

The Spiritual Connection of Water in Judaism

Source Sheet compiled by Rabbi Shari Shamah

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Water is the Center of Everything:

Genesis 1:6-10	בראשית א':ו'-י'
<p>God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water." God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth and called the gathering of waters Seas. And God saw that this was good.</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לַמַּיִם: וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָרָקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לָרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לָרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן: וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָרָקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־ בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־ מָקוֹם אֶחָד וַתֵּרָא הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן: וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבְשָׁה אֶרֶץ וּלַמְקוֹהַּ הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:</p>

Water: A source of Angst and Promise:

When the Israelites were in the Wilderness they worried about their water supply. Water meant survival and it was a connection to God and security for them. Water was also a symbol of a covenant with God – it comes as a result of doing something for God.

Exodus 15:23-27
<p>They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah.</p> <p>And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"</p> <p>So Moses cried out to Adonai, and Adonai showed Moses a piece of wood; Moses threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There [God] made for them a fixed rule; there they were put to the test.</p> <p>[God] said, "If you will heed your God Adonai diligently, doing what is upright in God's sight, giving ear to God's commandments and keeping all God's laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I Adonai am your healer."</p> <p>And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there beside the water.</p>

- Was it fair for God to have water be conditional?
- What do you think water meant for the Israelites?
- How would you react if you didn't have water?

Water as a Determinant for the Future:

Numbers 20:2	במדבר כ':ב'
<p>The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.</p>	<p>וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לַעֲדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־ מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן:</p>

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Numbers 20:8

You and your sibling Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.

Numbers 20:11

And Moses raised a hand and struck the rock twice with the rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

Numbers 20:12-13

But Adonai said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them." Those are the Waters of Meribah —meaning that the Israelites quarreled with Adonai —whose sanctity was affirmed through them.

- This moment was pivotal in Moses' journey as a leader. Because Moses struck the rock twice, it prevented Moses from going into the Promised Land. Do you think the action was justified?
- What emotions do you think Moses faced as a leader as another moment of strife occurred around water?
- Has there been a moment in your life when water has caused you to be emotional?
- Do you think the Israelites realized the significance of this water moment at this point?

Water as Inclusivity:

Exodus 15:19-22	שמות ט"ו:ט"ט-כ"ב
<p>For the horses of Pharaoh, with chariots and riders, went into the sea; and Adonai turned back on them the waters of the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea.</p> <p>Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, picked up a hand-drum, and all the women went out after her in dance with hand-drums.</p> <p>And Miriam chanted for them: Sing to Adonai, for God has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver God has hurled into the sea.</p> <p>Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water.</p>	<p>ה' ימלך לעלם ועד: כי בא סוס פרעה ברכבו ובפרשיו במים וישב ה' עליהם את-מי הים ובני ישראל הלכו בביבשה בתוך הים: {פ} ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את-התוף בידה ותצאן כל- הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלות: ותענ ליהם מרים שירו לה' כי-גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים: {ס} ויסע משה את-ישראל מים-סוף ויצאו אל-מדבר-שור וילכו שלשת-ימים במדבר ולא-מצאו מים:</p>

We don't often get to hear the voices of women cry out in song and lead the community. Miriam sang on behalf of the community.

- What does this moment mean for you?
- Have you had times at the water where you feel the inclination to break into song or prayer?
- How do you think water can be inclusive?

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Water as a Meeting Place:

Genesis 24:11-20

He (the servant) made the camels kneel down by the well outside the city, at evening time, the time when women come out to draw water.

And he said, "O Adonai, God of my master Abraham's [house], grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham:

Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townspeople come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

He had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.

The maiden was very beautiful—[and] a virgin, no man having known her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up.

The servant ran toward her and said, "Please, let me sip a little water from your jar."

"Drink, my lord," she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking."

Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels.

- Is the well a metaphor for a place in your community?
- What does this effort to feed both the person and the animals say about the value Judaism places on animals or of sharing water?

Water as Purification:

Numbers 19:9

And a person that is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and lay them outside the camp in a clean place, and it shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for the water of sprinkling: it is a purification offering.

Leviticus 15:13

When the one with a discharge becomes purified of the discharge, they shall count off seven days for their purification, wash those clothes, and bathe their body in fresh water; then they shall be pure.

Water is called Mayim Chayim (lit: "living waters"). It can purify someone, bring them back to health, and to allow them to re-enter the community. Water is still used for purification in Jewish life today. A Mikveh is a ritual bath.

Jewish Women's Archive

The mikveh is a ritual bath designed for the Jewish rite of purification. The mikveh is not merely a pool of water; it must be composed of stationary, not flowing, waters and must contain a certain

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percentage of water derived from a natural source, such as a lake, an ocean, or rain. Ritual purification in a mikveh is used for a wide range of purposes, including conversion and burial ceremonies. Individuals might immerse themselves in the mikveh before weddings or before the holiday of Yom Kippur, and even pots and pans can be immersed to make them kosher. Traditionally, men and women have used the mikveh for ritual purification, but it has always held special significance for Jewish women. Jewish law prescribes that women immerse themselves in the waters of the mikveh following their menstrual periods or after childbirth in order to become ritually pure and permitted to resume sexual activity. The observance of this ritual has declined in modern times, but it still remains a key element in Jewish ritual practice. In the United States, where most Jewish women have not observed the laws of menstrual purity, the mikveh continues to be an important institution of Jewish life.

- Have you immersed in a mikveh?
- How could you imagine using water as purification today?
- What modern rituals could you re-imagine taking place in mikveh?

God is Equated with Water and Wisdom:

Jeremiah 2:13	ירמיהו ב' י"ג
For My people have done a twofold wrong: They have forsaken Me, the Fount of living waters, And hewed out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, That cannot even hold water.	כִּי־שָׁתִים רָעוֹת עָשָׂה עַמִּי אֹתִי עָזְבוּ מְקוֹר מַיִם חַיִּים לְחַצֵּב לָהֶם בְּאֵרוֹת בְּאֵרֹת נִשְׁבְּרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־ יִכְלוּ הַמַּיִם:
Proverbs 18:4	משלי י"ח ד'
The words a man speaks are deep waters, A flowing stream, a fountain of wisdom.	מַיִם עֲמֻקִּים דְּבַרִּי כִּי־אִישׁ נָחַל נִבֵּעַ מְקוֹר חֲכָמָה:

Water as a Source of Peace:

Just as the ancient Israelites worried about water, fears of water shortage continue to plague the world. Amidst fears that Israel would run out of water, or that the water sources would dry up, Israel has learned to conserve and reuse water. 60-80% of water for drinking is provided by desalination. 20% of Jordan's water comes from the Sea of Galilee and desalination. It helps uphold the peace agreement between the two countries. Israel is working around the world to help with water conservation.

- Could the method of conservation that Israel has perfected end up being able to be incorporated throughout the Middle East and allow water to be a source of peace amongst Israel and its neighbors?

Read more on Desalination Here:

- Scientific American: [Israel Proves the Desalination Era is Here](#)
- IDE Tech: [Sorek Desalination Plant](#)
- JNS: [Israeli Desalination Can Help the World](#)

For Additional Reading:

- The waters of the flood with Noah ([Genesis 7:10-12](#))
- MyJewishLearning: [Mayim Hayim, From a Spring to a River](#)