



IMAGINING JUSTICE IN BALTIMORE

Part 2: Water Justice in Jewish Tradition(s)

Waters (plural tense, never singular) in Hebrew is Mayyim, “Mi” = from; “Yam” the sea.

God separates the waters (mayyim): there is water below (mayyim) and water above (sha’mayyim, “the heavens”).

Genesis 1:1-11

When God began to create the heaven(s) [ha-shamayim] and the earth, and the earth was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath was hovering over the water(s) [ha-mayyim].

God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided [va-yavdel] the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And it was evening and it was morning, first day.

And God said, “Let there be a vault in the midst of the water(s) [ha-mayyim], and let it divide [mavdil] water(s) from water(s) [beyn hamayyim lamayyim].” And God made the vault and divided [va-yavdel] the water [ha-mayyim] beneath the vault from water [ha-mayyim] above the vault, and so it was. And God called the vault Heaven(s) [Shamayim], and it was evening and it was morning, second day.

And God said, “Let the water(s) [ha-mayyim] under the Heaven(s) [ha-shamayim] be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear,” and so it was. And God called the dry land Earth and the gathering of the water(s) [ha-mayyim] He called Seas [yamim], and God saw that it was good.

Sifrei Chakhamim on Genesis 1:1:14

Water is different because the Torah mentions it in the sequence of creation: “The breath of Elohim hovered above the surface of the water.”

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 82a

And Moses made the Israelites journey onward from the Sea of Reeds, and they went into the Wilderness of Shur, and they went three days in the wilderness and did not find water. (Exodus 15:21-24)

“Water actually stands for Torah, as it is said (Isaiah 55:1), ‘all who are thirsty, come for water.’ Having gone for three days without Torah, the prophets among them stepped forth and legislated that the Torah should be read on the 2nd and 5th days of the week as well as on Shabbat, so that they would not let three days pass without Torah.”

Jews are continually reminded of the relationship between Torah and water. Like water, Torah is portable. Taking refuge in a book is easier than a temple.

Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 7a

And Rabbi Ḥanina bar Idi said: Why are matters of Torah likened to water, as it is written: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come for water.” This verse comes to tell you: Just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low place, so too, Torah matters are retained only by one whose spirit is lowly, i.e., a humble person.

Sifrei Devarim 48:5

“Words of Torah are compared to water. Just as water is life for the world, so, words of Torah, as it is written ‘For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all of his flesh.’...And just as water raises a person from his or her uncleanness, so, words of Torah raise a person from uncleanness to cleanliness, as it is written “The fear of the Lord is pure.’...And just as water restores a person's soul, so, words of Torah restore a person's soul from the path of evil to that of good, viz, ‘The Torah of the Lord is whole, restoring the soul.’...And just as water is free for the world, so words of Torah are free for the world, viz. “Ho! all who thirst, go to the waters!’...— But perhaps, just as water has no value, so Torah has no value; it is, therefore, written “It is more precious than pearls, and all of your desires cannot be compared to it.”