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**In honor of our mother Mrs. Diana Weiner, with all our love and gratitude and with best wishes for a shana tov u-metuka!**  
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**"On *Sukkot* Judgment is Passed with Respect to Rain"**

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

Translated by David Strauss

### The Festival of *Sukkot* – The Festival of Water

The *mishna* in *Rosh Ha-Shana* (1:2) establishes t: "At four seasons [Divine] judgment is passed on the world… And on the festival [of *Sukkot*] judgment is passed in respect of rain." It is on the festival of *Sukkot* that God decrees whether the coming year will be rainy or dry.

The connection between the festival of *Sukkot* and water is reflected in the unique *mitzvot* and customary practices observed on the festival, many of which are linked to prayer for rain during the coming year.

The *gemara* explicitly states that the taking of the four species – lulav, etrog, myrtle, and willow-branch – on *Sukkot* is essentially a prayer for rain (*Ta'anit* 2b):

R. Eliezer said: Seeing that these four species are intended only to make intercession for water, therefore, as these cannot [grow] without water, so the world [too] cannot exist without water.

Besides the very taking of the four species, the waving of the four species that accompanies the *mitzva* of taking them is connected, according to one opinion, to intercession for water (*Sukka* 37b):

R. Chama bar Ukva said in the name of R. Yose the son of R. Chanina: One waves them to and fro in order to restrain harmful winds; up and down, in order to restrain harmful dews.

According to this opinion, when we wave the *lulav*, we are essentially praying that the rain that will fall over the coming year should be for a blessing, as we say in the weekday *Amida* prayer, "Give dew and rain for a blessing," and as we end the Prayer for Rain on *Shemini Atzeret*: "For a blessing, and not for a curse; for life, and not for death."

The water libation that is observed on the festival of *Sukkot* is also essentially a prayer for water (*Rosh Ha-Shana* 16a):

Why did the Torah tell us to pour out water on the festival [of *Sukkot*]? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Pour out water before Me on *Sukkot*, so that your rains this year may be blessed.

The *piyyutim* known as *Hoshanot*, which are recited every day of *Sukkot*, include many supplications for rain. Thus, for example, in the *Hoshana* beginning with the words, *Adon Ha-Moshi'a*:

Cause an abundance of crops, of trees, of vegetation – save. Do not condemn the ground, but sweeten the luscious fruits – save. Let the wind bring the soaring clouds, let the stormy winds be emplaced, let the clouds not be withheld, He who opens a hand and satisfies. Your thirsty ones – satisfy.

Many more prayers for rain appear in the special *Hoshanot* recited on the seventh day of *Sukkot* – *Hoshana Rabba*:[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the merit of the Hill of Talpiyot [the Temple], source of water, may the earth open wide and the heavens give rain; and bring success now and save us, God, our Fortress…

Those who supplicate for water like willows alongside streams of water; please, remember for their sake the libations of water, and save us, God of our salvation.

Another *mitzva* of *Sukkot* that is connected to water is the *mitzva* of the willow-branch (*arava*), as described in the *mishna* (*Sukka* 4:5):[[2]](#footnote-2)

The *mitzva* of the willow-branch – how was it carried out? There was a place below Jerusalem called Motza. They went down there and gathered from there young willow-branches, and then came and fixed them at the sides of the altar so that their tops bent over the altar. They then sounded a *teki'a* [long blast], a *teru'a* [broken blast], and then again a *teki'a.* Every day they went round the altar once, saying, "We beseech You, O Lord, save now, we beseech You, O Lord, make us now to prosper…” But on that day they went round the altar seven times. …

Even today, when we beat the willow-branch against the ground, it being most sensitive to a lack of water, we pray for rain:

Open the gates of heaven and Your goodly treasure trove may You open for us. Save us, do not let accusations be drawn out, and save us, God of our salvation.

We see, then, that on the festival of *Sukkot* various different activities are performed as part of our prayer for rain: The four species, the *Hoshanot*, the *mitzva* relating to the willow-branch, and the water libation. Some of these activities are connected to the Temple and the sacrificial service (e.g., the water libation), while others are performed even outside the Temple (e.g., taking the four species and reciting the *Hoshanot*).

### Why is Water Poured on the Altar?

Throughout the year, wine libations are offered along with the burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. These libations are poured on the altar's base, and from there the wine descends to the *shittin*¸ two cavities in the southeast corner of the altar (Rambam, *Hilkhot Ma'aseh Ha-Korbanot* 2:1). On the festival of Sukkot, the Torah commands that also water be poured over the altar at the time when the wine libations are offered. Water is not poured over the altar together with all the burnt-offerings, but only with the daily offering brought in the morning, as is stated in the *gemara*: "R. Abba said, and some say it was Rami bar Chama, and others say it was R. Yochanan, who said: The water libation on the festival of Sukkotis offered only at the daily offering brought in the morning" (*Yoma* 26b). Thus writes the Rambam (*Hilkhot Temidin U-Musafin* 10:6-7):

On all the seven days of the [*Sukkot*] festival, a water libation is poured on the altar. This practice is a *halakha* communicated to Moshe on [Mount] Sinai. The water was poured as a separate libation together with the morning wine libation.

How was it offered? He would fill a golden vessel that contains three *logs* from the Shiloach stream. When they reached the Water Gate, they sounded a *teki'a*, *a teru'a*, and a *teki'a…* There were two silver cups there. The water [was poured] into the western one and the wine libation [was poured] into the eastern one. They were pierced with two small holes like two small nostrils. The hole for [the cup] of water was thinner than that for the wine so that the water would conclude flowing together with the wine.

What is the essence of this *mitzva* of pouring water on the altar on the festival of Sukkot? Is the water libation a "duty connected to the sacrifice" – that is to say, a part of the daily offering, which all year long it is offered together with wine libations, and on the festival of *Sukkot* a water libation is added? Or is it perhaps a "duty connected to the day" – that is to say, part of the set of *mitzvot* unique to the festival of Sukkot?[[3]](#footnote-3)

The *Rishonim* appear to disagree on this point. The Meiriexplains that the water libation cannot be offered at night, as the *gemara* explicitly asserts that a libation accompanying an animal offering can only be offered during the day (Meiri, *Ta'anit* 2b). He clearly maintains that the water libation is meant to serve the animal offering, and thus it is part of the daily offering brought on the festival of Sukkot*.* In contrast, the Ritva writes that "the water libation is not considered as accompanying an animal offering, as it is a duty connected to the day, and not at all a duty connected to the offering." According to him, it is only because of the customary practice that the water libation cannot be offered at night (Ritva, *Sukka* 48b).[[4]](#footnote-4)

This question regarding the very nature of the water libation may be connected to the issue of the nature of the wine libations that accompany animal offerings all year long. These libations are undoubtedly a duty connected to the offering and linked to the offering that they accompany. However, the *gemara* explains the need for them in two ways (*Menachot* 20a): They might be "atonement and joy" – that is to say, an expression of the person's joy over the atonement that he has achieved through the offering – or, alternatively, they might be "eating and drinking” – that is to say, just as the altar "eats" the offering, so too it "drinks" the libations (*Menachot* 20a).[[5]](#footnote-5)

If the wine libations are meant for "eating and drinking" and they constitute a single unit with the parts of the offering that must be burned on the altar, it stands to reason that the water libation is meant for the same purpose. The water libation is then "a duty connected to the offering," joining with the meat of the offering, the wine and the flour that are burned on the altar. The water libation is a prayer for rain because by giving the altar "water" to drink, we pray that this year's rains should be for a blessing.

If, however, the wine libation expresses a person's joy over the atonement he has achieved, it stands to reason that the water libation is not of the same character, as it is wine that expresses joy, not water. According to this opinion, the water libation is a duty connected to the day, an independent "water offering" brought on the festival of Sukkot, lacking any connection to an animal offering.

According to this understanding, why is the water libation connected specifically to the daily morning offering? The special offerings brought on the other festivals, such as the *omer-*offering and the two-loaves-offering, are not brought with the daily morning offering, but are rather independent offerings!

There might be an essential connection between praying for rain and the morning daily offering, and for this reason the Torah joined the two together. It should be noted that there are two aspects to the daily offering. On the one hand, it is an ordinary offering, like any other offering, while on the other hand, it is part of the fixed schedule of the Temple. In the book of *Bamidbar* (28:1-8), the Torah commands the offering of the daily offering alongside the command to bring the additional sacrifices, and from this perspective it is identical to other offerings. In the book of *Shemot* (29:38-42), the Torah mentions the daily offering that is to be offered continually alongside the lighting of the lamp continually, the burning of the incense continually, and the priestly garments that are continually worn by the High Priest. From this perspective, the daily offering is part of the general day-to-day running of the Temple, which expresses the continual resting of the *Shekhina* in *Eretz Yisrael*. For this reason, the Torah in *Parashat Tetzaveh* emphasizes the connection between the daily offering and the resting of the *Shekhina* in the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 29:42-45):

This shall be a continual burnt-offering throughout your generations at the door of the Tent of Meeting before the Lord, **where I will meet with you, to speak there to you.** And there I will meet with the children of Israel; and it shall be sanctified by My glory… And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.

The juxtaposition of the water libation to the daily offering emphasizes the centrality of water in the resting of the *Shekhina* in *Eretz Yisrael*. Rain falls in *Eretz* *Yisrael* not only to saturate the land and cause it to sprout. Rather, it expresses the continual resting of the *Shekhina* in the land (*Devarim* 11:11-12):

But the land, into which you go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinks water of the rain of heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are **always** upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Rain in *Eretz Yisrael* is a direct gift of God to the people residing in it. God's eyes are constantly upon the land, and He bestows His pure and holy bounty upon it. Unlike the land of Egypt, where the crops are irrigated by rivers and lakes, rain in *Eretz Yisrael* expresses God's concern for His people and His loving and bounteous relationship towards the land's inhabitants.

It is therefore fitting that the water libation is attached to the daily offering. The daily offering expresses the resting of the *Shekhina* in the Temple, and the water expresses the *Shekhina's* presence in *Eretz Yisrael*. When we offer the spring-drawn water to God, we express the fact that God is the source of all the water, blessing, and bounty in this world, and by virtue of this recognition, the coming year's rainfall will be blessed.

### "In All Places Where I Cause My Name to be Pronounced"

The three pilgrimage festivals fall out in three different seasons. Pesachfalls out during the period of the barley harvest; Shavuotfalls out during the period of the wheat harvest, and Sukkotfalls out during the period of the ingathering of the crops.

During the first two festivals, which are celebrated during the harvest season, there is still room to pray that blessing should be bestowed on this year's crops. The unique offerings brought on these festivals – the *omer*-offering on Pesach and the two-loaves-offering on Shavuot *–* express this prayer through the offering to God of the first barley and wheat of the year.

Sukkotis celebrated at the end of the agricultural year, when the grain has already been harvested and gathered. At that time, there is no longer reason to pray on behalf of the past year's crops. But there is still room to pray that the reaper should enjoy the fruits of his work and to express one's gratitude to God for His grand goodness, that He bestowed upon him stores of grain and fruit. This joy is expressed in the taking of the four species before God.

Paralleling the *omer*-offering and the two-loaves-offering, there is reason to take the four species in the Temple. There, in the Temple, the joy of the individual unites with the joy of the entire community, and this joint rejoicing reflects gratitude for the past and a prayer for the future that God's blessing should remain constant and only grow over the coming year. For this reason, the Torah commands that the four species be taken seven days in the Temple: "And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days" (*Vayikra* 23:40).

Paralleling the taking of the four species in the Temple for seven days, the Torah commands that the four species also be taken outside the Temple on the first day of the festival: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of the *hadar* tree, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick leaved trees, and willows of the brook" (*Vayikra* 23:40). What is the meaning of this intercession, which is not conducted in the Temple? And why on the other festivals do we not find some other intercession conducted outside the Temple?

The reason that the primary prayer is conducted in the Temple is clear. God is the source of all blessing, and His bounty descends upon His people Israel and the entire world through the site of His *Shekhina* – the place that God desired for His habitation. As is implied in Shelomo's prayer at the time of the dedication of the Temple, God's bounty that spreads through the world passes through the Temple, and it is there that one should seek His redemption, His salvation and His blessing from His broad and open hand (I *Melakhim* 8:26-30):

Therefore, now, Lord God of Israel, keep with Your servant David my father that which You did promise him… that Your eyes may be open towards this house night and day, towards the place of which You have said, My name shall be here, that You may hearken to the prayer which Your servant shall make toward this place. And hearken You to the supplication of Your servant and of Your people when they shall pray towards this place, and hear You in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive.

This accounts for the various commands: Bring before Me the *omer*-offering on *Pesach*, the two-loaves-offering on Shavuot, and the water libation on *Sukkot*; even the taking of the four species in the Temple fits in well with this picture.

But alongside the revelation of the *Shekhina* through the Temple, there is also another dimension of the *Shekhina* in this world, which finds expression in the verse stated after the revelation at Mount Sinai, but before the command regarding the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 20:21):

An altar of earth you shall make to Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings, and your peace-offerings, your sheep, and your oxen: **in all places where I cause My name to be pronounced,** I will come to you, and I will bless you.

This verse indicates that God's glory fills the entire world and the *Shekhina* is found everywhere. So too when Israel is commanded to build the *Mishkan*, it says: "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell **among them"** (*Shemot* 25:8). Paralleling the unique resting of the *Shekhina* in the Temple, which involves a constriction of God's glory in one specific place, there is also another dimension of the *Shekhina* that is not limited to the Temple alone, but breaches all boundaries and is found in all places.

These two aspects also find expression in the intercession for water on the festival of *Sukkot*. On the one hand, God's bounty comes from the place which He will choose, and therefore the Torah commands: "Pour out water before Me on *Sukkot*, so that your rains this year may be blessed" (*Rosh Ha-Shana* 16a). On the other hand, since God's blessing is evident in all places, and every drop of rain that falls in *Eretz* *Yisrael* gives expression to God's providence, it is necessary to pray for rain outside the Temple as well. Rain is an expression of the blessing: "In all places where I cause My name to be pronounced, I will come to you, and I will bless you," and therefore intercession must be made for water everywhere, through the taking of the four species on the first day of *Sukkot* in all places, even outside the Temple.

Emphasizing this dimension of the *Shekhina's* restingin the world, which does not necessarily pass through the Temple, is characteristic of the month of Tishrei. Pesachand Shavuot are festivals based on "awakening from above" – that is, they are heavenly driven. It is God who took us out to freedom and it is He who gave us His Torah. The month of Tishrei, on the hand, is marked by the seal of human action that aspires to progress and perfection. The day of *Rosh Ha-Shana* with which the month opens is the day on which man crowns God as king of the universe. Yom Kippur is the day on which the second set of tablets were given, those tablets being the product of human action (see *Tanchuma*, *Ki-Tisa* 31), and it is the day on which man enters the Holy of Holies in the course of the day's service in order to introduce atonement, blessing, and bounty into the world. Sukkotis a festival based on the *sukkot* built by man, and it also expresses the rejoicing of those who worked their land over the fruit of their labors. The *shofar* is sounded on *Rosh Ha-Shana* so that we will be remembered before God, and this is done in all places, not only in the Temple. Similarly, the taking of the four species, which serves as a prayer for water, is performed in all places, parallel to the water libation in the Temple.[[6]](#footnote-6)

### *Shemini Atzeret*

The festival of Sukkotends with the festival of Shemini Atzeret, which *Chazal* defined as "a festival in its own right" regarding various matters (*Yoma* 3a). In a later period, Shemini Atzeret turned into Simchat Torah, the day on which we conclude the annual cycle of Torah reading and start once again to read the Torah from the beginning. At the end of the festival of Sukkot,which includes a unique intercession before God in all places, we celebrate the festival of God's Torah, which knows no bounds of time and place and which needs no Temple or *sukka*. This is the way *Chazal* understood the uniqueness of God's Torah, which connects the people of Israel to God, in a *midrash* concerning *Shemini Atzeret* (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 28:9):

R. Abun said: We do not know in what we should rejoice, in the day, or in the Holy One, blessed be He. Then came Shelomo and explained: "We will be glad and rejoice in You" – in You, in Your Torah; in You, in Your salvation. R. Yitzchak said: In the twenty-two letters which You wrote for us in Your Torah – *bet –* two, *khof* – twenty.

1. The expanded *Hoshanot* on *Hoshana Rabba* may be a remnant of or an allusion to the position of R. Yehoshua (*Ta'anit* 2a) that mention is made of the rain from the time that the *lulav* is put down, i.e., on the seventh day of *Sukkot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Eliezer of Worms explains that the mitzvaof the willow-branch was observed in expanded form specifically on the seventh day of the festival of *Sukkot* because that day has an especially large number of sacrifices (*Sefer Roke'ach* 221). One who vows to offer a sacrifice must fulfill his vow before three festivals have passed. Thus, *Hoshana Rabba* is the last day on which one can fulfill his vow. Since "it is for the sin of vows that rain is withheld," as the verse states (*Mishlei* 25:14; and see *Ta'anit* 8b), "One who boasts of gifts that he does not give is like clouds and wind without rain," there is no day more suited than this one to pray for rain. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Kenneset Rishonim* on *Zevachim* (110b) suggests several practical ramifications of this question: Is the water libation fit if it was performed before the daily offering was brought? (The Rambam says it is fit; the Meirisays it is not.) Is the water libation disqualified if the daily offering was slaughtered with an intention that renders it *piggul*?(The Tosefta in *Sukka* 3:7 writes that the water libation is forbidden, but according to the reading of the Vilna Gaon, it is not forbidden.) And do the special laws governing wine libations, such as the possibility of bringing *tashlumim* for them, apply also to the water libation? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This dispute might depend on the source of the obligation to offer a water libation. R. Nechonai asserts that this obligation is a *halakha* communicated to Moshe on Mount Sinai, with no explicit Biblical source, whereas R. Akiva derives the obligation from the verses that speak of the libations that accompany offerings (*Ta'anit* 2b). It may be that according to R. Akiva, the water libation is one of the laws governing the daily offering, whereas according to R. Nechonai, it is one of the laws of Sukkot. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If the libation results from the joy of atonement, it is connected to the blood of the offering, as it is the sprinkling of the blood that atones for the person bringing the offering. If the libation is meant give drink to the altar, it constitutes a single unit together with the parts of the animal that are burned on the altar. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Like the taking of the four species, the *mitzva* of the willow-branch also has a dimension that is carried out in the Temple and a dimension that is carried out in all places. The *mitzva* by Torah law is to stand the willow-branch against the altar (Mishna, *Sukka* 4:5). But the customary practice of the prophets was to strike the willow-branch in all places on *Hoshana Rabba.* The *mitzva* of the willow-branch comes to intercede for water. Thus, we find another example of the combination existing on Sukkotof intercession made in the Temple and intercession made in all places. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)