

We are in the middle of the week of Sukkot, one of the most major festivals of the year, which unfortunately never really gets the attention it deserves because of the holiday fatigue that we experience. Every year on the Shabbat during Sukkot, our Torah reading is an excerpt from Ki Tissa, the parasha that we read in the winter about the Golden Calf. But the specific excerpt that we read during Sukkot doesn't describe the Golden Calf, but rather its aftermath, in Exodus 33:12-34:26.

Moshe is begging Hashem not to give up on the people, and begging for a sign of Divine favor. Specifically, Moshe asks to see God, and Hashem famously responds, in Exodus 33:19-20: "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Hashem, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." Then unfolds the scene in which Moshe ascends Mt. Sinai for the second time, and in Chapter 34, beginning at verse 6, receives the 13 attributes of mercy that we chant at all of our holidays that do not fall on Shabbat: "Hashem, Hashem El rachum . . ." Hashem, Hashem, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin;

Of course, that continues in verse 7:

לֹא יִנָּקֶה פִּקְדוֹן עֵינֹן אָבוֹת עַל-בְּנֵיהֶם וְעַל-בְּנֵי בְנֵיהֶם עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רְבָעִים:

not remitting *all* punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."

This text ends with the a very brief instruction about the pilgrimage festivals, which is always the pshat, bare explanation of why we read this during this time.

This week, however, I was struck by another reason that this text might tie to the middle of Sukkot.

Sukkot is the harvest festival, and is the cue to begin praying for rain. An entire tractate of the Talmud, Masechet Taanit, deals with the communal fasts that the people Israel would undertake in times of drought. That was a thing. And the very first page of Masechet Taanit discuss when in the year we should start praying for rain. There is a controversy – do we start at the beginning of Sukkot, or the very last day? Rabbi Eliezer argues for the beginning, saying it is appropriate to start mentioning rain before we actually want it. Rabbi Yehoshua argues that we don't actually want it to rain while we're sitting in our sukkah, and we shouldn't pray for rain until we actually want it – his opinion stands, and so on Shemini Atzeret, this Monday, we will do the prayer for rain, and then every Amidah thenceforth until Pesach will include the phrase “meishiv haruach u'morid hageshem,” “cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall.”

But there is lead up throughout the holiday – every morning service during Sukkot includes Hoshanot, special prayers meaning “save us,” culminating in Hoshana Rabbah this Sunday, - literally, “the great big save us.” We will celebrate in here at TBI with the Talmud Torah students, doing one of the weirdest authentic rituals that Jews do – whipping willow branches on the ground after marching in circles singing, “hoshanah.” The kids love whacking the heck out the willow branches, and they get the kinesthetic ritual – we are making the noises of rain. We are symbolically bringing down the rain. When our ancestors yelled “save us” they meant save us from drought.

Now, cue jokes about how here in Oregon we don't need to pray, because it's already raining. And yes, this year, Sukkot is late, and yes, we have started getting rainfall in the early fall. We are lucky, this year, Oregon got enough precipitation to mitigate the effects of a multi-year drought. We are lucky, here, that even a few years of drought in Oregon still leaves us much greener than many places on earth. But in fact, rain is no joke, and our ancestors understood this.

Last night, some of you heard Gidon Bromberg, director of Eco-Peace Middle East. He spoke about the effects of drought on the Middle East, how water scarcity exacerbates the conflict and how the intractability of the conflict makes it harder to address water scarcity. He explained how Israel is already addressing water issues that will ultimately face much of the world – but warned that Israel is dependent on what he referred to as “last resort” technologies, like desalination, whose long-term effects are unknown. Rainfall has decreased, certainly due to climate change, and water usage is at much higher than replacement levels.

Rabbi David Seidenberg wrote in “Choosing Life by Rosh Hashana 5790” in Tikkun magazine this month: Paradoxically, what our ancestors loved most about the land of Canaan was how vulnerable it was to drought and famine. As it says in the Torah, “The place where you are going is not like the land of Egypt, where you sowed your seed and you gave drink with your foot (by pumping water), like a garden of greens... She is a land of mountains and valleys, by the rain of the heavens she drinks water... Always the eyes of YHVH your God are upon her, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year” (Deut. 11:10-12). What it means to say that “God's eyes are upon the land” is that every day God would judge whether the people merited the rain needed for agriculture and for life.

What this amounts to in quasi-scientific terms is that the feedback loop between human actions and climate was extremely swift. In fact, that is literally true of the holy land, which is more vulnerable to extremes in the face of climate change than most places on Earth besides the polar regions.” He goes on to describe how global climate changes effects are occurring measurably faster in the region of Israel and its immediate neighbors than most other places in the world.

In other words, Israel is the metaphorical canary in the coal mine of climate issues. Our ancestors had some sort of intuition about their land as an ecological keystone. David Seidenberg argues that, politics aside, the best thing anyone who cares about Israel can do is work to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

This is the season in which we pray for rain. Silly as that might seem, we humans are awfully good at achieving what we collectively set our minds to. The climate crisis is a product of persistent mistaken priorities, and some praying for rain in the season that should be rainy reminds us that even though we may find more sunny days more pleasant, there is actually an order to creation that we want to maintain and if possible restore.

Which brings me back to tomorrow’s Torah reading. Hashem promises, “I will make all my goodness pass before you.” And what Moshe receives in fact, is a trip up the mountain, an incredible view, and a call to remember that divine mercy extends generations, but so do divine consequences for our misbehavior. No matter what you think of that theologically, I want to leave you with the thought that the goodness of creation is always before us, and that both our positive and negative deeds will reflect down the generations.