

“Ordinary Miracles and Beyond: A Response to Jonathan Schofer’s ‘Drought’”

Thomas A. Lewis
Department of Religious Studies
Brown University
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In the scholarly discourse of religious ethics today, drought is an unexpected topic. Chapter 4 of Jonathan Schofer’s *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* examines drought and rainfall as crucial sites for analyzing human vulnerability and virtue in rabbinic texts. Like the book as a whole, the chapter takes up the daunting task of connecting late ancient rabbinic ethical instruction to contemporary discussions in religious ethics. While drought and rain are unusual topics today, Schofer’s engagement grows out of and extends widespread recent emphasis on the importance of accounts of the human subject to ethics—as in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Bernard Williams. *Confronting Vulnerability* focuses on multiple, concrete dimensions of human vulnerability, particularly vulnerabilities of our bodies. Thus, although central concerns motivating the project emerge from discussions around virtue and embodiment that have been central to much recent work in religious ethics, Schofer extends our grappling with these issues in fascinating new directions.

Though I am not a scholar of rabbinic materials, reading Schofer’s analysis of multiple rabbinic discussions of drought in relation to ethics stimulates multiple responses. I focus here on three points. Schofer’s careful attention to the multiple themes raised by the passages makes an overview impossible. A recurrent and striking motif, however, brings the relatively extreme events of drought and the sudden breaking of the drought into relation with ordinary virtue. Although at one level rain is provided by God’s miraculous activity, God’s intervention is in key cases prompted neither by the usual “ritual responses” (135) nor by the extraordinary activity of an individual. Though proper ritual performances are part of the story, they are frequently less central than ethical matters. Specifically, divine intervention is prompted by individuals’ and/or community’s acting out of ordinary virtues—“humility, compassion, solidarity, receptiveness, and generosity” (137)—as well as “attention to tithes, caring for vulnerable women, work obligations, modesty, and others” (125). Several of these texts thus highlight the importance of ordinary virtue more than divine intervention itself. Although they suggest how extraordinary even ordinary virtue is, they nonetheless exhort us to act as we already know we should but often fail to do.

To appreciate this point, however, one must keep in mind Schofer’s pervasive attention to the pedagogical function of many rabbinic narratives. In Schofer’s analysis, these narratives frequently tell us less about God’s character than about how we human beings should act. As in cases where seemingly minor transgressions or virtuous acts generate dramatic responses from God (122-25 and 130-32), the point is the importance of attention to even seemingly minor acts on our part. If we fail to appreciate their context and pedagogical function, however, such passages easily suggest a petty and capricious God.

At the same time—and this is my second point—Schofer’s focus on these materials brings to our attention concerns that too often, too easily slip below the radar of much scholarly discourse in religious ethics. Water scarcity is a relatively insignificant or at least distant threat to most of us who teach and write about ethics in North America. Even as we talk about embodiment, we rarely attend to matters as plain as rain. As Schofer notes, however, our insulation from such threats relates not simply to temporal distance from the rabbis but also to contemporary global inequality. Recent events in Somalia—where drought has contributed to the hunger and displacement of over ten million people, as well as widespread death, particularly among the most vulnerable—painfully highlight that rain continues to be a matter of life and death for many people around the world today. Drought matters for ethics today just as much as it did for late-ancient peoples.

Lastly, the case of Somalia also draws attention to human contributions to water scarcity and its impact. We see this not only in the way that horrific political conflicts in Somalia dramatically augment the impact of drought but also in human contributions to global climate change (particularly by those who consume the most resources). The latter of these considerations suggest that our good (or bad) behavior may contribute directly to rainfall or drought—without the mediation by God posited in the rabbinic materials. Perhaps more significantly, however, the international context of the problem of global warming suggests that attention to virtue alone may be insufficient to respond to the problems. While Schofer specifically notes rabbinic attention to both “communal and individual virtue” (126), the texts analyzed offer little indication of a notion of a virtuous community or collective that is distinct from a group of virtuous individuals. Moreover, even communal virtue seems quite different from the kind of structural, systematic analysis called for by a range of modern thinkers, from G. W. F. Hegel to recent work by liberation theologians. Despite their differences, such thinkers maintain that ethical action requires attention to structures of injustice and their alternatives, not simply the vices of individuals.

Schofer’s examination of contemporary concerns about virtue and embodiment in a late-ancient context brings to our attention issues that are simultaneously current and too often neglected in religious ethics. A focus on late-ancient discussions of drought and rain-making thus highlights under-appreciated implications of a turn to virtue and embodiment while also suggesting the limits of a focus on virtue for confronting complex contemporary problems. Confronting drought today may require something other, perhaps more, than the ordinary miracle that is virtue.