

Water

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Most of us in the West take water for granted. When I was growing up, I don't recall ever hearing about droughts, hosepipe bans, or rationing. Neither do I remember seeing bottled water, except in spas or highly overpriced restaurants. Britain was the country of rain, and Manchester (where I was born) was the rainiest place in the UK. So I always thought it strange that we Jews kept on praying for rain. Even when my father gently explained that we were praying for rain in Israel, it didn't really sink in (which pun reminds me that as much as 50% of water supplied through urban water systems gets lost through leaks and sinks into the earth).

Nowadays water has become big news, as the human population increases while at the same time the world is getting hotter and the major sources of water, the arctic poles, are shrinking. According to United Nations statistics, 3.4 million human beings die each year from water related diseases. (I know, who trusts the UN? But that's when it comes to politics or human rights, some of their agencies do a better job on statistics.) One billion do not have access to clean water. One child dies from a water-related illness every 21 seconds. Only 10% of wastewater gets treated. The rest runs off into lakes, rivers, and oceans. Rachel Carson warned us in the 50s and 60s about the evil we were doing to nature, but we only half listened. We still needed Erin Brockovich in the 90s to sue contaminating companies and confirm that industry still pours millions of tons of poison into the earth's waters. And it doesn't help that 2.5 billion humans do not have access to toilets, so guess where most of their waste ends up.

U.S. tap water is apparently some of the cleanest on Earth, generally safe from the microbes and chemicals that have plagued water supplies for millennia. While much of the planet relies on polluted drinking water, Americans can fill a glass without fear of cryptosporidium, chromium, or chlordane. The Safe Drinking Water Act supposedly controls the standards and criteria for clean water, but it's far from perfect and bureaucracy and big money often get in the way.

All New York water is treated with chlorine, fluoride, orthophosphate, and in some cases sodium hydroxide. Fluoride is added to strengthen teeth. Chlorine disinfects, and others additives are to counteract corrosion in the pipes and other contaminants. In the UK, for many years, the national water supply has had fluoride and chlorine. Water remains safe to drink right up to your tap (assuming your pipes are not lead, of course).

At the same time, bottled water has become a trillion dollar industry. But why do so many people in the rich world pay inflated sums for bottled water every week when perfectly good water flows out of every tap (or faucet) in the house? It's all the more amazing since 40% of all bottled water is actually taken from municipal water sources, and I've been happily drinking tap water all my life. Bottled water companies are literally bottling up the

same water that comes out of the tap then inflating the cost and laughing all the way to the bank.

One of the biggest reasons people buy and drink bottled water is because they think it's cleaner than tap water. But it isn't. Also disturbing is the fact that far less testing is done on bottled water than on tap water. It turns out that unlike tap water, bottled water isn't tested for E. coli. And it can be distributed even if it doesn't meet the quality standards of tap water. Unlike tap water, bottled water isn't required to produce quality reports or even provide its source. Some consumers think the taste is better, but controlled tests consistently show that most people cannot tell the difference. I concede that around the world not all tap water tastes the same—still, neither is it all undrinkable.

Not only, but parents are doing their children a disservice by giving them bottled water instead of tap water because the fluoride in tap water does indeed strengthen teeth and prevent cavities. Unless they are Americans, who seem to be in love with popping pills (which they call dietary supplements!) of every imaginable kind and so don't mind throwing in a few fluoride ones too. Until municipal water companies in Britain began adding fluoride to water supplies in the 1960s, children usually had a mouthful of cavities by the time they reached adolescence. But that trend soon began to change, and dentists celebrated fluoride as one of the century's great health achievements.

Sukot is the festival of water above all else. The Sukah itself, which was originally used to protect from the sun, now reminds us that the summer is over and the rainy season is about to begin. The Four Plants we take and shake are dependent on water in different ways and to different degrees. The Rejoicing over the Temple Well House, which was instituted by the prophets, revolves around the pouring out of water in the hope that Heaven will replenish the supply, and of course we begin the prayers for winter rains in Israel. And believe you me, Israel needs all our prayers for rain.

Just as during the Days of Awe we are encouraged to think about our human lives and assess ourselves to see if we are on the right track, so during Sukot we examine our relationship to nature. I suggest we need to challenge ourselves. Do we really need to waste all that money on bottled water that could better be spent on charity and helping those who have far, far less than we do? Perhaps it is time to stop fooling ourselves about our water consumption, as we need to stop fooling ourselves about how good we think we are. The considered life, my friends, also includes asking whether we shouldn't stop contributing to the balance sheets of drink companies who fool us into thinking their water is healthier than "ours".