

# Toronto Torah

Parshat Noach

Vol. II

## Prayers for Rain and the Importance of Communal Unity

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

On this coming Motzaei Shabbat, the seventh of Marcheshvan, Israelis will begin to insert the **וּתְנֵן טַל וַיִּמְטֵר** prayer for rain into the amidah. Israelis always wait until two weeks after Succot to pray for rain, a practice dating back to the time of the Beit haMikdash, in order to allow Yerushalayim's Yom Tov visitors to return home before the rain begins. Outside of Israel, Jews wait until a date at the start of December to begin praying for rain. This practice, which dates back to talmudic times, was originated by Babylonian sages to coincide with the start of their rainy season; we pray for rain on Iraq's seasonal schedule.

Both Israeli Jews and Jews living outside of Israel conclude their prayers for rain at the start of Pesach. What is to be done, though, in a case of drought outside of these periods when we normally pray for rain? This became a controversial issue in early fourteenth-century Spain.

Rabbeinu Asher ("the Rosh"), a 14<sup>th</sup> century halachic scholar of the first rank, led the Jewish community of Toledo. In 1313, Spain experienced a

terrible drought; even in the month of Nisan, the region still needed precipitation badly enough that the Jews fasted and held communal prayer gatherings. Rabbeinu Asher declared that because of the great need, they should **continue** to ask for rain until Shavuot.

The Rosh declared, during davening in shul on Pesach itself, that the chazan should insert special prayers for rain – but to no avail. Dissenting rabbis protested and halted the chazan.

Rabbeinu Asher waited for chol hamoed, at which point he wrote a letter explaining his position. Rabbeinu Asher pointed out that the gemara rules that a **single city** in need of rain after Pesach should not recite the regular prayers for rain, but should instead say a minor prayer for rain in the catch-all blessing of Shema Koleinu. Rabbeinu Asher deduced that an **entire region or country** in need of rain could do more, and pray for rain en masse after Pesach.

The Rosh pointed out that the Rambam seemed to agree with him, and he

added that he had put this question to rabbis in Germany and Provence in the past, and both had agreed with him.

Despite his letter, Rabbeinu Asher was unable to convince the Toledo community to change their protocol... and so he recanted. He wrote a public letter on that same chol hamoed, declaring, "When I saw that the opposing sages had turned the heart of the community from accepting my words of the Living Gd, I also refrained from praying for rain in shul, even when I could do it as an individual, because I did not want us to turn into two separate camps."

The Rosh underscored the importance of his retreat by adding, "I would not write this letter on chol hamoed, since my custom is not to write during chol hamoed, but there is a need for a letter at this moment in order to prevent the desecration of Gd's Name" by having Jews split into two camps.

The Rosh's retreat is not simply a historical curiosity; rather, it teaches us a major lesson about the value of safeguarding our communal practices, and our communal unity. Certainly, we must use every method at our disposal to determine the halachah, as the Rosh tried to do in Toledo. The halachic process is all the more important when dealing with matters as essential to life as rainfall. Nonetheless, the Rosh's retreat teaches us that same halachic process must incorporate our loyalty to community and to the consensus; one of our highest priorities is that we should be a unified nation, **אגודת אחת**, in the service of HaShem.

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### Parsha Questions

Meir Lipschitz

(Sources are provided to help the reader research answers)

- Do we know the name of Avraham's mother? (Bava Batra 91a)
- What should one do upon seeing a rainbow? (Seforno Bereishit 9:13, Berachot 59a, Shulchan Aruch 229:1)
- What are the מצוות בני נח (Noachide mitzvot)? (Sanhedrin 56a-57a, Chulin 92a, Rambam Hilchot Melachim 8:11 and 9:1. For additional discussion see also the Encyclopedia Talmudit בני נח)
- *For children:* How many of each type of animal did Noach bring into the ark? (Rashi Bereishit 6:19-20, 7:2, 7:9) [mlipschitz@torontotorah.com](mailto:mlipschitz@torontotorah.com)

After the *mabul*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* entered into a *bris* with mankind that He would never again destroy the entire world via a flood. The rainbow was chosen to symbolize this *bris*. This is why one who sees a rainbow recites a *beracha* asking Hashem to remember and uphold His *bris*.

The Talmud (*Kesubos 77b*) states that when R' Yehoshua Ben Levi died he was greeted in heaven by R' Shimon Bar Yochai who asked him whether a rainbow had ever appeared during his lifetime. When R' Yehoshua replied that it had, R' Shimon commented that apparently R' Yehoshua was not that great a *tzadik*. The rainbow would not have appeared in a generation of a very great *tzadik*, because in his merit the entire generation would have been spared, and thus there would have been no need to invoke the aforementioned *bris* and have its symbol appear.

The Talmud proceeds to comment that in truth the rainbow had not appeared during his lifetime. R' Yehoshua Ben Levi had lied to R' Shimon out of humility. If he would have told the truth it would have appeared as if he were bragging. The Talmud (*Bava Metziah 23b*) tells us that a *talmid*

*chacham* may lie in three types of situations, one of them being for the sake of humility, that others should not know how learned or how pious he is.

This *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim 565:6*) applies this idea, stating that if one has accepted upon himself extra fast days and lets others know of his *middas chassidus*, "he will be punished for doing so". Every so often in *Shulchan Aruch* and in its commentaries we come upon a recommendation that a *ba'al nefesh* ought to be stringent on himself regarding some *halachic* issue. Rabbi Yehuda Amital *shlit*" relates that when he was a teenager learning in yeshiva, when the students learned *Mishna Berura* and came across a statement that "one who is a *ba'al nefesh* should act on accordance with the stringent view", they thought to themselves that this certainly refers to a few outstanding *tzadikim* who they knew of. Whereas today, he further commented, many of the yeshiva students instinctively assume that it refers to them!!

Even one who does belong in the category of *ba'alei nefesh* must be careful that his *middas chassidus* not turn into a public demonstration of his piety.

Today the term "frum" is usually used with a positive connotation. In pre-World War II Litta it was usually used as negative description of one who publicly displays his piety. Some of the *ba'alei mussar* used to say "a *galach* has to be 'frum'; a *yid* has to be 'erlich'". They would add that the word "frum" is *roshei teivos* (an acronym) for "*fiel rishis, veinig mitzvos* – much evil and very few *mitzvos*".

Additionally, a *middas chassidus* is not to be forced upon others. The expression in the *Shulchan Aruch* always is that a "*ba'al nefesh yachmir al atsmo* – a *ba'al nefesh* ought to be stringent **upon himself**."

The Talmud (*Berachos 35b*) states, "Many attempted to follow the style of R' Shimon Bar Yochai and they did not succeed." The style of the *ba'al nefesh*, following the stringent approach, was clearly not intended for the masses. Those who are able to should certainly strive to attain the state of *chassidus*, but this must be done step by step, as spelled out in the Talmud (*Avoda Zara 20*) and elaborated in *Mesilas Yesharim*.

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## The 613 Mitzvot – Mitzvah 2: Brit Milah (Circumcision)

The second mitzvah in the Torah is that of *brit milah*, circumcision. This was originally taught to Avraham, but the Rambam pointed out (*Peirush haMishnayot, Chullin, perek Gid haNasheh*) that it was reiterated in Parshat Tazria, after the Torah was given, to demonstrate that it would be binding for the Jewish people post-Sinai as well.

Why did HaShem command us to circumcise Jewish males? The *Sefer haChinuch* suggests that one purpose of

this Mitzvah is to physically mark the Jewish people as unique, just as our mitzvah obligations mark us as spiritually unique.

One might well ask why HaShem did not do this Himself, creating Jewish males with a natural circumcision, but HaShem has Man do it in order that he learn that just as a person can complete his body with his deeds (such as circumcision), so a person can complete his soul with his deeds.

## Torah in Translation

Defining Day and Night in Rabbeinu Yonah's Opening Commentary on *Brachot*

Rabbi Azarya Berzon

Rabbeinu Yonah, in his opening comment on the Rif to *Brachot*, presents an intriguing thesis regarding the proper time for the recitation of *shema* and *maariv*:

Once the sun has set, and the time for *minchah* has passed, it is proper to recite *maariv*. However, the *mitzvah* of reciting the first two paragraphs of *shema* cannot be fulfilled immediately after sunset; this *mitzvah* requires nightfall, which is halachically identified with the time that the stars emerge. One who would recite *shema* before nightfall would then need to repeat these paragraphs later.

The third paragraph of *shema* (ויאמר) has a different status. We recite this paragraph in order to fulfill the *mitzvah*, "Remember the day you left Egypt **all** the days of your life. (Devarim 16:3)" The extra word "all" teaches us that we must remember our redemption from Egypt at night. One may fulfill his requirement to recite this paragraph immediately after sunset, before the time Rabbeinu Yonah terms לילה ממש, "actual night."

Rabbeinu Yonah's presentation teaches us that there is a duality implicit in the halachic definition of day and night. On the one hand, day ends (and therefore night begins) with sunset. This allows us to *daven maariv* and to fulfill our obligation to remember the redemption. On the other hand, one cannot fulfill his requirement of reciting the first two paragraphs of *shema* until the stars have come out, לילה ממש.

Our Rebbe, HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveichik זצ"ל, linked this duality to two sentences that appear in the Torah in the story of creation:

One sentence (Bereishit 1:5) reads, "ויקרא ייאלקים לאור יום ולחשך קרא לילה" And G-d called the light 'Yom' and He called the darkness 'Laylah.'"

A second sentence (Bereishit 1:16) reads, "ויעש אלקים את שני המארות הגדלים את המאור הגדל" "And G-d formed the two great luminaries, the great luminary to reign during the Yom

## Rabbeinu Yonah

Rabbi Azarya Berzon

Born in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century in Gerona, Spain, Rabbeinu Yonah is best known for his *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, a work on ethics and repentance. He also wrote *chiddushim* on the Rif's *Sefer HaHalachot* on many *Masechtot*; unfortunately, only the section on tractate *Brachot* survives. These *chiddushim* on *Brachot* were recorded by one, if not several, of his pupils. Rabbeinu Yonah also wrote several smaller works, including a commentary on *Avot*.

Rabbeinu Yonah's rebbe, Rav Shlomo Montpellier, led the opposition to the Rambam's philosophical works, the *Moreh Nevuchim* and the *Sefer ha-Madda*. Rabbeinu Yonah's own active opposition to the Rambam was blamed for the 1233 public burning of the Rambam's writings by order of the Christian ecclesiastical authorities in Paris. As a result, the Jewish community's indignation at the burning was mainly directed against Rabbeinu Yonah.

According to tradition, nine years later, in 1242, when twenty-four wagon loads of manuscripts of the Talmud were burned at the same place where the philosophical writings of Maimonides had been destroyed, Rabbeinu Yonah confessed publicly, in the synagogue of Montpellier, that he had been wrong in his actions against the works and the reputation of the Rambam. As an act of repentance, he authored his classic *Sha'arei Teshuvah*. Rabbeinu Yonah died in Toledo, Spain on the eighth day of Marcheshvan in the year 1263. Perhaps the most famous of his many talmidim was Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba).

and the small luminary to reign during the *Laylah*."

The first sentence identifies *yom* with light and *laylah* with darkness, but the second identifies *yom* with the sun and *laylah* with sunset. Each definition is true, and halachah operates with both. [For further study see "Shiurim LeZecher Avi Mori", part one, pp. 91-112.]

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## Akko: A modern city with ancient roots

Itamar Zolberg

This week's parshah includes the story of the Mabul. The gemara teaches that there were actually two "Mabulim," a minor flood in the days of Enosh to warn humanity and the second, more familiar flood, later on. R' Acha, citing R' Chanina, said that the water from the first flood reached "Barbaria," and the water from the second flood reached the shores of Jaffa and Akko. [This is based on the sentence from *Iyyov* (38:11), "Until here you will go, and no further."]

Akko is mentioned explicitly once in Tanach, in connection with the cities which were not conquered by the Jews who entered Israel. It is in the portion of Zevulun. Because Akko was never captured by the Jewish people, it developed a unique status: For some matters it was considered part of Israel, but not for others.

The city of Akko sits on the border of Israel, split by the border itself, as an entry point into Israel. The gemara describes R' Abba arriving in Akko and kissing its stones, as a sign of his love for the land of Israel. Various sages of the mishnah and gemara lived in Akko, and in post-talmudic times a significant Jewish population remained in the city throughout the many wars and changes of power in the land.

Over the generations the Jewish community of Akko oscillated between destruction and splendor. Among the residents of the city were Rambam, some of the Tosafists, Ramban, the Ohr haChaim haKadosh, and R' Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. We are taught that the last of these was buried in the city.

Under the British, Akko lost its status as the central port to Haifa; instead, it became known as a British jail and gallows. In 1947, Jewish *machteret* fighters broke into the jail and released its prisoners. During the War of Independence the Jews conquered the city, and the Arab population fled.

Today Akko's population includes both Jews and Arabs; on Yom Kippur 5769 there was great strife between the Jewish and Arab populations.

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