

Dvar Torah Shmini Atzeret, Leffell School Newsletter

How seriously do we take our prayers? Do we actually believe that what we say matters? The *Geshem* “prayer” on *Shmini Atzeret* suggests that for the rabbis, at least, our prayers might be even more powerful than we might imagine.

On *Shmini Atzeret*, this coming Monday morning, the cantor will don a *kittel* (the white robe associated with Yom Kippur) and sing the beginning of Musaf in the tunes of Yom Kippur, adding a liturgical poem known simply as “*Geshem*”: Rain. At that moment, we will add the line to the Amidah: *mashiv haruach umorid hagashem*.

The timing of this line forms a fascinating debate in Mishnah Taanit, bringing with it a radical idea about the power of our own prayers. “From when do we start to mention the rain in our Amidah?” According to Rabbi Eliezer, we start to say “*mashiv haruach*” on the first day of Sukkot, while Rabbi Yehoshua places it at the end of Sukkot. When R. Yehoshua challenges R. Eliezer about potentially causing it to rain in the Sukkah, R. Eliezer answers, “I’m just mentioning rain. I won’t actually ask for rain until later in the season (with *v’ten tal umatar*, which we add on December 4).”

What an amazing discussion! The rabbis worry about asking for rain at the wrong moment for fear it will ruin the holiday. Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer both believe that they need to be so cautious with their words because, for them, *the prayers actually work*. Rabbi Eliezer even distinguishes between a mention and an actual “ask,” knowing that actually asking might have even more power than just a mention.

Long before we knew about the human power to affect the weather, the rabbis of the mishnah believed in *the human power to affect God*, that our prayers make a difference in the fate of the world. We may envy the certainty with which the ancients directed their prayers, but we have to ask ourselves, what would happen if we acted as if we believed so fully? When is the last time we prayed as though our requests would be received instantaneously?

Recent years have taught us not to be glib about the rain; we know too much about its capacity to cause danger and calamity. It is therefore no small thing to pray, as we will on *Shmini Atzeret*, that in the right time, God will bring just the right amount of rain-- a rain that is “*l’vracha v’lo l’klalah*,” for a blessing and not for a curse. Perhaps we might imagine that just as we pray for rain, we can pray for any of our hearts’ desires in the same way. We can pray as if our words matter deeply, as if we have the power to actually change the fate of the world, in the right time. “*L’vracha v’lo l’klalah*,” for a blessing and not for a curse. Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!