

Jews and Christians share a common foundation of Scripture. It is within this common, sacred text that we shall find the source of “Grace upon Grace: Living Water.” It requires little religious imagination to link the use of water as a purification rite in the Biblical world to the use of the *mikveh* in the early rabbinic period, and ultimately to the transformative ritual of Baptism as an essential sacramental rite in Christianity. My task this evening is not to trace that course of ritual development, but rather to consider the many and varied texts of Scripture from within which we find water, *Mayim*, as a central metaphor for God’s presence and human struggle. I offer a *midrash*—an open interpretation of Biblical texts on water, a Jewish understanding of the religious significance of water, for our ongoing interfaith conversation on ritual and liturgy. *Midrash* is a form of rabbinic literature in which the text is used like a prism and understanding, like light from many different sources, allowed to shine through the angles of glass, and if we are both lucky and skillful we shall see the bright colors of the spectrum suspended like a rainbow in front of our eyes. *Midrash* is a discipline of reading and rereading classic sacred texts, always allowing for our reality as readers and the overflowing surplus meaning of scripture to find their own new horizons of understanding. This evening is not meant to be taken as *the* Jewish statement on “water” as it relates to the liturgical use of water, as Baptism; but rather as scholarship that I offer from a single perspective, from one rabbi who is engaged in the “to-and-fro” of Jewish/Christian dialogue and for whom the religious value of “Grace upon Grace” requires no comparison within Judaism for justification. The *midrash* I offer is an opportunity for us to share our common Scripture, our common God, and our common yearning for the not-yetness of God’s presence to emerge within our lives. Let me explicitly note that our setting and time constraints allow me only to be implicit—suggestive in many areas, inviting further conversation.

Jewish tradition teaches us that God interacts within history in three ways: creation, redemption, and revelation. It is within these three rubrics that we seek passages of scripture in which “water” illuminates God’s presence.

Creation: (Genesis 1:2) “The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and *Ruah Elohim* sweeping over the water.” That water is an essential primordial ingredient in the creation and provides our initial context of religious value. In fact, “water” is essential in five of the six days of creation. It is from within the waters that the firmament is created by way of *havdalah* “separating the waters.” It is the gathering of these primordial waters from which the seas are created. It is

within these seas that the first forms of animal life come forth. Later it is this sea life over which *Adam Harishon* is given dominion.

It is God's creative design that "water" be a *necessary* element of life. So essential to creation is water in these initial verses of scripture that we who interpret them to our congregants cannot overlook the religious value intended. That God creates out of nothing is a Divine signature, that we can see that signature in something as mundanely universal as water is a Divine daily gift. I found it mildly fascinating that physics, certainly no traditional friend of religion or of scripture, would substantiate the religious value of water as it relates to creation.

Physics, biology, and chemistry all ask what is fundamental to life but seek different answers than when we ask the same question. Yet, it is unequivocal for a scientist that water is *quintessential* to life! Water in the liquid form is necessary as the carrier, the conveyance, of the nutrient of basic cell processes that sustain life itself. Water is the facilitator of all of those chemical reactions and their products, which necessarily take place within every cell no matter how simple or complex. Water as a carrier also takes away the waste products that would otherwise poison the cell. Water is the universal solvent and thus can carry what it dissolves. We overlook these basic scientific axioms, yet they do reflect exactly what the text in Genesis is trying to teach us. Lawrence Henderson in his classic 1913 text, *The Fitness of the Environment, An Inquiry into the Biological Significance of the Properties of Matter*, concludes his chapter on water with the following:

Water, of its very nature as it occurs automatically in the process of cosmic evolution, is fit, with a fitness no less marvelous and varied than that fitness of the organism which has been won by the process of adaptation in the course of organic evolution. If doubts remain, let a search be made for any other substance which however slightly, can claim to rival water as the milieu of simple organism, as the *milieu interieur* of all living things or in any other of the countless physiological functions which it performs either automatically or as a result of adaptation.

Simply put, *the* element within which God created five of the six days is scientifically a perfect element for life itself.

As a religious moment, taking a person to the water for the *mikveh* or baptism, one is returning symbolically to the primordial matrix of creation. It is from within water that life itself comes and is sustained. What better substance to use to initiate or purify, to make sacred a human moment that can be likened to God's creative impulse for new life? The living waters can and should be understood from the Genesis texts as the waters from which living comes. . .the waters from which life is sustained.

Within Jewish tradition we also relate through God's redemptive presence. Again the texts in which water is used illuminate God's presence and thus offer us an important opportunity for conversation. Exodus 1:22 states callously how Pharaoh decrees that the Israelite male children should be drowned in the Nile. One rabbinic text suggests that 10,000

infants were drowned, another argues as many as 60,000. The cruelty of this infanticide in *water* establishes the foundation of the agony of the people and establishes the tension around the use of “water” as a leitmotif throughout the redemption narratives. First, water is used to destroy life, then in Exodus 2:10 it is used as the source from which life is saved. Moses (Moshe in Hebrew) means “I drew him out of the water.” The irony is not lost on the critical reader—the very place in which Pharaoh decrees Israelite life to perish is the place from which the leader of the Exodus shall come, drawn forth by none other than the Pharaoh’s own daughter. For the Hebrew grammarians in our midst, there is some interesting *dikduk* in the name Moshe. The Hebrew verb is *mashah*—“to draw something from the water.” If the name were to indicate only that the child had been drawn from the water it would be *mashuy*, drawn in the passive sense. Moshe is in the active voice and really means “drawer.” Hence his name indicates that he would be the one “to draw” the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery.

Exodus 7:17-18 uses water again as a venue for disaster, the first plague, turning the Nile into blood. Sometimes, God’s redemptive presence requires using the “living waters” as a means for illuminating the evil in our own midst. Pharaoh uses the Nile to drown children, shedding blood; Moshe is drawn from the Nile to save the people; and the Nile becomes blood in order to teach Pharaoh the legitimacy of God’s redemptive presence. In Exodus 14:9ff, the Sea of Reeds is the use of water as the final barrier to freedom as well as another ironical use of water as a substance that both saves and destroys. The people have been led forth after the Passover to face water, “drowning” as Pharaoh had originally decreed. The text has Moses raising his staff and dividing the waters, but rabbinic tradition suggests that while Moses stood on the rock praying waiting for God to provide the dry land for the Israelites to flee, one from the tribe of Judah (the tribe of the future Messiah), Nachshon ben Amidadav, took off his cloak and dove into the water and then the dry land appeared. The rabbis want us to be aware that the Sea of Reeds was not ultimately God’s miracle, that after the Divine redemptive act of Pasach, passing over, it was human action, human choice in the face of more slavery, which ultimately divided the waters. Water, the primary venue of slavery’s cruelest agony, and the essential meaning of the name of Moshe, becomes the Divine and human action. God’s redemption is always present as we re-enter “the water,” remembering as we must the terrors that we have experienced and the hope we were granted as we flee to dry land.

Still other passages give us an even more illuminated understanding of God’s redemptive presence. Exodus 13:21 is one of many verses in which God is made manifest in the “pillar-of-cloud.” A cloud is a set of water droplets condensed in between gas and liquid, but nonetheless water. Throughout the desert experience the “pillar-of-cloud,” this very particular

form of water, is the primary means by which God is made manifest to the people during the day. How wonderful that in the arid desert the cloud, the physical presence of water, can and should be God's way of being immanent. It is the cloud that leads the people in their wanderings, water in a form we can see but cannot touch, water we can measure but cannot contain. Exodus 16:14 describes the manna that fed the Israelites like the dew that fell on the desert floor. Dew is water, like the droplets that form the pillar of cloud, and is visually so seemingly insignificant, that unless we focus our needs and our gratitude, we shall walk right past the very substance that God has provided to nourish us.

Water in many forms illuminates God's presence and promise. Exodus 17:1-7 offers yet another oft-repeated image of water while the Israelites wander. They enter the wilderness now free from their agony, but there is no water to drink. They murmur against Moses, challenging the intent of the Exodus, "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" One again senses the irony of the many different ways in which water acts as a venue for God's redemptive presence and the people's inability to understand it all. God tells Moses to strike a rock (a forecasting of even greater ironies) and that water will come forth. God always provides the water, but the people always whine and murmur over water, and Moses will ultimately be his most human as God's agent in dealing with the people's thirst. This scene is repeated several times in scripture, emphasizing that water, the basic element of creation and that venue of both death and redemption in the Exodus, cannot be taken for granted even as we wander in search of God's revelation. We may be free, but we are still thirsty; we may be drawn from the waters to safety to serve our God, but we are still basically insecure about our calling as a "not-yet-Holy-people." In other words, never underestimate the basic needs of the congregation while dealing with the lofty vision of religious destiny. Water may be salvific, but that means little if the people to be saved are just a frightened mass, parched by their own insecurities.

In Exodus 23:31 the boundaries of God's promised land are defined by three bodies of water. Land has always been the physical content of the covenantal promise. It is not curious that when God describes this ultimate goal to the people immediately following the revelation at Sinai, three boundaries are water: the Sea of Reeds, the Sea of Philistia, and the river Euphrates. The issue is not geopolitics of the 1990s, but that redemption is finally made tangible with the land promised since the time of Abraham, and that land is defined by the waters around it. Water once again is the substance that makes real the promise and hope of redemption.

In Deuteronomy, God's providential presence is promised as long as the people maintain the *mitzvot*, God's commandments. Deut. 11:10-14 promises the rain and dew necessary for survival will be provided by God, but that the punishment for failing to keep the law is God shutting up the skies so there will be no rain. Water in these passages is *the* substance that

both saves and destroys. Whether or not we today accept such basic providential meteorology is irrelevant; the ancient world understood “water” whether from the rock or from heaven, to be God’s redemptive presence made accessible for the human experience. In Deuteronomy 28:11 and 28:24 this same use of rain as evidence of God’s providential power is stated in the blessings and curses Israel can expect when they enter the land, always depending on their behavior. Human behavior may or may not influence the weather patterns, but water in the form of rain/dew is a metaphor for our willingness to look beyond our own power to a transcendent power from which all blessings come. Using water in the rituals of our faiths allows us to recall during the life of one person how God’s redemptive presence is still made manifest. When we use “immersion” to initiate, let us consciously recall that water can drown those who seek evil. This water can never be taken for granted as “mere” water, for when we are thirsty or fear that there is insufficient water, we lose our perspective and rebel even against those called to lead us. The water that sacralizes our life is no less sacred when it nourishes the earth and feeds us.

The third dimension within which God interacts in history is through revelation. Exodus 19:16 describes the theophany, “On the third day as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a *dense cloud* upon the mountain. . .” The verse describes the most indescribable moment in Jewish history, the giving of Torah. God’s presence is made religiously “real” in Revelation, but humanly experienced in the thunder, lightning, cloud, loud blast, smoke and fire. I am particularly interested in the Hebrew, *Anan Kaved*, “heavy/dense cloud; which is different from the “pillar-of-cloud: in which God is present when leading the people. We might venture that this difference is due to the extraordinary way in which we relate to God in the context of revelation. Of the three contexts within which we interact with God, revelation is the unique/Holy venue, the one in which the instant of “actual contact” is truly beyond definition. A long and valuable argument between Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber on this issue resulted in the compromise that revelation is the *event* over and against the content. With this in mind, the dense cloud. . .filled with water is the rain which never falls on Sinai, is the presence of God’s “fullest” content.

Exodus 34 is a second giving of the law after the sin of the Golden Calf. “Adonay descended in a cloud and stood with him there” (Ex. 34:5) repeats the aforementioned use of cloud (water droplets) as the manifestation of God, which is particularly important in this moment of revelation. “He [Moses] remained with Adonay for forty days and forty nights, he did not eat bread and he did not drink water” (Ex. 34:28). During revelation human need is irrelevant. Though the people experienced God’s redemptive power during the Passover and at the Sea of Reeds, they immediately whined that they were thirsty. Moses who has already received the Law once, returns to be in God’s presence again, but for the forty days he needs neither food nor drink. Revelation fills us up with God so much that we

don't need to drink. The revelation of God's substance satisfies our every need. So too the water for ritual, which "fills up" the consecrant and the celebrant, who like Moses both experience this as a revelatory moment—which we call the Sacred.

In Deuteronomy 29 and 30, we get the ultimate covenantal statement; Moses is to die and the people are about to enter the land. Water is mentioned in these classic verses as idioms of their cultural inventory. Deuteronomy 29:10 is the introduction of the great peroration. "Your small children, your women, and your proselyte who is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of wood to the drawer of your water." Here the text wants us to be completely inclusive of the entire society. When the covenant is reaffirmed it is not with the elders, prophets, or priests, but with the people. The "hewer of wood and drawer of water" are two necessary and critical professions and using them as the "extremes" includes everyone in the terms of the covenant.

Just as drawing water is absolutely necessary for everyone in the camp, so too is the covenant absolutely necessary for everyone. Again the universal need for water makes it a powerful metaphor of religious values. Deut. 30:12-14 has Moses rhetorically asking where the covenant is to be found, "not in the heaven," "nor is it across the sea." This represents an obvious boundary that the entire culture recognized as unreachable, thus the insistence on the immediacy and intimacy of the covenant, "the matter is very near to you. . .in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." Water is used in these passages to affirm God's revelation and covenant are not unfathomable mysteries or unreachable goals. The water of ritual and sacred moments is personal and intimate, "in your heart, to do it."

Creation, redemption, and revelation are the ways in which God interacts in human history. These Scriptural texts offer us a sampling of how God is illuminated in the use of water. These verses further provide Jews and Christians new venues for our conversation about the origins and meanings of our rituals and sacred symbols. Yet these verses do not fully exhaust how our scriptures use water as a powerful religious metaphor of human interaction with the Divine. Consider the following verses, which help us better understand how the Scriptures depict the human capacity to struggle and to strive to be Kodesh, Holy. Surely, in Baptism the use of Holy Water is a sacred moment to affirm such human religious aspirations.

Genesis 2:10-14 describes the rivers running through the Garden of Eden. Just as the rivers "water" the garden, so does this quintessential substance, water, nourish all of the living inhabitants of the garden, including Adam and Eve. The four rivers flowing out of Eden represent to me the diversity of life and choices that also flow from the garden. Though Jewish and Christian interpretation of Eden differ, we agree on the human archetype represented by Adam/Eve, the human who must make choices to be a moral being. From the very outset of the human struggle as water, the

“headwaters,” the source of all four human rivers comes from this place of essential moral orientation.

Genesis 6:17, 7:10ff, and 9:12-16 all tell of Noah and the flood. No part of scripture uses water as a more vivid venue of human struggle, punishment, and eventually hope. Water in the form of endless rain becomes the destructive flood that wipes away a sinful humanity. Only Noah and his family are saved by the use of an ark. While the rushing waters as described in Scripture destroy all life, we experience the natural disasters of floods and hurricanes, which give us an indication of how savage water can be. Juxtapose the image of Eden and its rivers running through a Garden with the relentless floods of Noah. Because water can both save and destroy, we can never take for granted our behavior in the water. It was the perversity of humanity that brought on the rain and the floods, but it was the righteous behavior of Noah that merited the ark, and finally it is the hopeful promise of our behavior that merits the rainbow, the sign that there will be no more complete disasters with water. In the Noah story, water becomes the way we measure humanity’s ultimate maturation. We can destroy ourselves, save ourselves, and remain forever hopeful—all this through the all pervasive and seeming insignificance of the raindrop. Human behavior is like the raindrop—it too has the full potential of both disaster and salvation. What better metaphor to illuminate our constant struggle to strive to be Holy than a ritual of water.

In Genesis 24:13-20, Eliezer meets Rebecca at the well and vows that the maiden who “waters” his camels will become his master’s son’s wife. Thus, water is an essential element of romance and relationships. Rebecca’s kindness to Eliezer creates the first link in the patriarchal chain, and she is the first woman “loved” (Gen 23:67) by her husband. All this is illuminated within the narrative because of water.

In Genesis 32:23 Jacob fords the river Yabok after separating his family in safety while waiting for Esau. The river, Yabok, is literally the name Jacob twisted around, thus allowing Jacob to prepare for his night of wrestling with “messengers of God” by going across himself. The river, the water, become the necessary venue for his personal challenge as well as his exceptional religious insight. The river/water is the line that separates Jacob the child and Jacob the man, finally capable of becoming Israel.

Throughout Exodus and later in Numbers, water is used to emphasize the lack of faith that the people have in themselves and their destiny. They constantly rebel over the lack of water, even though God provides them with more than enough to drink. Water becomes the ultimate challenge to Moses. Out of the depth of his humanity he fails, as do so many of us, in his faith as a leader. Numbers 20:11-13 tells of yet another episode of the people whining and Moses looking to God for help. This time God says “speak” to the rock, and water will come forth. In a reasonable fit of frustration so common among those called to serve God, Moses strikes the rock twice, and the water comes forth to quench their thirst. But Moses

fails to sanctify God in the presence of the people, and for this he is punished and denied entrance into the promised land. How curious that water, from which Moses/Moshe derives his name, should be his ultimate downfall as a leader but also his most accessible moment as a clergy/leader.

Water, the universal solvent, is also an essential component in the actual practice of the sacrificial cult. Moses has the Golden Calf ground into a powder and then dissolved in water and makes the people drink it (Exodus 32:30). Numbers 5:16 is the "Sotah," the test of bitter waters for the adulterous wife. Numbers 19 tells of the Red Heifer, in which water is used as a solution for the ashes of the sacrifice. Water is an essential element of the ancient Israelite worship. We often overlook this because the use of animal sacrifice and blood are the key elements of Biblical Judaism. Water is the ever-present universal liquid for public worship.

Water is used in the Scriptures to help us locate human striving as the necessary context of religious meaning. Men and women must always be able to choose how to behave in order for them to be truly human, and often those choices are framed within the Biblical narrative in which water is the river, the flood, and the sacrificial potion, and in which the thirst for water tests even the faith of the prophet. Water is the life-sustaining substance within which life itself is tested in search of religious boundaries. These passages of human struggle also illuminate the profound role water plays in making lives sacred lives. God interacts through water, and humans struggle to find God in their lives, which is often illuminated by the tests of water. Hence, it is water that so often links human struggle and Divine interaction. Can there be a better substance to use for blessing a soul?

Finally, in order to make absolutely certain I have fulfilled my obligation to do a midrash on water, I remind you of Gerald Bruns' definition of midrash. "The key to midrash lies in this reciprocity between text and history. Midrash is a dialogue between text and history in which the task of giving an account—giving a midrash—does not involve merely construing a meaning, it also involves showing how the text still bears on us, still speaks to us and exerts its claim upon us even though our situation is different from anything that has gone before. The task of midrash is to keep open the mutual belonging of the text and those who hear it." (Literary Guide to the Bible, p.634) I have attempted to push the various texts using water into our lives and then push our lives back through these texts. Scripture links both Jewish and Christian values in ritual and liturgy. In using this Scripture, I have tried to stimulate a midrash and intended to illuminate our shared vision of God in history and with humans struggling with choices. I hope this brief midrash helps all of us taste the living waters of our souls, so that we may all be nourished for an eternity.

I want to offer a very brief mystical midrashic epilogue, using *gematria*, the use of Hebrew numerology. I want to once again "prove" that water is the basic and most essential substance of "religious" life. Water in Hebrew is Mayim, mem, yod, mem. These three letters have the numeri-

cal value of 90/40, 10, 40. Using a special *gematria* concordance, I found the following words/passages that have the same numerical value. I should note that the mystics, or Kabbalists, believed that shared numerical values are not coincident but have multiple meanings, internal and hidden “in-between-the-letters.” The passages include Genesis 2:2—all/every; 4:17—and he knew; 14:1—king; 41:17—in my dream; 43:34—all of them; Exodus 13:15—I redeem; 28:6—the Ephod; 29:20—from its blood; Leviticus 25:49—and he may redeem himself; Numbers 16:5—and will make known; Deuteronomy 1:28—our hearts; 20:18—they teach; 31:12—they may learn.

If these are not enough, consider the atomic weight of water, H₂O: 2+16=18. In Hebrew 18 is the numerical value of Chay—life. Thus, “coincidentally” water weighs the equivalent of life. If you multiply 18 by 5, which in Hebrew is the letter hay, and used as an abbreviation for Adonay/God you get 90, the numerical value of water. Take its atomic weight, and multiply it by God, you get water—the essence of life. Five is also the day on which life came forth in the water. None of this in my opinion is just a gimmick or happenstance; it is yet another way for the texts to push against our history/science and our reality.

Water is the essence of life, both actual and religious; we need only look more carefully at how deep the water really is.