

Sukkot Yizkor 5780: Why Do We Pray for Rain on Sukkot?

While I was reminded by Ron Judenberg that we don't pray for rain until the end of the week, only on Shemini Atzeret--technically after Sukkot has ended--one has to wonder whether God wasn't listening just a little early this year. Since without question this has been the rainiest sukkot I can remember.

Although, as I watched the rain nearly obliterate an entire week of outdoor programming, on some level I realized that I should be thankful. Thankful, not only because people still came when we moved things indoors, but because if I was a rabbi in Winnipeg, Manitoba, this week, I would have celebrated Sukkot not with rain, but with several feet of snow. And thankful because all of my northeastern colleagues have spent the week posting photos of their sukkot blown over on their side.

And yet as I was reflecting on this rather rainy week of Sukkot, I couldn't help but think of the irony that our goal today, coming together to pray for rain, was somewhat humorous. Yes, we wait until the end of the holiday to pray for rain: But why is that on a holiday when so much takes place outdoors, do we pray for rain at all? Why during a holiday, where we are commanded to see the stars outside through weak slats in the roof, do we pray for it to rain on us, preventing us from going outside in the first place?

I want to answer this question this morning with a Talmudic story about the sage Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa. I actually came across this story in the form of a popular Israeli children's book by Ruth Calderon, a Talmud scholar, and a former member of Israel's Knesset.

The story opens with Rabbi Chanina walking home, somewhat aggravated by the fact it is raining. Rabbi Chanina notices the trees drinking up the water. The frogs are playing in the puddles. But all of this, while he is walking home from studying Torah, is immaterial. He is freezing to his bones, shivering, like many of us were in our Sukkah this week. And so what Rabbi Chanina do? The exact opposite of what we will do a little later today, although something that many of us might have done earlier in the week. He prays for the rain to stop. And because he is a great sage, it happens. God listens and the rain stops.

Rabbi Chanina gets home. He takes off his wet clothing. He changes into dry clothing. He gets settled in. But it's at that moment that he looks out the window and sees all that has changed in the world. The trees are suffering. The frogs are looking up the heavens expectantly. Where are the puddles? And it's then that Rabbi Chanina has an epiphany about his own selfishness. He realizes that there is a method to God's world. It's not all about him. There is so much more to the universe than Rabbi Chanina. And so--comfortably inside and dry at this point I might add--he prays for the rain to continue. And having learned his lesson, it does.

Even though we may get a little late, on Sukkot, I believe that we pray for rain to remind us that there is a plan to God's universe: And that we, human beings, are only a small part of that plan. There are, on this planet of ours, so many processes taking place at any given moment. And we are as human beings entirely oblivious to most of them. Winnipeg, for example, I can tell you, in warm weather is a breeding ground for mosquitoes that dominate the summer. This is why I laugh when Winnipeggers complain about the snow. When there is a good snow, it freezes and kills the mosquitos to make for mild summers. We also know in Atlanta the necessity of the rain and how it affects our climate here. Rain is an important part of our process. We all prayed for an end of the brutal summer that only ended once the rain came and brought about the fall.

But more often than not, we ignore these processes: Or, if we were to live like Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, we would turn the spigot off if we could. *Bishvili Nivra HaOlam*, we say, the world was created for me. Yet if all we can think about is the fact that Sukkahfest had to be moved indoors, or how the rain affected us, then we've missed the fact that God's universe has a plan. The world needs rain. Israel needs *geshem*. God's plan may involve human beings, but Sukkot reminds us that we are but one small part of the overall picture of God's universe.

As we enter the Yizkor service, I am reminded that there are two ways that we as human beings respond to death. One, which I believe brings most of us here this morning, is deeply personal. And the other one that we don't think about all that often, that with time and loss, we come to appreciate more. And that is the universal aspect to loss, as a process that happens, death, as a reality of the condition of being human.

Today, most of us are here because of the personal. We are like Chanina ben Dosa, rightfully so, taking time to be here because it is what we personally need for us. As our rabbis say, we are all here with our *dalet amot*, within our personal space, to feel our sense of loss and grief. All of us in this room remember our loved ones. We remember their faces. Their embraces. The way they made us feel. We miss them.

And yet as we look at this room today, as a community of mourners, as a community of people who have all lost someone we care about, we can't help but move only a little from the particular to the universal aspect of death. Sukkot, a holiday where we pray for rain even though we know it will literally rain our parade, reminds us that there is a universality to all of this, to the idea of loss and grief. We are all of us in a bubble of individual grief in this space. But here we are, all of us, here. A room full of 100 people. There are, after all, to quote Christopher Bullock, but two certainties in life: death and taxes. To be certain, not every death is the same. Some are tragic and painful. Others happen without pain after a long life. But death is, like the rain, is a part of God's plan for all that lives. And it is reassuring to know that in this world of ours, as sure as it is that the rains will come, all of us, the good and the wicked, the innocent and the guilty, will eventually die.

And that is perhaps why we pray for rain on Sukkot. Not because we want to be snowed into the Sukkah. But because we remember that we are, all of us, part of God's universe. A part, but not a whole.

I want to conclude with a story about Rabbi Simcha Bunim. He said that each of us should carry two pieces of paper. One that says, "the world was created just for me," for when we are feeling insignificant. But also another that says, "I am but dust and ashes," for when we are feeling too much like Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa. So that we can remember that we are part of God's great plan for the world.

May we this Yizkor remember that our loved ones, that we are both pieces of paper. On the one hand the world was created just for us, on the other hand, on the other, we are dust of the earth. We are, like the snow of Winnipeg, the rains of Atlanta, a part of God's plan for the world.