



Mayim Chayyim: The Waters of Life

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A Brief Exploration of Water in Jewish Texts and History

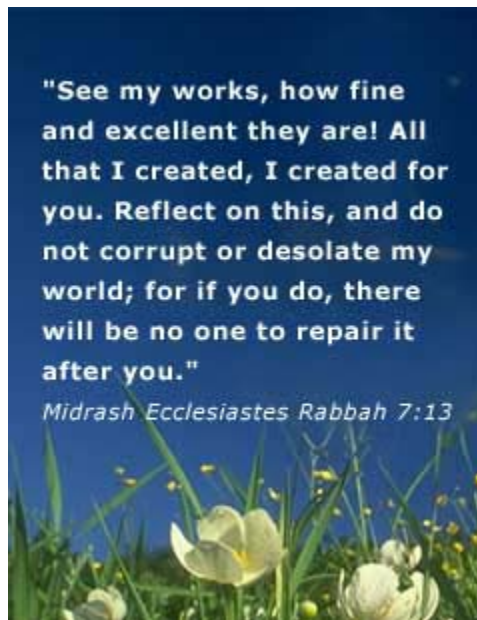
The scarcity of water played a central role in the early history of the Jewish people. In order to sustain agriculture and replenish wells and cisterns, our ancestors in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) depended upon unpredictable and often inadequate seasonal rain and dew. This is the ecological context for the following texts.

For the land you are entering to inherit is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where, after sowing your seed, you irrigated it by foot [kicking open an irrigation channel], like a vegetable garden. But the land you are entering is a land of hills and valleys, watered by the rains of the heaven; a land which the Eternal your God cares for; the eyes of the Eternal are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

And it shall come to pass, if you hearken diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Eternal your God, and to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the early rain and the late rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil. I will provide grass in your field for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied. Beware, lest your heart be seduced and you turn astray and serve other gods and worship them. Then the wrath of the Eternal will blaze against you. God will restrain the heavens so there will be no rain and the earth will not yield its produce. And you will perish quickly from the good land which the Eternal gives you. (Deuteronomy 11:13-21 is).

"See my works, how fine and excellent they are! All that I created, I created for you. Reflect on this, and do not corrupt or desolate my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13



-- Deuteronomy 11:10-21 (the second paragraph of the Sh'ma)

The word of the eternal, which came to Jeremiah concerning the droughts: Judah is in mourning, her settlements languish, men sink to the ground, and Jerusalem's cry rises. The masters sent the boys for water; they came to the water holes but found no water there. They returned with empty vessels; they were shamed and humiliated, they bowed their heads. The soil is cracked because there is no rain... Even the doe in the field forsook her newborn fawn because there was no grass.

-- Jeremiah 14:1-6 (650 BC-586 BC)

All of Jerusalem's public water resources, including the Gihon Spring, were insufficient for the total needs of the city's constantly growing population. For this reason, throughout Jerusalem's history, each house had its own cistern to catch rain runoff... The home cisterns caught every possible drop of water that fell on the rooftops and in the courtyards during the rainy season.

-- Nogah Hareuveni, Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage, commenting on the city of Jerusalem more than 2,000 years ago

If we were to walk in the woods and a spring appeared just when we became thirsty, we would call it a miracle. And if on a second walk, if we became thirsty at just that point again, and again the spring appeared, we would remark on the coincidence. But if that spring were there always, we would take it for granted and cease to notice it. Yet is that not more miraculous still?

-- Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), Eastern Europe

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