding that accompanies its receipt. Basically, be mindful of what you ask for in life, and be appreciative of what you receive.

The second premise is that of repentance and return, continuing the central focus of the season we just completed. There are telling inferences in both *Tefilat Geshem* and in the parshat itself. In the prayer, the beginning word in each stanza is *Z'Chor*, “remember”, followed by a chronological listing of our ancestors as worthy intermediaries. I’m no expert in Selichot piyyutim, but this structure represents an example of communal forgiveness by invoking the memory of our beloved forbearers to intercede on our behalf. Other references in the prayer serve as reminders to the *Ya'min No-ra-im*: the 2nd stanza for Issac makes note of the Akedah, which is read on the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah; and the 5th stanza for Aaron alludes to his priestly role on Yom Kippur.

In the parshat, amid the descriptions of the Ark construction, the gathering of the animals, and the terrible Flood itself, the theme of repentance and return also comes through. In Genesis Chapter 6,

at the end of Bereshit, G-d witnessed the cruelty of the people on earth, became pessimistic of mankind's future with the course they were taking, and actually started to repent to Himself for creating humankind at all. The righteousness of Noah and his family uplifted G-d and changed the equation: all was not lost, that there was still some good in the world among all the wickedness, and that Noah was a man worth saving from total annihilation. Noah never lost his faith, and he performed all that G-d requested of him, even through the arduous tasks of building the Ark, rounding up and loading all the animals, and surviving the ordeal of floating aimlessly for over a year. That faith led G-d to remember Noah, as stated in Genesis 8:1, and to begin the process of reconciliation, renewal and rebuilding.

Our sages offered other unique insights, emphasizing that even though G-d was clear on his intent to destroy humanity, He always left the door open for prayer and repentance. A notable midrash on this aspect is from Rashi, who observed that it took Noah 120 years to construct the Ark at a location that was far from any body of water. The idea was that people throughout the world could witness Noah's efforts and ask him what he was doing and why. Noah's answer: "In the future, G-d would bring a flood upon the whole world". His intent, and G-d's as well, was to encourage people to repent their evil ways. Instead, it prompted people to mock and ridicule Noah for embarking on such a foolhardy venture, right up to and even past the point when the first raindrops began to fall. In the end, it was Noah, his family, and the assembled multitude of animals that embarked on the Ark, survived the Flood, and repopulated the planet.

The gate of repentance and return was always open to the generation of the Flood, but no one saw the need or the merit to enter it, and as a result, did not realize the true consequence of their actions. May we learn this simple truth that it's never too late to return to G-d, His Mitzvot, and His

teachings, as long as we are willing to step through that threshold. If we remember G-d in our hearts and minds, then He will surely remember us in our time of need, as He did for Noah.

Shabbat Shalom