

The seventh day of Sukkot is a special day called *Hoshanah Rabbah* (the great hoshanah). Like *hallelujah*, *hoshana* is a compound word: *hosh* means save and *na* means please. *Hoshanot* are sets of liturgical poems chanted from Sukkot through Hoshanah Rabbah. The 6 poems for Hoshanah Rabbah implore HaShem to rescue and redeem us with enough rain to ensure a good harvest for the coming year. The Talmud views Hoshanah Rabbah as a sort of mini-Yom Kippur, the day HaShem decides if the community is worthy of receiving rain. The poems are chanted in seven circuits around the bimah with Torah scrolls and lulav, ending with a postlude reminiscent of the Ne'ila service on Yom Kippur. "Open the gates of heaven and Your goodly treasure trove. Save us, do not let accusations be drawn out, and save us, God of our salvation." Then, we strike the ground five times with a bundle of willows, symbolizing the eradication of sin and summoning HaShem to hear our prayers, to be merciful to us, and to send us enough rain to sustain us. In mystical tradition, it is on this day that judgement is delivered, which is why many Ashkenazi Jews wish each other in Yiddish *a guten kvittel* (a good note) – i.e. a positive verdict.

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated as one in Israel, but in the diaspora, they are two separate holidays. The Talmud refers to Shemini Atzeret both as the last day of Sukkot and as a festival in its own right. In the descriptions of Sukkot in Leviticus and Numbers, HaShem commands that an 8<sup>th</sup> (*shemini*) day is to be added to Sukkot as a sacred occasion of solemn gathering (*atzeret*). The word *atzar* means to stop or restrain, implying both a cessation of work and a lingering or retaining. We have gathered for 7 days to celebrate Sukkot, and now we are as reluctant to leave as HaShem is reluctant to let us depart, so we linger to extend the time of our joy, and to retain the closeness to HaShem that we have experienced during this long round of holidays.

Not only for our ancestors, but also for many people today, water is a precious commodity. On Pesach the Musaf Amidah includes a special prayer for dew, and on Shemini Atzeret a special prayer for rain. Here in Germany rain is usually a benign force. We do have the occasional extremes resulting in flooded cellars and washed-out roads, but relatively speaking, we are blessed with a temperate climate and land that is rich and fertile. Others are not so fortunate. From now until Pesach we recite *mashiv ha ruach u morid ha gashem* (Who makes the wind blow and the rain descend) at the beginning of the second prayer of the Amidah, and if it is one of those soggy central European winters, we may have fleeting thoughts of "enough already!" and long to escape to sunny Mallorca. But we also remember the dangerously hot, dry summers of the past few years, when lawns and fields were parched, and we yearned for rain. As the effects of climate change become ever more noticeable, we can readily understand why our ancestors so fervently prayed for just the right amount of rain to ensure good crops. They understood the capriciousness of nature, and they were afraid.

The rain prayer on Shemini Atzeret opens with a little poem by Eleazar Kallir (7<sup>th</sup> century) that begins *Af-bri, utat shem sar matar* – *Af-bri* is the name of the angel of rain.) *Af* denotes anger, countenance, nose, and a myriad of other things, including a preposition meaning even and also. And *bri* means health, creation, creativity. I love the symbolism this name contains. *Af* is always extreme: Too much water=Noah's flood / too little water=2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the *shema yisrael*. A face blazing with anger or power / a face stony with indifference. A nose full of water=a sick nose, and in German the expression *die Nase voll haben* means to be fed up / a nose so dry it bleeds. In contrast, *bri* stands for the moderation and balance that nurture and sustain. *Af-bri* is a force of nature tempered with love. We beseech HaShem to obligate *Af-bri* to give us rain from the heavenly waters; in other words, we ask HaShem to shower us with blessings.

We introduce *Af-Bri* right before the end of the *Avot*, the first prayer of the Amidah, and then continue after the opening line of *Givurot*, the next prayer. The following 6 stanzas implore HaShem to remember Abraham, Isaak, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and the 12 tribes with the alternating pleas to for their sake not withhold the water, and for their righteousness to grant abundant water – not too little, not too much, but rather, just enough. These 6 stanzas outline the journey from Genesis to Israel as we stand poised between the year that was and the year that will be, the old year seasoned with waters both sweet and bitter, and the new year largely unknown. Our impassioned plea is for abundance. Not a torrent, not a dearth, but just the right amount of abundance to sustain us all for another year.

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach!