

There are many connoisseurs who appreciate a good bottle and a fine label. With great care they taste and consider: Is there a rocky undertone in the nose, a subtle touch of bitterness in the mouth? Are the taste buds left with a soft alkaline feel, or a slightly sweet aftertaste? How does its olfactory bouquet rate? In its sparkling form, what terms would one use to describe its melody -- crackling or fizzing?

We're not talking about oenophiles here, those who drink wine with a discerning palate (or at least think they do). No the beverage I'm referring to is plain old H₂O, better known by its generic brand name of water. I'm not sure whether the proper term is aquaphile, but there are folks out there who have developed a vocabulary and a literature of tasting water, an etiquette for how it should be served and at what temperature, even a scale by which to rate beverages, whether still or sparkling. In places as distant from one another as Newport, Rhode Island, Toulouse, France, and Tokyo, Japan, there are aqua bars serving hundreds of brands of bottled water from around the world. Of course, if a whole bottle is too much, they do offer select waters by the glass for as little as \$5 . . . served with lemon, orange, or grape zest, what could be more relaxing at day's end than a glass of Zephyrhills reserve '04, crisp and balanced with just a hint of dry wetness (or is that wet dryness)?

I'm not sure that the proprietors of the world's aqua bars realize that Sukkot began last night. If they knew about the holiday, they surely would offer specials throughout the week, for more than any other festival, Sukkot is all about water -- as the Mishnah teaches, “בחג נדונין על המים” -- On Sukkot we are judged for water” (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:2). Given that Israel's narrow window for rainfall begins around the harvest and ends in early spring, it is not surprising that our ancestors considered this season the most propitious time to pray for rain.

Water is connected to virtually every observance of Sukkot. Each day of Sukkot we recite *hoshanot*, hymns that begin with the words, *hosha na*, meaning “save us.” As we chant these hymns after the Musaf service, on every day of the holiday except Shabbat we carry *lulav* and *etrog* and make a circuit around the sanctuary. This ritual harkens back to Temple times, and was but part of an elaborate holiday ritual that also included *Simhat Beit Ha-sho'eivah*, a joyous ceremony that accompanied a special water libation performed throughout the holiday. On *Shemini Atzeret*, we include in our services, *Tefillat Geshem*, a supplication for rain written by the Eleazar Kalir, the great liturgical poet of the early Middle Ages. In each of the poem's six stanzas, we recall righteous acts

relating to water performed by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and the twelve tribes -- punctuated with the plea **אל תמנע מים** -- “Please do not withhold water!”

The four species of the holiday -- like all flora -- are dependent upon water. The *lulav*, taken from the fronds of the date palm, grow naturally in oases, islands of irrigation in the larger desert. The Torah refers specifically to the *aravot* as **ערבי נחל**, willows of the brook, which are found in abundance along the banks of the Jordan River.

But perhaps the most puzzling connection between water and the festival centers around the Sukkah itself. For obvious reasons, rain is an enemy of celebrating the holiday in the *Sukkah*. Jewish Law releases us from eating in the Sukkah in the event of a downpour; even on the first night of the festival, when there is a special obligation to eat in the Sukkah, we may limit ourselves to *Kiddush* and *Motzi* outside, and then enjoy the rest of our meal indoors. Indeed, the *Shulkhan Arukh* goes so far to call a person who opts for a wet and miserable Sukkah experience instead of going inside an ignomarus. He receives no reward for such foolish piety, and should he recite the benediction **לישב בסוכה**, “. . . Who has commanded us to dwell in the *Sukkah*, it is considered a blessing made in vain.

Thus far it all makes perfect sense. If the Sukkah is a place of rejoicing, it's easy to understand why Jewish Law permits us to move our celebration indoors in case of inclement weather. Yet one of the hallmarks of a kosher Sukkah, is the absence of a waterproof ceiling. The ability of rain to penetrate the *sekhakh*, the natural roofing material of the booth, constitutes a basic requirement of a valid Sukkah. How strange that the one weather condition that drives us out of the Sukkah is also the very quality that makes the structure fit for ritual use in the first place!

Yet not so strange if we consider the meaning of Sukkot on a metaphorical level. This festival, more than any other, bids us to keenly contemplate the natural world in which we live. We leave the seeming permanence of our dwelling places, the comfort of having a roof over our heads, and exchange our complacency for the uncertainty of a natural world over which we do not exert ultimate control. Whether we use the pine branches common to northern climes or the palmetto found in more southerly latitudes, the shelter we create for ourselves is imperfect and vulnerable to the elements.

We often think Tu b'Shevat the quintessential celebration of Jewish environmentalism. Yet it is Sukkot that builds into its very fabric the folly of falling prey to our own hubris. On a holiday so focused on water, sitting in a booth so susceptible to rain, it is certainly appropriate to consider the religious value of a substance so basic to human life.

Judaism is wet all over. Every day of the year we include a reference to rain or dew in the *Amidah* prayer. We know the role that water played for our ancestors, individually and collectively. Abraham and the Philistine king Abimelekh fight over access to wells; Eliezer discovers a wife for Isaac at a well, Jacob and Moses also meet their spouses at local watering holes. Our ancestors pass through *Yam Suf*, the Sea of Reeds and leave bondage behind. During their sojourn desert, the dearth of water leads, at times, to conflict and even collision between the people, Moses and God. In order to be ritually fit, a *mikveh* must contain a certain proportion of naturally collected water. Not surprisingly, Torah is often called **מקור מים חיים** -- a source of living water.

There are few resources more basic to life than water, yet there are few substances we take more for granted. Perhaps if more of us moved out of the complacency in which we ordinarily dwell, and took time to live in the Sukkah of environmental reality, we might realize the magnitude of the danger we are facing.

A little more than a week ago, the *New York Times* ran a series of articles on the daunting challenges faced by India. As this Asian nation grows by leaps and bounds, it is facing enormous water shortages as demand far exceeds supply. Meanwhile, water pollution in India has reached epic proportion. Consider the Yamuna River, which passes through the metropolis of New Delhi and its 16 million residents. Nearly half of the city's residents remain unconnected to a modern sewer system. Each day, 950 million gallons of human detritus are dumped in the Yamuna each day, and by the time the river leaves city limits, it is a noxious black color, with methane bubbles gurgling to the surface and raw sewage floating on top. It is hardly surprising that the bacterial limit of the water is 100,000 times the limit deemed safe for bathing, let alone drinking. Yet downstream from New Delhi, bathe and drink from the Yamuna they do.

Ah, well, that sort of thing only happens in India and China, surely we're immune from such environmental horrors. Or not. According to its National Water Quality Inventory Report, the

Environmental Protection Agency noted that 39% of America's streams and rivers have been impaired by pollution or habitat degradation; another 8% are imminently threatened. Would you eat fish from the St. John's River? How about the sickening algae blooms that periodically blight the water that defines us as "River City," a result in large measure of fertilizer run-off from our city's well-manicured lawns. Yes, our water is safe . . . but stay away from fresh spinach -- it might have been irrigated with water contaminated with e-coli from cattle farms. Of course our water is safe . . . but the State Department of Health in Florida has a 24-page advisory regarding the safe limits of consumption for virtually every species of fresh and saltwater fish. Red Snapper isn't bad, you can eat two portion a week without fear. If you're planning to get pregnant or are a child, no more than one serving of Yellowfin tuna per month, one serving of grouper month, and no more than one portion of Bluefish per month. If you're a lover of King Mackerel, well, regardless of who you are, the health department advises we not eat any . . . period.

But of course water pollution is only part of the issue. The inconvenient truth of climate change has caused a surfeit of water in some places, an absolute dearth of it in others. In one corner of the world drought cripples Zambia, in another water covers New Orleans. Yes, there are scientists who tell us that the melting of the polar ice caps mean nothing, or that greenhouse gases are irrelevant to global warming. Of course, there were scientists who once told us that DDT was the next best thing to sliced bread, and other researchers who reassured us that lung cancer had nothing to do with smoking. Increasingly, science -- non-partisan, objective and verifiable -- has meticulously documented the negative human impact on our climate . . . yet many continue to hem-and-haw, equivocate and debate. We are tempted to wait and see what happens, and if the quality of life on earth is irreparably damaged for our grandchildren, I know that we'll apologize to them profusely.

Yet America steadfastly refuses to leave the false security of its house and dwell for a little while in the fragile ecosystem of the Sukkah. The city may tell me not to water my lawn or to do so only at certain times of day, but Goshdarnit, we're Americans and this is a free country. A few courageously, if quietly, suggest that given concerns about global warming -- not to mention dependence on foreign oil from warm and fuzzy countries such as Saudi Arabia and Venezuela -- maybe we should go easy on buying Hummers, but we know our rights . . .

Yet there are men and women of religious conviction -- across the political spectrum -- who are beginning to realize that ecology isn't primarily a political issue, but a religious one. Last October, many high profile leaders of the Christian right adopted an "Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," which stated, "We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part."

Whatever our theological differences, the religious issue that has begun to motivate the Christian right to speak out in favor of environmental sensitivity, impels as Jews to do the same. God placed humanity here, in the words of the Torah "לעבדה ולשמרה" -- to till and tend the earth, not to exploit the planet or treat it as an enemy to be plundered. If we accept a cosmology which teaches, as the Psalmist put it, "לה' הארץ ומלאה", the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, we are bound to acknowledge God's hand in the work of creation. It is simply impossible to honor God as the world's maker, yet demonstrate wanton and utter disregard for the Eternal's masterful handiwork.

Two weeks ago tomorrow we stood outside and performed *Tashlikh*, casting bread into the water to symbolize the sins we hope will be carried out of sight and away from us forever. On Sukkot, however, we read from *Kohelet*, the book of *Ecclesiastes*, which offers a different message: "שלח לחמך על פני המים כי ברב הימים תמצאנו" -- Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it" (11:1). What will we cast upon the waters? Protective legislation and keen appreciation for the divine gift of water, or pollutants like Mercury and PCBs? Will we indifferently cast garbage into our rivers and oil slicks upon our shores, or strive instead to preserve the well-being of our waters?. And should our grandchildren cast their rods into the pounding surf of the ocean, or the placid surface of a lake, will catch toxic and misshapen fish, or healthy creatures of the deep? When it comes to this world, there is a limit to *Tashlikh*, and only so many sins of pollution which the seas will be able to bear. Yes, *Ecclesiastes* is right. What we cast upon our waters today *shall* return tomorrow -- whether to sustain our children, or God forbid, to haunt and poison them. And as we continue to dwell in the only home we'll ever have -- God's fragile, beautiful and miraculous Sukkah we call the earth -- may us recall that we do not determine when the rain will fall, but whether, in falling, it shall contaminate or cleanse, blight us or bless us. *Hosha na*. Please save us, O Lord, above all from ourselves.