

Water

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Whatever is said about the festival of Sukot, the fact is that water is the most significant subtext. All plants need water, as do humans and all other living things. But the four “kinds of plants” we take and wave are all associated specifically water, whether natural rainfall, irrigation, or oases. Sitting in the Sukah is our farewell to the dry season, at least in areas where for thousands of years Jews mainly lived. The important post-Biblical traditions of “Nisuch Hamayim” pouring water over the altar as part of the prayers for rain, and the massive public celebrations of “Simchat Beit HaShoeva” the rejoicing over the well house in Jerusalem, prove the point that water is at the core of this festival.

Water also plays an essential part as the means of purification, both physical and spiritual. As with all the ancient “elements” it bridges the gap between the physical and the spiritual, the mundane and the sacred.

Water of course is not the only theme to the festival. Sukot was also the major communal reunion of the Jewish people. On the second day everyone gathered to hear the Torah (or parts of it) read in public. It was a huge public exercise in mass education that included women and children as well as men. Then Simchat Torah emerged as the happiest festival of the year, to record the conclusion of the annual cycle of reading the Torah in synagogues. Still the festival ends with new prayers for the rainy season, which were in part held off until the pilgrims from Babylon and the West could get home before the deluge made roads impassable.

During the early years of my life, no one seemed to make too much out of the issue of water and rain in general; no concerns then about climate change. The prayers for rain in the synagogue were regarded as a hangover from our agrarian past, something relevant only to the Land of Israel, not wet Manchester. But now the rising temperatures, the shortage of water, and the political tensions over its availability, have all brought the issue of water and rain to the forefront. It’s as if Moses and the rabbis of the past really could look into the future. Now nothing is more important on earth.

The Greek philosopher Thales thought that everything was derived from water, one way or another. He lost out to the popular theory that it was a combination of water, air, fire, and earth. That theory lasted until modern times. Even Maimonides believed it. In Medieval times water was so dangerously contaminated that people drank beer and wine instead. No wonder they called it the Dark Ages. We do not seek such simplistic solutions nowadays, but we do know how important drinkable water is, indeed almost any water is important to irrigate crops and facilitate industry.

In the rich world everyone is aware of the need for hydration. We spend vast sums on bottled water that is rarely superior to ordinary tap water. But in most of the world pure, potable (why the heck use that foreign word instead

of simply “drinkable”?) tap water is still a rarity.

The facts are disturbing. I am no fan of the UN, but it does occasionally produce something of value. The UN World Water Development Report (WWDR, 2003) from the World Water Assessment Program indicates that in the next 20 years the quantity of water available to everyone is predicted to decrease by 30%. Forty percent of the world’s inhabitants currently have insufficient fresh water for minimal hygiene. In 2000, more than 2.2 million people died from waterborne diseases related to the consumption of contaminated water or from drought. I might add the sad statistic that in the Industrial west 40% of the water is wasted each year through decaying infrastructure, leaking pipes, and poor management.

Increasingly, conflicts around the world relate to water. We are replaying Abraham’s conflicts with the Philistines over wells. We know the problems in the Middle East over the feeding rivers into the Jordan, the diminishing aquifers in the Judean hills, and the shrinking Dead Sea. This while swimming pools expand alongside villages where the wells have dried up. At least Israel is now investing so much in desalination that it could well satisfy most of its water needs this way within the next few years. Neither does Israel get credit (because it’s not political enough) for how much Israeli universities are investing in joint projects with Palestinians to deal with the water problem. But as we see millions of refugees trek across deserts to safety, the importance of water and its availability is growing by the day. It’s a sad state of affairs that too many states spend more on arms than they do on ensuring safe, accessible, drinkable water for their citizens.

So when we celebrate Sukot, we are indeed celebrating water and how lucky we are to have it. Literally, LeChayim, for life. And for those in the know, the alcohol comes a week later.