

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Noach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Noach – ‘Rains of Bracha’ or ‘Rain, Rain, Go Away’

Welcome back to Darchai Noam for 5783, our 10th year!

The topic of rain has been on everyone’s minds recently. Will we be able to enjoy the pleasant weather in the shade of our sukkah? Or will we need to stay indoors and watch as our sukkah gets washed away in the torrential downpour? Rain also features heavily in this week’s Parasha of Noach as we read about the Great Flood. Hashem opened the windows of the Heavens and the fountains of the deep¹ to inundate the world with 40 days of rain in order to reset creation.

Interestingly, this was not the first time that Hashem flooded the world as a punishment for Man’s behaviour. The Midrash² teaches that Hashem had also flooded one third of the populated world in the days of Enosh (Adam’s grandson) as a warning to mankind. However, unlike the flood in the days of Noach where the waters eventually receded, after this first great flood the waters stayed where they were as a permanent reminder – forming a great inland sea – what is today called the Mediterranean Sea! The Talmud Yerushalmi³ explains that this is how the Israeli cities of Yafo and Akko got their names – the flood waters came “until here” which in Hebrew/Aramaic is “Ad Ko” or “Ad Po” or “Haya Po”⁴.

The story of this first great flood actually has a fascinating practical halachic ramification. When one sees certain sights after not seeing them for 30 days, one recites a bracha. We usually only recite the bracha of ‘Oseh Maaseh Breishit’ (praising Hashem for the act of Creation) on a body of water that existed since the time of Creation. There is a machloket which bracha is recited when one sees the Mediterranean Sea – is it the bracha of “Oseh Maaseh Breishit” or “HaYam Hagadol” (praising Hashem for the great sea). If the Mediterranean Sea was only created after Creation (i.e. during the generation of Enosh) then perhaps we should not say the bracha of Oseh Maaseh Breishit when we see the Mediterranean Sea!⁵

Too much rain is not good. But insufficient rain can also be disastrous. Between 2007 and 2009 the South Eastern states of Australia endured three long years of drought. The drought was a big news item for a while and they even switched off the beautiful water feature at the entrance to the Melbourne CBD. But there were no water restrictions and the drought gradually became less prominent in the news. Those of us who did not live ‘on the land’ tended to forget about the drought. I remember once meeting a real live farmer and he informed me that rural Victoria was still struggling with the drought, even though it was no longer in the news. I was embarrassed to admit that I had almost totally forgotten about the drought.

This brings to mind the well-known story of the pious Choni HaMe’agel⁶. When the land of Israel was suffering a terrible drought, he was asked to daven for rain. Choni drew a circle and stood in it and then demanded rain from Hashem, saying that he would not leave the circle until his request was granted. First Hashem sent a very light rain but Choni said that wasn’t good enough. Then Hashem sent a downpour but again Choni complained to Hashem. Finally Hashem sent rain in just the right amount. When Shimon ben Shetach (the Head of the

¹ Breishit 7:11.

² Breishit Rabba 23:7 and see Rashi to Parashat Breishit, 6:4.

³ Shekalim 46b.

⁴ In Hebrew the sounds ‘p’ and ‘f’ are the same letter.

⁵ The time of creation of the Mediterranean Sea is only one factor in this fascinating debate. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 228:1) rules that one recites the bracha of ‘HaYam HaGadol’. The Mishnah Berurah rules like many Acharonim that dispute the Shulchan Aruch i.e. that we recite the bracha of ‘Oseh Maaseh Breishit’ on the Mediterranean Sea and we recite ‘HaYam HaGadol’ on the ocean. One should ask their Rabbi which bracha to say.

⁶ ‘Me’agel’ means circle – he received this name from the incident that we are about to describe.

Sanhedrin) heard about Choni's chutzpah he said that he deserved to be excommunicated for his temerity, but what can he do, Choni was beloved by Hashem and he could get away with it!⁷

Rain will even continue to be a source of punishment in the times of the Mashiach. A few weeks ago, in the Haftorah of the first day of Sukkot, we read that in times to come all the nations will come to Yerushalayim to prostrate before Hashem on Chag Sukkot. And those nations that do not come will be punished by the withholding of rain from their land.⁸

This is also the time of year that we start mentioning rain in our daily tefillah. We actually have two separate references to rain – praise and request.

- **Praise:** From Tefillat Musaf on Shemini Atzeret, we add the words “mashiv haruach u'morid hageshem” to the 2nd bracha of the Shemoneh Esreh. With this addition we **praise** Hashem as the Giver of rain.
- **Request:** A while later,⁹ when we actually need rain to start falling, we add the words “v'ten tal u'matar” to the 9th bracha of the Shemoneh Esreh. With this addition we **ask** Hashem to give us rain.

We wait until after Shemini Atzeret (i.e. after Sukkot) to start praising Hashem for rain because it is not good to have rain while we should be sitting in the Sukkah. We want to be sure that the entire community praises Hashem for rain together in unity. Therefore, to ensure everyone starts mentioning rain at the same time and no one forgets, it is prohibited for one to start mentioning rain in their tefillah before it has been announced publicly by the chazan.¹⁰ But why do we wait until Musaf? Shemini Atzeret starts the previous evening, so surely we should start mentioning rain in Maariv? The Mishnah Berurah¹¹ explains that not everyone makes it to shul for Maariv, and we are concerned that some people will miss the announcement and forget to mention rain. Therefore we wait until the next morning when the crowds in shul are larger.¹²

This demonstrates the importance of the community davening together in unity. All of the Jewish people around the world begin praising Hashem for rain at the same time – even those communities in the Southern Hemisphere who certainly do not need rain at this time!

In contrast, when it comes to *requesting* rain, the halacha seems to be less concerned about unity. We just start adding in the request from Maariv of the appropriate day. There is no requirement for one to hear the chazan announce the new addition. Why is there this difference between praising Hashem for rain and requesting rain? Perhaps we can suggest as follows.

When we are teaching a child to make their bed or brush their teeth, we often have to remind them again and again and again. But isn't it interesting – when the child needs to come back to the table for dessert, or pack their bag for a fun outing, for some reason they don't need to be reminded. Why is that?

It seems that we haven't changed very much since we were children. When we need or want something, we don't have to be reminded to ask for it. These days, many of us are less in tune with the need for rain. But many years ago, when society was more agrarian, everyone relied on the rain and understood how important it was. No-one needed to be reminded to ask for it. However, unfortunately, we need to be reminded to praise Hashem, because praising Hashem and acknowledging Him as the source of the rain, does not come as naturally to us.

Let's try something this week:

1. When reciting “mashiv haruach u'morid hageshem”, think about the fact that all of Am Yisrael together, in unity, are praising Hashem as the source of all rain. Even those communities that are going into summer!
2. Try to be aware of how we naturally focus on, and feel most urgency for, our own needs and wants. Let's try hard to increase our genuine praise of Hashem and our focus on the needs of others.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ See Taanit 19a and Brachot 19a. Choni HaMe'agel is buried neat Tzfat in Northern Israel and his burial site is still a gathering place for people who come to pray. Our family visited there recently on our trip to Tzfat.

⁸ Zechariah 14:18

⁹ The 7th Cheshvan in Israel and the 4th or 5th of December in chutz l'Aretz. The reason for this discrepancy and the source of 4th/5th December is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 112:2.

¹¹ Siman 112, seif katan 2.

¹² We don't start with Shacharit for a technical reason – we are not allowed to interrupt before Shacharit Shemoneh Esreh to announce the change. See Mishnah Berurah (ibid) and Taz 112 (2) for further discussion and an additional reason.