

BH
Debrah Shenefelt
Talmud Class
Rabbi Judy Abrahms
1/3/06

Prayer to Avert Hurricanes-A Talmudic View

The American Jewish community's response to Hurricane Katrina, the deadly category 5 hurricane that slammed into the gulf coast in late August of 2005, has been magnanimous and on-going. We have responded with money, temporary housing, intellectual treatises about what our tradition requires regardless of the merit of the people involved, and perhaps most importantly, prayers. Our mission seemed clear and therefore we were able to respond with the immediacy that the situation required. However, as will be discussed, a more difficult question concerns what to pray for in view of impending chaos, the destruction and death that a hurricane heading to where one calls home most certainly will bring. (1)

The purpose of this paper is to examine this question of prayer before a hurricane strikes through the stories of Honi HaMe'aggel as found in Tractate Taanit of the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, and in the works of Josephus. Honi the Circle Drawer was a miracle worker whose prayers not only were answered to regulate rain, but also brought rains that ended drought. The stories about Honi reveal the Talmud's ambivalence about miracles, the value of rain as a blessing or a curse, and whether blessings and curses are received as a matter of desert. Ultimately, after beginning with evidence to the contrary, the paper will conclude that Tractate Taanit supports our ability to pray for the miracle of averting a hurricane in the extreme situation of a potentially life-threatening storm. (2)

Honi HaMaagel in the Mishna

The Mishna begins the story of Honi HaMe'aggel in Taanit 3:19a with the Hebrew word **מעשה**. In the Talmud, ma'aseh "is the citation of an actual happening on which a decision is reported." (3) The most immediate curiosity concerns the decision to which the story of Honi refers. Just preceding the story, the Mishna tells us that "For any trouble that may come upon the community they **sound the alarm** for them, except for excessive rain." (4) It should be noted that the meaning of "sound the alarm" in this

Mishna is disputed in the Gemara of Chapter One of Tractate Taanit between named Taanim Rav and R. Yose . (5) “R. Yose says: ‘For help but not for Shabbat? Rather, is it not with *anenu* that the [Mishna] calls it sounding the alarm. Conclude from this.” “Sound the alarm” includes prayer for supplication, and may even imply a fast. (6)

The decision is a general rule that concludes a discussion of the use of communal fasts, public prayer and sounding the alarm in light of specific calamities. These calamities are spoken of in the present and past tense: “For a city that *is* being surrounded by a non-Jewish army, and for a city that *is* in danger of being inundated by a river that *has overflowed* its banks, and for a ship that *is being* tossed about at sea. (7)

Before we even begin to read the story of Honi, the Mishna seems to tell us that we may not pray to avert a hurricane on two counts. First, because the general rule *that an alarm is not sounded for excess rain* implies that special measures may not be taken. Second, the prayer to prevent a hurricane is proactive. The threat of a hurricane, the reason that prompts the prayer, is not consistent temporally with the Talmud’s list of calamities in the present and past tense. The prayer to avert a hurricane is said for something that may happen in the future, not necessarily for an established threat.

“They said to Honi Ha Me’aggel: ‘Pray that rain may fall.’” The commentary clarifies that “they” refers to the people. Hence it is not the sages who approach Honi and ask for help, the significance of which will be addressed below. Acting in a confident manner that his prayers would be answered, Honi tells the people: “bring in the ovens for the Paschal sacrifices so that they will not dissolve.” Honi prayed for the miracle of rain during an on-going drought and appeared confident that his prayer would be effective. (9)

By contrast, in predicting a hurricane, we cannot even be sure that its forecasted path is correct, and therefore cannot know for certain where the hurricane will strike. Yet, the threat of a calamity of this magnitude could be so immense that the human urge to pray to the Master of the Universe to avert the disaster may be paramount. Additionally, the question of whether we would be confident that our prayers would be answered would stand, and this writer knows of none who would answer yes. (10)

Returning to our circle-drawer Honi, his first prayer for rain was not answered. Honi then עג עוגה. He then drew a circle, stood inside of it and prayed to the Master of the Universe: "...I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children." Heaven responded with a light rain. Honi complained and asked for more rain. Heaven responded with a violent rain (לירד בלעף). Again Honi complained and asked for rains of benevolence and blessing. Heaven responded with a "normal" rain, but it rained so much that the people in Jerusalem had to seek higher ground at the Temple Mount. (11)

Until now, Honi has been self-directed in his prayers for rain and in specifying how he wants it to fall. After the initial request that he pray for rain, Honi has prayed until now without prompting or complaint from the people. Here the story changes. Returning to Honi, the people ask him to pray that the rains stop just as they had asked him to pray that the rains fall.

It is with what Honi does next that we come full circle to answering the question of how the story of Honi is used as a basis for the general rule "for any trouble that may come upon the community they sound the alarm for them, except for excessive rain." (12) Honi, consistent with the prohibition against sounding the alarm (crying out to Gd for help) does not respond with a prayer to stop the rain. Rather, he tells the people to go out and see if the "Even HaTo'in" is covered. Even HaTo'in was a very high stone column and if covered, it would mean that the houses in low-lying areas would be flooded and destroyed. (13) Consistent with the general rule, Honi did not "...sound the alarm..." i.e. he did not pray for the cessation of "excess rain." Rain was considered a welcome blessing in Israel and prayers were not said "on account of too much good." (14) This would seem to present an insurmountable boundary against praying to avert a hurricane.

The story ends with a rebuke by Shimon ben Shetah. This will be fully discussed in the analysis of the story of Honi in the Jerusalem Talmud.

In summary, almost everything about the story of Honi HaMe'aggel would dictate against moderns praying that a hurricane be averted. Praying to avert a hurricane is a proactive action taken in light of a possibility that is too life-threatening as to not be taken seriously. Honi not only prays to change a condition that already exists, he has confidence that his prayers will be answered. Honi, unlike most moderns, is a Tzaddik, a miracle-worker whose relationship with Gd is described as familial (father/son) throughout

the Honi stories. (15) At best, many moderns live with the question of whether their prayers are heard at all, let alone whether they will be answered. In terms of a request for something as powerful as a miracle, it may be imagined that the confidence level would be even less. Additionally, there clearly is a tradition that Honi is aware of and which he honors regarding the prohibition of praying for the cessation of rain. (16, 17) This is not surprising given that the prohibition developed in response to continual drought in Israel. As Rabbi Judy Abrams says, “there is no such thing as too much rain in Israel.”

On the other hand, amidst the laws that regulate public response in light of impending calamity is written the story of Honi. The Mishnah tells us this story (and others) that describes a situation of how people respond in a life-threatening situation. The people want to pray for relief. They ask for help from Honi as an intercessor who obliges them, but who does not transgress the general rule of not praying on account of too much rain. However, Honi does pray that the rain fall for blessing and benevolence when the way that it fell was not satisfactory. (18) From this it can be said that if rain is falling in a way that is destructive, then a prayer can be said to regulate it appropriately. The criterion that the situation should exist in the present would be met and the general rule would not be transgressed. The door to pray to avert a hurricane is open, perhaps, at present, not widely, but then the story continues through the Gemorah and there it holds more promise.

Honi in the Gemorah of the Bavli

In order to understand that context of the story of Honi and its consistency with the rest of the tractate, we reach back into the first chapter of Taanit to the origin of the general principle that for “any trouble that may come upon the community they sound the alarm for them, except for excessive rain.

“These (fasts) are more severe than the first ones, for on these they **sound the alarm** and they lock the shops.” (19) The Gemorah asks: “With what (do they sound the alarm)? With shofars, are shofars permitted on Shabbat (parenthesis mine)?” (20) “Rabbi Yose disagrees, arguing that an alarm may be sounded to summon help, but special supplications should not be inserted into the Shabbat prayers. Though, from the broader context of Taanit, “sounding the alarm” is commonly understood as blowing the shofar, the Gemorah “**concludes**” from this Mishnah: “that there is indeed a Tanna who maintains that when the sources speak of **sounding an alarm**, they may be

referring to reciting the anenu prayer as argued by Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Shmuel bar Shilat in the name of Rav.” (21) (22) **אלא לאו בעננו, וקרי לה התרעה. שמע מינה.**

“For any trouble that may strike the community the alarm is sounded, except when the community is afflicted by too much rain. Following this restatement in the Gemorah (22b) of the Mishna in 3:19, which refers back to the Mishna in 14a, **מאי טעמא**, the Gemorah asks: “What is the reason? Rabbi Yohanan said: Because we do not pray on account of too much good.” As the commentary notes, rain is the object of their prayers (referring to the Amida prayers), and a considerable amount of discussion is devoted in Chapter 1 of the Mishna to how to say prayers properly for the sake of rain. So important is rain to the sages that they argue over whether rain is greater than or equivalent to the resurrection of the dead. (23) Moreover, they also argue about whether rain is as great as or more important than Torah. (24) Either way, there is an equivalency here of rain with not less than Moshiaic time and the Torah! Not surprising, in the story of Honi, the sages determine that even a hard rain that knocks down trees and houses still is a blessing. (25)

The Gemorah now proceeds to make an exception to the general rule. It clarifies that the Mishnah’s statement about not praying because of too much rain refers to the Land of Israel, but not to the Diaspora (**גולה**—when unqualified *golah* refers to Babylonia). (26) “Rami bar Rav Yud (2nd cent CE) said: But in the Diaspora they sound the alarm for it. (27) Babylonia is described as a low-lying country that makes it susceptible to severe flooding which can cause significant damage and fatalities. Reminiscent of the ovens for the Paschal offering that our rain-maker Honi ordered to be brought in before he prayed, the houses in Babylonia were made of mud bricks and therefore unlikely to withstand excessive rain. The houses are compared to those in Israel where they were made of stone and likely to withstand a storm. (28)

The Gemora continues with a related Baraita that confirms that it is permissible to offer prayers for too much rain in Babylonia. The men of the priestly watch are to send word to the group of non-priests who remained at home to “Set your eyes on your brethren in the Diaspora so that their houses may not become their graves.” (29) Immediately, the sages begin to discuss the issue of when prayers may be said to stop the rains in Israel. The answer

they give makes it all but impossible to do so, reaffirming their original position. (30) However, though we may not pray for the cessation of rain in Israel, the Gemorah opens the door to do so in Babylonia and therefore outside of Israel.

As the Gemorah offers the possibility of prayer for the cessation of rain, it reveals its ambivalence about rain, but does not alter the conclusion that rain is a blessing. Rather, it is sin that comes between the people and the blessings of rain and the fruits of a good rainy season: “Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withheld the good from you.” (31) Gd sends sufficient rain when the people are deserving, and heaven responds with too much or too little rain when the people are undeserving. (32) With this understanding, the Gemorah turns to our Circle-drawer Honi.

The people send for Honi after fasting many times during a long period of drought. However, as the story progresses, there are significant differences between the Honi story of the Gemorah compared to the one in the Mishna. First, when the rains fall too soft and again too hard, it is Honi’s disciples, his “תלמידים,” who ask Honi to pray so that they “will not die.” This is in contrast to the story in the Mishna where Honi prays for changes in the rain without outside provocation. It is noteworthy because the students continue to ask Gd for help through Honi, and therefore reaffirm the use of an intercessor.

Second, when the people ask Honi in the Gemorah’s version to pray that the rains stop, Honi does not answer them cryptically as in the Mishnah. Rather, he acts. He acknowledges the tradition that prayers ought not to be said “on account of too much good” so that he would not reject a blessing from heaven. (33) It is here that the story of Honi pushes the door open to prayer for cessation of rain even further: “Even so, bring me a bullock (בַּר) for confession.” (34) Honi, apparently as a precursor to his request for a miracle, then reminds Gd of the Divine miracle of redemption from Egypt.

Yet, even in the midst of apparent flooding, Honi does not portray the rain as a curse. It is the people who are deficient and who cannot bear too much good or too much punishment. “You become angry with them-they cannot stand. You bestowed good upon them- they cannot stand.” (35)

The people are like broken vessels that cannot contain the good that Gd offers them nor can they withstand the correction that Gd gives them. Honi

asks Gd to stop the rain and bring abundance in the world (in a way that the world could receive it). “Immediately, the wind blew, the clouds dispersed, and the sun shone....” (36)

Thus far two arguments can be made in support of praying for the cessation of rain. First, the sages allow for the exception to the general rule that prohibits prayer on account of too much rain if in the Diaspora. These prayers can be said by lay people, and they can be said publicly. (37) Additionally, Honi’s departure from the tradition established by the general rule opens the door for this prayer even within Israel. However, in the case of Israel, only one who is recognized as “close to Gd,” i.e., an intercessor with access to Gd’s ears, a Tzaddik, a miracle worker, is empowered to pray for the cessation of rain. That the story of Honi is one amongst many stories in Taanit of miracles workers who ask for rain on behalf of the people only bolsters this point of view. (38)

This logic continues with the lavish praise that the Sages of the Sanhedrin bestow on Honi for saving the people from death with his prayer and his purity. The people, on the other hand, suffer due to their own corruption, a view of the sages that is consistent with the view expressed in Honi’s prayer. (39)

Looking back at the context of the Honi story outlined at the beginning of this section, the concern in the Talmud was with how many fasts and the degree of their severity that the people could endure. According to the Commentary, the people sent for Honi after most of the month of Adar had passed without rainfall. (40) According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the people had endured three years of drought and famine before beseeching Honi to pray on their behalf. (41)

Fasts functioned as a way for people to appeal to Gd to end divine punishment (drought) for their corruption. Fasts must also have had a practical value in so far as they helped extend the food supply. After widespread famine and after enduring the fasts, the people turn to Honi in what appears to be a last-ditch effort to move Gd to send rain. The sages of the Sanhedrin ultimately show their approval through their praise.

Praise for Honi from the sages did not follow him into death. There are two stories of how Honi died: one of social isolation as reported in the Bavli and one of violence as recorded in Josephus. (42) According to Josephus, Honi

was a “righteous man” who was a known miracle-worker and who had ended a severe drought. During a civil war between Aristobulus and Horkenus (Hasmonian brothers), the armies of Horkenus seized Honi and demanded that he curse Aristobulus and his army. Honi initially refused, but when forced, he prayed that Gd would not listen to the prayers for brother cursing brother: “O Gd, the King of the whole world! since those that stand now with me are thy people, and those that are besieged are also thy priests, I beseech thee, that thou wilt neither hearken to the prayers of those against these, nor bring to effect what these pray against those.” (43) Immediately the people stoned Honi to death. (44)

Of great interest, Josephus goes on to report that Gd punished those who stoned Honi by sending a “strong and vehement storm of **wind** that destroyed the fruits of the whole country... .” (45) The crops were destroyed by wind, not rain, perhaps to differentiate that it was Gd and not an angel (of rain) that took revenge. (46)

In both stories, Honi’s death occurs under horrible, even gruesome circumstances. In both cases, his end can be viewed as a warning to those who may consider praying for miracles, even if Gd does answer their prayers.

The Gemorah finishes the Honi section with stories of Honi’s grandchildren who carried on the tradition of successfully praying for rain. However, this may not be the only way in which Honi’s miracles live on. Toward the end of Chapter 3 of Taanit, a Baraita is taught about the water-pouring ritual performed at the altar on Succot: “Deep calls to deep at the sound of your channels,” referring to the rains that fall from above calling to the water that is held by the soil. According to the Commentary, flowing water from the upper and lower depths is a reward for observing this practice during Sukkot. (47)

Immediately following this Baraita, Rabbah says: “I myself saw Ridya appearing as an עיגל (three year old calf) whose lips were parted, and he was standing between the lower deep and the upper deep. To the upper deep he said, ‘Distill your water.’ To the upper deep he said ‘Let your water flow...’” (48)

It is curious that in the Hebrew it says: “אמר רבה, לדידי חזי לי האי, רידיא דמי לעיגלא....” (49) *Ridya* appeared as *עיגלא*, which contains the same root letters as *המעגל*, i.e., *עגל*-ayin, gimmel, lamed which means “to circle, to be round.” (49) *עגל* is the Piel form of the verb. The Etymological Dictionary notes that *עגל*, which means calf, is probably from *עגל*.

The Talmud is cryptic, encoded and not easily understandable. Is it not possible that Rabba saw the angel of rain as an *עיגלא* and not as a *פר* (bull, bullock, steer) in order to remind us of Honi? Honi from *חן*, grace (Gd’s grace), *HaMe’aggel*, the circle-drawer, from *עגל* who, like an angel who does Gd’s bidding, brought together heaven and earth—the needs of the people and their land for the blessings of rain and for the cessation of rain. In this way, Honi is like the angel of rain who joins heaven and earth during the libation ceremony of Sukkot. Perhaps, if any of this speculation is correct, this association of Honi with the angel of rain may be the Talmud’s way of honoring Honi. This then, would attenuate the warnings that can be surmised from the terrible tales of the way Honi died and offer a source of support for praying for the cessation of rain in Israel and therefore to avert a hurricane.

Who better to see the Angel of Rain than a sage, in this case Rabbah, who himself successfully prayed for rain. (50) A story is told in *Moed Kattan* 28a about Rabbah and Rabbi Chisda. Rav compared their lives to show that “life, children and sustenance do not depend on merit, but on mazel.” Both rabbis prayed for rain and heaven obliged both. But, Rabbah’s life was impoverished, filled with sixty funerals, and he died at age 40. Rabbi Chisda by contrast, had food to spare, had a household where there were 60 marriages and he died at 92. (51)

Rav’s story of Rabbah, our sage who saw the Angel of Rain, may then also represent a challenging view to Simeon ben Shetach and other sages whose voices create much of the backdrop for the stories of Honi and other miracle-workers. The backdrop in Chapter 3 of *Taanit* focuses on how the regimen of fasts is to be carried out in times of drought, how the prayers for rain were to be said within a standardized liturgy, and the philosophy widely adopted by the sages that evil is punished and good is rewarded. “Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withheld the good from you.” (52) By contrast, Honi and the others who were able to coax relief from

Heaven during times of drought used a shamanistic-like approach to Gd and prayer. (53)

That both views clearly are present in the Talmud allow for the possibility of prayer to avert a hurricane. For even if a hurricane is divine punishment made manifest, Gd alters the decree in response to the pleas of the favored. As the prayers of Honi, Rabbah and Rabbi Chisda demonstrate, the rain fell on both the good and the wicked, just as drought had scorched and starved them both. Though fasts and prayers may bring the rain, so too do the prayers of the righteous.

The placement of the story of Honi shortly after the sages make the exception to allow people to pray for the cessation of rain in the Diaspora lends support to our ability to pray to avert a hurricane. In the Gemorrah, Honi departs from the tradition of not praying “on account of too much good,” just as the sages depart from the general rule with the exception. The difference is that Honi is an intercessor and the exception to the general rule is made for ordinary people. Given that we no longer have a Temple where intercession was the norm, and given that the sages did in fact make the exception, it can be reasonably argued that the power to pray for the miracle of cessation of rain is within the hands of the people.

Finally, the story of Honi and the discussion of the sages about when prayers can be said for the cessation of rain in Israel reinforce the constraint of the present tense as discussed in pages 1-4 above. (54) However, when the Gemorrah instructs the non-priests to pray for the people in the Diaspora “so that their houses may not become their graves,” it seems to allow for the possibility to pray to avert a disaster in the future. “In a year whose rains are abundant...” is the time frame given. (55) This could refer to the present tense, but how would the people in Israel know about the daily weather conditions in the Diaspora? It could also imply that the prayers should be said to avert rain that could create extremely dangerous conditions if warning signs, i.e., a year whose rains are abundant, were present. This then would allow for prayer to avert a hurricane that was forecasted to make landfall, but had not yet done so.

Honi HaMe'aggel in the Jerusalem Talmud

The stories of Honi in the Yerushalmi are similar to the ones recorded in the Bavli, and what has been discussed thus far will not be repeated here except to note two things: 1. The people and not the sages ask Honi to pray for rain and to end the rains when they became destructive, and 2. The rabbis in the Jerusalem Talmud rebuke Honi more harshly than in the Bavli, but then the rain in Israel is a blessing and did not pose the same threat as in Babylonia.

As in the Bavli, Simeon ben Shetach, outraged by the impertinent, even impudent tone of Honi's prayers, wanted to excommunicate Honi, but was bereft of authority in light of Gd's positive response to Honi's prayers. Simeon wanted to place a ban on Honi also because, theoretically, if Honi had taken his oath at the "time of Elijah" when a punitive decree had been issued in response to Elijah's plea, it would "cause a public profanation of the Name." (56) Simeon ben Shetach continues: "What am I going to do to you? For you importune before the Omnipresent so he does what you want, like a son who importunes his father, so he does what he wants." (57) The concern of who had the power to manifest certain conditions was paramount here.

Simeon goes on to say: "...Whoever places an obstacle in the way of the public's doing a religious duty is subject to excommunication." In times of drought, the public is responsible for fulfilling certain religious obligations including specified communal fasts and public prayers. Rain is a sign of Gd being pleased with Israel and Gd sends the water as reward and blessing. But it is because of Honi's special relationship with Gd that the heavens respond with rain, and not the efforts of Israel.

The Yerushalmi continues with the sages of the Sanhedrin using lines from Job to explain what Simeon says to Honi about his power to nullify Gd's will. This is in contrast to the Bavli where the same lines from Job are used for the purpose of explaining how Honi had "saved a generation that was lowered by its sin..." (58) In the Yerushalmi "... light will shine on your ways (Job 22:28)" is said to refer to "rain". (59) In the Bavli, the line from Job is interpreted to mean "a generation that was in darkness you have enlightened with your prayer."

Just as the sages use a midrash on Job 22:28-30 to clarify Simeon's response to Honi, a midrash on Job 22 and 23 may clarify Honi's actions.

In Job, the lines in chapter 22 are spoken by Job's friend Eliphaz, who is critical of Job for Job's suffering. Eliphaz assumes that because Job is suffering, that he must be guilty and deserving of the punishment. "Is not your wickedness great...Accept instruction from his mouth...you will be restored." In Job 22, Eliphaz tells Job that if he will admit his guilt and return in repentance to Gd, then Gd "will deliver even one who is not innocent, who will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands." (60) The sages also quote Job 22:30 and they define "innocence of your hands" to mean "through the merit of the religious duties and the good deeds that were in your hands..." (61)

In the very next chapter, Job answers Eliphaz that he does not accept that it is his fault and that he will not sit in silent submission: "I have not departed from the commands of his lips...He does whatever he pleases...Yet I am not silenced by the darkness." (62) Job challenges Gd to explain what has happened to him, and in so doing calls to our attention the entire question of reward and punishment and the suffering of the innocent. Yet it is Job to whom in the end Gd reveals Gdself, and it is Eliphaz who is attacked by Gd for being uncritical of traditional religious explanations. (63) "My wrath is kindled against you....." (64)

Like Job, Honi is rebellious not only in the way that he addresses Gd (which may be understandable since he is standing in a circle amidst people living in dire straits brought on by drought), but also in terms of relying on miracles instead of the traditional means of fasts and prescribed standardized prayers. During Shimon ben Shetah's time (1st cent. B.C.E.), faith without miracles was exalted, and witchcraft and "credulity in the miraculous" was condemned and driven out of the land. (65) Shimon himself is credited with hanging eighty witches in a day. (66) Committed to strict observance of the Torah, he, as President of the Sanhedrin, also reacted vehemently against efforts to challenge established Halakhah, "whether from the outside or from sectarians of all kinds within the camp. (67) Honi was an Essene, (68) and though well respected for his piety and scholarliness, he still was associated with a sect that withdrew from general Jewish society and was highly critical of the Priesthood during Hasmonean and Roman times. (69) Honi represented a strong voice that was contrary to the world-view of Shimon ben Shetach and the view of the sages who shared it.

The importance of this last point deserves elucidation in regard to our ability to pray to avert a hurricane. In *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Solomon Schechter notes that for several reasons we simply do not know the role of miracles in Rabbinic theology. He notes however that not one miracle is attributed to Hillel or Shammai, who both significantly influenced Rabbinic Judaism, while the prayers of Honi HaMe'aggel and other miracle workers who were sought after during times of drought "left no mark on Jewish thought." (70) Furthermore, appeals to miracles proved nothing in the law. (71)

Yet, herein lays the main reason that can be used to salvage the possibility of prayer to avert a hurricane: Regardless of where the story of Honi is found, it is the people who were interested in their survival who asked Honi to pray for the miracles associated with rain. It was not the sages, some of whom may have been more concerned with obliterating faith in miracles, who asked Honi to pray. The sages clearly were concerned with issues of power between humans and Gd (who got the final say about rain), and preserving the connection between rain as a blessing and the religious duties of Israel. However, it does not seem that even the sages believed that they alone dictated the tradition, or that the people who departed from the law or the minhag did not add to the meaning of our traditions. The very presence of the story in the two Talmuds speaks to openings in the tradition that are made available to and made possible by the will of the people. Furthermore, the parallels between Honi and Job as righteous persons who, each in their own way, rebelled against the tradition, and as seekers who were answered by Gd, encourages us to pray for the good of subverting a hurricane even if the tradition discourages doing so. The tradition is crafted not only by those with authority. The individual's relationship with Gd is subjective and, to a considerable extent, in Gd's hands.

Shaping A Prayer to Avert a Hurricane

The need to pray in times of crisis arises from our vulnerability embedded in our humanity. That many, perhaps even most of us will pray in face of a crisis, in this case, when facing significant threat from the impact of a hurricane on person and property is a forgone conclusion. Ultimately, Taanit seems to reach this conclusion as evidenced by the stories of miracle workers and in its instruction to pray for those in the diaspora during times of drought and of flooding. However, just as we prepare for hurricanes with storm shutters, generators, and food supplies, the content of the prayer is

well worth considering ahead of time. For example, to pray that the hurricane not come to the area where one resides would leave us in the muddy moral waters of not accounting for the hurricane bringing its destruction somewhere else, even if that somewhere else is less populated.

Just as Taanit opens the gate to prayer in face of a hurricane, it also suggests how we can shape that prayer if one is to do so with support of Jewish tradition. To this end, a comparison of our miracle worker Honi HaMe'aggel with Nachdimon ben Guryon is instructive. Though Honi prays both for rain and its cessation, and Nachdimon prayed for rain only, they both prayed as individuals on behalf of other people whose lives and property were threatened significantly. Before making a comparison, a brief background summary of Nachdimon is offered.

The story in Taanit takes place in Jerusalem during a time of drought that affected one of the pilgrimage festivals. Nachdimon, a wealthy man, asked a Roman official for a loan of twelve wells of water for the pilgrims and pledged to return twelve wells of water which the rains would replenish. Nachdimon promised to pay twelve talents of silver if he did not return the wells replenished with water. When the time came for Nachdimon to return the water, the rain still had not fallen. He went to the Temple, wrapped himself in a prayer shawl and prayed to Gd. Nachdimon made clear that he prayed not for his own honor or for the honor of his father's house, but for the pilgrims who came to worship and honor Gd during the festival. "Rather I did [it] for Your honor, so that water would be available for the pilgrims." (72) Not only did the heavens open with enough rain to refill the cisterns, but there was such abundance that there was an overflow. When Nachdimon informed the Roman that he now had a debt because of the overflow, the official acknowledged that the "Holy One, blessed be He, shook His world only on account of Nachdimon," but claimed that the rain fell after the deadline. (73) Therefore, instead of the Roman official owing a debt, Nachdimon owed the official the twelve talents of silver. Nachdimon again went back to the Temple, wrapped himself in his prayer shawl, and asked Gd to "make it known that You have loved ones in Your world." (74) Immediately the sun broke through the clouds, shining beyond its normal time, and the Roman official could not persist with his claim against Nachdimon.

Both Honi and Nachdimon said personal prayers that were not part of the standardized liturgy. Both miracle workers prayed on behalf of the people.

Nachdimon reminds Gd of the relationship of the Divine with the people Israel in terms of the faithful honoring Gd through observance of the festivals and also of the loving nature of that relationship. Similarly, Honi reminds Gd of Gd's redemption of Israel from Mitzrayim.

However, in the latter case, when Honi prayed for rain, he did not rely on Gd's relationship with the Jewish people alone. Rather, Honi began to talk about himself and his special relationship with Gd: "He said before Him: 'Master of the universe! Your children have turned to me, for I am like a member of Your house.'" Honi then threatened Gd like a little child threatens a parent: "I swear by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children." And when the rain did not fall as Honi desired, he chastised Gd: "I did not ask [for] this, but for rain [to fill] pits, ditches and caves." How did Gd respond? "They came down strongly (literally in anger)..." Honi's students, afraid of bodily harm and death, asked Honi to pray that Gd moderate the rain. In front of his students, Honi complains to Gd: "I did not ask [for] this, but [for] rains of goodwill and blessing. The rain then fell in a normal way, but there was too much of it. Honi then asked his students to bring him a bullock for confession and he reminded Gd of the redemption of Israel. (75)

Different baraitot reveal the tradition's reactions to Honi's activities. In both the Yerusalmi and the Bavli, Shimon ben Shetach condemned Honi for the disrespectful tone of his prayer and for making an oath that could have caused the "Name of Heaven to be desecrated." (76) However, in another Baraita in the Bavli the rabbis praise Honi for enlightening and lifting up a humbled generation with his prayer. "...a generation that was lowered by its sin, you have saved it with your prayer." (77) The sages give him personal credit for bringing the drought to an end. The tradition clearly is ambivalent about Honi's activities. The second Baraita supports this author's musing about the possible positive implications of the story of Rabba seeing the angel of rain as an egel and not a par. However, the horrible circumstances of the two stories about Honi's death agree with and reinforce the clear rebukes by the sages within the Honi stories themselves (see pages 8 and 9 above).

Honi's grandchildren carried on the tradition of successfully praying for rain, and reveal a more positive attitude of the sages. During times of extreme drought, rabbis would send school children to Honi's grandson, Hanan HaNahba. The children would say to him: "Father, father, give us

rain.” Like Nachdimon, and unlike Honi, Hanan did not rely on his special relationship with Gd when praying. Instead, he would appeal to Gd’s compassion “for the sake of those who cannot distinguish between the Father who gives rain and a father who does not give rain.” (78) However, reminding Gd of the inadequacy of the people for who he prayed clearly was in the Honi tradition.

Of significant note is the question of the sages as to why Honi’s grandson was called Hanan HaNahba, Hanan The Hidden One. Hanan used to hide himself (מחביא) in the lavatory so that he would not be given personal credit (as was Honi) for bringing an end to the drought through his prayers. Clearly the rabbis acknowledged Hanan as a miracle-worker who had Gd’s favor, but praise him for praying in private. (79) Similarly, Nachdimon is acknowledged by the Roman official as the one to whom Gd responded with rain, but he too prayed privately in the Temple. Likewise, Abba Hilkiyyah, another grandson of Honi, successfully prayed for rain, and is praised by the sages for doing so in private. (80)

Finally, reference to “imperious men of Eretz Israel” is also informative: “Come and see the difference between the imperious men of Eretz Israel and the pious men of Babylonia, and you will realize that the former are much greater than the latter, for the pious of Babylonia entreat for rain in public, while the imperious men of Eretz Israel do so in private.” The sages add that the prayers should be said while standing in a “low place.” (81)

We can see from these stories that the rabbis did not completely reject miracle workers. The sages clearly knew who the miracle workers were and called upon them in times of crisis. What the sages ultimately rejected was a public display of prayer for miracles. Taanit teaches us through the stories and references that if one prays for a miracle, that one should do so with privacy, humility and modesty, and if possible, in a low place. Returning to the question of how we should shape our prayers in light of Jewish tradition, the following criteria are offered:

1. The prayer should be said privately. The sages captured this criterion in the following remark: “Thus we see that the sages of Eretz Yisrael prayed on behalf of the community without anyone, not even their families, knowing what there were doing.”(82) Even if others know that someone is praying, the conversation between the petitioner and Gd should be kept private.

2. If possible, say the prayer from the lowest possible place. Referring back to scripture, the Gemarah cites “Out of the depths I have called to you Lord.”⁽⁸³⁾ Two criteria can be drawn from this: First, a person should physically stand or sit in the lowest place possible when saying the prayer. Second, the prayer should be said from the deepest urge that provokes the petitioner to pray.

3. The petitioner should approach Gd with humility and modesty. Although the Baraita discussed above praises Honi for lifting up an entire generation with his goodness, it does not negate that Honi’s prayers could have been said privately and with humility. In both the Bavli and the Yerusalmi, Shimon ben Shetach compared Honi to a child who approached Gd with the familiarity of a son with a father. Clearly, the rabbis are supporting a much more reverent approach, to the point of suggesting that one put on sackcloth.⁽⁸⁴⁾

4. As we learn from all of the named miracle workers, the prayer should acknowledge one or more of the following aspects: a. the loving relationship between Gd and Israel, b. the miracle of Gd’s redemption of Israel from Mitzrayim, or c. Israel’s honor of and devotion to Gd through observance.

5. In the tradition of Honi, the petition is for Gd’s mercy, and may include an appeal based on the inadequacy of the human condition to withstand a full relationship with Gd. ⁽⁸⁵⁾ This criterion supports approaching Gd with modesty and humility, but is based on a world-view of the collective of humanity rather than the individual.

The prayer that one ultimately says is the prayer of the heart between the individual and Gd. Standing or sitting in the lowest available place, and praying in private, the prayer might sound like this:

Blessed are You, Adonai our Gd and Gd of our ancestors, Gd of Abraham, Gd of Isaac and Gd of Jacob, Gd of Sarah, Gd of Rebecca, Gd of Leah and Gd of Rachel; You, the One Who redeems when You hear the human cry of anguish, please hear me now as I pray for all life that is threatened by the violent and angry rains. Now please send the shearing winds to calm the storm and let all of your creatures live to praise You again. The dead cannot worship you from their grave, and the living are like broken vessels who cannot contain all of your blessing or your wrath. You are Gd Almighty

Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall, for a blessing, not a curse; for life, not for death. Blessed are You, Almighty Gd, the Heartbeat of life without which there is no compassion.

NOTES

Please note that The Steinsaltz Edition of the Talmud is used for all references to the Bavli.

1. The term Hurricane is specific to storms generated in the Atlantic Ocean. This paper also could apply to Typhoons of the Pacific or Monsoons of the Indian Ocean.
2. Although this ambivalence was ameliorated and the value of rain was later reconceived as found in codes, this part of the discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper, and will be taken up at another time. Additional relevant areas of inquiry through which to explore the question of praying to avert a hurricane include liturgy (especially private v. public prayer), Bible, and Rabbinic literature other than the Talmud.
3. Carmell, Aryeh, *Aiding Talmud Study*, (Jerusalem/New York: Feldheim 1998), p. 72
4. *M. Taan. 3:19a*. Throughout the paper, words appear in bold to clarify the referent of a specific sentence or paragraph. The use of this device is not part of the quotes.
5. *B. Taan. 14a*.
6. See Notes in Steinsaltz, Adin, Translator and Commentator, *Talmud Bavli, The Steinsaltz Edition, Taanit, Part II*, (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 65
7. *B. Taan. 14a.*; See Translation in Steinsaltz, Adin, Translator and Commentator, *Talmud Bavli, The Steinsaltz Edition, Taanit, Part I*, (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 177
8. *M. Taan. 3:19*
9. Steinsaltz, Part II, p. 65
10. See the *Notes* in Steinsaltz, Part II, p. 65. According to Rashi, because there is no assurance that prayers will be effective, the people may summon help from others in times of danger, but may not “cry out to Gd in prayer.” This later is clarified to mean that people may not cry out in communal prayer.
11. *M. Taan. 3:19*; There is an old saying that seems apt here: Be careful of what you pray for-you might get it!
12. *M. Taan. 3:19*
13. See *Translation and Commentary* and also *Notes* in Steinsaltz, Part II, p. 65
14. *B. Taan. 3:22b*
15. For example, see *M. Taan. 3:19*

16. See *Translation and Commentary*, Steinsaltz, Part II, p.66
17. The tradition to not pray for the cessation of rain may be part of a larger tradition “that gifts from Heaven are sometimes given but are never taken back (Steinsaltz, Vol. II., p 142).
18. *M. Taan. 3:19*; It is noted in different sources that Honi’s prayers for not too much or too little rain reflected the value of moderation. See Goldberg, J., *Honi the Circle Drawer*, (<http://members.aol.com/FLJOSEPHUS/HoniTheCircleDrawer.htm>) ; or Shorsh, Ismar, *Chancellor’s Parashah Commentary Sukkot 5756*, (Jewish Theological Seminary, <http://www.jtsa.edu/community/parashah/archives/5756/sukkot.shtml>)
19. *M. Taan. 1:12*
20. *B. Taan. 14a*
21. *Translation and Commentary*, Steinsaltz, Part I, p. 178
22. *B. Taan. 14a*
23. *Ibid. 1:7a*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid. 1:6*
26. See *Background*, Steinsaltz, Part II, p. 113
27. *B. Taan. 22b*
28. See *Translation and Commentary*, Steinsaltz, Part II, p. 113
29. *B. Taan. 22b*
30. *Ibid.*, also see *Translation and Commentary*, Steinsaltz, Vol. II., p. 114
31. *B. Taanit 22b*
32. The issue of desert as it relates to rain is discussed at length in the Chapter One of Taanit.
33. *B. Taanit 23a*; also see commentary by Steinsaltz, Vol II., p. 117
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *B. Taan. 22b*; The ma’amad, who were instructed by the mishmarot to pray for the Jewish Community in the Diaspora so that it would not suffer the ill-effects of too much rain, were lay people who prayed fasted and prayed together.
38. Traditionally the use of intercessors was associated with Temple times and the Priesthood. It is interesting to note that currently the Aleph Rabbinic Program is offering a course on how to act as an Intercessor.
39. Compare Steinsaltz, Vol. II., p. 118:1-3 with p. 119:6-9; also see p. 6 of the paper
40. Steinsaltz, Vol. II., p. 116

41. Quoted in Frieman, Shulamis, *Who's Who in the Talmud*, Jason Aronson Inc., 1995, p. 122
42. *B. Taanit, 3: 23a*; The Jerusalem Talmud relates a similar story about an ancestor of Honi who had the same name and who lived shortly before the destruction of the first Temple (*Y Taanit, 3:10*) The Jewish Encyclopedia and Montefiore and Loewe both note that the story in Josephus was repressed by Rabbinic sources.
43. *Works of Flavius Josephus*, S.S. Scranton Co., 1903, p. 409
44. What was Honi's merit that Gd answered his prayers. Perhaps it was, as this story demonstrates, Honi's unswerving faithfulness to all of the Jewish people that endears him so to Gd.
45. *Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 410
46. Angels are mentioned 194 times in various places in the Talmud, so it seems reasonable to assume that the people were familiar with angels. Briefly, angels are "beings dwelling in heaven who, on occasion, reveal to man Gd's will and execute His commands (Jewish Encyclopedia)." Ridya, the angel of rain, is mentioned in *B. Taanit 3:25b*
47. Steinsaltz, Vol. II., p. 152
48. *B. Taanit 25b*
49. Klein, Ernest, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, p. 463
50. According to Frieman, Rabbah is Rabbah bar Nachmani (p. 233)
51. Frieman, pp. 242, 246-247
52. *B. Taanit 23a*
53. An argument could be made that it is a matter of who has the authority to prescribe ritual rather than the ritual themselves that is at issue. Regardless of whether it is the people who observe the prescribed communal fasts and public prayer, or Honi who draws circles and talks to Gd in personal terms, the goal is to move Gd to send relief and that goal is common to both.
54. If a city is struck by the collapse of buildings brought on by stormy weather, the people of the city must sound the alarm and fast (*M. Taanit 3:19*)
55. *B. Taan. 22b*
56. Translation by Neusner, Jacob, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, South Florida Academic Commentary Series, p. 228
57. *Ibid.*, p. 229
58. *B. Taan. 23a*
59. Neusner, p. 229
60. Job 22:30

61. Neusner, p. 230
62. Job 23:13-17
63. Leaman, Oliver, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 26
64. Job 42:7
65. Montefiore, C. G. and Loewe, H., *A Rabbinic Anthology*, The Jewish Publication Society, 1960, pp. 690-693, 984
66. Bialik, Hayim and Ravnitzky, Yehoshua, eds., *The Book of Legends*, Schocken Books, 1992, pp. 795-796
67. Steinsaltz, Vol. II, p. 66
68. Jewish Encyclopedia, KTAV Publishing House, 1901, p. 404
69. Seltzer, Robert, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980, p. 220
70. Schechter, Solomon, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Reprinted by Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993, p. 7
71. Montefiore and Loewe, p. 692
72. *B. Taan. 20a*
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. Story and quotes found in *B. Taan. 23a*
76. *Ibid.*; Neusner, pp. 228-9
77. *B. Taan. 23a*
78. Story and all quotes in *B. Taan. 23b*
79. Steinsaltz, p. 125
80. *B. Taan. 23b*
81. *Ibid.*; See Steinsaltz Commentary for full quote, p. 126
82. *Ibid.*
83. *B. Taan. 23b*
84. *Ibid.*
85. It is interesting to note that according to Rashi, the instructions of the tabernacle were given after the sin of the golden calf. The first set of tablets was entirely spiritual and was to exist without an ark or tabernacle. In other words, we need religion because of our distance from Gd, and this distance forms ultimately from our human frailty. See discussion in Green, Arthur, Translator and Interpreter, *The Language of Truth, The Torah Commentary by the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Lieb Alter of Ger*, p. 134

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carmell, Aryeh, *Aiding Talmud Study*, Feldheim Publishers, 1998
- Bialik, Hayim and Ravnitzky, Yehoshua, eds., *The Book of Legends*, Schocken Books, 1992
- Frieman, Shulamis, *Who's Who in the Talmud*, Jason Aronson Inc, 1995
- Goldberg, J., *Honi the Circle Drawer*,
<http://members.aol.com/FLJOSEPHUS/HoniTheCircleDrawer.htm>
- Green, Arthur, Translator and Editor, *The Language of Truth, the Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger*, Jewish Publication Society, 1998
- Jewish Encyclopedia*, KTAV Publishing House, 1901
- Klein, Ernest, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987
- Leaman, Oliver, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1997
- Montefiore, C. G. and Loewe, H., *A Rabbinic Anthology*, The Jewish Publication Society, 1960
- Neusner, Jacob, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, South Florida Academic Commentary Series; pp224-231
- Seltzer, Robert, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980
- Shorsh, Ismar, *Chancellor's Parashah Commentary Sukkot 5756*, Jewish Theological Seminary,
<http://www.jtsa.edu/community/parashah/archives/5756/sukkot.shtml>
- Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin, *The Talmud Bavli, Tractate Ta'anit, Part I*, Random House, 1995

Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin, *The Talmud Bavli, Tractate Ta'anit, Part II*,
Random House, 1995

The Works of Flavius Josephus, S.S. Scranton Co., 1903