

“May My Speech Come Down Like Rain”: Halakhic Insights into the Transformative Power of Torah

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Now that the High Holy Days are over and we're headed into Sukkot and Simchat Torah, that tells you we're coming to the end of the Book of Deuteronomy and the long journey of the Jewish people under Moses' leadership.

In this week's parashah, Parashat Ha'azinu, Moses gives his final address to the community—his swan song.

And I say that purposefully, because he actually delivers his speech in the form of a song or a poem. It's inscribed in the Torah in verses and stanzas and columns, in contrast to the Torah's usual prose format.

At minyan yesterday morning, one of our congregants—I think it was Linda or Sandy—commented on what a journey Moses has taken, not only from Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land, but also in terms of his confidence as a leader and a speaker.

We remember, of course, that when God first calls to Moses at the Burning Bush and tells him to go to Pharaoh, Moses balks, saying to God: “I have never been a man of words. ...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Ex. 4:10).

But now, by the end of the Torah, Moses has become quite the orator, not only speaking easily to his community but delivering his farewell address in beautiful poetry, no less.

It's one of the many lessons of Moses' life: that we can overcome our perceived limitations and become someone we never imagined we could be.

I think of something my dad used to say to me when I was a kid: “Do the thing you fear the most, and the death of that fear is certain.”

Moses demonstrates this beautifully.

So now, Moses the orator—this Cicero of Judaism—launches his final address to the community with this call:

“Give ear, O heavens, let me speak!
Let the earth hear the words I utter.
May my speech come down as the rain,
My words distill as the dew,
Like showers on young growth,
Like droplets on the grass.”
(Deut. 32:1-2)

This imagery of words coming down on the people like rain watering the earth is powerful.

When I read it, I immediately thought of one of my favorite passages in the halakhah, the body of Jewish law.

In the 13th century in Spain, Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher wrote a book of halakhah called the Arba'ah Turim, or The Tur for short.

The Tur is widely regarded as one of the most important works of Jewish law ever written. It is the basis for the single most influential book of halakhah in existence, Rabbi Yosef Karo's 16th-century masterwork, the Shulchan Arukh.

In the Tur, Rabbi Yaakov has a section detailing the blessings we're supposed to say when we see certain special things¹—like seeing a friend after a long time, or seeing a rainbow, or the Mediterranean Sea, or Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel.

It's probably not surprising that Judaism gives us a spiritual vocabulary for all these and more. It's our way of pausing and affirming God's presence in the world, even and especially in the ordinary occurrences of life that we might otherwise easily let pass without notice or remark.

One of these ordinary things we're supposed to say a blessing for is when we see the rain fall.²

And it's not too hard to understand why:

Water is essential for all life. Without rainfall, the grass, the trees, the crops would wither and die, and human beings couldn't survive either.

So, we say a blessing to thank God for giving us rain.

(Incidentally, on the holiday of Sh'mini Atzeret/Simchat Torah coming up in a little more than a week, we will begin praying for rain as part of the daily Amidah.)

But what's really interesting to me is which blessing the halakhah tells us to say when we see rain.

If we own land, the blessing is: "Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, ha-tov v'ha-mayteev. Meaning: Blessed are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who is good and who does good."³

"Who is good, and who does good."

The twofold structure of the blessing is significant.

The first part, "who is good," refers to the blessing God has bestowed on the person saying the blessing, the landowner; meaning: thanks to God for the blessing of this rain, which benefits me by causing my plants or my crops to grow.

The second part of the b'rakhah, "who does good," refers to the blessing God has given to other people; meaning: We give thanks to God for the blessing of rain, which benefits not only me but also all the people around me.

As one commentator points out, rain has no definitive boundary.⁴ It's not like rain falls on my yard but not on my neighbor's.

In addition, the benefit of rain is not limited exclusively to the place where it falls.

People who live in other areas also benefit indirectly because the rain that causes food and plants to grow in one community helps to feed people in other locations, too.

All of this is obvious when you stop to think about it.

But that's precisely the point. How often do we really stop to think about it?

The practice of saying the b'rakhah is a way to force us to be aware of the manifold blessings of rain.

In addition, the precise way in which the halakhah formulates this blessing is profound.

It's an acknowledgement, every time we experience rainfall, that we are part of something greater: a community of nature and of people whose existence all depend on the life-giving water that, thanks to the intricate wisdom of God's design, falls from the sky.

And even when that rain is directed to one particular area and not another, its benefits ripple well beyond that specific locale.

This brings us back to Moses' oratory.

"May my speech come down like rain...like droplets on the grass," he says.

Now that we know the halakhah about saying a blessing when we see rainfall, it might give us some insight into what Moses means by using this imagery.

Moses' words are, of course, Torah.

And we know that our tradition speaks about Torah as life-giving and life-sustaining:

Our sacred literature frequently compares Torah to things in nature that nourish life, like mother's milk, a tree of life, and water.

So, on one level, when Moses says, "Let my speech come down like rain...like droplets on the grass," he is expressing his hope that the wisdom of Torah will cause us to grow as human beings—spiritually, intellectually, morally, and emotionally. ...

And to flourish in our relationships with other people, with our communities, and with God.

But he's also saying more than that.

I think he's expressing the hope that the Torah that comes to us through our personal learning—like the rain that falls on our personal yard—will also benefit the people all around us—those whom we know and those whom we don't know, too.

That's because Torah is not only knowledge; it's a way of being in the world.

And studying Torah is not only about the transmission of information. More importantly, it's about the transformation of the person who learns it.

And if we receive it that way and let it transform us, the Torah that comes down to us will indeed not only impact us; it will impact every person, and every transaction, and every little corner of the world we touch.

As the sages say in the Talmud: When we follow the Torah and act honestly in our business, for example, or kindly and compassionately in our relationships, people will say, "That person studies Torah, and he or she is honest and kind and compassionate."⁵

And that will make the world a better place, and it will also reflect well on us, and on Torah, and on God.

And what's more, it will inspire the people who witness our ethical behavior to try to live that way as well.

That's the rainfall effect of Torah.

But it doesn't just happen.

In his explanation of the Tur, Rabbi Joseph Karo—who would go on to write the Shulchan Arukh—points out that we're only supposed to say the blessing for seeing the rain when enough rain has accumulated.

How do we know when that's happened? When a drop falls to the ground, and there's enough water already accumulated in a puddle that a splash of water jumps back up to greet the falling rain.⁶

This imagery, too, says something profound.

It says that the transformational power of Torah must be met by a willing recipient: one who, when the words of Torah rain down on them, will jump back up eagerly to greet it.

For Torah to be impactful, we have to be eager learners—open and ready to be transformed by our encounters with its wisdom.

If we are, then Moses' words will indeed fall like rain upon our willing hearts, and its benefits, too, will be unbounded—not only transforming who we are and how we live but positively impacting and inspiring the world around us, too.

And that is truly a blessing worthy of our gratitude:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, ha-tov v'ha-mayteev.

Blessed are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who is good and who does good.

1 Tur OH 218ff

2 Tur OH 221

3 According to the opinion of the Rosh (quoted by the Tur at OH 221:2), this is the blessing someone who owns land should say. One who does not own land says a different blessing.

4 See Ben Ish Chai, Deut. 32:2

5 See b. Yoma 85-86

6 Beit Yosef, OH 221:1