

Iyyun for Sh'mini Atzeret
From Sarina Elenbogen-Siegel's 2023 Geshem Practicum

We have come to the end of our precious time dwelling in the sukkah. Our eyes have gazed up to the stars, we have been surrounded by the warmth of our ancestors, and now we pray for rain. Our Geshem liturgy asks that G-d create the appropriate amount of rain. *יטריח לפלג מפלג גשם*. We may know deep down that the rain will pour over us, but we don't know when or how much will fall. That uncertainty can be unsettling, especially amidst our climate crisis. We long for certainty and wholeness in this broken world.

Our tradition describes this season as *z'man simchateinu*, the season of our joy, and for me it is also a tender time of remembering. You see, two years ago on Shemini Atzeret a dark cloud descended upon me and I became seriously ill. I remember sitting under the sukkah with my friends, feeling numb and alone. Paranoia and self hating thoughts engulfed me. For months, I lost access to my full range of emotions. My eyes were dry and glossed over like the desert. My mouth uttered no song.

Just before I got sick, I had felt lost and destabilized. I yearned for divine closeness, but I wasn't able to receive it because I didn't know who I was. And when I became unwell, I felt fully cut off from Hashem, believing I did not deserve to have a relationship with them. I endured this stormy existence for most of the year, severed from any spiritual connection. But through slow and painful work, I recovered and Hashem welcomed me back with abundance. My deep well of suffering transformed into a wellspring of liberation and what I longed for I eventually received. But not in the way I expected.

The seasons flowed on and I found myself more at peace. In the month of Adar as I was walking back from yoga, it started to rain just as I was passing the playground down the street from my childhood home. As per usual, I didn't have an umbrella with me. But rather than running home to avoid getting drenched, I put down my yoga mat and I swung on the swings, kicking my legs up to the open sky. I allowed myself to be fully embraced by Hashem's geshem and I returned home to myself.

It will not always feel good, sometimes it will be intensely painful, but it is a blessing to feel the heavy rain of our emotions. Our feelings are fluid, and as sukkot reminds us, everything is temporary. It is sacred to long for what we don't have, because the yearning itself is so alive. Our prayers are a fertile place in which there is infinite possibility for transformation. Hashem welcomes all of our desires because Hashem wants to be in relationship with us. And, it is also upon us to put in the work to fulfill our desires.

We will now turn to our ancestors to give us the strength to pray for rain. We know the rain will come. We don't know when or how much will fall. But we can remember that we have it within us to weather this storm together. Whatever we're yearning for today, may we feel it deeply, may we trust in ourselves to put in the work to fulfill our desires, and may we trust in Hashem to provide for us with abundance.