



## **SERMON ROSH HASHANAH: WATER**

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 26 September 2022  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

The skin cracks like a pod.  
There never is enough water.

Imagine the drip of it,  
the small splash, echo  
in a tin mug,  
the voice of a kindly god.

Sometimes, the sudden rush  
of fortune. The municipal pipe bursts,  
silver crashes to the ground  
and the flow has found  
a roar of tongues. From the huts,  
a congregation: every man woman  
child for streets around  
butts in, with pots,  
brass, copper, aluminium,  
plastic buckets,  
frantic hands,

and naked children  
screaming in the liquid sun,  
their highlights polished to perfection,  
flashing light,  
as the blessing sings  
over their small bones.



- 1 That poem, by the Pakistani-Glaswegian poet Imtiaz Dharker,<sup>a</sup> is an incredibly vivid description of the importance of water to the life, not just of individuals, but of the community.
  
- 2 The theme of water trickles through Rosh Hashanah. “My flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”<sup>b</sup> “Rain waters the earth, making it blossom and bear fruit.”<sup>c</sup> “Hear God’s voice above the waters!”<sup>d</sup>
  
- 3 The absence of water in the story of the binding of Isaac fuels the sacrificial fire which drives the action;<sup>e</sup> in other years, we read the story of Hagar in the wilderness, hopelessly abandoning her parched son only to be saved, at the last minute, by a miraculous well.<sup>f</sup>
  
- 4 The theme of water trickles through our world today as well – and it is only a trickle. This summer just gone, the National Infrastructure Committee warned<sup>g</sup> that the UK will face regular droughts by 2030, with people queuing for bottled water off the



back of lorries. But at least we'd have the opportunity to queue for bottled water. Figures from Unicef show that by then – by 2030 – over 700 million people could be displaced by intense water scarcity.<sup>h</sup> Food supplies will be hit by lack of irrigation,<sup>i</sup> and the geostrategist Brahma Chellaney raises the prospect of “water warriors, ready to spill blood to control or shield sources of supply”.<sup>j</sup>

5 According to the Talmud, drought is a punishment – a punishment, moreover, imposed should we fail to start to make proper repentance each Rosh Hashanah.<sup>k</sup>

6 This is theologically very challenging. Those most affected by droughts are, inevitably, the weakest and most defenceless members of humanity. Children. Women. Ethnic minorities. Developing nations. As Brahma Chellaney says: “The poorest, most vulnerable people tend to be at the receiving end.”<sup>l</sup> The very fact that a legal ‘right to water’<sup>m</sup> is being postulated is proof that water shortages hit the powerless rather than the powerful: the privileged and the secure don’t need new rights in order to survive. So how



can we be comfortable with a theology which argues that the victimisation and degradation of these vulnerable people is a punishment from God?

7 Yet, actually, we have to recognise the inconvenient truth that, on a macro level, droughts and the inequitable distribution of potable water across the globe is entirely influenced by, and down to, human actions. Humanity operates as a species, not as a disconnected series of individuals, and as a species it is indeed our bad behaviour and reckless disregard for the environment which led to the crisis we are currently facing. Our confessions at this season are in the plural – **אֲשַׁמְנוּ**, 'we have sinned' – but so too is our water. **מַיִם**, water, is a plural noun.

8 Perhaps it is time to cast off the theologically hideous narrative that humanity is afflicted as a direct punishment from above, and instead reflect that our wrongs inevitably wreak their toll on people who are weaker than we are. Theft is wrong not because it's bad for the thief, but because it's bad for the victim; the thief may go



undetected and unpunished, but even so the impact of their wrong will be felt. Their victim suffers despite having done nothing wrong. So too, those of us in developed countries where we can afford lawn-sprinklers and dripping taps – for whom a burst pipe is an aggravation rather than an enormously exciting, once-in-a-lifetime municipal event – do the sinning, and our fellow but less fortunate human beings do the suffering.

- 9 Nobody is weaker than somebody without water. And they are unlikely to be saved by a miraculous well opening up next to them. But, again, true teshuvah, true repentance, operates on that plural, macro level – like water itself. We don't need to rely on a miracle. Instead, we need to make amends. Cut down our own water usage. Fix dripping taps. Get this congregation to Eco-Synagogue gold standard. Support development charities and push for green legislation.
- 10 We can create our own miraculous wells; that will be the truest form of teshuvah that there is. **בן יהי רצון**, may this be God's will.



<sup>a</sup> Imtiaz Dharker. “Blessing” in *Postcards from God* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 1997): 45.

<sup>b</sup> *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*: 98.

<sup>c</sup> Ibid: 130.

<sup>d</sup> Ibid: 136.

<sup>e</sup> Genesis 22:6–7

<sup>f</sup> Genesis 21:14ff; Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 30

<sup>g</sup> Sandra Laville, Fiona Harvey and Robin McKie. “Act now on water or face emergency queues on the streets, UK warned”, *The Guardian* (31 July 2022)

<sup>h</sup> Unicef. “Water scarcity” (undated):  
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20220801130727/https://www.unicef.org/wash/water-scarcity>>

<sup>i</sup> Laville, Harvey and McKie: *ibid.*

<sup>j</sup> Brahma Chellaney. *Water, Peace and War: confronting the global water crisis* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013): 162.

<sup>k</sup> y.Rosh Hashanah 1:3, 57b

<sup>l</sup> Chellaney, *ibid.*: 161–162.

<sup>m</sup> United Nations General Assembly resolution 64/292 (28 July 2010)