

When Rain Became Our Responsibility

A D'var Torah on Deuteronomy 11:13–21, by Gui Susteras

A recent study¹ by Hanane Benadi and Kristian Noll of the London School of Economics (LSE) examined how people in Egypt and Jordan speak about extreme heat, drought, and environmental instability. They found that climate events are interpreted not only scientifically, but morally and religiously. Heatwaves are not merely meteorological phenomena; they are experienced as charged with meaning.

Their conclusion was pragmatic rather than theological: climate communication fails when it ignores religion. Nearly three-quarters of the world identifies as religious. If climate change is described only in technical language, it may be scientifically precise yet existentially thin. Religion shapes how billions interpret crisis.

What, then, does Judaism say when the rain does not come?

The Torah addresses this directly in Deuteronomy 11:13–21 — the second paragraph of the *Shema*: “*Ve-hayah im shamo'a tishme'u...*” — “If you indeed heed My commandments... I will give the rain of your land in its season.” And if not, “*ve-atzar et ha-shamayim*” — “the heavens will close.”

For modern Jews, this passage has long been unsettling. Early Reform liturgy omitted it, uneasy with what appeared to be theological determinism: obedience produces rain; disobedience produces drought. That instinct reflected the movement's intellectual integrity.

And yet, climate science has brought us back to this text with unexpected urgency. Since the Industrial Revolution, atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations have risen significantly. These gases absorb and re-emit infrared radiation, altering Earth's radiative balance. Warmer air can hold more water vapor, increasing the intensity of heavy rainfall events, while higher temperatures also accelerate evaporation, worsening drought in vulnerable regions.

For generations, we insisted that human beings do not control the rain. Science now compels a more nuanced admission: not individually, not miraculously — but collectively — we have altered atmospheric systems in ways that influence when and where rain falls.

Through probabilistic event attribution, scientists can now calculate how much more likely specific heatwaves, floods, or droughts have become due to anthropogenic

¹ <https://www.lse.ac.uk/research/research-for-the-world/sustainability/religion-climate-change-middle-east>

warming. No single storm is “caused” by human behavior alone. But collectively, human activity has altered the background conditions that shape rainfall patterns.

Deuteronomy is not teaching atmospheric physics. It is articulating a moral ecology. The Torah assumes that human behavior and environmental stability are linked. Its language is covenantal rather than chemical; its mechanism is pre-scientific. Yet its intuition — that collective conduct shapes the conditions of the land — resonates powerfully with contemporary climate science.

Rabbi Arthur Green argues² that creation is not a past event but an ongoing unfolding of Being itself. God is not a supernatural engineer intervening from beyond nature, but the underlying Oneness manifesting through natural process. If creation is continuous, then destabilizing ecological systems is not merely damage to matter; it is disruption within the unfolding of life itself.

The passage also warns against *avodah zarah*. Idolatry is not only the worship of statues. It is misdirected ultimacy — treating something finite as absolute. In our time, idolatry may take the form of assuming that economic growth is limitless, that extraction has no cost, that the Earth exists solely for our consumption.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his essay “*The Ecological Imperative*,³” reminds us how Judaism teaches that we are not owners of the Earth but its guardians. The command in Genesis *le’ovdah u’leshomrah* — to work the land and to guard it — establishes stewardship, not domination. In that respect, Deuteronomy insists on limits. Covenant means restraint.

The atmosphere, too, has limits. We no longer understand rainfall as supernatural reward or punishment. But we now know that natural law itself reflects the cumulative consequences of human action. The heavens do not close because God intervenes capriciously. They close when greenhouse gases accumulate without restraint.

The Torah’s phrase *shamoa tishme’u* — “if you truly listen” — now speaks in two registers. It calls us to hear divine command, and it calls us to heed scientific evidence. To ignore atmospheric data would not be sophistication; it would be a new form of *avodah zarah* — worshiping convenience over covenant.

The LSE researchers argue that religion must be part of climate discourse because it shapes how communities interpret crisis. Deuteronomy suggests something deeper: that responsibility accompanies knowledge. The text concludes, “*Ve-limadetem otam et beneichem*” — “Teach them to your children.” Ecological awareness is not a policy preference; it is intergenerational covenant.

² Radical Judaism, Rethinking God and Tradition by Arthur Green, Yale University Press

³ <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shoftim/the-ecological-imperative/>

The Torah once warned that the heavens could close. We now understand how that can happen. And we know that responsibility does not lie in the clouds, but in us.

In our generation, rain has become our responsibility.