

THE JEWISH PRAYER FOR RAIN IN BABYLONIA

BY

ARNOLD A. LASKER

Margate, Florida

AND

DANIEL J. LASKER

Beer-Sheva

With the development of Jewish law during the rabbinic period, different customs emerged in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia. One such divergence was in the prayer for rain, i. e. the insertion of the phrase *ve-ten tal u-matar li-verakhah* (grant dew and rain for a blessing) into the *Shemoneh 'Esreh*. The practice in the Land of Israel was to begin the recitation of this prayer usually in early October, setting the date in accordance with the Jewish lunisolar calendar. The Babylonian custom was to start praying for rain in late November on a date fixed in the solar calendar. Our purpose here is to analyze the reasons for the development of these two separate practices.

I

Mishnah Ta'anit 1:3 tells of a dispute between an anonymous tanna and Rabban Gamaliel¹) concerning when the saying of the prayer for rain should start. The former gives the third of Marḥeshvan as the proper date, while the latter says, "On the seventh of that month, fifteen days after the feast [of Sukkot], so that even the tardiest Israelite may reach the Euphrates [on the return journey from the pilgrimage to Jerusalem]." The Babylo-

¹) Some texts read Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel; cf. Raphael RABBINOVICZ, *Diqduqei Soferim, Ta'anit*, reprinted, Jerusalem, 1960, p. 50. For other textual variants, see Jacob N. EPSTEIN, *Mavo² Le-Nusah Ha-Mishnah*, Jerusalem, 5724, 2, pp. 1161-62.

nian Talmud thereupon quotes Rabbi Eleazar²⁾ as saying, “the halakhah is in accordance with Rabban Gamaliel”³⁾.

Immediately after Rabbi Eleazar’s endorsement of Rabban Gamaliel’s ruling, a supplementary opinion is offered: “A *baraita* records: ‘Ḥananiah says, “But in the *Golah*, [one waits] until the sixtieth day from the [autumnal] equinox’ ”⁴⁾. This statement has a parallel in the Jerusalem Talmud: “Ḥananiah, the son of Rabbi Joshua’s brother, says, ‘In the *Golah* they do not act [*lo’ nahagu*] in this manner, but rather [they wait] until the sixtieth day from the [autumnal] equinox’ ”⁵⁾. In both versions, Ḥananiah’s statement is followed by the assertion of Samuel that “the *halakhah* is in accordance with Ḥananiah”⁶⁾. The practice of beginning the prayer for rain on the seventh of Marḥeshvan was, thus, not universal.

Ḥananiah, a second century tanna, in referring to the *Golah*, was undoubtedly speaking not of the entire diaspora but only of

²⁾ Some texts read R. Ḥisda instead of R. Eleazar; see Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, *Hiddushei Ha-Riṭba, Ta’anit* ed. E. LICHTENSTEIN, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 35-36; Henry MALTER, *The Treatise Ta’anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, New York, 1930, pp. 10, 34. Riṭba and MALTER argue that reading R. Eleazar makes much more sense than R. Ḥisda. David HALIVNI, *Sources and Traditions* (Hebrew), Yoma to Hagiga, Jerusalem, 5735, pp. 435-37, however, reads R. Ḥisda (especially in the context of Bab. Ta’anit 4b); cf. also Amemar’s statement in Ta’anit 6a, and see below, nn. 18, 74.

³⁾ Ta’anit 10a. For the text and translation see MALTER, *The Treatise Ta’anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, Philadelphia, 1928, p. 69 (1967 edition, pp. 138-139).

⁴⁾ “Ḥananiah omer u-va-golah ‘ad shishim yom ba-tequfah.” MALTER, p. 69 (p. 138), translates Ḥananiah’s statement as “In the diaspora we must wait until the sixtieth day after the autumnal equinox.” As we shall show, this translation is incorrect on three accounts. *Ba-golah* is not “in the diaspora” in general, but in one particular diaspora country, viz., Babylonia. MALTER’s phrase, “we must wait”, is interpolated gratuitously into the sentence without any foundation in the Hebrew text. *Shishim yom ba-tequfah*, which means literally “the sixtieth day of the [autumn] season,” can be translated as “the sixtieth day from the equinox” (as we do) since the season (*tequfah*) starts on the day of the equinox (also called *tequfah*), but it cannot be understood to mean, as MALTER’s translation implies, the sixty-first day of the season. The dispute between Rav and Samuel, reported below, is in regard to whether the word ‘ad (until), in the phrase ‘as *shishim yom* (until the sixtieth day), is inclusive or exclusive.

⁵⁾ Ta’anit 1:1, p. 63d. Moses MARGOLIOT, in *Penei Mosheh*, *ad loc.*, says that Ḥananiah’s statement here refers to both mentioning rain and asking for it. David ben Naphtali Hirsch FRAENKEL in *Qorban Ha-‘Edah*, *ad loc.*, says it refers only to the request for rain. Joseph HEINEMANN, “*Le-Verur Peshutan shel Mishnayot Aḥadot*”, *Bar Ilan*, 3, 1965, p. 16, agrees with Margoliot.

⁶⁾ Bab. Ta’anit 10a; Jer. Ta’anit 63d. In the Babylonian Talmud, this statement is quoted by Rav Huna bar Ḥiyya in the name of Samuel.