

The Sound of the Shiloach

Why Water Became the Joy of Sukkos

Sukkos 5787 Slot Five Sunday Night Shiur

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The Night the Water Entered the Beis Hamikdash

Please look at Source 1 on the source sheet.

Picture Yerushalayim on a night of Sukkos. The courtyards of the Beis Hamikdash are filled with people. Great lamps illuminate the city. The Leviim play their instruments. The greatest sages dance before the nation. The celebration continues through the night as the people prepare for one of the most unusual avodos ever performed upon the mizbe'ach.

A procession leaves the Beis Hamikdash and descends to the spring of the Shiloach. Water is drawn into a golden vessel. The procession then climbs back toward the Mikdash and enters through the Water Gate. At that moment the trumpets sound:

תִּקְעוּ וְהִרְיעוּ וְתִקְעוּ

The water is brought to the mizbe'ach and poured as the nisuch hamayim. This was one of the central avodos of Sukkos and the source of the extraordinary celebration known as the Simchas Beis Hashoevah.

There is something deliberately surprising about the scene. Gold is precious. Trumpets are ceremonial. The procession is public. The mizbe'ach is the center of the avodah. Yet the substance being carried with such honor is the most ordinary substance in the world. Had the vessel contained rare wine or costly perfume, the dignity of the procession would have seemed natural. The Mishnah wants us to notice that all this grandeur surrounds water.

That contrast is already the beginning of the answer. The Beis Hamikdash is teaching us that what appears plain may express the deepest part of the covenant. A mitzvah does not receive its holiness from the excitement we bring to it. It receives its holiness from the One Who commanded it. Therefore even water can enter through a gate bearing its name, accompanied by the voice of the trumpets.

Yet the Shiloach itself was not an impressive river. Chazal describe its flow in strikingly modest terms:

Now look at Source 2.

The stream flowed through an opening only the size of an issar, a small coin. Agrippas looked at that narrow opening and decided to improve it. He commanded his workers to widen the outlet so that more water would emerge. They carried out his order, but the result was the exact opposite of what he intended. The water diminished and nearly stopped. His advisers told him to restore the opening to its former narrow size. Once they narrowed it again, the water resumed its flow.

The Questions

1. Why did the Torah add a water libation specifically on Sukkos when the regular libations accompanying the korbanos throughout the year were made with wine?
2. Why was the water drawn amid such extraordinary celebration at night, although it was poured upon the mizbe'ach only during the day?
3. Why did the Beis Hamikdash greet ordinary, tasteless water with a golden vessel, a public procession and blasts of the trumpets?
4. Why was the Shiloach intended to flow through an opening no wider than an issar, and why did the water diminish when Agrippas widened it?
5. Why does the same measurement of an issar appear in Chazal's description of how deeply a Jew should bow during the Amidah?
6. If kabbalas ol is the beginning of avodas Hashem, does a mature and accomplished Jew eventually graduate from it and move to a more sophisticated service based upon understanding?
7. Finally, what does the narrow stream of the Shiloach ask from us in our homes, our offices, our businesses and the ordinary decisions of daily life?

These are not seven unrelated questions. They are seven entrances into one idea. The Shiloach teaches us what remains of a Jew's relationship with Hashem when all the taste has disappeared.

Wine and Water

Please turn to Source 3. This source gives us the central distinction upon which the entire shiur is built.

Throughout the year, the korbanos brought upon the mizbe'ach were accompanied by wine. Only on Sukkos was water added. The difference between wine and water is immediately recognizable.

Wine possesses taste, fragrance, color and character. A person drinks it slowly and experiences it. Wine therefore represents an avodah possessing taam: a service of Hashem that a person understands, appreciates and feels.

There is an avodah in which the mind recognizes the wisdom of a mitzvah. The heart is moved by its beauty. The person feels uplifted by davening, excited by Torah and enriched by the atmosphere of Yom Tov. His intelligence and emotions participate in what he is doing. This is the wine of avodas Hashem.

Water is different. Pure water has no distinctive taste. It does not ask to be examined, analyzed or savored. It is plain and essential. Water therefore represents an avodah that does not depend upon understanding or emotional satisfaction. A Jew performs the mitzvah because it is the will of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

קיום מצות הבוֹרֵא אֶת וְכֵן מִכֵּין שְׂזֵהוּ רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא

This is kabbalas ol. The phrase literally means accepting the yoke. It means that Hashem's will remains binding even when my mind has not grasped it, my heart has not warmed to it and my personality is receiving no immediate pleasure from it.

We should serve Hashem with understanding, but never merely because we understand.

The Torah does not reject wine. Wine accompanied the korbanos throughout the year. Understanding, inspiration and feeling are indispensable parts of Jewish life. A cold Judaism stripped of thought and emotion is not the goal. But wine cannot be the foundation. If my service depends entirely upon taste, then it will last only as long as the taste lasts.

There are days when a person opens a siddur and every word seems alive. There are other days when the same words appear closed. There are mitzvos whose beauty is immediately apparent, and there are mitzvos that a person struggles to understand. There are seasons in life when Hashem's kindness is visible, and there are seasons in which the pattern is hidden.

The same change can occur within a single day. A person may leave an inspiring tefillah and, an hour later, face an irritating obligation that feels entirely unspiritual. He may understand the holiness of Shabbos and still find one particular restraint difficult. He may believe deeply in Divine providence and still be unable to understand the circumstance now standing before him. The question is not whether wine has value. The question is what carries him when the wine is no longer present.

If the relationship rests entirely upon wine, the relationship becomes conditional. I serve because I understand. I remain faithful because I feel

inspired. I continue because the experience is rewarding. Water represents the deeper statement: I serve because I belong to Hashem.

Water is not tasteless Judaism. It is Judaism that does not depend upon taste.

The Water Drawn at Night

This distinction explains the unusual timing of the avodah. The nisuch hamayim upon the mizbe'ach took place during the day, together with the korban. The great drawing of the water, however, belonged to the night.

Day is the time when the world is illuminated. A person sees the objects around him, recognizes where he is standing and understands how the different parts of his surroundings relate to one another. Symbolically, day represents clarity. The person sees meaning, understands purpose and senses the direction of his life.

Night is not necessarily tragedy. Night is concealment. The same world is present, but the person cannot see it clearly. He cannot identify the road or understand the landscape around him. The pattern has not necessarily disappeared; it has become hidden from his vision.

There are intellectual nights, when a person cannot understand. There are emotional nights, when he understands the words but feels nothing. There are circumstantial nights, when events seem to contradict everything he expected. And there are quiet nights known only to the person himself, when no crisis is visible from the outside but the inner light has dimmed. The avodah of water speaks to every one of these nights.

The avodah of wine naturally belongs to the day. It flourishes when matters are illuminated, when the mind understands and the heart responds. But the avodah of water can continue at night. Kabbalas ol does not require the road to be visible. It allows the Jew to continue even when he cannot explain where the road is leading.

This is one of the most necessary capacities in religious life. A person must never stop learning, thinking or attempting to understand. At the same time, he cannot place his obedience on hold until every matter has become clear to him. He carries water through the night.

That does not mean suppressing honest questions. A Jew may ask, study, struggle and seek guidance. Kabbalas ol is not the refusal to think. It is the refusal to make complete understanding a condition of faithfulness. I can say that I do not yet understand and, in the very same breath, say that I still belong.

Eventually, the water drawn in darkness is brought upon the mizbe'ach in daylight. The faithful act performed without comprehension becomes part of an

illuminated avodah. But the faithfulness came first. The Jew did not wait for the morning before beginning to walk.

The Point Deeper Than Understanding

The waters of the Shiloach represent the inward and essential bond between a Jew and Hashem. That bond is not created by philosophical proof, spiritual emotion or accumulated achievement. Those things may reveal and enrich the relationship, but they do not create its essence.

At the deepest level, the bond is not a matter of quantity. It is a matter of quality. It is the nekudas hayahadus, the inward Jewish point. A point occupies very little space, yet everything can be built from it. The flow of the Shiloach is narrow, but it comes from the source.

This explains why the measurement of the stream was an issar. Chazal use that same small coin when describing the proper bow during the Amidah:

Please look at Source 4.

עד שִׁירָאָה אִיסָר כָּנָגַד לְבֹו

Rashi explains that a person bends until two folds form in the flesh, one above the heart and one below it, with the space or remaining flesh between the folds corresponding to the size of an issar. The issar is a physical measurement. It tells us that the bow is not a vague internal sentiment. The person actually bends.

During the Amidah, the Jew stands before the King. At prescribed moments he bows, and his body declares what the mouth alone cannot fully say: I am not the final authority. My preferences are not sovereign. My understanding does not determine the limits of my obligation. I stand before Someone greater than myself.

The same issar therefore appears in the narrow water of the Shiloach and opposite the bowed heart. Both images express bittul. The stream is small because it represents the irreducible point of submission from which the larger avodah must flow.

Modern life trains us to expand ourselves. We are encouraged to express ourselves, develop our abilities and make our voices heard. Torah does not ask us to erase our minds or personalities. It asks us to preserve, beneath all that expansion, one place where we can bend.

**A person may possess a broad mind and a passionate heart,
but he still requires one narrow place in which Hashem's will
is final.**

The Mistake of Graduating from Kabbalas Ol

A thoughtful religious person may accept that kabbalas ol is necessary at the beginning. A child obeys before he understands. A beginner follows before he has acquired knowledge. The foundation must certainly be obedience rather than the beginner's limited understanding.

After many years, however, a different thought can quietly develop. The person has learned. He has performed thousands of mitzvos. He has passed through many Yamim Tovim and lived a largely faithful life. His understanding has matured and his religious world has broadened. He begins to assume that the simple acceptance with which he started has already completed its work.

That assumption is precisely the danger. Kabbalas ol is not temporary scaffolding removed once the building is complete. It is the foundation beneath the completed building. The higher the structure rises, the more disastrous it becomes to weaken the foundation.

In fact, sophistication can create a new test that the beginner never faced. The beginner knows that he does not know. The accomplished person has good reason to respect his own judgment. He has experience, learning and perhaps the admiration of others. At that point the ego does not need to reject Hashem openly. It can speak in the language of maturity and persuade the person that his judgment now defines which obligations remain necessary for him.

A mature Jew should possess more wine than a beginner: deeper understanding, richer feeling and broader knowledge. But he must never possess less water. Growth does not mean graduating from obedience. Growth means that understanding and emotion are built upon an obedience that has become deeper and more conscious.

Agrippas and the Generation That Had Risen

Please look at Source 5.

We can now return to Agrippas. Chazal relate that he once wanted to determine the size of the Jewish population. He instructed that one kidney be taken from each Korban Pesach and counted. The total demonstrated an enormous population, twice the number who had left Egypt.

The inner meaning of that event is not merely that there were many Jews. Pesach is connected with dilug, a leap. In the days of Agrippas, all Israel brought the Korban Pesach. The nation appeared to be in an elevated condition, leaping from one spiritual level to another.

Agrippas was not attempting to abolish avodas Hashem. His error was much more subtle. He saw a nation that had advanced. He therefore believed that the nation no longer needed to be sustained by the narrow flow of simple kabbalas

ol. The source could be widened. Their avodah could now rest upon harchavah, an expansive service of understanding.

That is what makes his mistake so instructive. It did not present itself as irreligion. It presented itself as an improvement to religion. The king did not close the spring; he tried to enlarge it. He did not want less water; he expected more. Yet a person can damage the source precisely while believing that he is making the avodah broader, more intelligent and more suited to an advanced generation.

He looked at the tiny opening and saw limitation. He failed to recognize that the narrowness was protecting the source. Once he widened the opening, the water diminished. Even the water that had previously flowed began to disappear.

This can happen within a person's religious life. He begins with loyalty. Later, he acquires knowledge, sophistication and standing. Gradually, without openly rebelling against anything, he allows his personal judgment to become the measure of obligation. He continues with the parts he appreciates and quietly weakens the parts that no longer speak to him.

The result is not a broader river. The result can be less water. Once the relationship depends upon the person's present understanding, everything becomes vulnerable to changes in mood, circumstance and intellectual fashion.

Agrippas did not seek less avodas Hashem. He mistakenly believed that spiritual advancement could replace simple kabbalas ol.

Yesterday's Acceptance Cannot Serve Today

Source 6 contains the sentence that should remain with us after the shiur.

There is an additional dimension. Kabbalas ol cannot survive as a historical memory. It must accompany a person's avodah continually and be renewed every day.

קְבָלַת־עוֹל שֶׁל יוֹם הָאֶתְמוּל אֵין זָה דִּי עֲבוּר עֲבוּדַת הַיּוֹם

Yesterday's acceptance was genuine, but it belonged to yesterday's person and yesterday's circumstances. Today brings a new test, a new mood, a new responsibility and sometimes a new darkness. Today requires its own submission.

Habit can resemble kabbalas ol from the outside. Both may produce repeated behavior. Internally, however, they are opposites. Habit says, I continue because this is what I have always done. Kabbalas ol says, I choose again today to stand before Hashem.

The distinction becomes visible when the routine is disturbed. Habit works well while yesterday's conditions remain in place. When the schedule changes, fatigue arrives or a sacrifice is demanded, habit loses its support. A living acceptance can respond to a new day because it is directed not toward the routine but toward Hashem. The action may look identical, but the inner source has been renewed.

When the daily renewal is missing, the ordinary waters begin to diminish. The person may remain outwardly observant, but vitality recedes. Prayer becomes thinner. Mitzvos become negotiable. The relationship slowly changes from obedience to convenience.

This is why the morning acceptance of *ol malchus Shamayim* is never redundant. A Jew who said *Shema* yesterday says it again today. He does not merely recall an old allegiance. He declares a present one.

The Warning of Yochanan Kohen Gadol

The second part of Source 6 gives us a frightening example. Yochanan Kohen Gadol served in the *Kehunah Gedolah* for eighty years and ultimately became a *Tzeduki*.

Consider the spiritual stature represented by those words. The Kohen Gadol was the holiest representative of the Jewish people. He came from the tribe of Levi, the tribe selected for special holiness, and from among the Kohanim he was chosen for the highest service. Year after year he entered the *Kodesh Hakodashim* on Yom Kippur and emerged safely.

He did this not once or twice, but for eighty years. Eighty Yom Kippurs. Eighty entries into the holiest place on earth on the holiest day of the year. If accumulated spiritual experience could guarantee the future, he possessed an unmatched guarantee.

Imagine the memories he carried. He had heard generations of *tefillos*, offered decades of *korbanos* and stood again and again where no other Jew was permitted to stand. The lesson is not that those years were meaningless. The lesson is that even the holiest past remains a past. It can inspire today's *avodah*, but it cannot perform today's bow.

Nevertheless, when the inward movement of *kabbalas ol* weakened, the spiritual world constructed over eight decades could not preserve itself. The warning is severe because it removes the comforting illusion that yesterday's greatness can make today's submission unnecessary.

**No yesterday, not even eighty magnificent yesterdays, can say
today's yes for us.**

Return and Narrow It

Please look at Source 7, where the entire teaching is brought into the ordinary settings of life.

Agrippas's advisers supplied more than an engineering recommendation. Their words become the spiritual remedy:

חזרו ומעטוהו

Return and make it narrow again. Return to the original point. Restore the place in which a Jew does not negotiate with the Ribbono Shel Olam. Rebuild the avodah upon the simple statement that preceded all the understanding and all the feeling: I am Yours.

Once the outlet was narrowed, the Shiloach flowed again. When a Jew returns to the small but essential stream of kabbalas ol, the relationship with Hashem becomes steady and strong. Understanding no longer threatens obedience; it grows from obedience. Feeling no longer determines commitment; it beautifies commitment.

This is not a call for intellectual narrowness. The mind should expand. Torah knowledge should deepen. The heart should become more sensitive. The narrowness belongs only to the source. At the source, there must be no opening through which the ego can redefine the will of Hashem.

The Shiloach in Ordinary Life

The Shiloach cannot remain in the Beis Hamikdash. Its water must enter the ordinary places in which a Jew spends his life.

At home, kabbalas ol appears when a person fulfills an obligation even though he is tired and unappreciated. In marriage, it appears when loyalty is not made dependent upon the mood of the moment. In raising children, it appears when a parent continues to model consistency even when immediate results cannot be seen.

Sometimes the home presents no dramatic challenge at all. The test is the small promise that would be easy to forget, the patient answer that must be given for the fourth time or the apology that pride would prefer to postpone. These moments do not feel like the great avodah of the Beis Hamikdash. They feel like water. That is precisely why they reveal whether Hashem's will is present in ordinary life.

In the office and in business, the test may be even sharper. A person is surrounded by calculations of advantage, profit and reputation. The narrow stream reminds him that he was placed in that setting by Hashem. His

assignment is not merely to earn a living but to make the place in which he stands a dwelling for the Creator of the world.

דיכּה לבּוּרָא הָעוֹלָם

That means honesty when dishonesty appears profitable. It means responsibility when no one is watching. It means speaking properly about another person when a damaging comment would win approval. It means maintaining the standards of a Jew not only in shul, but in the private room in which the significant decision is actually made.

The crucial decisions are often narrow decisions. No audience sees them and no trumpet announces them. A number can be entered one way or another. A commitment can be honored or explained away. A few words can protect another person's dignity or diminish it. At that moment, the person may possess many clever arguments. The Shiloach asks whether there remains one place within him that simply bends.

When the inner bond is strong, every part of life can fulfill its mission. The person is no longer divided between religious moments and ordinary moments. The same acceptance of Hashem's authority accompanies him into the beis midrash, the kitchen, the office and the marketplace. This brings stability and blessing in spiritual life and in material life.

The Sukkah Beside the Electric Fence

Rabbi Yosef Mendelevich spent twelve years in Soviet prisons and forced-labor camps because of his struggle for Jewish freedom and his attempt to leave for Eretz Yisrael. Within the camp, he fought to observe whatever mitzvos remained possible.

He kept Shabbos despite repeated punishment. He later wrote that he spent three years under the harsh conditions of a closed prison because he would not work on Shabbos. He attempted to pray and to preserve the Jewish calendar under circumstances designed to strip a prisoner of identity and hope.

There was one mitzvah that appeared completely impossible: sukkah. The authorities would never permit a prisoner to construct a religious structure. There was no private yard, no lumber and no schach. For years, Sukkos arrived in the prison without any apparent way for him to sit in a sukkah.

Then, one year, he noticed a large pile of straw near the edge of the camp. He realized that if he could crawl inside the pile, hollow out a small space and clear away enough straw above him to see the stars, the pile could become his sukkah.

The location made the plan terrifying. The straw stood near the electrified perimeter fence. Prisoners were forbidden to approach that area. A guard in one

of the towers could assume that anyone running toward the fence was attempting to escape. The guard could shoot before asking for an explanation.

As evening approached, before the searchlights on the towers were switched on, Mendelevich made his decision. He ran toward the straw. He crawled into the pile, pushed aside enough of it to look upward and see the stars, and recited the berachah:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לִישֵׁב בַּסֵּכָה

As soon as he completed the berachah, he crawled out and hurried away from the fence.

There was no decorated sukkah and no beautifully set table. There was no silver Kiddush cup, no festive meal, no guests and no singing. There was scarcely time to remain beneath the straw. There was only a Jew, a glimpse of the stars and the words v'tzivanu, Hashem commanded us.

Everything that normally gives the mitzvah taste had been stripped away. There was no comfort, beauty, approval or companionship. Performing it exposed him to danger rather than reward. If the mitzvah had depended upon atmosphere, there was no mitzvah left to perform. What remained was the narrowest point of all: Hashem commanded, and a Jew wished to answer.

Yet when he emerged, his heart was filled with joy. In his own account, the feeling was simple and triumphant: he had done it.

That joy cannot be explained as relief alone. Relief would have begun only after he reached safety. His joy was already bound to the few moments beneath the straw, because those moments proved that the prison could control his movement without owning his allegiance. The guards could deny him a proper sukkah, but they could not sever the inward bond that made a pile of straw into a meeting place with Hashem.

He did not enter the straw because he was filled with joy. He was filled with joy because he entered the straw.

The joy was not the condition of his obedience. It was born from his obedience. First came the water: no taste, no explanation and no visible reward. First came the acceptance of Hashem's will. Then the water itself became the source of joy.

Why the Water Produced the Greatest Joy

This explains why nisuch hamayim became the source of the extraordinary joy of Sukkos. Wine already possesses taste. Its pleasure is visible before the person drinks. Water begins with plainness. When a Jew discovers that his bond with Hashem survives even without taste, he discovers a joy deeper than taste.

The greatest simchah is not the excitement of receiving something from the relationship. It is the discovery that the relationship itself cannot be taken away. Understanding may disappear for a time. Emotion may grow quiet. Circumstances may become dark. But beneath everything flows the Shiloach, narrow as an issar and connected to its source.

Agrippas tried to widen the Shiloach, and the waters nearly disappeared. Rabbi Mendelevich entered the narrowest place imaginable, beneath a pile of straw beside an electric fence, and there he found a wellspring that the Soviet empire could not close.

We naturally seek the wine. We want to understand, to feel and to be inspired. We should seek all of that. But underneath the wine, a Jew must preserve one stream of ordinary water:

Today, once again, I accept the will of Hashem.

Perhaps that is why the silent waters of the Shiloach were greeted with trumpets. Sometimes the loudest declaration a Jew can make is his quiet, unqualified yes.

Sources and Acknowledgments

- Mishnah Sukkah 4:9, the drawing and libation of the water and the trumpet blasts at the Water Gate.
- Talmud Bavli, Arachin 10b, the narrow flow of the Shiloach and Agrippas's attempt to widen it.
- Talmud Bavli, Berachos 28b; Rashi as cited by Tur, Orach Chaim 113, the measure of an issar opposite the heart when bowing.
- Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 64b, Agrippas's census through the kidneys of the Korban Pesach.
- Talmud Bavli, Berachos 29a, Yochanan Kohen Gadol's service and later change.
- The central development of the teaching is adapted from Rabbi Eliyahu Wolf, Me'at Min HaOr - Moadim, Sukkos, 'Kolot HaShiloach,' based upon a sichah delivered at Simchas Beis Hashoevah 5716.
- The concluding story is Rabbi Yosef Mendelevich's firsthand account, published in his memoir and in an English excerpt titled 'Sukkot in a KGB Prison.'