

FOUR

Drought

What is the fundamental relation between humans and nature? Contemporary Western answers may center on human domination, use, responsibility, care, value, or celebration of nature. They may also invoke nature's instrumental value, intrinsic value, rights, or connection to the divine. This chapter highlights human dependence upon the environment and related vulnerabilities. I write at a time when this vulnerability is highly visible. Climate change, earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes raise pressing issues. Problems surrounding water are prominent and include droughts and floods, the drying of rivers and aquifers, and the impacts of dams and hydraulic engineering. In management of water, ecological issues are closely tied with social and political issues including land ownership, urban and regional planning, and the power to drill, drain, contain, purify, and pollute.¹

Late ancient rabbinic texts, and the biblical sources that inspire rabbis, most fully explore relations between humans and nature through the topic of rainfall. Humans as animals need to eat and drink. This feature of embodiment makes us vulnerable to anything that prevents access to nourishment, such as drought. I focus on narratives that draw upon responses to drought and convey ethical instruction. These narratives do not present an environmental ethic, or even a proto-environmental ethic. Rather, the

1. Major influences on my thinking about nature, politics, and ethics are Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 117–204; and the dated but still important Gorz, *Ecology as Politics*. A brief survey of environmental ethics is Taylor, "Environmental Ethics." Accounts of Judaism and environmental ethics include Tirosh-Samuelson, *Judaism and Ecology*, esp. 61–92 on late ancient rabbinic views; Yaffe, *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*. Contemporary issues surrounding water are stressed in Nash, "Consuming Interests."

stories portray humans as deeply grounded in their surroundings and the cycles of nature, and they set out ideals for day-to-day interpersonal relations given vulnerabilities to the environment.

In modern Jewish and Christian environmental ethics, a very influential biblical verse states that God placed Adam “in the Garden of Eden, to work it and tend it” (Gen. 2:15). This scene is a primary inspiration for the notion of “stewardship”: God is the owner of the created world, and humans are responsible for looking after the earth and for conserving natural resources as divine gifts.² This chapter considers themes that are far more pervasive than stewardship in ancient Israelite and classical rabbinic sources, and I begin with a rabbinic commentary upon a prior verse in Genesis 2. Just before the creation of Adam, the Bible presents a distinct connection between earth, rainfall, and human beings:

. . . no shrub of the field was yet on the earth, and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not set rain upon the earth, and there was no human to work the soil. (Gen. 2:5)

Genesis Rabbah asserts a strong link between the three:

Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai said: Three things are weighed equally, and they are earth (אֶרֶץ), humans (אָדָם), and rain (מָטָר).

Rabbi Levi bar Hiyata said: The three of them are written with three letters, to teach you that without earth there would be no rain, and without rain there would be no earth, and without the two of them there would be no humans. (Gen. Rab. 13:3)³

The following passages include a tribute to rain. Rain gathers exiles, unites peoples of different cultures, and is valued with the messianic resurrection of the dead and even the entire work of creation. (Gen. Rab. 13: 4–6)

In ancient Israel and later Roman Palestine, rain is essential for agriculture and the source of fertility, growth, nourishment, and wealth (in contrast with ancient Egypt, where flooding of the Nile enables irrigation). Drought, by contrast, brings barrenness, death, weakness, and poverty. Passages in the Hebrew Bible portray the Israelite God in the role of a rain deity. Perhaps the most influential of these texts in later Judaism is Deuter-

2. Bakken, “Stewardship”; Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought*, 76.

3. Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 115; for an analysis of related material in Gen. Rab. 13:13, see Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 107–108.

onomy 11:13–17: late ancient rabbis as well as many other observant Jews through history are to recite these verses each evening and each morning as part of the Shema. This passage connects divine control of rain and human need for food, inspiring listeners to observe God's commandments:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I command you this day, to love YHWH your God and serve him with all your heart and soul,

I will give you rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather your grain, your wine and oil.

I will give grass in the fields for your cattle and you shall eat and be satiated.

Beware lest your heart be seduced, and you turn away to serve other gods and bow to them.

For YHWH's anger will flare up against you, and he will shut up the skies and there will be no rain and the land will not yield its produce; and you will perish quickly from the good land that YHWH is giving you. (Deuteronomy 11:13–17)

These words link covenantal loyalty (loving the God of Israel and observing His commandments) with divine gift giving (the verb “to give” appears three times: twice the giver is God, and once the giver is the earth). The passage sets out concrete connections between human action, God's response, rainfall, and human bodily needs. If Israelites observe the commandments, God gives rain that enables the production of grain, wine, oil, and cattle, so humans will “eat and be satisfied.” If Israelites do not observe the commandments, God will be angry and withhold rain, so there will be no produce, and they will “perish quickly.”⁴

Argument and Major Themes

A large cluster of rabbinic prayers, rituals, and communal fasts develop the idea that God's justice conditions rainfall. Rainfall is likely the most

4. I follow the translation and comments of Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 430, 433–434, 446–448; also Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 113–114; Tabory, “Prayers and Berakot,” 296–297; Anderson, *Sin*, 181–182. Note that Deut. 11:10–12 characterizes Israel as a region particularly dependent upon rain. The importance of Deut. 11:13–17 and general conceptions of divine justice for Jewish understanding are nature are discussed in Tirosh-Samuels, *Judaism and Ecology*, 179–181, 427–429; Yaffe, *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*, 127–128, 112–119. Other biblical passages that invoke or discuss God's rain-making power include Jer. 5:24; Jer. 14:22; and Zech. 10:1. Moshe Weinfeld sees Jer. 5:24 as dependent on Deut. 11:14: *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 360. See also D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 13.

concrete, public, and urgent natural phenomenon that rabbis aim to influence through their behavior before God. Drought results from sin, rain is a sign of God's favor for right character and action, and divine accounting addresses a full range of behavior and not only the covenantal concerns of Deuteronomy 11. This theology and related practices become the background for narratives in which distinctive people attempt to bring rain through their connection with the divine.⁵ Certain narratives invoke drought and rain-making as part of ethical instruction. Many studies have attempted to recover the historical events or persons underlying the narratives. I build on this research but focus on the conceptual underpinnings, exegetical contextualization, and pedagogical force of the material. In figurative terms, I attend to the husk that is usually pared away in the search for kernels of history. The stories convey values through statements by characters, through actions by characters, through the ways the stories are edited into larger units, and through their location as commentary to laws and biblical verses about drought and rain.

These narratives provide a counterpart to those discussed in chapter three. Again God's justice is central: an event occurs in the world, and the cause is attributed to human behavior. Again we find a disjunction in magnitude between event and cause. The previous stories framed the crisis (early death) as punishment for an apparently small sin. These stories frame the solution to the crisis (miraculous rain-making) as reward for an apparently small virtue or interpersonal act. With these theological underpinnings, the narratives promote rabbinic ideals such as compassion and generosity through several pedagogical techniques. Most generally, the stories uphold actions or character states by portraying them as inspiring positive changes in divine accounting that brings rainfall. Another motif is that drought becomes a test of virtue for the rabbi and the community, raising questions of who is at fault for the drought and who is sufficiently righteous to bring rain.

5. On public fasts, see D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, especially 120–144; Lapin, "Rabbis and Public Prayers for Rain in Later Roman Palestine"; Sperber, "Drought, Famine, and Pestilence in Amoraic Palestine"; Lowy, "The Motivation of Fasting in Talmudic Literature." Some influential studies regarding pietistic and miraculous activity are Büchler, *Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*; Safrai, *In Times of the Temple and Mishnah*, 518–539; Green, "Palestinian Holy Men"; L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 105–109; Hirshman, "Changing Foci of Holiness"; Diamond, "Hunger Artists and Householders"; Kalmin, "Holy Men, Rabbis, and Demonic Sages in Late Antiquity," 213–249. Beyond rain-making, passages that address the relation between human action and natural disaster include m. Avot 5:7; Avot R. Nat. A, ch. 38; Avot R. Nat. B, ch. 41 (Schechter and Kister, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, 113–116; H. J. Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 268–275, 382–384).

The central vulnerability is the human need for nourishment. Without food and drink we are hungry. Judith Holman writes,

Hunger, by which I mean an acutely perceived need for literal food, determines bodily processes perhaps more than any other characteristic of poverty. Further, hunger may shape not only the physical body of starving individuals but also the interactive dynamics of the starving group in the larger social body of the community. The role of religion in famine dynamics is rarely straightforward and always closely tied to other power dynamics.⁶

Rabbinic narratives present a world where rain conditions whether or not people have basic resources. Historically speaking, food shortages are caused not only by weather but also a host of “disordered relationships”:

human and environmental factors that affect the harvest (weather, pest infestation, blight, land security, harvesting methods), those that affect food distribution (war, natural disasters, transportation failures, storage decisions, political control of the markets), changes in the availabilities of necessities to the very poor (loss of land ownership, changes in market prices, stockpiling by the very rich), and changes in patronage dynamics that may also impact the availability of goods and services to certain sectors of the population.⁷

We do not have clear evidence regarding the frequency of drought and food shortages in Roman Palestine of the first centuries C.E. Several scholars agree that food crises (short-term reduction in food leading to rising prices, discontent, and hunger) were quite common in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Famines that brought starvation and increases in mortality were less frequent but still points of apprehension. When compared with other late ancient Mediterranean literatures, rabbinic sources are distinctive for their extensive attention to rainfall and drought. We do not know whether this attention indicates agricultural crises (especially in the third century), or the cultural and theological importance given to rain by rabbis, or both.⁸

6. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 64–65. Levinas sets out a phenomenological treatment of the need for nourishment in *Time and the Other*, 62–64.

7. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 66–67.

8. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 67–71; Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, esp. 6, 14–16, 17–39. Garnsey’s main reference concerning rabbinic material is Sperber, “Drought, Famine, and Pestilence.” Sperber claims that the rabbinic sources indicate agricultural decline in the third century (“Drought, Famine, and Pestilence,” 272 and throughout), but Garnsey holds that comparative evidence does not support the view that rainfall was abnormally low at that time (*Famine and Food Supply*, 15). Also note Lieberman’s comment, “Absence of rain at the begin-

According to the narratives, the primary response to drought is ritual and prayer. What about rationing, eating of less desirable or unfamiliar foodstuffs, and emigration? We do not know if rabbis engaged in worldly, concrete reactions. We do know that rabbinic storytellers and editors employed examples of crises to impart ideals for character and action. Rabbis extensively discussed charity and care for the poor,⁹ and these values inform the conclusions and ultimate prescriptions of the narratives I examine. The stories portray sages who give short sermons that instruct their audiences to be compassionate, to give to others, and to serve God with diligence. In addition, narratives uphold generosity as bringing miraculous rainfall through the divine economy. These materials do not presume that people will help others in time of drought, but rather they instruct members of a community to support their fellows.

Cosmology, Calendar, and Holy Men

Many rabbinic teachings, including those in tannaitic and amoraic sources, configure rainfall through what Jeffrey Rubenstein has called an earthly hydraulic system. Below the earth are the waters of the “Deep” (*tehom*), which periodically flow up to streams, rivers, and ultimately the clouds. Above the skies are also waters that, in some views, provide moisture for the clouds. The key time when humans can influence this process is during the autumn festival of Sukkot, through libations at the Jerusalem Temple that imitate and have a causal effect upon the rains that flow into the deep. A stone located either beneath the Temple or at the altar is said to be the center of the cosmos, containing the waters of the Deep that God had imprisoned beneath the earth.¹⁰ Even without the Temple as a locale of ritual practice, Sukkot remains central to rabbinic temporal framing of rainfall, and the symbolic connections between the festival and rain continue to develop: cultic rituals for managing water flows in the cosmos were imagined if not enacted. More generally, the rituals and prayers of Sukkot focus on rain, and the daily liturgy marks the change of season with two additions to the Amidah: the mention of divine power to bring rain (“Who makes the wind

ning of the season was not infrequent in Palestine, and prayers for it do not prove that there was a drought during the whole season” (“Martyrs of Caesarea,” 435; also discussed in Sperber, “Drought, Famine, and Pestilence,” 283).

9. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, 26–32, 69–86; Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 38–48; Anderson, “Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms.” Gregg Gardner is currently developing an important study of related issues centered on tractate Peah of the Mishnah and Tosefta.

10. Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot*, 122–131.

blow and the rains come down”) and the request for rain (“give dew and rain as a blessing”). In two narratives discussed below, these prayers bring rain and end a drought.¹¹

It is not always clear whether rituals and stories of rainfall presume the imagery of an earthly hydraulic system. Rabbinic sources discuss God’s control of water at several different periods: creation, great floods, when the Temple existed, and the world that rabbis inhabit. If we treat each source in isolation, we atomize and present an overly fragmented picture, yet we cannot assume an easy integration of the diverse materials. Complex combinations do occur, as in teachings that connect mythic accounts of God’s early relation to the waters and the Deep, ancient floods during the period described in Genesis, and divine justice. When considering their own times, rabbis may have understood the earthly hydraulic system to be managed through divine accounting. The Mishnah and Tosefta both name Rosh Ha-Shanah as a time when all humans are judged by God (*ha-‘olam niddon*), and Sukkot either as a time of further judgment regarding rainfall, or as the time when the initial decree is manifest (compare m. R. H. 1:2 and t. R. H. 1:12–13).¹²

These dimensions of rabbinic culture push us to qualify the use of terms such as nature, environment, and ecology. These categories appropriately convey the world that surrounds humans, that humans inhabit, that is immediate for human life. However, such terms can imply a nature that operates according to a scientific notion of causality, while rabbinic accounts of rainfall are quite different. Often I prefer the broader category of cosmology: cosmologies of earthly hydraulics and divine justice underlie rabbinic accounts of drought, precipitation, the growth of crops, and miraculous rain-making.

If all is well with God, rain should fall soon after Sukkot. No rain for twenty-five days (by 17 Marheshvan) indicates that God is withholding rain because of human sin. The rabbinic response, then, is to intervene in the divine accounting through prayer and ritual fasting, with the goal of appeasing God so that the heavens will open and rain will fall. Chapter one

11. Rubenstein, *History of Sukkot*, 117–131, 311–317 on the Deep, rain symbolism, and libations, and 171–178 on liturgical changes; as he points out, a number of teachings concerning the source of waters and other created entities in the earth or in the heavens are collected in Gen. Rab. 12:11 and related sources (see 129 and n 102); Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 124–131; Patai, “The ‘Control of Rain’ in Ancient Palestine,” 251–286.

12. Fishbane exposit accounts of God’s relation to the waters and the Deep, and of the waters as instruments of divine justice, in *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 113–131, 208–211. Rubenstein discusses connections between Sukkot, rain, and divine judgment in *History of Sukkot*, 165–169.

of Mishnah Taanit (the tractate on “fasting”) prescribes a series of rituals in response to drought. Initially, only select “individuals” (*yehidim*) fast, and they do so for three days spread out on a Monday, Thursday, and the following Monday (as we will see, amoraic discussion of these “individuals” included people who could pray and bring rain). If there is still no rain, the court (*bet din*) decrees three fasts for the whole community. Continued drought means that the whole community fasts repeatedly, up to a total of thirteen fasts. At that point, communal activities are “lessened,” and the “individuals” continue to fast until the end of the month of Nisan—that is, the end of the rainy season in the spring after the festival of Passover. The public is to be “as people reprimanded by the Omnipresent” (m. Taan. 1:4–7).

These ascetic activities perform atonement in the face of a rebuke by God. After the first three communal fasts, the prescriptions presume the five “afflictions” (*innuiyim*) characteristic of Yom Kippur for those fasting—to avoid eating and drinking, washing, anointing, wearing leather shoes, and sexual relations (compare m. Taan. 1:6 and m. Yoma 8:1). In addition, the Mishnah describes public rituals, liturgical passages, and six additions to the Amidah based on verses in the Bible when people call out to God in distress (m. Taan. 2:1–4).¹³

Palestinian amoraic narratives of rain-making, which make up the bulk of my analysis, presume something close to the mishnaic model of public fasting. A significant difference is the communal leadership. The Mishnah portrays the heads of the community as diverse and impersonal. “The court” decrees a fast. In the liturgy various people are prominent: the “individuals,” political and legal heads, the leaders of the services. The identities of these figures and groups become points of discussion in the amoraic literature, but the narratives that I examine tend to emphasize distinct main characters. Even when the stories explore relations between powerful individuals and the community, they still name prominent rabbis or other figures. The compilers of the Babylonian Talmud and Rabbi Nathan A may

13. Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 118–120; Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity*, 76; D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 14–16, 36–60, 66–94; Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” 258–260; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 108–111; Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 173–174; Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 23–24, 109, 127; Hoffman, *Beyond the Text*, 8–15. The Bible presents many examples of individual and communal fasts. Several of these have been incorporated into the mishnaic liturgy, including the fast of the people of Nineveh after Jonah’s prophecy (Jonah 3), Jeremiah’s denunciation of an attempt to repent through fasting (Jer. 14); and Joel’s call for a fast after a locust invasion (Joel 1); on the last of these, see Gaster, *Thespis*, 72.

not have carried out all the mishnaic prescriptions, but the narratives present major elements including the autumn festival of Sukkot, the blessings of the Amidah for the rainy season, and public fasts.¹⁴

The stories often present periods when rain has not come even after extensive fasting, and men engage in powerful speech that brings rain—sometimes customary forms of prayer and sometimes words for the specific occasion. Viewed from a comparative perspective, these accounts of miraculous rain-making present people who may be classified as holy men, and the attempt to control rainfall can be considered weather shamanism. Cross-culturally, rain is a common site for attempts to gain extraordinary control over worldly causation. Max Weber has even remarked, “Throughout the world the magician is in the first instance a rainmaker, for the harvest depends on timely and sufficient rain, though not in excessive quantity.”¹⁵ This categorization needs specification based on subtleties in rabbinic culture. Rabbis had terms that translate directly as “holy man” and as “magic” (*k.sh.p.*), and one Talmudic *sugya*¹⁶ even presents an elaborate treatment of “magic” as a prohibited yet enticing cluster of practices (b. Sanh. 67a–68a). However, these terms are not present in the narratives I examine, and manuscripts of one story explicitly label the rainfall as a “miracle” (*nes*).¹⁶

Compassion, Human and Divine (Genesis Rabbah 33:3)

In the story of the flood in Genesis, a major shift occurs after 150 days. The text states:

God (*’elohim*) remembered Noah, and all the beast and cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters

14. D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 121–166; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 111–114.

15. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 56. The category of weather shamanism is central to Wilbert, *Mystic Endowment*, 219–245. For rabbinic sources see Green, “Palestinian Holy Men,” 619–647; L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 105–109; Kalmin, “Holy Men, Rabbis, and Demonic Sages,” 213–249.

16. The attribution of holiness to rabbinic sages is discussed in Fine, *This Holy Place*, 16–21; Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 75–85. The word “miracle” (*nes*) appears in manuscripts of a story about Nakdimon ben Gurion, which I discuss below; see b. Taan. 19b–20a and especially the text and analysis of Fraenkel, “Time and Its Shaping in Aggadic Narratives”; Malter, *The Treatise Ta’anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, 284–285; Rabbi Nathan A, ch. 6 (Schechter and Kister, *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, 32; H. J. Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 90–91), especially the manuscripts of MS New York Rab. 25 and MS New York 10484. A recent overview of “magic” and related dimensions of rabbinic culture is Harari, “The Sages and the Occult.”

subsided. The springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens were stopped up, and the rain from the heavens was held back. (Gen. 8:1–2)

The midrash of Genesis Rabbah explores several interpretative problems that emerge from these verses. Why does God remember specifically Noah, and what is the relation between God attending to a righteous man and God attending to others around him? Another problem centers on the detail that the divine name is Elohim, which rabbinic sources often link with divine judgment: what brings the attribute of justice to remember humans and animals, and to end the flood? This second topic, which I examine here, is developed through a midrashic homily that opens with a passage from the Psalms and concludes with Genesis 8:1.¹⁷

The opening verse employs the Tetragrammaton, the name of God linked with mercy, and emphasizes divine compassion, “Good is YHWH to all, and His compassion is upon all His works” (Ps. 145:9). The editors then present three sages’ explanations of what the line means:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: *Good is YHWH to all*, and His compassion is upon all, because they are His works.

Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman said: *Good is YHWH to all*, and His compassion is upon all, for His attributes are [that] He has compassion.

Rabbi Yehoshua in the name of Rabbi Levi: *Good is YHWH to all*, and He gives parts of His compassion to all creatures.¹⁸

The third teaching emphasizes that compassion transfers from God to humans. The next passage states that human compassion brings divine compassion:

Rabbi Abba said: If tomorrow a year of famine comes, and all creatures have compassion upon each other, the Holy One, blessed be He, will be filled with compassion for them.

17. Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 182–184; Urbach, *The Sages*, 448–461. The passages discussed in this section appear in Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 304–307.

18. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi focuses on “His works,” stating that God is compassionate upon all creatures because He made them. Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman highlights that YHWH is “good” and that compassion is “His” to state that compassion is intrinsic to the divine. The syntax is difficult, and my addition is based on the critical apparatus in Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 304. Rabbi Yehoshua emphasizes the word “upon,” stating that God bestows part of divine compassion upon all creatures.

Rabbi Abba's ideal that people should act with compassion in a time of crisis becomes central to the ensuing narrative and the literary unit as a whole (the motif also appears in b. Shab. 151b).

The story is set in the late fourth century and portrays an anonymous community calling upon a rabbinic sage to lead a fast for rain:

In the days of Rabbi Tanhuma, Israel needed a fast.

They came before him and said: Rabbi, decree a fast.

He decreed a fast a first day, a second day, and a third day, and rain did not fall. He went in and expounded, saying to them: My children, be filled with compassion for each other, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will be filled with compassion for you.

When they were distributing alms to the poor, they saw a person giving money to his divorced wife.

They came to him [Rabbi Tanhuma] and said: How is it that we are sitting here and there is this [mis]deed!

He said: What did you see?

They said: We saw some man giving money to his divorced wife.

He sent for them, brought them, and said to him: Why did you give money to your divorced wife?

He said to him: I saw her in great distress, and I was filled with loving compassion for her.

Rabbi Tanhuma raised his face upward and said: Master of all worlds! This one, upon whom the other has no legal claim for sustenance, saw her in distress and was filled with compassion for her. You, that it is written about You, *Compassionate and merciful is YHWH* (Psalms 103:8). We are your children, the children of your loved ones, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—how much the more that you should be filled with loving compassion for us!

Immediately rain fell and the world was relieved.

The story begins with three fasts. In the Mishnah's schema, these fasts could be the first series of three by the "individuals" (m. Taan. 1:4). Another possibility is that the public asks Rabbi Tanhuma to "decree" (g.z.r.) three fasts after the initial ones, just as the Mishnah prescribes that the court decree three fasts upon the community (m. Taan. 1:5).¹⁹

19. On the fourth-century setting, see Lapin, "Rabbis and Public Prayers," 115, and L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 67. For the translation "[mis]deed," some witnesses have "deed" (עבירות) and others have "transgression" (עבירות) (the difference lies in the

These fasts do not bring rain, and the rabbi gives a public sermon that aims to inspire compassion and social action—this theme connects the narrative to the broader literary unit. The community distributes alms, but mistrust and division arise, for people suspect a man of giving money to his divorced wife for improper sexual activity. The misunderstanding conveys that a virtuous act may be perceived a vicious one. This motif appears elsewhere in rabbinic ethical teaching, and the point seems to be that common opinion can be misguided and true virtue may belie appearances. The accused man shows himself to have enacted exemplary behavior, giving money to another in need even though the other has no legal claim upon him (the root *r.h.m.* can have the senses of both love and compassion, as the man both shows familial love for his former wife and merciful behavior toward her).²⁰ The generous man, although people accused him of sin, is the figure who carries out the teaching of Rabbi Tanhuma (and Rabbi Abba), “Be filled with compassion for each other, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will be filled with compassion for you.”

The rabbi first acts as arbiter and judge by recognizing that the charges are false and the man’s action is right. He then intercedes with God through a particular form of expression that Joseph Heinemann has described as a “law court” prayer: a forceful prayer fitting the pattern of courtroom pleas, often used in times of distress and particularly in instances of rain-making. The worshipper is usually an exceptionally righteous individual who acts not as a defendant but as a prosecutor who brings claims, complaints, and protests against God. Many pious figures in narratives employ this form, yet the assertion pushes the boundaries of rabbinic norms concerning acceptable ways of speaking to God.²¹

fourth letter from the right): Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 304; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 115 n 31. Lapin interprets the fasts as “an initial cycle of three fasts” (“Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 113 n 21).

20. Both D. Levine and Lapin highlight the role of the rabbi as giving a public sermon to mobilize activity, and the watchfulness among the public: D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 132–133, 141, 210; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 114–116. On the dynamics of crowds and disputes, see MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 63–68. The motif of a virtuous act being perceived as vicious is also discussed in Schofer, *The Making of a Sage*, 49–53 and notes; Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, 69–94. Anderson emphasizes the significance of almsgiving in *Sin*, 183–185; and Azzan Yadin pointed out to me the importance of *r.h.m.*; also see Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 233–237.

21. Richard Kalmin pointed out to me the sage’s role as arbiter and judge. For law court prayers, see Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 193–209; he discusses law court prayers in rain-making, including the prayer of Rabbi Tanhuma, on 209–211. Heinemann writes that this form is not fixed (*Prayer in the Talmud*, 205). Green challenges Heinemann’s method on this point: “Palestinian Holy Men,” 629 n 52, 638 n 75.

This form of prayer has the structure of an address, a plea, a petition, and then divine response. In the case of Rabbi Tanhuma, we find:

(a) *address*: Master of all worlds!

(b) *plea, statement of facts, or accusation*: This one, upon whom the other has no legal claim for sustenance, saw her in distress and was filled with compassion for her. . . . We are your children, the children of your loved ones, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—how much the more that you should be filled with loving compassion for us!

(c) *petition*: [implied: act according to the attribute of compassion and let rain fall]

(d) *divine acceptance of petition*: Immediately rain fell and the world was relieved.

Rabbi Tanhuma's opening address is standard for such prayers, and his plea is quite rich, citing scripture and using rabbinic reasoning as well as technical terms. Rabbi Tanhuma appeals to the good deeds of another man, not as a request to recognize the man's merit, but as an exemplar for God Himself. The rabbi makes an inference from a minor case to a major case. The man is human, yet God is divine and characterized through scripture as merciful. Also, the woman is a divorced wife (and the man owes her no obligation), while the rabbi's community are God's children and descendants of God's loved ones, the patriarchs of Genesis. If the man shows love and supererogatory mercy toward his former spouse, how much the more should God show love and compassion toward His family. God, both the accused and the judge, accepts the argument and responds with rain.

The story, then, begins with a moment of crisis and presumes a liturgical response, with the implicit understanding that God acts in concrete ways responding to human action, that drought is caused by God withholding water because of sin, and that ritual atonement is needed to rectify the debt in divine accounting. When this process fails, the rabbi upholds a particular form of virtuous activity—compassion, manifested specifically as alms for those in need—as a response to the situation. The ensuing events show that the community is easily fragmented, the most virtuous are suspect, and the rabbi ends up being more significant for his rhetorical abilities (both toward the community and toward God) than for any compassionate or charitable activity of his own.

The ethical ideals, however, are quite constant. The story develops Rabbi Abba's teaching that if people are compassionate toward each other in times of famine, God will respond with compassion. Rabbi Tanhuma's ser-

mon, the community's charity, the man's generosity toward his wife, and the forceful prayer all reinforce that point. The rainfall is the concrete evidence that this teaching is accurate and has been fulfilled: compassion rises from the human realm to the divine and inspires rain, in a manner that echoes the image of water rising from the Deep to feed the clouds. The rest of the edited unit, moreover, continues with three stories about Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch that have various twists and turns but all emphasize compassion. The literary sequence concludes with a return to the earlier biblical verses that bring together divine compassion and the case of Noah. When did God show compassion upon all His creations? When judgment turned to mercy and God remembered Noah and all others on the ark.²²

Virtues and Large Rewards (Palestinian Talmud Taanit 1:4 [64b–c])

Several passages in the Palestinian Talmud present extended compilations of ethical instruction centered on narratives. Scholars often view this corpus as significant for legal or historical considerations, not literary analysis, but here I focus on the homiletical shaping of aggadic materials.²³ In Palestinian Talmud Taanit a cluster of teachings presents small positive actions that bring great rewards. A person has acquired enough merit or credit that prayers are answered by God with rainfall. The material comments on the first mishnaic guideline setting out fasts for rain:

If 17 Marheshvan arrives and no rain fell, the "individuals" (*yehidim*) begin to fast three fasts. They may eat and drink after nightfall, and they are permitted to work, bathe, anoint themselves, wear sandals, and have sexual intercourse. (m. Taan. 1:4)

The Tosefta and both Talmuds ask: What is an "individual"? Each source takes this question in a distinct direction. In the Tosefta, the issue is whether a man can appoint himself as a *yahid* or needs authorization from others (t. Taan. 1:7). The Babylonian Talmud initially specifies rabbis as the *yehidim* and then later takes on questions of whether or not someone

22. Azzan Yadin pointed out to me the analogy between compassion and water rising. The story of Rabbi Tanhuma also appears in Lev. Rab. 34:14 (Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 802–809). See also Lapin, "Rabbis and Public Prayers," 113 n 21, 115–116 nn 27–32.

23. The value of Palestinian amoraic sources for historical studies of Palestinian rabbinism is addressed by Saul Lieberman in "The Martyrs of Caesarea," 395; more recently, Schäfer, "Introduction," esp. 16–20.

can join the elite simply by choice (b. Taan. 10a–b).²⁴ The Palestinian Talmud begins by asking: “Which are the ‘individuals’? These are the ones who are appointed as leaders over the community.” The point of being a *yahid* is that one prays on behalf of the community to bring a change in God’s judgment. The question is raised, “Because he is appointed over the community, he prays and is answered?” In other words, does social status bring divine favor? No. “Rather, because he is appointed as leader over the community, and he is found to be trustworthy (*ne’eman*), then he is worthy to pray and be answered.” Through being in these roles, people will prove themselves worthy to bear the responsibility or not.

The rest of the commentary consists of five narratives about rabbis encountering other Jews. The first builds upon the image of a man being “trustworthy” (*ne’eman*), a term used in several mishnaic passages discussing the payment of tithes (agricultural taxes). This narrative centers upon a man who is notable for scrupulous attention to this process. A rabbi honors him by asking him to recite publicly a series of biblical verses that are traditionally said at the end of Passover, specifically Deuteronomy 26:13–16 as the confession over the second tithe:

A man would separate his tithes properly. Rabbi Mana said to him: Rise and say, “I have completely removed the holy portion from my house and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow . . .” (Deut. 26:13)

The passage connects tithing and those who are vulnerable. Both of these topics are developed in the following stories, which center upon the idea of a person being “worthy to pray and be answered.” In the context of the commentary upon the *yehidim* who fast during a drought, this statement implies that the person has elite status before God and is worthy to have his prayers bring rain.²⁵

The first man shows exemplary concern for the source of his money. He chooses to beg rather than use money devoted to tithing:

A man came before one of the relatives of Rabbi Yannai. He said: Rabbi, earn merit through me [by giving me money].

24. Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 118–120; Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society*, 76–77; D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 136–140, 157; Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah*, Part 5, 1070–1071.

25. Kalmin, “Holy Men,” 220; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 119. On *ne’eman* and tithing, see m. Dem. 2:2, 4:6; t. Dem. 2:2; also m. Peah 8:2–4. For the confession over the second tithe at Passover, see m. Maas. S. 5:10; m. Meg. 2:5.

He said: Does not your father have money?

He said: No.

He said: Collect what was put in deposit.

He said: I heard about them that they were for redemption.

He said: You are worthy to pray and be answered.

The story opens with a man requesting money from a sage. Gary Anderson has observed that the phrase “earn merit through me” reveals that “the act of giving alms to a needy person is thought to be tantamount to depositing money directly in the heavenly treasury.” The story, though, focuses not on the sage who may show compassion and generosity, but on the anonymous man who needs to beg. This man’s family has money, but he refuses to use funds that are for “redemption” of the second tithe. Such a person is “worthy to pray and be answered.”²⁶

The next story loosely develops the ideal of helping a “widow” in Deuteronomy 26:13, the confession over the second tithe quoted above. The vulnerable character is a woman whose husband is in prison:

It appeared [in a dream] to the rabbis that some donkey driver prayed and rain fell. Rabbis sent for him and brought him.

They said: What is your trade?

He said: A donkey driver.

They said: What good deed did you do?

He said: Once I rented my donkey to a woman. She cried on the way.

I said to her, “What is happening to you?” She said, “The husband of this woman is imprisoned, and I want to see what I can do to free him.”

I sold my donkey and gave her the money. I said to her, “This is for you. Free your husband and do not sin.”

They said: You are worthy to pray and be answered.

The profession of a donkey driver is, according to the Mishnah, one that a man should not teach his son, and most of its practitioners are “wicked”

26. Anderson, “Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms,” 53–54; Anderson, *Sin*, 147. For “redemption,” we have the story in two variations. The printed edition says that the man heard that his father’s money was “unlawful” (פרקון). Other witnesses state that the money was for “redemption” of the second tithe (פירקון). The latter builds more clearly upon the opening narrative, developing the theme of men who were scrupulous in tithes even well after the destruction of the temple. For פרקון, see Lieberman, “עיר-פרקון”; Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies*, 1:403; also the Leiden manuscript published in Sussmann, *Talmud Yerushalmi According to Ms. Or. 4720*; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 119 n 46.

(m. Qid. 4:14). Yet this man encounters a woman in need, sells his very means of livelihood in order to help her, and does this specifically so that she would not “sin” through prostitution.²⁷ This is no small deed, yet it is still striking that through one act, a person of suspicious occupation gains merit sufficient to bring rain through his prayers. In the following story, the motif is intensified. The hero is named as “Entirely-wicked” (or “Five-sinner”) based on his involvement with the theater, yet he sells his bed to help a woman whose husband is imprisoned. Finally, the unit culminates with an account of rabbis meeting a pious man (*hasid*) who, along with his wife, demonstrates odd but strident concerns with work responsibilities, honest communication, care of borrowed objects, modesty, and the honor of the rabbis who come to meet him. They are worthy “to pray and be answered.”²⁸

These stories have attracted much scholarly discussion and insights, but the debates miss the pedagogical force of the small virtuous act, particularly as these acts appear in the edited unit. The unit as a whole incorporates both the event of a drought, and the ability to offer prayer that will end the crisis, into an embrace of everyday values. More specifically, the rabbinic editors of the Palestinian Talmud employ the literary figures of non-rabbis to uphold ideals that are not specific to Torah study but still crucial for interpersonal relations and community building: attention to tithes, caring for vulnerable women, work obligations, modesty, and others.²⁹

27. See Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 119–120; also D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 138–139.

28. The two stories that follow the ones analyzed here have received significant scholarly attention. The final story has a parallel in b. Taan. 23a–b (where the main character is a grandson of Honi the Circle Drawer), which has sometimes been the focus rather than the Palestinian version. See Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature*, 31; Büchler, *Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, 201–205; Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 31–33; Lowy, “Motivation of Fasting,” 26–27; Safrai, “Tales of the Sages in the Palestinian Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud”; Safrai, *In Times of the Temple and Mishnah*, 526–529; Fraenkel, “Chiasmus in Talmudic-Aggadic Narrative”; Hirshman, “Changing Foci,” 113–116; Neusner, “From Mishnaic Philosophy to Talmudic Religion”; L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 109 n 46; D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 138–139; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 119–121; Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society*, 75–76; Kalmin, “Holy Men,” 222–234 (including extensive references).

29. Below I examine two Babylonian stories that also portray non-rabbis bringing rain through activities other than Torah study (b. Taan. 24a). Kalmin emphasizes, though, that a focus upon universal values is distinctive to Palestinian rabbinism (“Holy Men,” 219). For other interpretations of these stories: Lapin argues that they deemphasize the role of rabbis in public prayer in “Rabbis and Public Prayer,” 119; Kalmin writes that they show the interaction of rabbis and non-rabbis, and attest to the existence of non-rabbinic Jewish holy men in *The Sage in Jewish Society*, 75, and “Holy Men,” 222–227; Lieberman holds that they give some insight into popular piety in *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 30–34. Also see L. Levine, *The Ancient Syna-*

Communal and Individual Virtue (Palestinian Talmud Taanit 3:4 [66c–d])

When rabbis and other figures in rabbinic sources interpret drought and rainfall by way of divine justice, distinct problems arise. These cosmic events are public and visible, and they affect a large number of people. At the same time, their cause is indeterminate. Nature does not specify whose sin caused the drought, or whose virtue brought the rain. This ambiguity can lead to contestation regarding praise and blame. Palestinian Talmud Taanit 3:4 explores these tensions at length and portrays rabbinic sages as exemplifying generosity and fellowship. Chapter three of Mishnah Taanit builds upon the discussion of drought to name other events that require ritual response. The disasters include crop failure, a span of forty days between rainfall during the rainy season, a particular city that does not receive rain even if surrounding ones do, and then:

Similarly, a city that has pestilence or houses falling in, that city should fast and blow the *shofar*, and all those surrounding it should fast and not blow the *shofar*. Rabbi Akiva says: They should blow the *shofar* and not fast. (m. Taan. 3:4)

The Palestinian Talmud opens with a story of a pestilence, but it quickly moves to explore situations in which one city or part of a city has rain but others do not.³⁰

gogue, 467–468; Marmorstein examines these stories as exemplifying aspects of rabbinic merit or *zekhut*, specifically that people with great powers should not be self-righteous, since they may be unworthy in other respects, in *Doctrine of Merits*, 31; Neusner takes a similar approach, emphasizing that deeds beyond the requirements of Torah can bring great favor, transforming an ordinary person into a holy man, in “From Mishnaic Philosophy to Talmudic Religion,” 644–649. In addition to these points, the Palestinian Talmud’s conception of *yahid* raises a historical question. Syriac Christian writings employ the term *’ihidaya*’ to indicate a person of special status in that community. In the fourth century C.E., discussions proliferated about these elites, who were often framed as celibates, ascetics, and practitioners of intense piety. Does the Palestinian Talmud characterize the *yehidim* in terms of virtuous behavior as a response or counter to this development further east? The earlier Tosefta and later Babylonian Talmud do not specify the *yehidim* in this manner. See the discussion and references in Griffith, “Asceticism and the Church of Syria.” Discussions of comparisons between rabbinic rain-making figures and Christian holy men, with extensive references, are D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 136–140, 194–214; Kalmin, “Holy Men,” 213–220. I thank David Levinsky for his observations.

30. These issues also appear in the commentaries of the Palestinian Talmud to m. Taan. 3:2 and 3:3. The Babylonian Talmud develops a very different set of themes, focusing on houses falling in, in b. Taan. 20a–21b.

The commentary begins with an account of a plague in Sepphoris that affects the entire city except the neighborhood of Rabbi Hanina, who apparently lived there during the mid-third century. The citizens outside that neighborhood and the sage dispute who is at fault for the suffering:

There was a plague in Sepphoris. It did not come into the area that Rabbi Hanina lived in. The Sepphorites would say: How does this elder cause harm?³¹ He and his neighborhood sit in peace, yet the city perishes in misfortune!

[Rabbi Hanina] came and said before them: There was one Zimri in his generation, and 24,000 of Israel died. For us, how many Zimris are there in our generation, yet you complain! (y. Taan. 3:4 [66c])

How does one assess praise and blame for inciting divine action when some suffer and others do not? In this passage the Sepphorites single out a specific individual, Rabbi Hanina, as having a decisive effect. They suggest that Rabbi Hanina harms the rest of the city, while those close to him are safe. This kind of accusation—a powerful figure hurts others through supernatural means—is not common in rabbinic literature but appears elsewhere in Roman sources and also cross-culturally. Rabbi Hanina responds by appealing to the story of the Israelites and Moabites in Numbers 25: Israelite sexual and religious relations with the Moabites incite the wrath of God, resulting in a plague that kills 24,000 people. The key figure named in transgression is Zimri (Num. 25:9,14). This biblical reference implies that the divine punishment of the Sepphorites is due to major transgressions on the part of the community, not the actions of an individual.³²

31. Their accusation comes down to us in two versions. In the printed edition, they ask: how is it that the elder is “among you” (בניכי), such that his neighborhood is not harmed while the rest of the city is ruined? This reading is ambiguous, but seems to imply wonderment that the sage’s virtue stops the plague from affecting those around him. A geniza fragment, which my translation follows, presents the Sepphorites as more aggressive, accusing the sage of causing harm (מיניכי = מניכי). See Sussmann, *Talmud Yerushalmi According to Ms. Or. 4720*; Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies*, 1:420; Lieberman, “Emendations to the Yerushalmi 1,” 169; D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 124, 227; L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 121.

32. Other examples of accusations or practices of attack through supernatural powers are described in Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 62–65; Wilbert, *Mystic Endowment*, 219–234. For Rabbi Hanina’s response, other traditions portray Zimri as improperly challenging Moses’ authority, so the rabbi may also be labeling his critics as illegitimate (L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 121 n 101).

In the next story, the people of Sepphoris again accuse Rabbi Hanina of causing harm in a time of difficulty:

One time they had to call a fast [in Sepphoris, led by Rabbi Hanina] and rain did not fall. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi called a fast in the south and rain fell.

The Sepphorites said: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi brought down rain for the southerners, and Rabbi Hanina holds back water from the Sepphorites.

They needed to fast a second time. He sent for Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and said to him: My lord (*mari*), please lead a fast with us.

The two of them went out and fasted, and rain did not fall. He entered and said before them: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi does not bring down rain for the Southerners, nor does Rabbi Hanina hold back water from the Sepphorites. Rather, as for the southerners, their hearts are soft. They hear the word of scripture and humble themselves. The Sepphorites, their hearts are hard. They hear the word of scripture but do not humble themselves.

When he went in, raised his eyes and saw that the air was clear. He said: Is it still thus?

Immediately rain came down.

He vowed to himself not to do such a thing again. He said: Why should I tell the holder of the bond (*mare ḥova*?) that he not collect what is owed to him! (y. Taan. 3:4 [66c])³³

In this narrative and others, an ability to bring rain attests to a rabbi's virtue and power, which legitimates his status as leader of a community. If a rabbi leads a fast that fails to bring rain, he may be challenged from any number of directions. This story explores two matters: contestation between a rabbi and the community over the blame for the drought, and a potentially divisive situation among rabbis when one sage succeeds and another does not.

When Rabbi Hanina's fast fails, the Sepphorites accuse Rabbi Hanina of holding back water from the city. They contrast Rabbi Hanina with an older rabbi of another area, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi of Lydda, claiming that Rabbi Yehoshua brings rain for his community. Rather than competing with his fellow, Rabbi Hanina calls upon Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi with

33. See the printed edition as well as Sussmann, *Talmud Yerushalmi According to Ms. Or. 4720*; Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies*, Vol. One, 420–421; D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 227; L. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 106–108; Lapin, "Rabbis and Public Prayers," 125. The story is also discussed in Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, 15; Sperber, "Drought, Famine, and Pestilence," 276–277. L. Levine comments, "R. Hanina's relationship with the citizens of Sepphoris was a checkered one," citing this material and others (*The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 120–121).

polite and deferential language (such as *mari*, “my lord”). They both try to bring rain and fail. From this moment on, the story is ambiguous as to which rabbi speaks and acts. This uncertainty may reinforce a sense of solidarity among rabbis. The unnamed sage does not debate the relative merits of the two leaders but rather shifts responsibility back to the citizens. Those who submit to the Torah with humility receive rain. This emphasis on communal responsibility for divine judgment is reinforced later in the Talmudic discussion where we find a maxim cited twice: “What can the great ones of the generation do when the community is judged (*niddon*) only after its majority?” First the editors attribute the saying to Rabbi Hanina, and then to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. Again the two sages are portrayed in agreement, and again they blame communities rather than powerful individuals for divine punishment.³⁴

The final lines of the story combine two motifs in rabbinic rain-making. First, while the earlier part of the story deemphasizes the role of the individual in relation to the community, in the end a charismatic rabbi employs powerful speech to bring rain. Unlike Rabbi Tanhuma above, he does not pray to God but utters a sharp statement toward the clear sky (“Is it still thus?”). Second, the issue is framed in terms of a divine economy. God is a creditor. A sage makes a purchase and realizes that he has spent his funds accumulated by virtuous actions. This act is both generous and self-interested, since it benefits the members of the city and also reinforces his status along with the status of others in the rabbinic movement. The term of deference formerly used between rabbis (*mari*) is now used for God as holder of a bond (*mare ḥova*).³⁵

34. D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 132, 137–138; he also notes that even though the story is set in Sepphoris, the Patriarch is not mentioned, but rather the community seeks out a rabbinic sage (126, 141); also on Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, see Safrai, *In Times of the Temple and Mishnah*, 524–525 [139–140]. For the later part of the story when the sage is not named, Lapin suggests that the protagonist is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (“Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 125), though D. Levine names him as Rabbi Hanina (*Communal Fasts*, 173–174). L. Levine indicates that the speech about submitting to scripture is made by Rabbi Hanina, and he does not translate the last lines (*The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine*, 107). Other stories describe sermons or comments by rabbis that elicit tears from the crowd in the synagogue, and then rain falls; see y. Taan. 2:1 [65b]; b. Taan. 25b. The word for judgment (*niddon*) echoes the statement about the world being “judged” in m. R.H. 1:2 and t. R.H. 1:12–13, discussed above; also Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 125 n 67. The unit concludes with two stories about tensions in rain-making: D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 124, 138, 157–158, 174; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 118–119.

35. Anderson, *Sin*, 182–183; D. Levine, *Communal Fasts*, 139. Note that a Babylonian source presents strong speech toward God as a dangerous act that may bring harm (the story of Levi in b. Taan. 25a).

The story presents several teachings concerning ideal behavior. The rabbis exemplify solidarity within their movement, generosity in giving up their divine merit to bring rain, and also humility before God in the very end. In addition, they are able to preach to the community and prescribe softness of the heart. These ethical themes are distinctly prominent in the Palestinian version of the story, as a parallel version found in the Babylonian Talmud emphasizes different issues. The Babylonian version has a greater focus upon prayer, more boldly embraces sages who carry out distinctive speech acts to bring rain, and does not make prominent the ethical ideals prescribed by the sages (b. Taan. 25a).³⁶

Virtues and Large Rewards in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Taanit 24a)

The Babylonian Talmud preserves numerous stories about crisis and rain-making, gathering many as commentary to the story of Honi the Circle Drawer in the Mishnah (b. Taan. 23a–25b to m. Taan. 3:8). This literary unit includes stories about people from the Second Temple, tannaitic, and amoraic periods, and presents them synchronically as part of a single rabbinic portrait of miracle working. The narratives explore many issues surrounding crisis, community, and the role of miraculous power in relation to rabbinic authority. Generally, Babylonian narratives of rain-making do not emphasize ethical instruction, and Babylonian editors do not assemble these stories into larger discussions of virtues and exemplary action, as we have seen in both Genesis Rabbah and the Palestinian Talmud. Two stories, though, show signs of strong editing and present small virtues bringing large responses from God.

These narratives offer extremely compact instruction that connects drought, rain-making, and rabbinic ethics. The pedagogy is streamlined with no extraneous details—simply powerful speech that brings rain and a short conversation upholding specific acts. Editors place the stories in succession, and their formulaic features can be seen through considering them in parallel:

36. Schofer, “Theology and Cosmology in Rabbinic Ethics,” 250–252; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 123–129; also the brief comment in Urbach, *The Sages*, 101. In addition, several other stories in the Babylonian Talmud portray criticism and conflict when fasts fail; see for example b. Taan. 24a.

Rabbi decreed a fast. Ilfa, or some say Rabbi Ilfi, went down before [the ark].

He said: "Who makes the wind blow," and the wind blew. "Who makes the rain come down," and rain came.

He asked him: What is your good deed?

He said to him: I live in a poor and remote place. I take pains to get wine for Qiddush and Havdalah, and I make sure that the community fulfills its obligation. (b. Taan. 24a)

Rav happened to come to a place where he decreed a fast. The emissary of the community went down before [the ark].

He said, "Who makes the wind blow," and the wind blew. "Who makes the rain come down," and rain came.

He asked him: What is your good deed?

He said: I am a teacher of young children. I teach children of the poor just as those of the rich. For anyone who cannot pay, I do not take a fee. I have a fish pond. Whenever one of the children is rebellious, I bribe him with fish to entice and appease him, so that he comes and studies. (b. Taan. 24a)³⁷

The narratives are set in different times and places: the first in Palestine around the end of the second century C.E., and the second a generation later in Babylonia. The first rain-maker may be a rabbi, and the second is anonymous.

The stories are preserved in the same structure. The presumed setting is a drought. A rabbi decrees a fast. In the course of praying the Amidah in the synagogue, the emissary "mentions the power of rain" by saying that God "makes the wind blow and the rains come down" (m. Taan. 1:1). Rain falls. Both rain-makers say that their extraordinary powers come from virtuous actions performed in the course of everyday life (in this sense, their acts are similar to those of the non-rabbinic rainmakers in the Palestinian Talmud who are "worthy to pray and be answered"). Specifically, the figures make supererogatory efforts to support, despite poverty, ritual observance of the boundaries marking the Sabbath and education of children in the Torah.³⁸

37. Malter, *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, 362–365. For "emissary of the community," see Tabory, "Prayers and Berakot," 317.

38. Another story in which the words of the Amidah bring rainfall appears on b. B. M. 85b; on financial support for students, see L. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 417–420.

Again we see pedagogical use of a miracle. Through the voice of the rain-maker who explains the sources of his power, the event becomes an occasion to uphold ordinary acts that sustain communities committed to rabbinic ideals for practice and study.

Rain and Human Action in the Babylonian Talmud and Rabbi Nathan A, ch. 6

Despite the pedagogical development of rain-making narratives in amoraic sources, and resonances in the Babylonian Talmud, these topics are not prominent in ethical collections. Sometimes the ethical shaping of a motif happens more fully in midrashic or Talmudic sources than in the specifically ethical anthologies—as we saw in chapter three with the story of Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Simeon in the Mekhilta. Two short passages in Rabbi Nathan A, though, take up the themes of rain and God’s response to human beings, and one is a narrative of drought. The story centers on Nakdimon ben Gurion, a figure from the late Second Temple period, and appears as part of commentary to the maxim of Yose ben Yoezer, “Let your house be a meeting place for the sages, sit in the very dust of their feet, and drink with thirst their words” (m. Avot 1:4; Avot. R. Nat., ch. 6).³⁹ In some respects, the account of Nakdimon ben Gurion is a digression based on his appearance earlier in the discussion. The pedagogy still develops the maxim: he makes the Temple (Hebrew: *bayit* or “house”) a meeting place for pilgrims with thirst, who drink because of his words to God.

In the story, Nakdimon ben Gurion is a wealthy man of Jerusalem who uses his resources to support pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for a festival holiday. The narrative integrates several themes that we have already seen: tensions between Jews and Romans, a non-sage carrying out miraculous acts, and law-court prayers. We get a glimpse into economic and power relations that condition access to water in times of drought, as Nakdimon negotiates with a Roman to procure water for Jewish pilgrims. Most importantly, the act that brings the rainfall is his generosity and specifically

39. The other passage in Rabbi Nathan A describing rainfall and God’s justice weaves verses from Deuteronomy 11:13–17 into a teaching that emphasizes the cosmic significance of Temple practices—when the Temple survived, rain fell, and without it, drought is always a threat: Avot R. Nat. A, ch. 4 (Schechter and Kister, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, 19–20; H. J. Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 66–69). The narrative of Nakdimon ben Gurion also appears in Babylonian Talmud Taanit 19b–20a. The maxim of Yose ben Yoezer is also quoted in Avot R. Nat. B, ch. 11 (Schechter and Kister, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, 27; H. J. Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 338).

support for others engaging in Jewish practice. The fundamental problem driving the story is the need to drink:

Why is he called Nakdimon ben Gurion? Because the sun shone through (*naqdah*) for his sake.

One time Israel went up to Jerusalem for a festival and there was no water for them to drink. He went to a general and said: Lend me twelve wells of water from now until such and such a day. If I do not give you in return twelve wells of water, I will give you twelve talents of silver.

He fixed a time for him.

When the time came, [the general] sent a message to him: Send me twelve wells of water or twelve talents of silver.

He said to him: There is still time in the day.

The general sneered at him and said: This entire year, rain has not fallen, and now rain will fall?

The general went into the bathhouse happy.

Nakdimon ben Gurion went to the study house, wrapped himself [in a prayer shawl], and stood in prayer. He said before Him: Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that I acted not for my own honor, nor for the honor of my father's house, but for Your honor, so that there would be water for those who come up for pilgrimage. Immediately the heavens became thick with clouds, and rain fall until twelve wells were filled with water, and more.

He sent a message [to the general]: Send me payment for the extra water that is in your hands.

He said to him: The sun has already set, and the water has fallen in my domain.

He returned and entered the study house. He wrapped himself [in a prayer shawl] and stood in prayer, and he said before Him: Master of the Universe, perform for me at the end like at the beginning.

Immediately the wind blew, the clouds were scattered, and the sun shined.

He went out, and they ran into each other, and [the general] said to him: I know that the Holy One, blessed be He, shook the world only for your sake. (*Avot R. Nat. A*, ch. 6; also *b. Taan 19b–20a*)⁴⁰

Several points need to be filled in. The festival is likely Sukkot at the start of the rainy season, and there is no water for the pilgrims. The need for drink

40. H. J. Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 88–91; Schechter and Kister, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, 32; Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 44–45.

sets off a host of other problems: financial (how to gain resources), social (how Jews negotiate relations with Romans), and ultimately theological (how to persuade God to bring rain).

Nakdimon requests the water of twelve wells, or perhaps cisterns, and offers to pay a substantial fee if rainfall does not replace the water by a particular date. Rain does not fall until the day of payment, and on the last day Nakdimon brings rain through prayer. The general, however, says that the rain has come too late: the sun has already set, so the water came after the deadline, and Nakdimon must still pay him the money. Through a second prayer, though, the sun shines through, revealing that the day has not ended and that the water has been replaced on time.⁴¹

The first prayer conveys rabbinic values. The form fits Heinemann's typology of a law-court prayer, and Nakdimon not only petitions God but also conveys to the reader or listener that God does not respond to forceful prayer based on self-interest, but rather for the sake of the divine. In several passages of the Babylonian Talmud, sages also emphasize to God that they are not acting for personal honor or glory. In a much-studied scene, Rabban Gamliel is on a ship, a wave comes that will drown him, and he understands God to be punishing him for a prior controversial act. He speaks to God in terms that are very similar to those of Nakdimon ben Gurion:

b. B. Metzia 59b

[Rabban Gamliel] stood on his feet and said: Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before you that I acted not for my glory, nor for the glory of my father's house, but for Your glory, that divisions would not multiply in Israel.

Rabbi Nathan A, ch. 6
(also b. Taan. 20a)

[Nakdimon ben Gurion] said before Him: Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that I acted not for my own honor, nor for the honor of my father's house, but for Your honor, so that there would be water for those who come up for pilgrimage.⁴²

Nakdimon's action for God's glory is to provide "water for those who come up on pilgrimage." Again we see a narrative upholding generosity in pro-

41. Concerning wells and cisterns, see Kister, *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, 208. Jonah Fraenkel has offered a subtle treatment of this narrative, highlighting that multiple temporalities are at play; Fraenkel, "Time and its Shaping in Aggadic Narratives," 134–140, 159; also Eliav, "Did the Jews at First Abstain from Using the Roman Bath-House?" 31 n 117.

42. Rubenstein notes this parallel and others in *Talmudic Stories*, 55–56; also Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 195–196, 209–210; Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 168–174.

viding goods needed by other Jews to sustain their religious practice. For Nakdimon ben Gurion, the miraculous rain both confirms God's favor and enables him to stay in a position of wealth and relative power to continue his support for others.

Ethics, Narrative, and Ritual

Narratives of rain-making build upon rituals and prayers articulated in legal texts—the autumn holy days, additions to the Amidah, and fasts in times of drought—that reveal a profound connection with the environment. This background calls attention to the vulnerabilities underlying the stories. Although the stories culminate in the possibility or actuality of miraculous rain-making, they present no easy picture of people controlling the environment. Rather, they often begin in moments when there is drought and ritual responses have failed:

He decreed a fast a first day, a second day, and a third day, and rain did not fall. (Gen. Rab. 33:3)

One time they had to call a fast [in Sepphoris, led by Rabbi Hanina] and rain did not fall. (y. Taan. 3:4 [66c–d])

The narratives open with vulnerabilities exposed by drought and food crises, and with related interpersonal tensions. They conclude with pedagogy that upholds virtue and community building.

The symbolic and ritual framing of rainfall in rabbinic culture also conditions my response to the difficult question: did rabbis believe their miracle stories? Or, in more formal terms, what is the force of the rain-making motif in the late ancient context, and how can we situate these narratives in relation to modern dichotomies such as literal/figurative or historical/fictional?⁴³ We should not domesticate the material by viewing anything that conflicts with a scientific worldview as merely figurative. Late ancient Mediterranean cultures were filled with divine acts and supernatural events. Another mistake is to read the texts in an overly literal manner that disregards irony, hyperbole, and persuasive features. The stories are highly stylized with many stock phrases (such as, “you are worthy to pray and be answered”). Rainfall, or affirmation of the ability to bring rainfall,

43. The question echoes the highly influential title and study: Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* For reflections on this issue in rabbinic sources, see Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society*, 76; Lapin, “Rabbis and Public Prayers,” 107–108.

appears in moments that are significant for plot development. In stories examined here, the miracle can resolve conflicts and legitimate particular people, actions, or qualities. Rabbinic ethical instruction centered on rain-making, then, has figurative dimensions but also draws upon themes that sages took very seriously. Pedagogy employs a large cultural reservoir of imagery and practices.

The rabbinic concern with drought and rain shapes the ways we compare rabbinic sources with those of surrounding groups. The symbols and rituals are extremely foreign to philosophical schools. The case of early Christianity is more complicated. Two texts are notable for similarities in overall themes and in certain details. First, Basil of Caesarea gave a sermon entitled “In Time of Famine and Drought” (*Homily 8*) in response to a famine in Cappadocia starting in 368 C.E. Although this text has no mention of miraculous rainfall, the homily shares many motifs with the Palestinian amoraic sources. According to Holman, the sermon was delivered during a service devoted to and probably calling for public repentance. Basil states that the drought is divine response to wrong behavior, specifically neglect of the poor (8:2). These theological claims support a call for those with material resources, and especially the wealthy, to assist the needy (8:4). Like the rabbinic sources, Basil links drought, God’s judgment, repentance, and the need for giving. In addition, certain biblical motifs appear in both Basil’s sermon and rabbinic sources, including references to Elijah, the people of Nineveh, and Zimri (compare *Homily 8:4–5* with m. Taan. 2:1, 2:4 and also y. Taan. 3:4 [66c] discussed above). Second, an extended story of rain-making in the fifth-century *Syriac Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* presents a holy man bringing rainfall. The narrative has commonalities with rabbinic forms of worship, including public prayer, ashes sprinkled on the heads of leaders, and references to Elijah and Samuel. In addition, both this story and the mishnaic account of Honi the Circle Drawer portray a prayer bringing so much rain that the public becomes distressed (section 75; compare m. Taan. 2:1, 2:4, and 3:8).⁴⁴

These sources reveal that rabbis and certain Christian writers in the eastern Mediterranean of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. drew upon common biblical figures and theological motifs when encountering drought. Basil’s sermon, moreover, is similar to the Palestinian amoraic texts in linking drought with a call to support others. These commonalities need to be set in very different liturgical contexts. Rabbis frame the rainy sea-

44. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, 4, 71–74, 76–79, 183–192; Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, 155–157.

son ritually through holy days and prescriptions for public fasts in time of drought. Perhaps as an extension of this framing, rabbis frequently discuss rain-making, while this miracle is relatively rare in Christian materials. A full comparison of rabbinic rain-making with practices of Christians or other groups, then, would not only treat particular teachings or events but would also take into account the differing roles of rainfall in each group's cosmologies and practice.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Accounts of rabbinic rain-making portray people as entrenched in natural processes. Humans are dependent on the world around them for food and other basic needs, and they are vulnerable to changes in climate and weather. The motif at hand is rain, but the underlying issues are hunger and sustenance, wealth and poverty. Drought brings multiple kinds of contestation. Members of a community suspect each other of improper action. Communities may challenge leaders. Those with high status—whether through the Roman political hierarchy or through wealth—have privileged access to water.

These rabbinic narratives situate hunger and sustenance within an account of causality that weaves together human action, God's action, and the cosmos. People attempt to intervene in divine accounting through a variety of means: public fasts in which the community tries to make up for past sins and inspire divine mercy, acts of compassion and generosity that are meant to inspire divine compassion, or prayers by individuals with significant favor or merit before God. When these concepts and practices form the background of ethical instruction, then rabbinic pedagogy integrates the extraordinary and the supernatural with the mundane and the everyday. The distinctive moment of miraculous rainfall is used to uphold virtues such as humility, compassion, solidarity, receptiveness, and generosity.

Stories of rain-making convey ethical ideals in several ways. Perhaps the most straightforward instruction appears though stories of non-rabbis, sometimes even sinners, who are worthy to have their prayers answered. Each rain-maker names certain actions that inspire great response from God. Nakdimon ben Gurion incorporates his virtuous act into the very

45. Another point of contrast is the differing understandings of fasting in rabbinic and Christian sources. See for example Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 93–120; Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 230–233, 239–244.

prayer that brings the rainfall. Rabbi Tanhuma calls upon his community to show compassion for one another, and the combination of this compassion and the sage's forceful prayer ends the drought. For both forms of instruction—an act inspiring a miracle, and a sage preaching to a community—the values upheld in the narrative may be reinforced through the larger literary and exegetical unit. The genre of narrative also allows indirect forms of ethical instruction, which is most evident in the story of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. The community tests and assesses a rabbi's virtue based on his abilities to bring rain. The sages model rabbinic solidarity in the face of potentially divisive comparison, and they make a public call for the people to be humble and submit to Torah.⁴⁶

These rabbinic sources do not present an environmental ethic, but ethical ideals for those who are vulnerable to the world they inhabit. I believe that contemporary environmental ethics can learn much from considering these perhaps exotic rituals and stories. Today, the economic and political forces mediating humans and nature are far more extensive than in the ancient world (though they were present in the past as well). In the case of food shortage, global markets mean that many people are not dependent on food from any one place, and growers are not necessarily dependent on water from their immediate locale. Social processes are so pervasive that we can rarely distinguish naturally caused harms from humanly caused ones, and many of our biggest problems emerge from humanly caused devastation.

In addition, capitalism is highly resilient and adaptable to ecological obstacles. Wealth brings the ability to avoid the damages of pollution, disaster, and ongoing erosion. The weight of environmental devastation, whether drought or hurricane or earthquake, falls upon those in weak economic and political condition, while those in powerful positions tend to be shielded. In a detailed study addressing historical changes in use and consumption of water in highland Chiapas, June Nash writes, "We are on the brink of a new resource war that will divide the populations of the world into the haves and have-nots of water."⁴⁷ Even with this disparity, human vulnerability to the natural world is becoming visible for all, regardless of economic and political status, for storms, rising ocean levels, and droughts around the world are becoming part of all people's concerns.

46. On narratives that test a rabbi's virtue, see Schofer, *The Making of a Sage*, 49–53. A sense of a test runs in a general way through the ritual prescription set out in Mishnah Taanit, which frames the community as reprimanded by God for unspecified vices.

47. Nash, "Consuming Interests," 621–639.

Vulnerability is not only a matter of human needs and natural resources, but also a basic relation between humans and the earth. In this sense vulnerability differs from the notion of scarcity commonly employed in environmental discussions. At the level of virtues, attention to vulnerability brings humility and reverence toward the world that surrounds and holds us.⁴⁸ For environmental ethics inspired by the Hebrew Bible, passages such as Genesis 2:5 and Deuteronomy 11 can provide resources for considering human dependency on rainfall and the earth, which complement the image of stewardship inspired by Genesis 2:15 and other motifs. Finally, these sources present intricacies in worldly causality, specifically small actions that generate large consequences. This focus on the personal and everyday complements reflection on the political dimensions of ecological issues, foregrounding the problem of how to live with others in a world where all are dependent upon natural processes.

48. D. Harvey discusses the concept of scarcity in *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 139–149. He also argues that a “socialist approach to environmental-ecological politics” has to be wary of hubris: “the very idea that the planet is somehow ‘vulnerable’ to human action or that we can actually destroy the earth, repeats in negative form the hubristic claims of those who aspire to planetary domination. . . . Against this is crucial to understand that it is materially impossible for us to destroy the planet earth”: *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 194.

