

# Rain

Between the two World Wars in Eastern Europe, yeshiva students used to entertain each other at weddings and other happy occasions with Gramen–rhymes in Yiddish prose or song that combined humor and scholarship. They were “party acts”. Now, with so many other forms of entertainment, the art is all but lost. Sad remnants are preserved at weddings in Chasidic circles where, at the very end (often at 5:00 in the morning), at the Mitzvah Tanz, a Badchan (a Chasidic-style court jester and amateur comedian), introduces guests and relatives with a few lines of rhyming verse. Nowadays they lack the skills of the past, so their rhymes are invariably banal, sycophantic ditties about how everyone is a scholar, a saint, a renowned benefactor. And the guests actually pay the Badchan for the honor.

Another old tradition of Jewish religious humor is the Purim Torah. Witty combinations of laws and ideas strung together in a nonsensical, humorous, but usually brilliant flow of Talmudic and Halachic texts. Alcohol helps; after all, nowadays that is what Purim is—a mixture of the spiritual and the profane. Standards have declined. My father was absolutely brilliant at both, in Yiddish and English. At weddings and at school parties. I have one record of a tour de force of his at a family wedding in the fifties where he succeeded in making fun of the other attending rabbis as well as the parents of the bride. But like all septuagenarians, I can look back and say that “fings ain’t what they used to be!” I, sadly, have dropped the baton.

This Jewish tradition was mirrored, in my youth, by brilliant non-Jewish or secular entertainers who combined academic and cultural excellence with musical talent. They were the stars of my youth, now long forgotten (though YouTube thankfully ensures they can still be found). Men like the American Tom Lehrer, a Harvard mathematician and satirical songster who used to pack auditoriums. And in England we had the brilliant Michael Flanders and Donald Swann. Michael Flanders (1922–1975) was an actor and composer, and Donald Swann (1923–1994) was a pianist and linguist. Amongst their most famous are the Hippopotamus and the Gnu songs. Their version of Mozart’s Horn Concerto with comic lyrics still delights me. I still love their song about the awful British weather. Here are the words:

*January brings the snow  
Makes your feet & fingers glow.  
February’s ice and sleet  
Freeze the toes right off your feet.  
Welcome March with wintry wind.  
Wish you were not so unkind.  
April brings the sweet spring showers  
On and on for hours and hours.  
Farmers fear unkindly May.  
Frost by night hail by day.  
June just rains and never stops.  
Thirty days and spoils the crops.  
In July the sun is hot.*

*Is it shining? No, it's not!  
August cold and dank and wet  
Brings more rain than any yet.  
Bleak September mist and mud  
Is enough to chill the blood.  
Then October adds a gale  
Wind and slush and sleet and hail.  
Dark November brings the fog.  
Should not do it to a dog.  
Freezing wet December, then  
Bloody January again.*

This is part of my multicultural upbringing. And this is how I remember the British weather, although as I write this I sit in New York under driving rain, and Britain sees much more sun nowadays than it used to, thanks to Global Warming ( for those who believe it). But still, this explains why praying for rain and the Suca experience (I can't remember when we weren't washed out) just did not resonate as much with me as it should have done. It wasn't until, as a teenager, I experienced Sucot in Israel that I really understood why it was so relevant there.

Now, of course, rain/water is a massive issue almost everywhere in the world. What was once seen as a minority concern of a small people living in the Middle East is now universal. The genius of our tradition is that old customs and laws that were instituted thousands of years ago are just as relevant now as they were then. Everything the Romans laughed at the Jews for are now major preoccupations and issues in modern society. The original Romans are long gone, but we are still here (no more popular than we were then). And according to that most derisory of bodies UNESCO and its lies, we never even existed! Nearly as insane as suggesting that the Quran written over a thousand years later than the original text was the true version and the earlier one's forgeries. Such its the state of madness in our world. At least the rain doesn't play politics.

Praying for rain, understanding its importance, the growing concerns over climate change and the state of the universe, are all issues that make Sucot even more relevant now than ever before. We need to be reminded. We need rituals to shake us out of our convenient stupor and tendency to do the least possible. This festival is about us and our position in the natural world and the importance of the decisions we take to preserve it or destroy it, for us and our children.

Happy Sucot!