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What is Dew to You? An Examination of Tefillat Tal

Wikipedia has over 40 million articles, available in 250 languages,³⁵⁴ on almost every topic imaginable. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is even one on dew, that under-appreciated little water-cousin of rain. In the article detailing the details of dew, dew is described as “water in the form of droplets that appears on thin, exposed objects in the morning or evening. As the exposed surface cools by radiating its heat, atmospheric moisture condenses at a rate greater than that at which it can evaporate, resulting in the formation of water droplets.”

A few paragraphs below that description, in the section labeled “Significance,” after informing its readers that “another effect of dew on plants is its role as a habitat for pathogens such as the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* which infects potato plants,” the Wikipedia page states that:

Dew, known in Hebrew as *tal*, is very important in the Jewish religion for agricultural and theological purposes. On the first day of Passover, the chazan, dressed in a white kittel, leads a service in which he prays for dew between that point and Sukkot. During the rainy season between December and Passover there are also additions in the Amidah for blessed dew to come together with rain. There are many midrashim that refer to dew as being the tool for ultimate resurrection.

Though the first line of *Tefillat Tal*, written by Eleazer Ha-Kallir, is “*be-da’ato abi’ah chidot*” – “with His help I will speak of hidden things,”³⁵⁵ clearly dew has become more famous, and less hidden, over the course of time.

The prayer for dew is a literary masterpiece, full of biblical, midrashic, and liturgical allusions.³⁵⁶ Following the paragraph inserted as a conclusion of the first *berakhah* of the repetition of the *Musaf Amidah* that begins with the words above, and the first line of the next *berakhah*, that of *Geshamim*, there are seven stanzas. Each of these has its own internal rhyme scheme, in a reverse acrostic, with the first line of the first stanza starting with a *taf* (“*tehomot ha-dom*” – “the depths of the earth”), and proceeding backwards through the alphabet, until the last line, which begins with an *aleph* (“*ana tafeik lah ratzon*” – “on her [the nation] please, we pray, bestow Your favor”). The prayer then culminates in an almost identical ending to *Tefillat Geshem*: “For You, Lord our God, make the wind blow and the dew fall. For blessing, and not for curse. For life, and not for death. For plenty, and not for scarcity.”

As alluded to in the Wikipedia entry, dew is portrayed throughout the prayer as symbolizing revival, both agriculturally (“increase for us our corn and wine”; “may the fruit of the earth be fine and fair”; “let it sweeten the mountain streams”; “may it fill our granaries to overflowing”) and on the metaphorical-national plane (“to revive those [buried] in the clefts of the rocks”; “in Your jubilation set us as a blessing”; “send light in the midst of darkness”; “free Your beloved ones from captivity”). This ability to serve as a rich metaphorical image is due to the mysterious, magical element of dew: its point of origin is not readily apparent to the naked eye – in contrast to rain – and we often first notice it in the morning when we wake up.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴. As of April 2017.

³⁵⁵. Translations of *Tefillat Tal* taken from Jonathan Sacks, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth* (London, 2006), 696–701.

³⁵⁶. See *ibid.* for examples.

³⁵⁷. “The Prayer for Dew: A Spiritual Connection to the Season in the Land of -Israel,” accessed June 21, 2012. http://www.myviewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Passover/In_the_Community/Prayer_for_Dew.shtml.

However, as noted by R. Shaya Karlinsky, we often think of *Tefillat Tal* as less important than the Prayer for Rain, especially in the Land of Israel, where *Tefillat Geshem* is recited with much emotion and fervor, because dew just appears overnight, without any fanfare.³⁵⁸ In contrast, the very appearance of rain itself is striking:

Accompanied by dramatic winds, lightning and thunder, [rain] is the creative force in the world – providing the source for our very sustenance, but also being unpredictable, a wild card. Will this year be a year of abundant rains or will there be a drought? Will there be abundance or the flooding of OVER abundance.³⁵⁹

And the Prayer for Rain reflects this drama. That prayer (which contains a regular acrostic, starting with “*av nimshakh acharekha ka-mayim*” – “[remember] the Patriarch (Abraham) who followed you like water,” and ending with “*teifen ki nafsheinu afefu mayim*” – “turn to us, for troubles engulf our souls like water,” contains more striking images and references than *Tefillat Tal*, referring to “*Af Beri*,” a “Prince of Rain” (*sar matar*),³⁶⁰ Moshe hitting the rock, and Yaakov wrestling with an angel made of fire and water.³⁶¹

Dew, on the other hand, is thought of as something that we are given all the time. It just happens. It comes without the pomp and circumstance of rain, and is more regular. As such, it is not surprising that when Yitzchak thought he was blessing Eisav (*Bereishit* 27:28–29) he wished upon him “*mi-tal ha-shamayim u-mi-shmanei ha-aretz*” – “of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth.” Eisav, a hunter, a man who was married to foreign wives, the son clearly not special enough to be the chosen son, did not receive the special *berakhah* of his father, the covenantal blessing of Avraham that wished upon its recipient that his descendants become an “assembly of peoples”³⁶² and inherit the land of their forefathers. Rather, Eisav received a “plain” blessing, promising him nothing more than the regularity of dew.³⁶³

Despite dew’s regularity and its not being met with excitement like rain is, it is very much something to hope for and something to pray for. After all, whether or not Yaakov was correct in obtaining the *berakhah* of *mi-tal ha-shamayim* from his father, he did receive it, and this blessing is part of our heritage and our patriarchal legacy. Commenting on this part of the blessing (27:28), many *parshanim* note that Yaakov is given “of the dew of the heavens” (*mi-tal ha-shamayim*), not just “the dew of the heavens,” and thus, there is an element of selectivity and specialness to this blessing, and by extension, to the dew we are meant to receive. The Seforno notes that the dew being granted to Yaakov is that which will “gladden all” and, unlike rain, which is disruptive, it “will not interfere with the comings and goings of the people.” Radak similarly notes that the dew that will be received is the amount which will be needed, not a random amount, and Ramban too emphasizes that it is not general dew that is being referred to here, but rather appropriately abundant dew, in its proper time.

Dew also has value-laden meaning, and a connotation of special selectivity, in other places throughout *Tanakh*, such as in *Mikha* 5:6, which describes how “the remnant of Yaakov shall be, in the midst of many peoples, like dew from the Lord, like droplets on grass.” *Tehillim* 133:3 similarly describes extraordinary dew, “the dew of Hermon, which

³⁵⁸. “Pesach #2,” <http://www.torah.org/learning/maharal/pesach1.html>.

³⁵⁹. Ibid.

³⁶⁰. For an interpretive history of this “Prince” see Eliezer Segal, “Prince of Rain,” in *In Those Days, at This Time: Holiness and History in the Jewish Calendar* (Calgary, 2007), 51–56.

³⁶¹. David B. Brooks, “Geshem and Tal: The Prayers for Rain and for Dew in Our Liturgy,” <http://adath-shalom.ca/divrei/geshem.htm>.

³⁶². NJPS translation.

³⁶³. It is worth noting that conventional wisdom is that Rivkah gave Yaakov good advice when she told him to “steal” the *berakhah* from Eisav, and that Yaakov did the right thing by dressing up as his brother to receive the blessing of *mi-tal ha-shamayim* from his father. However, some commentators explain that Yitzchak, despite his physical blindness, never intended to give Eisav the covenantal, patriarchal blessing, and what Yaakov “stole” wasn’t the more important *berakhah*, which Yitzchak planned on giving him all along (*Bereishit* 28:3–4). See Shmuel Klitsner, *Wrestling Jacob: Deception, Identity, and Freudian Slips in Genesis* (Jerusalem, 2006), 65–67; for a slightly different take, which reaches a similar conclusion, see Menachem Leibtag, “Yitzchak’s Blessing of Yaakov and Eisav,” <http://tanach.org/breishit/toldot/toldots1.htm>. Many have pointed out that the understanding of the narrative which concludes that Yaakov was wrong to dress up as Eisav leads to the implication that Yaakov is later punished for this act by being deceived by his own sons when they sell Yosef, a narrative that, like that of the “stolen” blessing, involves a slaughtered goat and a cloak. Such a reading of this story is fortified by the fact that Yaakov is also the recipient of poetic justice when Lavan switches brides on him, in another story of mistaken identity of siblings. See Nehama Leibowitz, “Your Brother Came with Deceit,” in *Studies in Bereishit* (Jerusalem, 1973), 264–270; Klitsner, *Wrestling Jacob*, 67–68.

falls upon the mountains of Zion.” In fact, God compares Himself to dew, evoking its revivational powers in *Hoshea* 14:6, “I will be to Israel like dew, he shall blossom like the lily.”³⁶⁴

Thus, despite its not being as flashy as rain, dew is crucial in the Jewish tradition for the survival and re-energization of our nation, both in the yearly agricultural sense, and on the national plane. In fact, R. Yehonatan Eybeshitz notes that the fact that we can count on dew always appearing represents *Hashem’s* ever-present ability to forgive *Benei Yisrael* for their sins, even when we are undeserving.³⁶⁵ Therefore we pray for it during Pesach, the time of our national redemption. After all, when Moshe, in *Devarim* 32:2, introduces the song of *Ha’azinu*, the song that represents the history of the Jewish people, he proclaims “*tizal ka-tal imrati*” – “let my speech settle as the dew.”

As such, on Pesach, when we pray for dew, we pray for the dew that is particular. Not any dew, but the dew given to our forefather, Yaakov, in his blessing from Yitzchak. The same dew whose image Moshe uses to frame his words of Torah – the words that describe our history. That is the dew that displays God’s care for Israel. It is dew that is appropriately abundant, gladdens all, and that has the power to, in the words of *Tefillat Tal*, “sweeten the mountain streams,” “fill our granaries to overflowing,” and “send light in the midst of darkness.”

The *Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 66:1)*, building off of the tradition that Yaakov’s being described as a “dweller of tents” (*Bereishit 26:27*) meant that he studied Torah, states that Yaakov merited the *berakhah* of *ve-yitein lekha Elokim mi-tal ha-shamayim* due to his study of Torah, which is compared to water. May our own study of Torah enhance our fervent praying for dew, and help bring about an abundance of productivity for the Land of Israel, and the ultimate redemption and resurrection speedily in our days.

³⁶⁴. NJPS translation.

³⁶⁵. See Shalom Hammer, *Derash Yehonatan: Around the Year with Rav Yehonatan Eybeshitz* (New Milford and Jerusalem, 2013), 13.