

Pesach Day 1 5778

The Message Of The Dew

Hidden away among the great events that mark Pesah, among the new tastes and the miracles and the old, familiar tunes and the retelling of our people's master story, there is one little aspect that often gets overlooked.

On the first day of Pesah we stop asking for rain and ask for dew - *Tal*. Having done so, we make the appropriate adjustment in the daily Amidah - not *ten tal u'matar livrachah* but just *ten brachah*, and we don't ask for rain again until Shemini Atzeret. And we amend every Amidah by omitting the words *mashiv haruach u'morid hagashem* from the start of the second paragraph, again until Shemini Atzeret. Sefardim substitute the words *morid ha-tal*, Ashkenazim (and I am an obstinate Ashkenazi!) do not.

The request is made as part of the Musaf Amidah. It takes the form of a *piyyut*, a liturgical poem, that is very old, authored by Eliezer ben Kallir, a Byzantine poet from the 6th century. It is a reverse acrostic from *taf* to *alef* and links dew both to the productivity of the land and the end of exile. And it has a special, haunting tune that is also used for the preceding Kaddish and opening of the Amidah; and traditionally (but it's not mandatory) the *shaliah tzibbur* puts on their *kittel* in order to recite it.

Isn't there enough going on at Pesah? What could this prayer possibly add? To answer that question, we need to look more closely at the role played by dew in our tradition.

In the Tanakh, dew is universally regarded as being a sign of abundance and wellbeing. Isaac blesses Jacob with 'the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth;' Moses asks for his final speech to distil 'as the dew.' Rashi brings a Midrash from *Sifre* on this verse, suggesting that while rain can make some people sad - travelers, for example - everyone rejoices at the dew. In the Talmud (Ta'anit 3) the dew is described as 'never ceasing.' Elijah swears to King Ahab that there will be no more rain or dew until he says so. The rain stops - but the dew keeps right on falling. We can imagine Elijah's frustration at this slow, gentle, obstinate defiance! While the second paragraph of the Shema teaches us can be given or taken away according to our behavior - dew is never withheld.

Dew is also the signal of divine nourishment. After God provides the people with meat in the form of quails, there is a dewfall in the night, and in the morning they find manna for the very first time (Shemot 16). We learn later (Numbers 11:9) that when the dew fell in the night, the manna would fall with it, as a sort of heavenly Saranwrap.

And dew has a rich symbolism in the Tanakh. For Gideon the judge, a fleece soaked in dew on a dry floor is a message from God. In the beautiful passage we read on Shabbat Shuvah, the prophet Hosea tells us that God *will be like dew to Israel/who will blossom like the lily*. For the prophet Micah, we ourselves are the dew:

*the remnant of Jacob shall be
in the midst of many peoples
like dew from the Lord,
like showers on the grass,
which delay not for a man
nor wait for the children of man.*

And dew has a critical role to play in our - literal - revival. Based on a passage from Isaiah (26:19), the Rabbis of the Talmud infer that in the time to come, when our bodies once again rise up to claim our souls (as in the Midrash from last week's brochure), that mysterious regifting of life will take place by way of the dew.

So how does all this relate to Pesah? I think we can draw out three key concepts.

The first has to do with the constancy of the dew. In the same way as Pesah requires of us that we each perceive *ourselves* as having been liberated from Egypt, the inclusion of the prayer for dew at this time is an additional reminder that we should constantly be aware of the miracle that gave us our freedom. The Exodus reverberates through time. As the Haggadah puts it: *If God had not taken us out of Egypt, then we, and our children, and our children's children, would still be enslaved*. Yet the Jewish people has made itself both ephemeral and permanent - just like the dew.

The second is to do with abundance and nourishment. We often think of Pesah as being a season of deprivation. Even with all the ingenious modern inventions such as Pesah bagels and Pesah Cheerios, we are still apt to feel somewhat disgruntled that we 'can't' eat our favorite things at what is supposed to be a happy time of year. Or we might get tired of the matzah - after all, same old thing, same old taste...there are echoes here of exactly the way the Israelites behaved towards the manna - which as we remember, came wrapped in dew. It's at times like this that we need to remember Jacob's blessing, the idea that dew is rich and precious, that we are indeed being nourished. Like the dew, the matzah should be a source of joy to us. (Well...we can work on that.)

And the third concept is the most mysterious and subtle. One of the Torah's main lessons is that the people can't assimilate their freedom all at once. I think of this as the alchemy of freedom. It's a process that has to happen gradually. After the shock of the Exodus itself and the huge miracle at the sea, the people - who are only human, after all - needed time to assimilate the change. Moses was telling the truth, I think, when he asked P to let the people go to serve God in the wilderness. It takes time to do that; to recognize that we are free, and then decide what we will voluntarily serve.

So the dew of Pesah reminds us that our bondage was - and is - not only physical. There is gradual spiritual work to be done, for which this season is only the beginning.

But gradual spiritual work pays off. In our Shabbat classes we have just begun to encounter the character of Rabbi Akiva. He was an illiterate shepherd until he was 40. And then, one day, the Talmud tells us, he was sitting by a well and saw how the drops of water had worn a path in the stone. "If water can do that to stone," he thought, "then how much more so can Torah make a path in my heart!" And the next day he enrolled in preschool.

So at this season, let's keep ourselves attuned for the lessons of the dew. It's easy to miss them; perhaps that reverse acrostic of the poem is telling us about the way they creep up on us, the way they might be easy to miss.

But they are there, unfailingly. The lesson of constant awareness; the lesson of abundance; the lesson that the subtle and gradual has greater power than the overt and the dramatic.

As we enter the Musaf service to pray for dew, let's be mindful of what it has to teach us this Pesah.

Shabbat shalom and hag sameah.