

# Being Pelted with Etrogim<sup>1</sup>

In my second year of rabbinical school I learned the fifth chapter of Tractate Sukkah, ההליל, “the flute,” about the water-drawing festival that occurred during Temple times. Before we got there, however, we learned a few small sections of chapter four, לולב וערבה, one of which tells a bizarre story. It begins with שמחת בית השואבה, the water-drawing festival during which the priests filled a golden flask with water from the Siloam spring to offer on the altar of the Temple. The water was brought as a libation to G-d to receive a favorable judgment in the amount of rainfall that would occur in Israel during the coming year. One time, rather than pouring the libation on the altar, the priest poured it on his feet, and as a result the entire community pelted him with etrogim.<sup>2</sup>

I’m telling this story on Shabbat so that I do not get pelted with *etrogim*. Seriously, though, when I first learned this story I thought of being pelted with tomatoes or eggs after a poor performance. Many people are still pelted, ranging from Chancellor Angela Merkel at a

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to my teacher Rabbi Jason Rogoff whose teaching “Our Very Life” for JTS reminded me of this text. <http://www.jtsa.edu/our-very-life>

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Sukkah 4:9

campaign rally<sup>3</sup> to the South Korean soccer team after returning home emptyhanded from the World Cup.<sup>4</sup> Generally when one person pelts another it's to indicate that they don't like something that the other person is doing, whether politically or in a public performance. In our Mishnah, the *Kohen* is supposed to pour water on the altar for G-d to provide the people of Israel with water in return. No mention is made as to why the *Kohen* poured the libation water on his feet. Perhaps he made a mistake and slipped up. Perhaps he meant it as an act of rebellion. Whatever the case, the Jews at the Temple don't take kindly to him doing so.

In *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah*, we learn that on Sukkot Israel is judged for rain-that the amount of rainfall for the entire year is determined on Sukkot.<sup>5</sup> Rain was a life or death matter: if there was drought, one would not eat. In Tractate *Taanit* we read of a number of fasts that would occur if rain did not fall within a certain period of time on the Hebrew calendar. We read of miracle workers like *Honi*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/3721375/angela-merkel-pelted-with-tomatoes-rally/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-5902051/South-Korea-squad-pelted-eggs-Union-Jack-cushions-return-home-World-Cup.html>

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2

*HaMaagel* and *Hanina ben Dosa* who beseech G-d to make rain fall.

Therefore, it stands to reason that a priest who does not follow the proper procedure for obtaining rainfall would be severely condemned, as his error could be held responsible for a drought.

In an age without a centralized Temple in Jerusalem, we believe that sacrifices are replaced by prayer, <sup>6</sup>ונשלמה פרים שפתינו<sup>6</sup>. As such our prayer for rain, which we will begin to say the evening on December 4<sup>th</sup>,<sup>7</sup> has a great power to it. One must ask, however, if our prayer for rain as a blessing (תן מטר לברכה) really has an impact. In two days we will pray that the rainfall be ולא לקללה, for blessing and not for curse; להיים ולא למוות, for life and not for death; לשבע ולא לרזון, for satiation and not for famine. If we continue to have torrential hurricanes, like Florence, or wildfires, like in California, does that mean that G-d is not heeding our prayers? Is there someone to hold responsible, to “pelt with *etrogim*,” because of negligence?

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 14:7

<sup>7</sup> In Israel it will be said beginning October 16, the 7<sup>th</sup> of Marcheshvan.

Some will say I am going about this wrong, that the story in the *Mishnah* is really a political dispute. The rabbinic reason given for why the *Kohen* poured the water on his feet is because he was a Sadducee who believed that the rabbinic customs were nonsense, as there is no biblical basis for the water libation. The pelting was a protest by the Pharisees, or “proto-rabbis,” against those who ignore the Oral Law. With that being said, I think there is room to see this as a *Kohen* who made a mistake and paid a severe price for it. The Talmud teaches that the people pelted the *Kohen* so hard that it damaged the horns of the altar.<sup>8</sup> The same could be said for the way the teens throw candy at an *aufruf* or *Bar Mitzvah*.

I hope that in addition to enjoying *Sukkot*, each of us will take a moment to look at the situations where we feel like pelting another with something—hopefully not our *etrog* after *Sukkot*—and examine why that is the case. Is it because we disagree politically or religiously? Is it because we feel their behavior is antithetical to what it should be? Is it because we feel they are engaging in negligence and something is at stake which

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<sup>8</sup> Talmud Sukkah 48b

we highly value? Before we “pelt the etrog” let us take a step back and reexamine the situation, seeing whether or not that is the warranted approach or whether another response would be more effective. In so doing, may we avoid an approach like in the *Mishnah*, and not damage our altar.