



Water: It's For Life

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There are some days when the synchronicity between isolated events cannot be ignored. This week, Rabbi Rogozen and I spent two days in New Jersey at a Schechter Association workshop whose aim was to begin development of a “Judaism and the Environment” curriculum for Schechter schools. When it came to deciding which natural resource we would focus on for this project, water was obvious choice. Almost the next day, I stumbled across an edition of National Geographic devoted exclusively to water and its use around the world. Finally, this week’s Torah portion is Hukat, which mentions water no fewer than 22 times!

In Parshat Hukat, water plays a central role in many ways. In the ritual of the Red Heiffer, the ashes of which are the only way that one can overcome the ritual impurity that comes from contact with the dead, water both purifies the impure and paradoxically makes impure the ritually pure. Three days after Miriam dies, the people complain about the lack of water. This connection between Miriam’s death and lack water is the source for Miriam’s well, which was one of the items created at the end of the Sixth Day of Creation. God created the well at the beginning of time. It was lost for generations, but later restored to B’nai Israel through the righteous actions of Miriam. Later on, in Parshat Hukat, the people’s complaining about the lack of water lead to Moses losing his temper and striking the rock to get the water to flow. This incident resulted in God not allowing Moses to enter the land of Canaan. Before Israel gets to Canaan, they must pass through the lands of the Edomites and Amorites. Showing an early sensitivity to managing water as a resource, they promise to the Edomites and Amorites, among other things, that they “will not drink the water of a well.” Later on, we find a song that Israel would sing to make the well arise: “Come up, O well, call out to it! The well that the ministers dug; nobles of the people hewed it, through a lawgiver, with their walking sticks. And from the wilderness, a gift.” (Bamidbar 21:17-18)

One could go back to any Torah portion and find connections to water, wells, or rain. In Breisheet, one of the few things that precede Creation is the primordial water, called *tehom*, or the Abyss. Avraham digs wells. Jacob crosses rivers and uncovers a well. Joseph saves Egypt from a lack of water. B’nai Israel are enslaved to make mud-based bricks, and pass through the Sea of Reeds when their enslavement comes to an end. During the years of wandering, water is a major issue, since it is a scarce and precious resource in a desert. One could read the entire Torah as a narrative centered on water.

So what is the Torah telling us about water? The Torah reminds us that water is essential for life, that we must appreciate it is as a gift from God, and that we have an obligation to make sure that the water supply is healthy and accessible. Too often, we take water for

granted. We can just turn on the faucet and feel confident that clean water will come gushing out. In most of the world, this is not the case. Most of the world lives like B'nai Israel did during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. Water was scarce, sometimes brackish, and when there was not enough, panic would ensue. We are blessed to have clean water every day, but with that blessing comes the ability to lose appreciation for God's gift of water. And with lack of appreciation comes abuse. The abuse of our planet's water happens in every community, large and small, through over-consumption and pollution.

According to the American Water Works Association, the average American uses 69.3 gallons of water per day. We can reduce that amount by 30% through the installation of water conserving faucets and fixtures. This is not just a nice civic thing to do. The Torah is telling us that concern with water is a physical need that should be at the center of our spiritual lives.

Jonathan Neril, from [Canfei Nesharim](#), compiled a list of action items that can help us with both the spiritual and physical dimensions of water:

1) Easy: Connect to the physical source of the water you drink. Go to that source and sit by it, like Jacob and Moses did. Listen to the water. Think about how most of your body is comprised of water. Try this every year or every month and see what happens.

2) Still not demanding a lot: Contemplate your monthly water bill, remembering that each drop is given to you as a gift. If you use close to 70 gallons a day, like the average person in the United States does, think about key areas where you could reduce the amount you use.

3) More involved: Connect this physical substance to its spiritual source, which is the Creator of the Universe. Before and after you drink water or any liquid, say the blessing on it. The blessing begins with the word 'baruch,' which is related to 'bereicha,' pool, since God is like an infinite pool.

4) Still more involved: Another gateway to water awareness is the Jewish ritual netilat yadayim, washing hands with water for purity. By using a vessel to pour water over our hands when arising in the morning and before eating bread, we can connect to the purifying potential of water.

5) For the truly committed: Take a few concrete steps toward water conservation. Install low-flow faucets and toilets. Hook up a grey water system to water your lawn with sink water. For more information and how-to, click [here](#).

Water is one of the few substances that we need each and every day in order to live. By focusing on water as one of the ways that God gives us life each day, we can find opportunities to come closer to God, our fellow human beings and our planet each day.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

- Use the above action list to raise your family's awareness of the role of water in our lives, how we use water, and what we can do to make sure that there is enough water for everyone.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION [HUKKAT](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. The animal whose sacrifice is described in this week's parashah has four main characteristics. What are they?
2. Someone who touches a dead body becomes ritually impure. For how long? On which days does he or she purify himself?
3. Where did Miriam die?
4. When the people complained that there was no water, and that they would have been better off had they remained in Egypt, God gave Moses specific instructions on how to satisfy the peoples' complaint. What did God tell Moses to do and what did he do?
5. Because Moses showed a lack of faith in God and failed to follow God's instructions, he was severely punished. What was the punishment?
6. Where was Aaron buried, and what action of the people showed that they revered him?
7. The people had to go around Edom because the King would not allow them to pass through. Once again they began to complain because of their hardships. How did God punish the people this time for their disobedience, and how was the punishment lightened?
8. When Moses sent messengers to the King of Edom, how did he describe the relationship of Israel to Edom and on what basis?
9. The people had to fight their way through three peoples to get to the Land. Who were they?