

Tefillat Geshem: A Prayer for the Right Kind of Rain

Recited during the *chazan's* repetition of *Musaf* on Shemini Atzeret, *Tefillat Geshem* (Prayer for Rain) contains references to water in its natural state such as in clouds or underground, and in rivers or streams. It also contains a reference to the miraculous flow of water emanating from the rock after Moshe struck it in the desert. The prayer further mentions metaphorical interpretations of events whose unfolding recalls the liquid character of water – how it splashes, runs, and tumbles. Because water is so elemental to life, it was certainly not hard for the author of this *piyut* (Elazar Kallir) to find specific examples from Jewish history that evoke events related to water. And, yet, *Tefillat Geshem* is not simply a paean to water, as essential as it is. Rather, *Tefillat Geshem* is a prayer for one particular type of water, rainwater, so that agriculture will flourish.

Ancient Israel was first and foremost an agrarian society. The vast majority of people lived close to the land, their daily and seasonal rhythms reflecting that of the agricultural cycle. At the biblical city of Gezer, an ancient text from the tenth century BCE preserves an old folk-song or schoolboy exercise (or perhaps tax-collecting tool!), which attributes particular agricultural tasks to monthly or bi-monthly periods. The calendar is as follows:²⁸⁹

The Gezer calendar, limestone, 10 cm tall.

Two months of gathering [olives; September, October]

Two months of planting [grain; November, December]

Two months of late planting [millet, legumes, fruits, vegetables; January, February]

A month of hoeing flax [March]

A month of barley harvest [April]

A month of harvest (wheat) and feasting (Shavuot)[May]

Two months of (vine) pruning [June, July]

One month of summer fruit [grapes, figs, pomegranates; August]

The entire agricultural cycle in the Land of Israel depended on rain. This is in contrast both to Egypt where sufficient water arrived with the annual inundation of the Nile and to southern Mesopotamia where a network of canals between the Tigris and Euphrates irrigated the fields. In Israel, successful cultivation required at least 12 inches (300 mm) of rain. Because Israel is situated in a subtropical zone defined by dry summers and wet winters, people eagerly anticipated the fall rains and the beginning anew of the agricultural cycle.

When the rains first arrived in October-November and the ground was adequately softened, farmers would begin to plow the soil and spread the seeds before a second plowing to cover the grain. The increasing saturation of the ground made possible sequential plantings of legumes and other vegetables as well as horticulture. If the rain was delayed or insufficient, the farmers suffered an immediate setback, postponing their planting (since they could not break up the hard, sun-baked ground) with the risk of missing out on the critical timing for the proper development of the plants. Of course, if the rain continued to hold back, even the seeds that were already planted would not grow to their potential.

It was imperative, therefore, that the rain began falling in October-November. However, it was equally significant that the right *kind* of rain should fall at the appropriate time throughout the rainy season. Thus, Hebrew has several words for rain:

²⁸⁹. Translation and annotation by the author.

matar refers to rain in general;
yoreh is the early rain that softens the soil;
geshem refers to the heavy, winter rains that soak the ground; and
malkosh is the spring rain that fosters plant growth.

This sense of timing and orderliness fits in well with the passage from *Mishnah Rosh Ha-Shanah* (1:2) that “on the festival [of Sukkot] the rainfall of the world is judged.” Sukkot is the festival that occurs at the end of the dry season. *Tefillat Geshem* is not said at the beginning of the holiday for the obvious reason that rainfall is not desired right away as it would interfere with the *mitzvah* of eating in the *sukkah*. For this reason, the prayer is said on Shemini Atzeret.

One final aspect to consider is that unlike farmers in Egypt and southern Mesopotamia, where plentiful water was nearly always guaranteed, farmers in the Land of Israel were reminded year after year that rain was a blessing that came from heaven. Plentiful harvests were celebrated while droughts and famines had to be compensated for by tightening belts, reaching into reserves, and seeking food elsewhere.

Whatever the yield of the previous year, each fall brought a renewed sense of possibility and hope, that it should be a bountiful year – for blessing, for life, for prosperity – and it all hinged on whether or not *Hashem* would “make the wind blow and the rain fall” – *mashiv ha-ru’ach u-morid ha-geshem*.”