

Water is Life: From Tears and Tashlich to Protective Action

Germantown Jewish Centre | Rosh Hashanah Day 2 (5781) Text Study

Source Sheet by Rabbi Rebecca Richman

In this text study, we will use the ritual of tashlich (ceremonially casting our "sins" into the water) on Rosh Hashanah as a starting place for considering the transformative, cleansing, and sustaining power of water in Jewish tradition. We will study traditional Jewish texts and contemporary calls for water protection by activists. Our learning will inspire reflection in preparation for tashlich and, hopefully, greater concern for environmental protection.

Opening Questions to Consider

- What does Jewish tradition teach us about the power of water?
- How does *tashlich* highlight the transformative, cleansing, and sustaining power of water?
- What water justice fights echo the Jewish idea that water is a sacred source of life?
- How might upholding the sacredness of water help ensure access to clean water for all?

Tashlich As a Starting Place for Considering the Power of Water

1. Days of Awe, edited S.Y. Agnon (p. 96)

Why do Jews go to a body of water and say, "And thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea?" Because when one considers the phrase "into the depths of the sea," the event of the Creation of the world is made clear. For "the depths of the sea" refers to the abyss, the deepest part of the sea.

2. Genesis 1:2, 6-7

(2) **the earth being unformed and void**, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water...(6) God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate **water from water**." (7) 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.

בראשית א':ב', ו-ז'
(ב) וְהָאֵרֶץ רֵץ הִתְהַוָּתָהּ וְבָהוּ וְחָשָׁךְ
עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת
עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם... (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי
רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מִבְדֵּיל בֵּין מַיִם
לְמַיִם: (ז) וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָרָקִיעַ
וַיִּבְדֵּל לִבְיִן הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לָרָקִיעַ
וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לָרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי-כֵן:

3. Genesis 6:17

(17) "For My part, I am about to bring the Flood—**waters upon the earth—to destroy** all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish.

בראשית ו':י"ז
(יז) וְאֲנִי הִנְנִי מְבִיא אֶת-הַמָּבּוּל מַיִם
עַל-הָאָרֶץ לְשֹׁתָהּ כָּל-בֶּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ
רוּחַ חַיִּים מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-בָּאָרֶץ
יָגוּעַ:

4. Toras HaOlah 3:56

The natural order demands that water should cover the entire planet and it is only through the chesed of G'd that G'd allowed us to have portions of land on which to live. Therefore, we go to the water to see that idea first hand...it causes us to repent. We don't throw our iniquities into the water- they are figuratively thrown in the river when we are inspired to repent.

Power of Water in Jewish Tradition - Threatening, Life-Sustaining, Purifying

5. Exodus 14:16, 21-22

וְאֵתֶּה הָרֶם אֶת־מִטְּךָ וְנִטַּתָּ אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וּבָקַעְתָּהּ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בִּיבֹשָׁה:

Lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it; and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground.

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּזְלַךְ יְהוָה | אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֲזָה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׁם אֶת־הַיָּם לַחֲרֹבָה וַיִּבְקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and G'd caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the **waters were divided**.

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בִּיבֹשָׁה וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה מִיְּמִינָם וּמִשְׁמָאלָם:

And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground; and **the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left**.

6. Numbers 20:1-5

Miriam died there and was buried there. The congregation **had no water**; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron. **The people quarreled** with Moses, and they said, "If only we had died with the death of our brothers before the Lord. Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord to this desert so that we and our livestock should die there? Why have you taken us out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place; it is not a place for seeds, or for fig trees, grapevines, or pomegranate trees, and there is no water to drink.

במדבר פרק כ פסוקים א - ה

וּתְמַת שָׁם מֶרְיָם וְתִקְבְּרָה שָׁם : (ו) אֵת הַיָּם
מַיִם לַעֲדָה וַיִּקְהְלוּ עַל מַיִשָּׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן
וַיִּבְרַח בַּהֶעֱמָם עִם מַיִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ
לֵאמֹר וְלֹא גִוַעְנוּ בְּגֹועַ אֲחִינוּ לִפְנֵי יְק
וָק : וְלָמָּה הִבַּאתֶם אֶת קֹהֶל יִקְנֹק אֶל
הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לָמוֹת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ וּבַעִיר נֹו :
וְלָמָּה הֵעֲלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לָהֵבִיא אֶת־נוֹ
אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה עַ הַזֶּה (א) מָקוֹם זֶרַע
וַתֵּאֱחָז וַיִּגְפֹן וַיִּזְרַח מִן הַמַּיִם אֵין לְשִׁתּוֹת :

7. Deuteronomy 11:13-17

...if you really listen to my commandments...to love the LORD your God, and to serve God with all your heart and all your soul, then... you will eat and be satisfied. [BUT!] be careful, lest your heart be seduced, and you turn away, and serve other gods, and worship them. Then the wrath of God will be upon you; **God will stop up the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the Earth will not give its produce**; and you will speedily be evicted from the good land that God is giving you..."

8. Mishnah Yoma 8:9

...Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for a transgression against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until having appeased one's neighbor. Thus R. Eleazar ben Azariah expounds the text, "From all your sins before the Lord shall ye be clean": For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones, for transgressions against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until

משנה יומא ח' ט'

עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַמָּקוֹם, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים
מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְחֶבְרֹ, אֵין יוֹם
הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיִּרְצֶה אֶת חֶבְרֹ. אֵת
זוֹ דְּרָשׁ רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה, מִכָּל
חֲטָאֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְיָ תִּתְהַרְוּ (וּיקרא טז),
עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַמָּקוֹם, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים
מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְחֶבְרֹ, אֵין יוֹם
הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיִּרְצֶה אֶת חֶבְרֹ. אָמַר

one appeases their neighbor. R. Akiva says, Happy are you, Israel! Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you [of your transgressions]? Your Father Who is in heaven. For it is said, "**Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean**"; and it is also said, "**The ritual bath [lit. Hope] of Israel is the Lord**"; even as a ritual bath purifies the unclean, so does the Holy One, Blessed be G'd, purify Israel.

רבי עקיבא, אֲשֶׁר־יְכַסֵּם יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְפָנַי מִי אֲתָם מְטַהְרִין, וּמִי מְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם, אֲבִיכֶם שְׁבִשְׁמִים, שְׁנֵאמַר (יִחְזָקָא לֹ), וְזִרְקָתִי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיָּם טְהוֹרִים וּטְהוֹרָתָם. וְאֹמַר (ירמיה יז), מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ, מִה מִקְוֵה מְטַהֵר אֶת הַטְּמֵאִים, אֵף הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְטַהֵר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Reverence for Rain

9. Sifrei Devarim 48:5

Words of Torah are compared to water. **Just as water is life for the world, so, words of Torah**, as it is written (*Ibid.* 4:22) "For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all of his flesh."...And **just as water restores a person's soul, so, words of Torah restore a person's soul** from the path of evil to that of good, viz. (*Ibid.* 8) "The Torah of the L-rd is whole, restoring the soul." And **just as water is free for the world, so words of Torah are free for the world**, viz. (Isaiah 55:1) "Ho! all who thirst, go to the waters!" — But perhaps, just as water has no value, so Torah has no value; it is, therefore, written (Proverbs 3:15) "It is more precious than pearls, and all of your desires cannot be compared to it."

ספרי דברים מ"ח:ה'

נמשלו דברי תורה למים: **מה מים חיים לעולם - אף דברי תורה חיים לעולם**, שנא' (משלי ד':כ"ב) כי חיים הם למוצאיהם ולכל בשרו מרפא. ומה מעלים את הטמא מטומאתו - כך דברי תורה מעלים את האדם מדרך רעה לדרך טובה, שנא' תורת ה' תמימה משיבת נפש. ומה מים חנם לעולם - אף דברי תורה חנם לעולם, שנאמ' (ישעיה נה) הוי כל צמא לכו למים. ומה מים שאין להם דמים - אף דברי תורה אין להם דמים, שנאמר (משלי ג) יקרה היא מפנינים וכל הפצים לא ישוו בה.

10. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 6b

Rabbi Abahu said, "From when do we bless the rain? From when the groom goes out toward the bride [an idiom for a large amount of rain—see Rashi]. What does one bless? Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: **'We give thanks to You, Hashem, our G-d for every single drop** which you have caused to fall upon us.'"

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף ו עמוד

ב
אמר רבי אבהו: מאימתי מברכין על הגשמים - משיצא חתן לקראת כלה. מאי מברך? אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: **מודים אנחנו לך ה' א- להינו על כל טפה וטפה שהורדת לנו**.

Tashlich - The Symbolic Power of Water on Rosh Hashanah

11. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Commentary to Tashlikh from pp. 936-947 of Koren-Sacks Machzor for Rosh HaShana

It is a custom, on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh HaShana (or second, if the first is Shabbat) to go to the shore of the sea, the bank of a river, or other running stream of water, as a symbolic enactment of the words of the prophet Micah: "God will cast (*tashlikh*) into the depths of the sea all their sins" (Micah 7:19)...Many folk customs have become associated with *Tashlikh*, among them the custom of throwing

crumbs into water as a symbolic gesture to accompany the process of repentance, begun on Rosh HaShana, as if we were "casting away" our sins. This practice was dismissed by some halakhic authorities and ridiculed by gentiles. However it is less ridiculous than it seems. Maimonides writes: "There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being and laid on that of another. But **these ceremonies are of a symbolic character**, and serve to impress people with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent, as if to say: we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs and removed them from us as far as possible (Guide III:46)."

12. Micah 7:18-19

(18) Who is a God like You, Forgiving iniquity And remitting transgression; Who has not maintained wrath forever Against the remnant of G!d's own people, Because G!d loves graciousness! (19) G!d will take us back in love; will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins Into the depths of the sea.

מיכה ז': י"ח-י"ט

(יח) מִי־אֵל כְּמוֹךָ נוֹשֵׂא עוֹן וְעֹבֵר
עַל־פְּשָׁע לְנִשְׁאַרִית נִחְלָתוֹ לֹא־הִחַיִּיק
לְעַד אֲפֹ כִי־חָפֵץ חֶסֶד הוּא: (יט) יָשׁוּב
יִרְחֲמֵנו יִכְבֹּשׁ עֹ, נִתְּנוּ וְתִשְׁלֹךְ
בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל־חַטָּאוֹתָם:

Water is Life: Lessons from Social Movements for Water Justice

13. Tractate Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 2:43

מסכת אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא ב פרק מג

(translation by Rabbi Neril)

Water is called life, as it says (Zechariah 14:8), "Water of life went out [from Jerusalem]."

מים נקרא חיים שנאמר יצאו מים חיים
זכריה י"ד ח

14. Holy Rage: Lessons from Standing Rock, Louise Erdrich

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/holy-rage-lessons-from-standing-rock>

Dakota Access Pipeline, or D.A.P.L., owned by Energy Transfer Partners and Sunoco Logistics...would pass beneath the Missouri River and imperil drinking water not only for the tribe but for farmers, ranchers, and townspeople all along the river's course.

15. "Water Is Life": Standing Up For Standing Rock, Alex Papali

<https://www.cleanwateraction.org/2016/09/12/%E2%80%9Cwater-life%E2%80%9D-standing-standing-rock>

The Dakota Access (or Bakken) Pipeline, at over 1100 miles in length, is similar to the much better known Keystone XL pipeline...what's unique here is the opposition being led by Native folks, who insist on being referred to as 'protectors' rather than protesters. This is because their opposition to the 'Black Snake', as many of them call the pipeline, is based on concern about a spill on the mighty Missouri, the continent's longest river, and the source of drinking and irrigation water for the reservation's residents and millions of others. They assert encroachment by private interests on their ancestral lands.

16. Standing Rock is everywhere: one year later: A call for continued efforts to protect our water and our Earth (Chief Arvol Looking Horse), *Chief Arvol Looking Horse is the 19th Keeper of the Sacred Bundle and Spiritual Leader of the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota People.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2018/feb/22/standing-rock-is-everywhere-one-year-later>

Mni Woc'oni is part of our creation story, and the same story that exists in many creation stories around Mother Earth....When we say "Mni Woc'oni" — Water of Life — people all over the world are now beginning to understand that it is a living spirit: it can heal when you pray with it and die if you do not respect it. We wanted the world to know **there have been warnings in our prophecies and, as we see it, those warnings are now taking place...Water is a source of life, not a resource.** In our tradition...when the environment that we live in is sick and suffering, so too are the minds and decisions of our leaders. We must continue to work together for the health and well-being of our water and our Earth. In a Sacred Hoop of Life, there is no ending and no beginning.

17. Michigan to Pay \$600 Million to Victims of Flint Water Crisis: Residents were left ill and relying on bottled water. Health officials said the effects on children were most concerning, Julie Bosman <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/us/flint-water-crisis-settlement.html>

In 2014, as a cost-saving measure for a city in deep financial distress, officials in Flint...switched the city's water supply from Lake Huron to the notoriously foul Flint River. Officials failed to add corrosion controls to the tap water...allowing lead and other chemicals to leach from the old, worn pipes into the drinking supply. It did not take long before Flint residents knew there was something terribly wrong with their water. It tasted metallic and often appeared to be green or light brown. Many people began feeling ill and experiencing skin rashes, hair loss and other mysterious symptoms. Months later, testing showed increased and alarming levels of lead in the blood of some Flint children. In fall 2015, in the face of overwhelming evidence, Gov. Rick Snyder of Michigan acknowledged that the water was not fine. The state of Michigan is expected to pay about \$600 million to victims of the Flint water crisis...would largely be designated for children in Flint.

Water Justice on Rosh Hashanah - Repairing What's Been Broken

18. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 130:1

The Ten Days of Repentance, as characterized by their name, are designated for repentance. During this time everyone is obligated to repent wholeheartedly before God, blessed is G'd's Name, before the coming of the great and awesome day, of *Yom Kippur*, as it is said, "Before God you will be cleansed" (Leviticus 16:30). It is also said, "Seek God when G'd may be found", (Isaiah 55:6) and our Rabbis of blessed memory said that this refers to the ten days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Therefore, during these days you must examine your conduct and repent of

קיצור שלחן ערוך ק"ל:א'
עֲשֶׂרֶת יָמֵי תְּשׁוּבָה, שְׁמֵם מוֹרָה
עֲלֵיהֶם, שָׁהֵם מִיְּחֻדִּים לְתִשְׁבּוּבָה. וְכָל
אָדָם מַחֲבִיב אֶז לְשׁוּב בְּתִשְׁבּוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה
לְפָנֵי ה', יִתְבָּרֵךְ שְׁמוֹ, קֹדֶם בּוֹא הַיּוֹם
הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים, שְׁנֵאֲמַר
לְפָנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ, וְנִאֲמַר דְּרָשׁוּ ה'
בְּהִמָּצְאוֹ. וְאֲמָרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ, זְכוּרֵנוּם
לְבִרְכָה, אֱלֹהֵי עֲשָׂרָה יָמִים שְׁבִין רֵאשׁ
הַשָּׁנָה לַיּוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים. לָכֵן צָרִיךְ
הָאָדָם בַּיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה לְפַשְׁפֹּשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו

your bad deeds... Above all, **you must set right the wrongs you committed against your fellow, for which there is no atonement unless you compensate them for any stolen articles or withheld funds in your possession, and patch things up and placate them so that they will forgive you.**

וְלָשׁוּב מִמַּעֲשֵׂיוֹ הָרָעִים... וּבִיּוֹתֵר
צָרִיךְ הָאָדָם לְתַקֵּן דְּבָרִים שֶׁבִּיְנוּ לְבֵין
חֵבְרוֹ, אֲשֶׁר עָלֵיהֶם אֵין כְּפָרָה עַד
שֶׁיַּחְזִיר אֶת הַגָּזֵל וְאֶת הָעֶנְשֶׁק, וְיַפְסֹד
שֶׁיִּמְחֹל לוֹ.

19. Berakhot 32b:5

On the subject of prayer, Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked and prayer is not accepted as it once was, as it is said in lamentation of the Temple's destruction: "Though I plead and call out, G!d shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8). Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked with the destruction of the Temple, the gates of tears were not locked, and one who cries before God may rest assured that their prayers will be answered, as it is stated: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears" (Psalms 39:13). Since this prayer is a request that God should pay heed to the tears of one who is praying, one is certain that at least the gates of tears are not locked.

ברכות ל"ב ב:ה'

ואמר רבי אלעזר
מיום שחרב בית
המקדש ננעלו שער
תפלה שנאמר גם כ
אזעק ואשוע שתם
תפלתי ואף על פי
ששערי תפילה ננעלו
שערי דמעה לא ננעלו
שנאמר שמעה תפלתי
ה' ושועתי האזינה אל
דמעתי אל תחרש

Questions for Reflection

- Why might the gates of prayer close, while the gates of tears never shut?
- How might tears enable you to move forward through patterns of injustice?
- What do you need for the waters of your tashlich ritual to do for you, this year?