Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum — Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations”

King David & Akavish the Spider
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Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

Humans have a complex relationship with rain. Nature provides us with the water that sustains all life, but in the wrong season or in too great a quantity rain is a destructive and even deadly force. Jewish sources show this precarious balance and highlight our relationship with rain in all its forms. This unit examines rain in those texts, exploring how a traditional Jewish approach to rain can help us cultivate a deeper understanding of our relationship with rain and the environment today.

Let’s think about your associations and experiences with rain. Depending on where people live, their relationships with rain/water vary greatly. Some of you may have experienced drought, while others might have stories of flooding or hurricanes.

Ask:

1. Are there sounds, smells, or significant events that you associate with rain? Are these associations largely positive or negative?

Part One: Waiting for Rain (20 minutes)

“Water” is a poem by Wendell E. Berry (b. 1934), one of America’s foremost environmental poets and activists.


...Fear of dust in my mouth is always with me,
and I am the faithful husband of the rain,
I love the water of wells and springs
and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns.
I am a dry man whose thirst is praise
of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup.
My sweetness is to wake in the night
after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.

Ask:

1. Have you ever been thirsty? Have you ever been in a situation where you feared for lack of water?
2. What does it mean for the poet to say, “I am the faithful husband of the rain”? What images does this evoke for you?
3. Do the emotions in this poem resonate with you? Why or why not?
The poet has a very intense relationship with rain. A spouse or “husband” might be loyal, patient, and loving. Notice the tension between love of rain and fear of its absence, as well as the deep appreciation of the benefits brought by the rain.

Text #2A is an excerpt from the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ta’anit, the entire first chapter of which is dedicated to discussing the need for and impact of rain and how best to pray for it. Text #2B is the full Nishmat prayer which is referenced in the Talmud text.

Text #2A: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 6b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Abbahu said: From when does one recite a blessing over rain? From when the groom goes out to meet the bride, so that is, when there are puddles of water on the ground such that the water below, represented as the bride in this metaphor, is splashed from above by the raindrops, represented as the groom.

The Gemara asks: What blessing does one recite over rain? Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: We thank you, O Lord our God, for each and every drop that You have made fall for us. And Rabbi Yohanan concludes the blessing as follows: If our mouth were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with singing like the multitude of its waves, etc. And one continues with the formula of the nishmat prayer recited on Shabbat morning, until: May Your mercy not forsake us, O Lord our God, and You have not forsaken us. Blessed are You, O Lord, to Whom abundant thanksgivings are offered.


If our mouths were as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with jubilation as its myriad waves, if our lips were full of praise like the spacious heavens, and our eyes shone like the sun and moon, if our hands were outstretched like eagles of the sky, and our feet as swift as hinds — still we could not thank You enough, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, or bless Your name for even one of the thousand thousands and myriad myriads of favors You did for our ancestors and for us. You redeemed us from Egypt, Lord our God, and freed us from the house of bondage. In famine You nourished us; in times of plenty You sustained us. You delivered us from the sword, saved us from the plague, and spared us from serious and lasting illness. Until now Your mercies have helped us. Your love has not forsaken us.
A Time for Rain

Ask:

1. Look carefully at the language of this blessing over rain. What is God being thanked for in this blessing?
2. What imagery is used in Texts #2A and #2B, and why do you think these particular descriptions were chosen?
3. These texts describe a prayer of gratitude for rain. Have you ever responded to rain or another natural event with prayer?
4. How might offering this kind of blessing in response to rain shift our perception of nature?

Let’s appreciate the ways in which the Nishmat prayer recognizes the value of every single drop of rain. In fact, the rain provides a moment to stop and remember important moments of salvation throughout Jewish history.

The Nishmat prayer is traditionally recited on Shabbat and festivals as part of the morning liturgy. Rain, then, creates a sort of mini-holiday, in which we can pause and appreciate each drop as a gift from God, and then go beyond that to reflect on all the many triumphs in Jewish history.

The nature imagery within the prayer is full of movement (our tongues like waves, splashing raindrops, etc.). Take a few minutes to reflect on and react to the power of the imagery, and to compare the emotions evoked here with those you felt while reading Wendell Berry’s poem.

Each of these sources make it clear that while many take rain for granted, without it we cannot survive. What is true about rain is true about our relationship with the broader natural world; we forget to appreciate the resources we have, sometimes remembering only when those resources are endangered. However, while we do not always remember to stop and give thanks, we rarely forget to mourn when rain (or the lack of it) brings about destruction. Let’s take a moment to reflect on what a more mindful and appreciative stance towards nature might look like.

Part Two: The Day of the Rain (8 minutes)

Ask a participant to read Text #3 aloud.

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a–b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Abahu said: The day of rain is greater than the resurrection of the dead. The reason is that while the resurrection of the dead benefits only the righteous, rain benefits both the righteous and the wicked... Similarly, Rav Yehuda said: The day of the rains is as great as the day on which the Torah was given, as it is stated: “My doctrine [likhni] shall drop as the rain” (Deuteronomy 32:2), and lekah means nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: For I give you good doctrine [lekhah]; do not forsake My Torah” (Proverbs 4:2)... Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: The day of the rains is as great as the day on which the heavens and the earth were created...
Ask:

1. “The day of the rains” is compared to three distinct events: The resurrection of the dead, the giving of the Torah, and the creation of the world. What did or will each of these events contribute to the world? What is the significance of these comparisons?
2. What would you compare a “day of rain” to in your own life?

This text highlights how every aspect of life is truly dependent on having enough water. “The day of the rains” is compared to major events of the past, present, and future of Jewish life. The giving of the Torah was a major contribution to the spiritual sustenance of the Jewish people. “The day of the rains” is precious — a gift of life and growth. We should mark each day of rain with the same thankfulness with which we would mark the miracle of the Torah being given to Moses or the miracle of creation.

Perhaps most importantly, each of these analogies represents a gift that human beings possess. The balance of nature is a gift that we receive without doing anything to deserve it, and without giving anything back in return.

Part Three: Deserving Rain (22 minutes)

Text #4, from Deuteronomy, shifts the focus from rain as a gift to human interaction with nature, highlighting how we can “deserve” or preserve a positive balance within nature.


13 If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, 14 I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil — 15 I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle — and thus you shall eat your fill. 16 Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow down to them. 17 For the LORD’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.

Ask:

1. According to Deuteronomy, human behavior, whether in keeping or breaking commandments, brings about rain or drought. Who is punished for this behavior — the land or the people?
2. Do you think that human beings can deserve or merit rain? Why or why not?
3. What do you think the Torah means when it speaks about “rain in season”? When is the season for rain — and when is it not the season for rain?
Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers a commentary on Deuteronomy 11:17. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

**Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Introduction to Ta’anit”. Koren Talmud Bavli.**

The most common misfortune that should stir feelings of repentance is a lack of rain, and therefore most of the tractate [Ta’anit] deals with this issue. As stated in the Torah (Deuteronomy 11:17), a drought is a sign of God’s anger, as both a warning and a punishment. At a time of a dearth of rain, even more than with other disasters, one has no way to improve the situation other than by turning to God and praying. Furthermore, a lack of rain is not simply a local or temporary problem; it can bring catastrophe on the entire country.

Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that a lack of rain in the Bible is a sign of God’s anger, and that the presence or lack of rain can have ramifications on a much wider scale. While today some of us may not use the language of reward and punishment when speaking about rain and natural resources, it is still important to look at the impact of human behavior on the world around us. Let’s take a moment to discuss what steps humans can and should take in response to rain as a natural resource.

➤ Ask:

1. What are some examples of catastrophes that can affect an “entire country”?  
2. Natural disasters are not often caused by a single action from an individual. Instead, many actions by many individuals can have a “domino effect” that creates a much larger result. What are some positive actions each of us can take that will have a “positive” domino effect? (For example, not watering our lawns during a drought, or keeping drains and pipes cleared during the rainy season.)  
3. Water conservation, in its most basic sense, is conserving a finite amount of water. This often involves the individual sacrificing for the collective. In a time of drought we don’t water our lawns. But it can be difficult enough for individual people to change behaviors — think about how hard it is just to break a bad habit. What about changing the behavior of many people collectively — of an “entire country”? What would a communal change of behavior look like? How would the thankfulness or mindfulness of individuals impact the collective behavior?

Let’s think back to the earlier sources about the ways in which Judaism pushes us to be sensitive to the precarious balance that exists within the natural world. We are meant to be thankful for every drop of rain and appreciate it as a life-sustaining gift.

**Part Four: The Blessing of Rain** *(12 minutes)*

In the verses from Deuteronomy rain in its proper time is a sign of Divine favor. Texts #6 and #7 push us to think about the fine line between too much and enough, the careful timing, and all the other factors that determine how rain affects us as individuals and as a society.

➤ Ask participants to read Texts #6 and #7 in chavruta and consider the questions below the texts. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.
A Time for Rain


§ The mishna adds: In general, they cry out on account of any trouble that should not befall the community, a euphemism for trouble that may befall the community, except for an over-abundance of rain. Although too much rain may be disastrous, one does not cry out over it, because rain is a sign of a blessing.

The mishna relates: An incident occurred in which the people said to Honi HaMe’aggel: Pray that rain should fall. He said to them: Go out and bring in the clay ovens used to roast the Paschal lambs, so that they will not dissolve in the water, as torrential rains are certain to fall. He prayed, and no rain fell at all.

What did he do? He drew a circle on the ground and stood inside it and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children and answer their prayers for rain.

Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. He said: I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves with enough water to last the entire year. Rain began to fall furiously. He said: I did not ask for this damaging rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.

Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner but continued unabated, filling the city with water until all of the Jews exited the residential areas of Jerusalem and went to the Temple Mount due to the rain. They came and said to him: Just as you prayed over the rains that they should fall, so too, pray that they should stop. He said to them: Go out and see if the Claimants’ Stone, a large stone located in the city, upon which proclamations would be posted with regard to lost and found articles, has been washed away.

In other words, if the water has not obliterated the Claimants’ Stone, it is not yet appropriate to pray for the rain to cease.

Shimon ben Shetah, the Nasi of the Sanhedrin at the time, relayed to Honi HaMe’aggel: Were you not Honi, I would have decreed that you be ostracized, but what can I do to you? You nag [mitachat] God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding without reprimand. After all, rain fell as you requested. About you, the verse states: “Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice” (Proverbs 23:25).
Text #7: Conclusion of Prayer for Rain. Recited on Shemini Atzeret. Translation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the Koren Mahzor.

For You, Lord our God,
Make the wind blow and the rain fall.
For blessing, and not for curse. Amen.
For life, and not for death. Amen.
For plenty, and not for scarcity. Amen.

Questions for chavruta discussion:

1. Under what circumstances is rain a curse? When does it cause scarcity or death?
2. The last three lines of the prayer seem to be variations on the same phrase. What do the similarities and differences between these lines tell us?
3. What does it mean to want just enough rain?

Bring the group back together to discuss these questions.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

The poem by Wendell Berry and the first section of Tractate Ta’anit place the human being in relationship to rain and nature as a whole. We are the grateful supplicants, bound to nature, and we express gratitude for each and every drop of rain. The second source from Ta’anit equates rain to a gift — one which we can never fully deserve and which provides physical and spiritual sustenance, as well as hope for the future. In contrast, the verses in Deuteronomy and the Rabbi Steinsaltz commentary paint a picture in which human behavior is the cause of rain or the lack thereof. They also remind us of the importance of rain in the right time. The concluding prayers remind us that water is a matter of life and death — something not to be taken lightly. It affects all of us. Even if our actions do not actually affect rainfall, we must ensure that we respect and care for resources that are available. This includes being grateful for what we have, making more thoughtful choices, and taking actions to conserve water and nature more generally.

Ask:

1. We’ve learned that poetry, prayer and study are all ways of being more mindful and appreciative of the natural world. What will/can you do in your life to be more thankful for rain?
Part One: Waiting for Rain


...Fear of dust in my mouth is always with me, and I am the faithful husband of the rain, I love the water of wells and springs and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns. I am a dry man whose thirst is praise of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup. My sweetness is to wake in the night after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.

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The Gemara asks: What blessing does one recite over rain? Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: We thank you, O Lord our God, for each and every drop that You have made fall for us. And Rabbi Yohanan concludes the blessing as follows: If our mouth was as full of song as the sea, and our tongue with singing like the multitude of its waves, etc. And one continues with the formula of the nishmat prayer recited on Shabbat morning, until: May Your mercy not forsake us, O Lord our God, and You have not forsaken us. Blessed are You, O Lord, to Whom abundant thanksgivings are offered.


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שָׁאַתָּה הוּא א' אֱֹלֹהֶנָּה
מַשִּׁיב הָרוּחַ וּמַשֵּׁיב הַגָּשֶׁם
לֶבַרְכָּה וְלֹא לַקְלָלָה. אָמֵן
לְחַיִּים וְלֹא לְמָוֶת. אָמֵן
לְשֹׂבַע וְלֹא לְרָזוֹן. אָמֵן