

Kol Nidrei 5778 - More than Returning, Overturning (or קומי צאי מתוך ההפכה)

This evening I am going to talk about water and its role in our festivals this time of year, and its place in the rabbinic imagination. Obviously, water is so central to our tradition because it is so essential to life.

This evening, I don't want to talk about water without first acknowledging the water crisis now facing Puerto Rico where hundreds of our fellow citizens are without water and electricity. As I said on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, the word *Tzedakah* is from the root for *Tzedek* [צדק]- "justice." *Tzedakah* is justice to help those in need, not because we decide to take what's ours and give it to someone who needs it; rather because we realize that what we think of as "ours" is actually God's and in a godly, justice-oriented view of the situation, God's resources could be better used, for example, for the people who have lost their homes and do not know where they will be able to get clean water. This situation feels most pressing at the moment although, as you know, there are many places of need in our country and on the planet and I encourage you, especially at this time of year, after Yom Kippur to put justice into action and engage in *Tzedakah*.

To begin our Jewish water journey, we start with Rabbi Akiva who would become one of, if not *the* greatest rabbis of the Talmud. But he was a very late bloomer. In this story, at age forty, Akiva is an illiterate shepherd. The story describes the moment he started on the path to becoming the great Rabbi Akiva.

Once Akiva stood at a well, where falling water had carved a groove in the stone. He asked, "Who carved this stone?"

They told him, "[It was] the water, which drips up it every day." And they said to him, "Akiva, are you not familiar [with the verse,] 'As the waters wear away the stones?'" (Job 14:19)

On the spot, Rabbi Akiva made the following deduction: If something soft [like water] could chisel its way through something hard [like stone], then surely the words of Torah, which are as hard as iron, can penetrate my heart, of flesh and blood!" Immediately, he turned to studying Torah.

-- *Avot d'Rabbi Natan chpt 6*

In the background of this midrash is an earlier midrash about water and Torah. By “Torah” is meant both the literal Torah and also Wisdom.

This metaphor of water as Torah arises out of a verse from the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus. In verse 18, ecstatic from their deliverance, Moses, Miriam and the Israelites sing: *Adonai yimlich l’olam v’ed* - *May God Reign for Ever and Ever!* And six verses later, the challenges of freedom and responsibility set in. The midrash begins with the verse from Exodus:

“They traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water” (Ex 15:22), some metaphorically inclined Rabbis explained: “‘Water’ means Torah! as it is said (Isaiah 55:1), ‘Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water.’ Having gone for three days without Torah, the prophets among them stepped forth and legislated that the Torah should be read on the second and fifth days of the week as well as on Shabbat so that they would not let three days pass without Torah” (*Bava Kama 82a*).

Another example of this metaphor from a midrash on Song of Songs: (Shir Rabah 1;19)

Just as *water* is life for the world, [as it says; A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters (Song of Songs 4:15)], so the *Torah* is life for the world! [as it says: For they are life unto those that find them and health to all their flesh. (Prov. 4:22)]

How does this metaphor inform the process of *Teshuva* and entering fully and responsibly into the new year?

Our tradition comes from a Mediterranean desert climate where it rains half the year. The year is divided into two main seasons: dry summer and wet winter. The rainy winter is from *Sukkot* to *Pesach*, fall to spring. This is reflected in our prayers in the *Amidah*, where, from *Sukkot* to *Pesach* we pray for rain, and from *Pesach* to *Sukkot*, in summer, we pray for dew. That puts *Yom Kippur* at the very end of the dry season. For people dependant on harvests and herds, there was an urgency and vulnerability in this moment of the year that we do not feel. In a culture where God provides the rain, and the economy is based on agriculture and herding, wiping away sins and having God’s favor is felt acutely as we wait for the rains to fall and pray they are sufficient for a successful crop and abundant grasses for the herds.

The Talmud has a series of stories of fast days that are instituted during a drought to pray

for rain. In fact, the *Avinu Malkeynu* prayer characteristic of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and fast days, originated in one of these stories where, again, Rabbi Akiva spontaneously prays:

Avinu Malkaynu! Ain Lanu Melech Ayleh atah! –

(Our Father our King we have no ruler but you!)

Avinu Malkaynu! Rachaym Alaynu –

) Our Father our King be merciful to us!) – and the rains fell.

- Bavli Taanit 25b

It is hard for us to internalize the importance of rain and the strong linking of rain, life and blessing embedded in our tradition. Just one comment from the Talmud to give a sense of it: Rav Yehuda said: The day of the rains is as great as the day on which the Torah was given! (Bavli Taanit 7a)

Because of our dependence on water, and the scarcity of water in a desert landscape, water is a natural metaphor for what is most precious: Torah and Wisdom. Akivah's experience at the well, his *teshuvah* moment of transformation, turns an illiterate middle-aged shepherd into one of Jewish history's greatest scholars and teachers. Such a moment is not one of *intellect*, but of deep feeling welling up, something coming from the depths of self to the surface.

This "welling up" is a different model of *teshuvah*. The *teshuvah* we usually talk about is very cerebral.

- think about what you've done wrong,
- build the courage to address it,
- understand why it happened and how you will make sure it never happens again
- Apologize and express regret and commitment to change to any person you may have wronged.

It all takes place in the head. But sometimes the best direction for us, the way in which we need to transform our lives is not in the head. Sometimes, what we most need simply does not occur to us because we are disconnected from what's really going on - deep down. We are limited by our patterns of thought and our expectations, we are *dis-integrated* - not understanding the whole picture: We are *lost* without knowing we are lost.

Have you ever been startled, in a crowded place to feel a child you don't know lean up against your leg or grab your hand. That child is *lost* without knowing she's lost - but she is about to find out. For many of us, that moments repeats itself long after childhood; the sometimes joyous, sometimes scary shocking moment when we realize where we *really* are. *Teshuvah* is turning toward a better path, but is also a *re-integration*, bringing together our whole selves and our whole consciousness.

For the illiterate shepherd Akiva, Torah study is not in his to-do list. And suddenly, he is overwhelmed that his heart has been so hard, that he has been so cut off from Torah and Wisdom. The way we usually talk about *teshuvah* is two dimensional - turning from going in this direction to going in that direction. And that certainly happens and is important, *but* often real change is an upheaval and involves not choosing one direction over another direction but a dramatic transformation in how we see the world and our place in it.

The trigger for R. Akiva's transformation is something extraordinary: stone carved by water. I think there is a strong link between Akiva's capacity to see the *extraordinary-in-the-ordinary* and his ability to transform his life so positively and dramatically. Is this a miracle - stone carved by water? No, but it is wondrous - if we have the eyes, mind and heart oriented toward wonder. Akiva notices it, and he takes it in very deeply.

Seeing the world with wonder means an openness to being amazed and surprised. Our prayers try to cultivate this way of living. Specifically the prayer for gratitude, *Modim* that is at the end of every Amidah, every standing silent prayer - three each day.

מודים אנחנו לך, שאמך הוא, יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו, לעולם ועד, צור חיינו, מגן ישענו, אתה הוא לדור ודור נודה לך ונספר תהלתך. על חיינו המסורים בך, ועל נשמותינו הפקודות לך, ועל נסיה שבכל יום עמנו, ועל נפלאותיה וטובותיה שבכל עת, ערב ובקר וצהרים, הטוב כי לא כלו רחמיך, והמרחם כי לא תמו חסדיך מעולם קוינו לך.

The first half of the prayer reads:

We thank You! You, who are our Our God and the God of our ancestors through all time, protector of our lives, shield of our salvation.

From one generation to the next we thank You and sing Your praises -

- for our lives that are in Your hands,

- for our souls that are under Your care,
- for Your miracles that accompany us each day, and
- for Your wonders and Your gifts that are with us each moment - evening, morning, and afternoon.

Now you may not be available for three full prayer experiences each day - but what would it mean, if morning, afternoon and evening we took 10 seconds? 40 seconds? A full minute? 5 minutes? To ruminate on, and identify in *that* moment what were miracles accompanying us? What were the wonders and gifts we were experiencing? If we were to engage in such a practice, - to take the time to cultivate gratitude and wonder, what might rise up in us?

The mundane wonder of water inspires the midrash to assert that “Water is life!”

Water is life! There’s a wonderful midrash on that assertion from the periodic table. You know that each Hebrew letter has a numerical equivalent, and each element on the periodic table has its atomic number (determined by the number of protons in the nucleus of an atom). What is H₂O? Two hydrogen atoms, atomic number one each and Oxygen atomic number 16 giving a total of? 18, also the numerical value of the letter of the Hebrew word חַי - Life! So: Water equals life!

H₂O leads to life in another way because the water molecule has a unique shape that causes an amazing paradox. Here it is: as water, or any liquid, cools, the motion of the molecules slow so they take up less space and get denser and heavier - so a cold liquid is heavier and will sink - so the coldest liquid is at the *bottom* of the glass, or the pond.

But here’s the amazing thing: as we get down to 32 degrees, something very ironic happens. Because of this special chemical structure, when water freezes the molecules get further apart and so lighter. It is actually *very strange* that ice floats, we’re used to it, but it’s surprising because since ice is water at its coldest, and therefore we would expect, as with all other liquids, coldests would mean most dense and most heavy.

Ice floating rather than sinking is very important for life. When a pond or lake or the ocean freezes, the ice on top insulates the water below. Things slow down, but life continues. If water didn’t have this very special characteristic a pond or lake or the

ocean would freeze from the bottom up into a solid block which would end (or at least suspend) the life of every frozen thing.

There's another phenomenon, based on the specialness of water, more subtle, that occurs at this time of year. I want to leave you with this as we think about *Teshuvah* not just as turning, but as re-integration of self. In the fall, and in the spring, (also the great ritual poles of the Jewish Calendar) lakes and ponds "turn-over." Just as I spoke of the limitations of our self-awareness, the waters in lakes and ponds in winter and summer are not interacting. In the heat of the summer and cold of the winter, the water separates into different horizontal zones of similar temperature. You may have experienced this diving into a lake where it does not get colder progressively but all of a sudden it gets much colder. These layers in the lake do not mix, and so can become very different chemically and biologically.

But in the spring, as the water is warming, or in the fall as it is cooling, the difference in temperature between separate layers become less and then there's the *teshuva* moment, the reintegration of the whole system when the lake "turns over" the coldest water from the depths upwelling to the sunlight and warmer surface.

This is revitalizing and healing for the lake and the creatures living there. The organic materials at the bottom come up to the surface and are exposed to the light so you have nutrients and sunlight which makes for fertile growth of phytoplankton which is bottom of the food chain upon which the whole ecosystem is based. Toxins that can build up on the bottom are diluted and dispersed.

On Rosh Hashanah we learned a midrash about Truth and the verse: *Emet m'Eretz Titzmach!* ("Let truth spring up from the earth!") I want to leave you this Yom Kippur with the hope that *Teshuva k'Mayyim Titzmach* May your teshuvah rise up like the waters -- overturning, reintegrating, renewing and cleansing.

May we appreciate the wonders surrounding us, and may our hearts swell and be overwhelmed and lead us toward learning and acts of justice and loving-kindness.