

THE PROPER TIME TO SAY TAL UMATAR

by Menachem Raab

In the first *Mishnah* in Tractate *Ta'anit* we read, "From when do we recite the 'Power of Rain'?"¹ The opinions of different *Tannaim* are mentioned. Rabbi Eliezer says on the first day of the holiday, meaning *Sukkot*. Rabbi Joshua says the last day of the holiday. Rabbi Joshua then asks of Rabbi Eliezer, since rain during the holiday of *Sukkot* is undesirable why mention it. Rabbi Eliezer responds that he did not say, "to ask"² for it but merely to mention it. The phrase 'Power of Rain' or the Hebrew formula *Mashiv haru'ah umorid hageshem*, is not a request but a praise of the Almighty Who gives rain. We thus see a distinction between mentioning that *Hashem* gives rain and "asking" for Him to give it. The *halakhah* follows the opinion of Rabbi Joshua and we begin reciting the praise to *Hashem* for giving rain on *Shemini Atzeret*,³ which is referred to in this *Mishnah* as the last day of the holiday.

The third *Mishnah* in this tractate discusses when we should start "asking" for rain. The formula to ask for rain is *Veten tal umatar* and is inserted in the ninth *berakhah* of the *Amidah*. In this *Mishnah* we read: On the third of *Marheshvan* we begin asking for rain. Rabbi Gamaliel says on the seventh, which is fifteen days after the holiday so that the last Israelite may reach the river Euphrates.⁴ Rabbi Elazar in the Talmud says the *halakhah* is like Rabbi Gamaliel and the practice in Israel today, indeed, is to follow the opinion of Rabbi Gamaliel and commence asking for rain on the seventh of *Heshvan*, which is fifteen days after the holiday. In the Diaspora a different *halakhah* applies and is based on the prevalent practice among the Babylonian Jewry at the time of the Talmud, as is explained in the *Gemarah*.⁵ The Talmud states: Hananiah says, in the *Golah* we do not begin until the sixtieth day of the *tekufah*. The word *Golah* refers to the Diaspora and in the Talmud generally designates the Babylonian Jewry. The term *tekufah* refers to the autumnal equinox, usually called in Jewish literature *Tekufat Tishri*, the equinox that occurs in the Jewish month of *Tishri*. *Rashi* submits that the reason for commencing later in the *Golah* is because the terrain there is on a lower altitude and hence requires less rain.

The *halakhah* for the Diaspora, as mentioned above, is to follow the practice in use among the Babylonian Jewry. This is strange since Babylonian Jews in Talmudic days and Jews in the Diaspora today start saying *Mashiv haru'ah umorid hageshem* according to the needs in Israel.⁶ Why then do we today start "asking" for rain according to Babylonian needs? Regardless of this question, there is, however, a major problem with this date. The Rabbis of the Talmud, in calculating the time of the equinox, followed the teaching of Samuel Yarkhinai the *Amora* who was of the first generation of *Amoraim* and who believed that the year was exactly 365 days and 6 hours long. Dividing the year into four equal parts to give you the spring and autumnal equinox and the summer and winter solstice you conclude that each part is exactly 91 days and 7.5 hours.⁷ This calculation brings the *Tekufah* of *Tishri* or the autumnal equinox to *Tishri* 28 or October 8 in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The calculation of 91 days and 7.5 hours for a *tekufah*, when multiplied by 4 *Tekufot* in a year renders a year of 365 days plus 6 hours. These 6 hours accumulate in 4 years to make another day. This extra day is accounted for every 4 years when a leap year is inserted into the civil calendar. Using the Rabbinic figures, sixty days after the *Tishri Tekufah* brings us to December the 5th in an ordinary year and December the 6th in a year before a leap year. These are the days on which the Diaspora starts asking for rain. Since in Jewish reckoning the night precedes the day, most prayer books state that the prayer for rain should be inserted beginning on December 4th going on the 5th in an ordinary year and the night of December 5th going on the 6th in the year before a leap year. The calculation that scientists use today for the length of the year is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds. This brings the autumnal equinox in the Gregorian calendar that is in general use today throughout most of the world to September 23rd in an ordinary year.

The difference between Samuel Yarkhinai's calculation and the modern calculation is 11 minutes and roughly 34 seconds each year. This difference accumulates and after approximately 128 years there is a difference of 24 hours or an entire day. Thus the *Tekufah Tishri* moves forward almost one day every 128 years. According to the Gregorian Calendar that we follow, every four years is calculated as a leap year with one exception. Thus the date of the *tekufah* remains constant in the civil calendar. The exception to this rule occurs when the century year divided by 400 does not result in a whole number but has a remainder. Leap year is then skipped. Thus the year 1800 when divided by 400 is 4.5 and the year 1900 when thus divided is 4.75. Since both of these century years yield a remainder when divided by 400 they were not leap years though they should have been based on the normal calculation of a leap year every fourth year. The century year 2000 is evenly divided by 400 thus it was a leap year.

Because of the variation in the leap year rule, during certain century

years the date for *Tal umatar* moves ahead. Thus during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *Tal umatar* was recited from December 1st and in a leap year from the 2nd. During the eighteenth century, from December 2nd and 3rd respectively and during the nineteenth century from December 3rd and 4th respectively. During the twentieth century and the current twenty-first century we recite it beginning with December 4th and 5th respectively.⁸

The scientific autumnal equinox now is on September 23rd. The *Tishri Tekufah* or Rabbinic autumnal equinox is currently October 8th. There is a discrepancy of fifteen days. If we would be using the scientific autumnal equinox, sixty days later, the time to start saying *Veten tal umatar* would be November 21st.⁹

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein in his responsa *Igrot Moshe*,¹⁰ records an answer he gave to a Rabbi whom he does not name but who apparently asked why we do not correct the calculation of the *tekufah* and bring it in line with the scientific calculation of the equinox. His unflattering response is that the Rabbis who established the rule to follow Samuel Yarkhinai's calculations also had a more accurate calculation¹¹ but evidently for some reason elected to follow Samuel Yarkhinai in this matter. We have no authority to alter their decision.

In explaining the dates for commencing with recitation of *Veten tal umatar* as mentioned in the *Mishnah*, Maimonides in his *Perush Hamishnayot*¹² says, "...all this (the dates mentioned in the *Mishnah*) refers to the Land of Israel and to lands similar to it (in climate). ...However, in other lands, 'asking' is when the rain is good and suitable in that location. ... For there are lands where the rain does not begin until *Nisan*, and lands where the summer is in *Marheshvan*¹³ and the rains are not good for them, for they rather kill and destroy. How can these places 'ask' for rain in *Marheshvan* when this ('asking') is false and wrong. All this is correct and obvious." It appears apparently that Maimonides believes every land should 'ask' for rain when it is beneficial for that particular land and not to 'ask' based on Babylonian practice. In his *Yad Hahazakah*¹⁴ he takes a somewhat different approach. Here he says, "Places that require rain during the summer months, for example the distant islands, 'ask' for rain in the times that they need them in *Shome'a Tefillah* (the last of the intermediate blessings of the *Amidah*). It seems that his opinion here is to recite the formula for rain as they did in Babylonia but only add an extra request in a later *berakhah*. This discrepancy is discussed by the commentaries on Maimonides,

The *Rosh*¹⁵ in his commentary on the *Mishnah*¹⁶ quoted above also makes a similar remark. He says, "And I wonder why our practice is similar to the Diaspora (meaning Babylonia) in this matter. Although our Talmud is Babylonian, nevertheless, a matter that depends on the land, why should we follow their practice? If Babylonia is a valley with sufficient water, and is

not in need of (rain) water, all (other) lands do need water in *Marheshvan*.¹⁷ Why should we delay the 'asking' until sixty days in the *tekufah*? It is well known that if there were no rain until the sixtieth day of the *tekufah* the crop would spoil. Why should we not act according to our *Mishnah*?¹⁸ I noticed that in the Provinces they do 'ask' for rain in *Marheshvan* and it appears very correct in my eyes." We thus see that the *Rosh* also maintains that we should not follow Babylonian custom in this matter. However, the *halakhah* today is, indeed, to follow Babylonian practice.¹⁹

Veten tal umatar is said up to and including the *Minhah Amidah* on *erev Pesah*. In the *Amidah* recited during *Hol Hamo'ed*, we start saying *Veten berakhah* and make no mention of rain.

One last trivial item. Because *Veten tal umatar* is started in Israel during the month of *Heshvan*, it is never possible to say *Veten berakhah* during *Hanukkah* when *Al Hanissim* is said. In the Diaspora *Veten tal umatar* is started during the beginning of the month of December. *Hanukkah*, as a rule, comes out later in the month of December so *Veten berakhah* and *Al Hanissim* are also not said in the same *Amidah*. It happens, however, though very rarely, that *Hanukkah* comes out in the beginning of the month of December and it is then possible to say both of these prayers in the same *Amidah*. In the year 1999 *Hanukkah* started on the night of December 3rd, and since it was a year before a civil leap year, the 'asking' for rain did not start until the night of Sunday, December 5th. Both *Veten berakhah* and *Al Hanissim* were said in the same *Amidah* on Saturday night, December the 4th. An added rarity in 1999 was that on Saturday night, December the 4th the usual Saturday night prayer of *Attah Honantanu* was also said together with *Veten berakhah* and with *Al Hanissim*. The combination of all three of these prayers happened only seven times in the twentieth century.²⁰

On a rare occasion, this combination of dates coincides also with *Rosh Hodesh*. When this happens *Ya'aleh Veyavo*, the prayer recited on *Rosh Hodesh*, is also added. Hence, one says in the Sabbath night *Amidah Attah Honantanu, Veten berakhah, Ya'aleh Veyavo* and *Al Hanissim*. This combination is extremely rare. It last occurred on December 3rd, 1994 and before that on December 2nd, 1899, a span of 95 years. It will occur again in the year 2089, again 95 years later.

FOOTNOTES

1. The expression 'Power of Rain' refers to the phrase *Mashiv haru'ah umorid hageshem* recited in the second *berakhah* of the *Amidah* during certain times of the year.
2. There is a special formula *Veten tal umatar* (give dew and rain) that is included in the ninth *berakhah* of the *Amidah* during the rainy season (see below). Rabbi Eliezer states he was referring to this prayer.
3. See *Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim* 114,1. The actual time when we commence reciting the formula is not at the *Arvit* service as would be expected, since then the day begins according to Jewish tradition. We do not start until the *Musaf* Service in the morning. The reason for this is discussed in the Jerusalem Talmud. (*Ta'anit*, 1,1, p. 63,3). The Talmud asks let us start

mentioning it (*Mashiv haru'ah umorid hageshem*) in the evening. The answer given is that not everyone is present then. That is, not everyone comes to the evening service. Then let us start saying it in the *Shaharit* Service? The answer given is that someone who was not there at night and came in the morning and heard it recited would assume that it was started the night before and in the future would recite it in the evening. If we start at the *Musaf* service and since the worshiper was there for *Shaharit* and it was not recited, then everyone would start at the same time.

The *Yerushalmi* further adds that it should not be recited until one hears it from the *Hazzan*. Based on this there are various customs as to when one actually starts saying it. In most synagogues in Israel a prayer is recited for rain before the *Musaf Amidah* and thus everyone starts reciting it in the *Amidah*. In the Diaspora this special prayer is recited before the *Hazzan* repeats the *Amidah*. Therefore, someone calls out before the *Amidah* that it should be recited so everyone includes it in the *Amidah*. There is an opinion, however, among the early Rabbis that one should not start saying it until he actually hears the *Hazzan* recite it and thus cannot start until the *Minhah* service.

4. The Israelites had to make a pilgrimage to the Temple of Jerusalem on each of the three Jewish festivals. In order to allow those Israelites who came to Jerusalem for the holiday of *Sukkot* to get home without being inconvenienced by rain, we refrain from asking for it. The Rabbis estimated that to get to the furthest point in the Land of Israel at that time would take fifteen days.

5. See *Rema, Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 117,1

6. See below the opinions of some of the *Rishonim* or early rabbinic *halakhic* authorities concerning when *Veten tal umatar* should be said in the Diaspora.

7. Rav Ada bar Ahava was a younger contemporary of Samuel Yarhinai and he had a more accurate calculation. He maintained the length of the year was 365 days, 5 hours, 55 minutes and 25 27/57 seconds.

8. See Arthur Spier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, twentieth to twenty second century, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem/New York, p.20.

9. Since according to the Talmud mentioned above and the law as it is found in the *Rema, Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 117, 1 the reciting of this prayer starts on the sixtieth day.

10. *Orah Hayyim* Vol. 4, Chapter 17.

11. See note #6 above.

12. On *Mishnah Ta'anit* 1,3 (found in the Talmud *Ta'anit* 10a).

13. The second month of the year in the Jewish calendar.

14. *Hilkhos Tefillah* 2,17.

15. Rabenu Asher ben Yehiel (c. 1250-1327) Talmudist, codifier.

16. *Ta'anit* 1, 3.

17. This translation follows the emendation of the *Bach*.

18. Which calls for a much earlier date to "ask".

19. See *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 117, 1.

20. In 1904, 1907, 1934, 1972, 1983, 1988 and 1999.

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