

Sukkos Day 1

Water, Water, Everywhere

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

It was a pouring, rainy late afternoon in Woodmere and I had just returned home from work and the gym not long before. Florita, Shaya's nanny, had just gone home and Shaya and I were spending time together. The back entrance to our home was enclosed by a small vestibule in between two doors, and I thought it would be a nice idea to sit with Shaya on the back steps and watch the rain. Shaya was two at the time, and while this activity was interesting to him, it failed to sustain his attention for more than a minute or two- so he got up, walked inside and shut the door behind him.

At that moment, I realized four things:

1. I had not returned my house keys to my pants after I showered at home.
2. I had also not returned by cell phone to the same pants, an extremely uncharacteristic omission for a phone addict like me.
3. I was not wearing shoes.
4. The door was locked from the inside.

Shaya had locked himself in the house, and he was not yet tall or dextrous enough to open the door on his own, no matter how many times I begged him to do so. My efforts at trying to force open the door were to no avail

either, and because Shaya was near the window (and because we were renters) I was reluctant to bash it in. Did I mention that it was pouring outside? I began to lose it. Shaya was clearly in danger inside, alone, and while he was more or less maintaining composure, it would only be a matter of time before he would begin to freak out as well. There was no doubt in my mind that *someone* would call Child Protective Services on me, and that as soon as she found out, Jessica would divorce me instantaneously. I quickly ran to the next door neighbor (and no, they didn't have a copy of our key as they should have), wearing the galoshes I had somehow had the presence of mind to keep in the vestibule, and borrowed his phone. With Shaya firmly in my sights, I called every locksmith in the vicinity, all of whom told me that they could only be there within a few hours. When I informed them that I have a child in the house, they told me I had to call the fire department. By this time, Shaya was beginning to get worried, but there were other things that occupied his attention; we lived a block from the Woodmere LIRR station and Shaya was transfixed by the trains that would come in with great regularity. This was keeping him calm and interested, but soon enough, something else attracted his attention-a large firetruck showed up within minutes filled with several volunteer firefighters equipped with crowbars and other tools of forced entry. Now, the members of the Woodmere Volunteer Fire Department are locals, and are therefore mostly Orthodox Jews- one of whom asked me if I am the Rabbi of the

Irving Place Minyan...my cover was blown and my horrible, negligent parenting would now be revealed to all. Fortunately, they were discreetly able to jimmy the back door open, and a soaking me and Shaya were tearfully reunited. Don't worry- Jessica knows this story: I told her after it was all resolved.

Rain: it can provide opportunities to bond with your child, or it can exacerbate a terrifying 20 minutes caused by said child. It causes crops to grow, yet it devastates major American cities and flattens entire Caribbean Islands. It can cause structural damage and mold, but it can also fill a mikvah and make it fit for ritual use. If there is one time of the year that calls us to notice this duality, it is Sukkos. Consider the Mishnah's (Sukkah 28b) description of the significance of rain on the first day of Sukkos. Because there is a biblical commandment to sit in the Sukkah on the first night and day of Yom Tov, the Mishnah views meteorological occurrences that prevent the performance of the Mitzvah as being highly negative. In fact, the Mishnah likens rain on this day to a butler who brings a pitcher of water to his boss, who then pours the water on the butler:

משנה. כל שבעת הימים אדם עושה סוכתו קבע וביתו עראי. ירדו גשמים, מאימתי מותר לפנות - משתסרח המקפה. משלו משל: למה הדבר דומה - לעבד שבא למזוג כוס לרבו, ושפך לו קיתון על פניו.

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¹ תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף כח עמוד ב

We dread water in our Sukkahs; our decorations get waterlogged, sagging from the weight of water they never meant to bear, the colors bleeding from paper chains and onto the plastic table cloth. Yet, throughout the holiday of Sukkos, the Beis Hamikdash was the site of a unique ritual in which water was drawn with great fanfare from the Shiloach spring and poured joyously on the altar every day. This is the ritual known as the *nissuch hamayim*, the pouring of the water, in the context of the celebration known as the *Simchas Beis HaShoeva*, the festival of the drawing of the water. In just a few days, on Shemini Atzeres, we will usher in the season of praying for rain with *Tefillat Geshem*. So which is it? The question is quintessentially parochial yet rather appropriate in the context: Is rain- is water- good for the Jews, or bad for the Jews?

I'd like to share with you a profound thought from Rav Moshe Wolfson, the Rabbi of the Emunas Yisroel community in Boro Park, Brooklyn and the Mashgiach, the spiritual dean, of Mesivta Torah Vodaas. In his work *Emunas Itecha*, Rav Wolfson explains that on Sukkos itself, we view water that comes from heaven as an unwelcome development, but when we draw the water ourselves, it is holy and desirable. When we wait for rain, it engenders a sense of entitlement when it is given and bitterness when it is taken away, and on the holiday of our happiness, we want to avoid anything that will

lead down the path toward resentment and anger. When we draw water, however, we are working hard to fulfill the need we feel. It is in this distinction- between water given and water drawn- that we find the message of Sukkos.

The author, blogger and entrepreneur Donald Miller² describes two kinds of people in the world (with the caveat that he is generally loathe to describe the world in such stark terms): Creators and consumers.

***Creator:** A person who leans toward being a creator is not necessarily creative; it only means he believes he has the power to create the kind of life he wants.*

***Consumer:** A person who leans towards being a consumer believes he has little power to create the life he wants and instead must shop for it in an endless sea of options being presented to him.*

If a consumer longs for community he or she goes online looking for a place to plug in. He might look for a church, a sports league, a class he can take, whatever. And that's all fine.

But when a creator longs for community he or she invites the neighbors over for dinner, he puts up a screen in his backyard and hosts a neighborhood movie night, he starts a frisbee-golf league, or he teaches a painting class...Consumers believe their options are limited. Consumers only guide

² <http://storylineblog.com/2016/02/08/why-creators-are-happier-than-consumers/>

culture with their buying choices; they aren't actually "making" culture at all, only voting for it.

In other words, a creator draws water, a consumer waits for it to fall from the sky. On Sukkos, we are challenged to recognize that true fulfillment-true happiness at the time of our joy- comes from pouring water out for others. Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, in his work *Michtav Me'elياهو*, describes this in terms of the *koach hanetinah* and *koach hanetilah*- the attribute of giving and the attribute of taking. The dichotomy between these two attributes plays out in so many different ways, governing the choices we make in terms of who we socialize with, where we live, what kind of work we do and what kind of religious lives we live. A taker is more likely to follow the crowd, choosing the Pumpkin Spice Latte even though it is completely revolting, because it seems like a seasonally appropriate thing to do. [Wake up, sheeple! There is no season called fall in Dallas, Texas. The closest we get is January. The leaves don't change color, there is no nip in the air- and there are plenty of other culinary things you can do with pumpkin!] On Simchas Torah, a taker- a consumer- will stand on the side and evaluate if popular people are dancing, if they are attending the "cool" synagogue, whether the kiddush is better or the conversation more interesting than whatever else is going on elsewhere. A giver will come to minyan without waiting to be WhatsApped about it, because that is what a Jew should do, and there are other people who need a minyan. A taker is

concerned only with *chapping* the amud when he has *yarzheit*, a giver brings a little *kibud* for after *shacharis* for others to enjoy. A giver takes the new guy under his wing at the office, and a taker makes sure the new guy knows his place in the corporate structure. Those who give and create are usually happier, because their aspirations are directed outward and they expect nothing in return. Those who take or consume are rarely happy, because they are unlikely to feel they are getting what they rightfully deserve, or if they are getting it, they are not getting enough. As Milton Friedman said,

“Deserves' is an impossible thing to decide. No one deserves anything. Thank God we don't get what we deserve.”

The truth is that most of us would not appreciate being labeled a “taker,” but there is another way to frame the divide between the “giver” and the “taker” which doesn't quite bear the same stigma. I am referring to the dialectic between rights and responsibilities. The world is obsessed with rights- whether it is the rights we believe we are entitled to by dint of being part of the human species, rights enshrined in our constitution or rights we feel others are unfairly given because of their birth or social standing. Either way, the focus solely on rights comes from a *netilah* mindset. Focusing on rights, independent of responsibilities, can have disastrous consequences and is a path primarily to unhappiness.

This is why it seems that most people who loudly proclaim their rights seem to be dissatisfied, even when they are granted that which they requested. Freedom of speech exercised just because it is allowed, with no internal filter and no judgement, does not render the speech redemptive or responsible in any way. We are challenged to look beyond that which is granted and strive for speech that is not just allowed, but is elevated. We have a right to own a gun. We may disagree about what kind of arms this should encompass and how many, if any, and whether there should be a reassessment of limits. We may even disagree about whether the aftermath of the largest domestic massacre in the history of this country, by the agency of illegally purchased weapons in the arms of an undetected psychopath with an arsenal he had carefully amassed, is the right time for this discussion, especially while so many are wounded or grieving. But regardless of where you are on this issue, there is one perspective that should reign above all, whenever we talk about it: *tzelem Elokim*. One person killed 58 others, injured over 500 and sent 20,000 scrambling for cover in a scene that is nothing short of apocalyptic chaos and pandemonium. A loss of life of any kind, let alone of this magnitude, has to be felt by the Jewish community because it is a serious diminution of the *tzelem Elokim* in the world, particularly for us, who know what mass bloodshed looks like. It is at times of the greatest darkness that the best of human nature comes out, where the creators and the givers outshine the takers and the consumers.

From those who stood on line at blood banks to the man who stole a truck in order to rush victims to the hospital, as well as all the official first responders. The silver lining in these moments of darkness is that there will be more giving.

And so wherein do we discover our simcha in times like these? We find the joy when we draw and pour water. When the altar of senseless sacrifice becomes transmuted into the altar of **ניסוך המים**. It is the celebration of the time when we stop consuming and start creating, exercising ingenuity, autonomy and above all responsibility. That water is sacred, and is thus the instrument of our worship and the subject of our joy.

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