



## Rosh Hashannah 5774 (2013)

The final Saturday evening of July, my husband and I found ourselves driving through a torrential downpour along the A303 past Stonehenge towards the edge of Somerset. We were going to stay the night with old university friends before heading the next day just over the border to Dorset for a wedding. July, as you will undoubtedly recall, was the hottest on record since 2006 and was bitterly dry for most of it as well, but towards the very end of the month the weather began to turn.

The wedding we were attending was to be located in a woodland farm and retreat centre, where the chuppah was meant to be held in the middle of a field. All environmentally friendly, but as we drove towards Taunton in the worst storm for weeks, we were worried about the plans for the following day's wedding. When we arrived at our friends' home, almost the first words out of our mouths were 'Will it rain tomorrow?' William, whose home we had arrived at, is one of the leading weathermen in the country, working as a Chief Weather Forecaster for the Met Office in Exeter. But when faced with 'will it rain tomorrow', his wife took me aside to say, 'He hasn't been at work all week, so probably doesn't really know.' So much for the modern prophet of the weather; he has little to offer without computers and tracking devices.

Still Sunday morning started off bright enough, but as we drove towards the wedding venue, the words, 'Will it rain?' kept echoing through my head. We were lucky, the weather held for the outdoor reception, though the wedding itself was relocated to a sort of large open air barn, that for the back wall might otherwise have doubled as a rather oversized chuppah. And still the weather held. When the ceremony finished, we broke into spontaneous, ecstatic dance. The chazzan sang and the guitars played and we danced until we spilled out of the barn and into the road beside it, lifting the exuberant couple high on chairs, encircling them with our delight. And then the song changed and we found ourselves dancing to a most traditional Israeli folk dance. We sang as we danced,

You shall draw water with joy from the wells of salvation. [Is 12:3]

And as we chorused **מים, מים, מים, מים, האים בששון**, the grey clouds above us began to spill over with joy, their raindrops clutching our eyelashes and bare toes and we were cooled in these gentle waters, our enthusiasm never drenched, as we danced on. And when the dancing finally halted, so, too, did the rain and we retired for afternoon tea and much to everyone's great joy the worst of the weather held off until later in the evening when we are all safely ensconced indoors, feasting into the night.

Next day as I sliced through the waters of our local pool, I was turning over and over in my mind the great conundrum of biblical new years. Although many of you might be familiar with the notion that the Jewish calendar has four new years – 1 Nisan, 1 Elul, 1 Tishrei and 15 Shevat – only 1 Nisan and 1 Tishrei are really biblical. The other two – Tu BiShevat, the New Year of the Trees; and 1 Elul, the new year for cattle – appear to date from the Mishnaic period. In the Bible, however, we are told of two new years, 1 Nisan, the first month of the year and the month during which Pesach falls, and 1 Tishrei, the seventh month of the year and the date of Rosh Hashanah.

Nisan and Tishrei are the sort of twin foci of the Jewish calendar. They are not precisely halfway through the year from each other, but rather denote the beginning and end of the harvest season. Pesach, 15 Nisan, and Sukkot, 15 Tishrei, are the spring and autumn harvest festivals respectively and mark the beginning and end of the dry season in the land of Israel. From Shemini Atzeret (the end of Sukkot) until Pesach the insertions in our Amidah liturgy calls for us to pray for rain, for without the rainy season between Sukkot and Pesach, the harvests of these festivals (alongside that of Shavuot) could not exist. Without rain, the crops will not grow and our mainly settled agricultural ancestors would have starved. 'Will it rain' was the perpetual question of our ancestors as well, but more crucially perhaps, 'will it rain at the right time in the right season'.

Which set me to thinking, again. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are often seen as anomalous in the tension between historical and agricultural roots for our festivals. Pesach is the spring harvest, but also the exodus from Egypt; Shavuot is the early summer harvest, but also **זמן מתן תורה**, the time of the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai; Sukkot is the autumn harvest, but also the wanderings in the desert. But what of Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur? They are merely only the day of trumpeting and atonement respectively. They appear more theological than historical and certainly not at all agricultural. I have always accepted that received wisdom and yet a question this summer nagged at the back of my mind – ‘will it rain?’

And as I swam through the chemically treated waters of our local pool, something about that query clicked into place. The ancient Israelite standing at attention listening to the sound of the shofar, entering into the period of the ten days, beginning the sacred process of atonement, they would also have that question hanging at the back of their mind. Very soon, a mere fortnight, and Sukkot would be upon them and then, if they had followed God’s commandments properly and atoned for what they had not kept faithfully, the rainy season would be upon them. Think only of the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the Shema, Dt 11:13ff:

**וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעְתֶּם תִּשְׁמַעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם..**

‘This will happen if you listen carefully to My commands which I give you today, to love and serve the Eternal your God with all your heart and all your soul. I shall then give your land rain at the right time, the autumn rain and the spring rain, so that each one of you can harvest your own grain, wine and oil. I shall also give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Take care that your heart is not deceived into straying, obeying other gods and worshipping them. God’s anger will then blaze out against you. God will shut up the sky. There will be no rain. The land will not produce, and you will quickly be destroyed from the good land which God gives you.’

The passage is clear. If we do not follow God’s ways, then God will shut up the skies and the rain will not fall and the crops will fail. And by extension, we starve.

What are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur then, if not the last dying moments to be called to attention and repent, so that we might have rain in its season and live. Rosh Hashanah becomes not the New Year of taxes and tithes and marking the reigns of kings, but rather as R. Zeira stated in the Talmud (RH 8a): the New Year for the seasons. Rosh Hashanah is the New Year for the rains. For sustaining life as we know it.

We are so accustomed to speaking of the weather as though it were a matter of convenience or a pleasantry to break the ice or a matter of curiosity that we all too often

forget that the weather is a matter of life or death. As we continue to grapple with a world where global climate change is a reality affecting us all, a reality that we have the potential to alter, I am in awe of our Jewish heritage that has known for more than two millennia that we must constantly ask ourselves, 'will it rain?', and seek to find the answer to that question within our own behaviours. Our ancient texts – Bible, Talmud, Midrash, etc. – continue to inspire us to re-examine our behaviour and, as we stand at the head of the year once more, to help us focus on the questions that matter and the ways in which we shape those answers.

As we stand here at the edge of what should be the rainy season in our ancestral homeland, as we stand here moving into another English winter that must refill our aquifers and replenish our rivers, the question 'will it rain' has never mattered more and our ability to ensure that it does has never been more within our own power to achieve.

.כִּן יִהְיֶה רְצוֹן. May it be God's will.