

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Emor

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Rivkah bas Eliezer a''h

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Praying for Rain

Among the various *mo'adim* (festivals) dealt with in this week's *parshah* – each unique in its own way – is the *yom tov* of Shemini Atzeres. A superficial glance seems to suggest that there is not much “happening” on this *yom tov*, especially in contrast to the entire Sukkos festival that preceded it. Sukkos was categorized by visible mitzvah fulfillment in abundance, in the form of *sukkah*, *lulav* and *esrog* and the many practices observed throughout the festival. For all intents and purposes, these all come to an end with the advent of Shemini Atzeres. This glaring contrast is manifest as well with regard to the Temple service. The sacrificial order throughout Sukkos itself is quite elaborate, entailing a large number of animals. These include the great quantity of bulls that were offered, beginning with thirteen on the first day, twelve on the second, etc. By the end of the Sukkos festival, a total of seventy bulls had been offered, corresponding to the seventy nations of the world on whose behalf the sacrifices were intended. Yet, on Shemini Atzeres, the number of bulls offered is reduced to a single one.

Chazal inform us that, in fact, this “pairing down” on Shemini Atzeres is actually a sign of Hashem's special love for and relationship with the Jewish people. As mentioned, the seventy bulls offered throughout Sukkos were intended to arouse favor for the nations of the world, that their welfare be sustained from on High. But the single bull offered on Shemini Atzeres is intended for the benefit of Klal Yisrael alone. By mandating this individualized sacrifice at this time, Hashem conveys the following sentiment to Yisrael: “Throughout this period, I have engaged in a great, communal celebration. Now, I desire a smaller, more intimate celebration with you alone” (*Sukkah* 55b).

A Matter of Practicality

There is a curious practice we follow at this time, which is unique to the *yom tov* of Shemini Atzeres: Tefillas Hageshem, the prayer for rain. This somewhat elaborate prayer is accorded great solemnity, offered in a manner reminiscent of the Yamim Nora'im (Days of Awe): the *chazzan* wears a *kittel*, and even the tune of the Yamim Nora'im *davening* is adopted for the occasion. Yet, the whole experience may appear somewhat mystifying: What occasions such an elaborate and “serious” ceremony? What is the connection specifically to Shemini Atzeres? It is true that we begin to insert into the Shemoneh Esrei the brief phrase of *mashiv haru'ach u'morid hageshem* (“He makes the wind blow and brings down the rain”). But what is the significance of such an extended version, characterized by such solemnity?

On the surface, it may be that practical considerations are at play here. As an essential for life, the need for rain is universally appreciated. “The world cannot exist without water,” Chazal tell us (*Ta'anis* 2b). The world is judged for rain on Sukkos; the annual allotment is determined at this time (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). A number of the Sukkos observances reflect an attempt to elicit a favorable judgment from Hashem on this matter. The four species, for example, are all heavily water-dependent, as is evident from how they are described in this week's *parshah*: “fruit of the tree that is *hadar* (identified by the Gemara as water-related)... willows of the river” (*Vayikra* 23:40). Nevertheless, we refrain from a full-blown petition for rain. R' Yehoshua explains that his

reason for postponing the inclusion of *mashiv haru'ach* until the end of the festival is because rain during Sukkos can be detrimental. As stated in the Mishnah in Ta'anis (1:1):

רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ אָמַר... אֵין הַגְּשָׁמִים אֶלָּא סִימָן קָלָלָהּ בְּחַג.

“R’ Yehoshua says: ...Rain during Sukkos is an inauspicious sign (revealing Hashem’s displeasure with Yisrael’s service, as rain preempts the mitzvah of staying in the *sukkah*).”

When Shemini Atzeres arrives – and the principal observance of *sukkah*-dwelling has ended – rain no longer constitutes a bad omen. As such, it is the first opportunity to render explicit and lengthy prayers for this life-giving element – which we do through the Tefillas Hageshem.

Rain from Heaven (Literally)

The *Shem Mishmuel* (*Shemini Atzeres* 5677), however, offers an alternative and novel approach, revealing some of the depth inherent in this solemn rite. He bases his explanation on a Talmudic dispute that revolves around a central question: from where does rain originate?

“R’ Eliezer says: The whole world derives its moisture from the ocean (i.e., through evaporation and other components of the rain-cycle)... R’ Yehoshua says: The whole world derives its moisture from the ‘*mayim ha’elyonim*’ (the upper waters)” (*Ta’anis* 9a).

The *mayim ha’elyonim* mentioned by R’ Yehoshua refers to an item appearing in the Creation narrative of the second day: “And G-d made the firmament and separated between the waters that are below... and the waters that are above” (*Bereishis* 1:7). Identifying what these “upper waters” are is no simple matter; the Ramban contends that this verse represents a mystical concept, the true meaning of which lies beyond standard comprehension. At the very least, we can understand that it refers to something of an elevated, spiritual quality. Thus, the dispute between R’ Eliezer and R’ Yehoshua can be summed up as follows: does rain emanate from a *physical* source (R’ Eliezer) or a *spiritual* one (R’ Yehoshua)?

The *Shem Mishmuel* understands that, in fact, these two positions are not mutually exclusive, for rain actually contains *both* elements. What we see is the outer, sea-based “shell,” which is its physical component. (The Hebrew term for rain – “*geshem*” – actually derives from the overall term for physicality – “*gashmius*” [*Rabbeinu Bechaye, Devarim* 11:17].) But it is apparently also imbued with an inner, *spiritual* essence, which stems from the ethereal “upper waters.” (The Nesivos adds that those rains of exceptional beneficence known as “*gishmei berachah*” [rains of blessing] emanate specifically from the “upper waters” [*Nachalas Ya’akov, Ta’anis*].)

This dual arrangement is reflected in the nature of the festival. As mentioned, Sukkos is the time when the world is judged for rain; the seventy bull offerings, on behalf of the nations, have the effect of obtaining a favorable judgment for them. However, explains the *Shem Mishmuel*, their allotment is for the *physical* component of rain. But the loftier, more blessed and spiritual side of this Heavenly gift is reserved for the Jewish people alone.

This is the principal aim of the Tefillas Geshem. It is a unique prayer for singular, spiritual bounty, reflecting how special Klal Yisrael is to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. It is no coincidence, then, that it is offered on the very day that celebrates Hashem’s special affinity for His people.