

Jonathan Wyn Schofer's "Drought"
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Confronting Vulnerability, from which "Drought" is taken, applies the specialized tools of rabbinic studies to develop thought-provoking interpretations of late ancient rabbinic texts that were intended for the ethical instruction of students. Schofer regards these texts as troubling in certain respects; some of the rabbis' views offend contemporary sensibilities. Yet he regards these texts also as honest and humanizing. This material is worth pondering, he thinks, not only for what it reveals about a formative period in the history of Jewish law and ethics, but also for what it might contribute to our own ethical reflection, most notably to the way we think about goodness, ethical instruction, and character formation.

"Drought" attends to a selection of amoraic narratives. It reveals a world that will seem both strange and strangely familiar to many of us. In this world, water from the Deep regularly flows up and into streams and other waterways. In time, this water evaporates. Eventually, it returns to the earth in the form of rain. If the rain is plentiful, it restores the water level of the Deep, and the cycle continues. According to the rabbis, God controls this cycle. God sometimes adjusts the flow of rain in an effort to adjust the attitudes and behavior of the people. God opens the spigot (but not so far as to cause flooding) as an encouragement and a reward for virtue. God closes the spigot as a punishment for hard-heartedness and sin. Once God closes the spigot, causing the land to become parched, someone needs to do something special to persuade God to re-open it: A rabbi needs to say prayers or offer compelling arguments to God; select individuals need to fast or engage in other rituals aimed at evoking God's mercy; or someone needs to demonstrate virtue, say, by showing compassion toward a person who is especially vulnerable. It is the last strategy that interests me here.

Abundant rain, and the generous flow of water in general, are of obvious importance for life. The body and every living thing on which the body depends are composed in part of water and require the regular intake of water. Moreover, many life-sustaining exchanges are facilitated by water. For this reason water is a good symbol for compassion. According to Genesis Rabbah, “*Good is YHWH to all, and He gives parts of His compassion to all creatures*” (118). Humans thrive when they open themselves to this compassion, are replenished by it, extend it generously to others, and receive the compassion of others in turn.

God appears in certain rabbinic narratives not only as the first cause of compassion, but also as a teacher of compassion. The rabbis suggest that God sometimes withholds God’s compassion in order to challenge the people to become more effective agents of compassion themselves. More precisely, God withholds certain *expressions* of compassion, such as the rain that is needed by the plants that are part of the human food chain. God sometimes allows the people to become extremely uncomfortable in order to awaken them to the ethical deprivation that is draining the life out of their relationships. So often, it is a drought of the heart that causes their problems, including their water deprivation. A lack of compassion can cause people to behave in ways that keep water resources in the hands of a greedy few. It can cause people senselessly to ruin resources for future generations. Today we know that it can even cause people to act in ways that, over time, upset the normal processes of climate change, so that some parts of the globe become flooded with water while other parts become desertified.¹

In teaching their students not to blame *God* for the sorry state of the world, not to wait for *God* to fix things, but to take responsibility for increasing the flow of compassion in their communities, the rabbis bring to my mind the words of Audre Lorde. In “Man Child,” which addresses the challenges of raising a black boy in a racist America, Lorde says that one of her most important tasks as a mother is to

¹ See the NASA website, “Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet,” <http://climate.nasa.gov/>.

teach her son to feel his own emotions: “I do not exist to do his feeling for him.”² Compassion is not a matter of feeling only, but it does require being moved by the suffering of others and by our perception of their plight, and moving ourselves to act so as to alleviate their suffering. Listening to the rabbis, and hearing the echo of Lorde’s voice, the rabbis seem to be saying to their young male students: “God does not exist to feel your compassion for you. Nor does God exist to rescue you from the consequences of your lack of compassion. Cultivate your emotional and moral lives, *soften your hearts*, and help the other people in your communities to do the same.”

Like the students to whom these teachings were originally addressed, we are vulnerable to countless factors that can injure us, corrupt us from within, and alienate us from others. The best way to confront this vulnerability is not to deny it or steel ourselves against it, but rather to become more supple in relation to it. The best response is to practice compassion toward ourselves and each other. As Rabbi Tanhuma says, “My children, be filled with compassion for each other, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will be filled with compassion for you” (119). This is not simply a carrot that Tanhuma holds out to his students: Do this, and you will be rewarded. It is a statement of the way things (still) work: Follow the way of compassion and you will experience the refreshing, regenerative power of God.

Some people act in generous ways, but their actions do not reflect a generosity of spirit. They seek to follow the duties of the limbs, but not the duties of the heart.³ Schofer’s analyses reveal that the amoraim took special care to insure that their students became good men, and not simply men who behave well. With Schofer’s expert guidance, we can learn a lot from the rabbis’ teachings.

² Audre Lorde, “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response,” *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Cal.: Crossing Press, 1984), 77.

³ Bahya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).