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## Moonshine Heshvan: Earth, Rain and the Future of Humankind

**Rabbi Michael Zion | Text and the City | Moonshine Heshvan**

Dedicated to a theme in the Jewish month, **Moonshine** is a combination Dvar Torah and springboard for learning in the coming 30 days. **Moonshine** - in honor of the Hebrew month's commitment to the lunar cycle, with a hint of distilling fine spirits off the beaten track and - perhaps - intoxication. I'll be hosting an **online text study** about the most clicked on texts towards the end of the month. Details forthcoming.



*"Ten Generations From Noah to Abraham,"* If the move from the very humanistic and universalistic tales to a narrow chosenness is on your mind, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' "[Dignity of Difference](#)," continues to be the best exploration of the tension of particularism and universalism in the post-modern, post-industrialist world. To follow in the steps of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, read Jon D. Levenson's new "[Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in](#)

After the intense cycle of Jewish holidays, and with winter peeking around the corner, the month of Heshvan is all about returning to routine, to the simple repetitive tempo of life. No frills - life itself. Meanwhile the Torah portions of Heshvan raise the root questions of human existence, wrapped in the stories of a primordial world. From Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, the Torah outlines the complexity – and darkness – of Humanity, and God's attempts to work with it.

[Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.](#)”

***“Like clouds and wind without rain is one who boasts of gifts never given”*** (Proverbs 25:14).

What do you do if it doesn't rain? Most turn to miracle makers and rain dances. The [Mishna of Taanit](#), however, seeks to transform the drama of rain-dancing into a drama of social change. In a gradual process of public and private fasts, sit-ins and protests, the Rabbis delineate a process by which the failure of the elements brings humanity to introspection and self-improvement. [Study the first two of Mishna Taanit](#), noticing how the process employs different spheres of power, public space and liturgy in its vision of social change as the key to climate change.

***“And he called him Noah, saying: May this one comfort us from our sorrow...”*** (Gen 5:29)

Rereading the biblical story of Noah, the best companions are [Nechama Leibowitz's study](#) into the portion, or [Avivah Zorenberg's deep psychoanalytical reading](#) (and now, [Aronofsky's film](#)). But the simple text is powerful too, especially with [Robert Alter's literary](#) translations. Or, better yet, [R. Crumb's Genesis](#) who illustrates Alter's

**Noah.** This year I find myself appreciating the Noah narratives anew thanks to the

recent [blockbuster commentary by Reb Darren Aronofsky](#).

In studying the Deluge I always focused on God's vindictiveness or Noah's disappointing silence, not to mention the cute animals coming two by two. But returning to the tale of the Flood after a bloody summer, Aronofsky's film puts a painful truth center stage: that Human beings left to their own devices are horrific. It is a Hobbesian tale of the deepest Human moral bankruptcy. Of a world turned from “very good”, to: *“Great was humankind's evildoing on earth, And every form of their heart's planning, Was only evil all day. Then God was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, And it pained his heart.”* (Genesis 6:5-6)

Something about this perspective rings disturbingly true this fall. How do we face Humanity's murderous and destructive nature? It once seemed that the Enlightenment saved us from our darker demons. Yet the 20<sup>th</sup> century made us doubt if progress makes the world a more civilized place; now the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings to the fore

full text. Be prepared for lots of nudity.

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those who shun progressiveness, turning the world back to more medieval fundamentals. And that is only in the realm of man to man (and woman?). In the realm of our relationship to the Earth, to Creation, we seem to be failing even more. Is it too late to heal our relationship to nature, to the world, to each other?

**Rain.** Ideally, we should live in deep symbiosis with the earth. Humanity's name, *Adam*, derives from the Hebrew word for earth, *Adamah*. Yet we fear the earth, for it reminds us that not only have we come from it – but that in the end, we will return to it. Earth symbolizes our death, our limits, our finitude. When Adam is banished from the garden, the *Adamah* becomes damned on his account. The word itself – *Adamah* – leers at Humanity: “Adam–Mah”, says Earth, “Human, what is Human?” Can we redeem our relationship to *Adamah*?

Heshvan, in which Nature molts its dried leaves and begins its slow process of hibernation and renewal, is also the month of rain. Rain, as opposed to Flood and Deluge, is a sign of blessing. Rain heals the curse of Adam/*Adamah*, offering a promise of divine collaboration with Humanity in the project called Life on Earth. Rain is about relationship. Just as Noah offers us a “pleasing smell” to the Lord after the Flood, so the rains of Heshvan leave the earth with a “pleasing smell” for us, Humans, to believe in the possibility of renewal and relationship, growth and change.

**Great Father.** In the move from Adam to Noah and ten generations after that, God mostly hides his face from Humanity. Can't live with 'em, can't kill 'em. Until a new figure enters the scene. Avram of Ur, who somehow forces God out of His divine hiding place. What did

Avram do that got God to seek out a new relationship with him? The Torah never discloses directly, but perhaps it lies in his name: Avram, Av-Ram, Great-Father.

For the first time a human being stopped acting like a child, and assumed a parental stance towards the world. God later says as much: “For I have chosen him in order that he teach his children and household to do justice and righteousness” (Gen 18:19), choosing to share with Abraham news of the upcoming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, unlike his ancestor Noah, challenges God. This is the essence of the Abrahamic path – joining God in looking at the world as a parent, stepping up for others and expecting accountability – even from the Creator. Lets hope we see those walking in Abraham’s path today continuing this tradition in the coming month of Heshvan. It’s not too late.

Hodesh Tov,  
Mishael

**Moonshine: A Monthly Springboard to Jewish Learning**

*In the age of the instant, who has time for things that take 30 days?*

In the age-old human project of infusing time with meaning, the month is an underappreciated unit. Weeks, years, days all get much focus, but in modern life we mostly ignore the months, Julian or Hebrew. Yet 30 days is an amount of time in which something substantial can take place: a journey, a process, a cycle. As the moon waxes and wanes, we too transform in a way that other time units lack.

After a few years of following the weekly portion, this year I hope to focus on the Hebrew months as a meaning-making unit. The hope for this piece is to be a spring board to a journey, a cycle, inspiring learning, exploring or conversation that can fill the upcoming month. Each installment will consist of a few short explorations, suggesting various reading and follow up. I’d love to hear if you find this useful, or simply file it in your “Read Later” folder for it to rot in gmail oblivion...

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