

Parshah Eikev – Ian Abrahams

In this week sidrah, Moshe continues his speech to the Israelites, reminding them to keep the commandments when they enter the land and the rewards they will receive. He makes it clear that if they follow the laws and protect them god will allow the tribes to conquer the whole land. The punishments are also spelt out again.

Part of Aliyah 6 of the sidrah had been adopted as the second paragraph of the Shema. It reinforces the relationship between following the mitzvot, and reward and punishment especially in relation to the land of Israel, its rain and its crops. I want to focus on one aspect of the parshah and the Shema – that is the sentence

I will grant the rain for your land in season,	וְנָתַתִּי מְטֶר־אֶרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ
the early rain	יּוֹרֵה
and the late rain	וּמִלְקוֹשׁ
You shall gather in your new grain and wine	וְאָסַפְתָּ דַגְנְךָ וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וְיֵצְהָרְךָ
and oil	

So what were Yoreh and Malkosh?

And why are they specifically named in the Torah?

As ancient Israel was an agrarian society then the rains and growing seasons were central to people's lives. The Grains that sustained them - barley and wheat, were planted in the late autumn after Sukkot. The Barley was harvested around Pesach and Wheat at Shavuot.

In thinking of the calendar and the way that the festivals fit with the flow of the seasons and harvests, then we must note that in Temple times the beginning of the Month of Nisan was fixed in Jerusalem, using both the new moon and whether the barley had ripened, to declare the month of Nisan and hence the build-up to Pesach. If the Barley wasn't yet close to harvest, then the Additional month - Adar Sheni would be added. Our current fixed Hebrew calendar wasn't developed until 4th Century CE, and took time to be adopted, but that's story for another day.

By the time of Sukkot there will have been at least 5 months with no or very little rain and the land would be parched. So the first rains that allow the crops to start growing will determine the success of the whole crop for the next year.

This first rain after the summer at the time of sowing the crops is given the name Yoreh, Rashi links the word Yoreh to Marveh which thoroughly drenches (מרווה) the soil and the seed.

The expected time for this Rain to start is just into the month of Cheshvan, 3 weeks after the end of Sukkot.

The importance of the start of the rains is emphasised by it's inclusion in our prayers, with origins going back at least to the time of the Rabbis of Mishnah, who devote a complete but short Tractate Ta'anit to the topic of rain and rituals that go with it as well as fasting.

Their accepted view was that a prayer for rain should be said on Shemini Atzeret, and from this we now have the Tefilat Geshem embedded in the start of the Musaf service. It is most unusual as it invokes the name of a specific Angel - "Af-Bri" as the bringer of rain – who "gathers the light and heavy clouds, and causes them to pour out the rain on the earth", and includes a piyyut, or liturgical poem written by Eleazar Ha-Kallir in 8th Century Palestine.

Also from Shemini Atzeret Mussaf onwards, the phrase "Mashiv Haruach oMirid HaGeshem" "Who makes the wind to blow and the rain to fall" is added to each Amidah – through until Pesach.

Additionally, in the weekday Amidah the phrase "tal v'matar livrachah' - "Dew and Rain as a blessing" is added – originally starting from early in the month of Cheshvan, and now fixed in our siddurim as 5th December.

So what was done if the rains didn't come when expected?

In line with the Sidrah this was seen as divine punishment for the people.

The Mishnah considered this in detail and has an escalating series of responses. If the rains were delayed, an increasingly severe set of fasts were prescribed. Firstly for individuals if no rain had fallen 3 weeks after the end of Sukkot (the middle of the month of Chesvan). No rain by the start of Kislev led to fasts for the whole community, if there is still no rain then there were a further 3 communal fasts, then 7 and finally if after these 13 fasts days over a number of weeks hadn't resulted in the start of the rainy season, then entire community would observe the customs of mourning. There is also defined community response to crop diseases and droughts of 40 days during the growing season.

Sadly, we have seen the effects of failing rains and drought in Africa in our times, and the devastating impact on peoples lives across many countries.

What of the 'latter' rains the Malkosh?

The Malkosh rains timing is in the month of early spring period of Adar and early Nisan before Pesach. – The name Malkosh is given various origins by the Rabbi's and commentators, but most see it as a reference to the ears of the wheat or barley (melilot or memalle) and the stalks (Koshin), which are generally developing to their full extent in early spring.

What kind of rain is it? It is seen as a gentle rainfall, quite different from the autumn and winter.

By the time of the year then a gentle rain to swell the grains before harvesting is what is expected. Without this rain there is no viable crop.

Pesach is linked to the Barley harvest, and in the days of the Temple there were elaborate rituals in the fields culminating in the bringing of the Omer tithe to the Temple on the 2nd day of Pesach.

Rain after the start of Pesach is a disaster for the crops – So at Musaf on the 1st Day of Pesach we have the prayer for Tal - Dew. As with the Prayer for Rain it contains a piyyut

with rhyming verses from Eleazer Ha-Kallir and we stop asking for Rain in the Amidah and some add morid HaTal instead.

So we've seen the rains through the season in ancient Israel and in our services and prayers – does this have relevance in Israel today? Well, yes it does.

As we all know - Israel is still a heavily agricultural country with a great deal of land devoted to growing the historical foods from the Torah and many more.

I found the Israel Government Agricultural stats fascinating – but that just me!

- Wheat is still the highest volume cereal crop in Israel, with the distinctly unbiblical sweetcorn the second by quantity and top by value. Barley is now a much smaller crop. It is the intensely grown, irrigated and water hungry crops that now are heavily grown and exported that put a strain on Israel's water resources.

What about the rainfall? - Broadly the pattern hasn't changed over the last few thousand years, dry from April to September, with rains starting in October and ending in March.

However, Israeli research into climate change has identified noticeable changes in rainfall patterns. There has been a shortening of the rainy season in the spring with the dry weather coming earlier. Whilst the total rainfall is similar over the last 40 years, it has become more intense in the mid-winter. The amount of rain falling early and late as Yoreh and Malkosh has declined.

Different patterns have been seen in the rainy north and coastal plain as compared to the much drier Arava.

Into the future the impact of climate change in Israel is unclear, as it sits at a point where several global weather systems meet, but warming and rainfall changes are of concern.

So – at a time when we have concerns about the UK weather as well, we still need to keep rain and Dew in our thoughts and prayers, both for Israel and here.

– Shabbat shalom

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