

Snow and Commitment

*(In recognition of the recent record snowfall
that broke tree limbs, caused power-outages,
school closings, traffic snarls, and special
challenges for Shabbat observance)*

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The drama critic and naturalist, Joseph Wood Krutch (1893-1970), in a rumination on snow,¹ wrote:

I have long envied those who never saw so much as even one flake of crystal until a day when—after they had reached years of discretion—they were permitted to watch the whole visible earth disappear under the relentless accumulation of soft glistening powder. No matter how hard I try, I know that I shall never be able to see a snowfall with really fresh eyes; that I can never shake off completely the dulling effect of the fact that I have always known from my own experience that such things do happen...Only Adam had the privilege of first looking at the world through eyes capable of wonder, and perhaps Adam was the only man who could ever have appreciated the miracle of the snow for the miracle that it actually is. And Adam, alas, was born into a paradise less paradisiac that it might have been if snow had been permitted to fall in the Euphrates Valley...

And how quietly the flakes fall, either one by one, or collected into soft, harmless-seeming masses. You would never suspect that anything so small and so soft could ever become formidable. You cannot even feel the weight of one flake on your cheek—only the tiny point of coldness when it touches and the tiny point of wetness when it melts. Yet the relentless accumulation of the individually imperceptible adds up to a crushing weight. At last the great limb of the elm or the maple comes down, or the backbone of the barn breaks. Talk about the last straw that breaks the camel's back! Why would we impart so strange a metaphor from so distant a land?² Does anyone, for that matter,

¹ "December: First Snow" in The Twelve Seasons; A Perpetual Calendar for the Seasons, William Morrow, New York, 1949, pp. 129-40.

²"Last straw, the" in Christine Ammer, The Facts On File Dictionary of Clichés, Checkmark Books, New York, 2000, p. 219.

The final minor irritation; one last superfluous item. This term, also put as *the straw that broke the camel's back*, appears in Dickens's Dombey and Son (1848). It is a version of the earlier "last feather that breaks the horse's back," found in Archbishop John Bremhall's Works (1677) and repeated in Fuller's

even in Arabia, pile straws one by one on a beast's complaining back? A snowflake is far lighter than any straw, yet right here in New England we see, every winter, one added to one until something gives way. "It was the last flake that broke Farmer Brown's rooftree" would be a far better expression...

R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, editor of the Encyclopedia Talmudit and author of a number of volumes on various Halachic topics and personalities, composed an entire essay in his book, LeOhr HaHalacha,³ on the different ways that snow appears in our Tradition. It's amazing to think of the different questions that snow engenders, most of them having to do with Tuma and Tahara, ritual impurity and purity. Issues included in R. Zevin's essay include:

- a. Is snow considered a liquid or a solid with respect to the laws of ritual purity and impurity?⁴
- b. Can one immerse in forty Sa'ah's of snow and become ritually pure? Is there a difference with regard to this question between melted snow and snow still in its original form?⁵
- c. Is snow considered like an extension of the earth for the purpose of Kisui HaDam, covering the blood spilled during the ritual slaughter of Kosher undomesticated animals and fowl? (See VaYikra 17:13 and the verse's Halachic applications.)
- d. Can one perform Netilat Yadayim (the ritual washing of the hands upon awaking, before eating bread, etc., using snow?
- e. How is the whiteness of newly fallen snow to be used as a standard for determining whether someone is suffering from Tzora'at, the spiritual skin affliction? (See VaYikra 4:6; 12:10.)

Probably the most famous Agaddic⁶ passage in the Talmud in which snow plays a significant part is found in a Baraita appearing in Yoma 35b:

Our Rabbis taught: The poor, the rich, the evil doer come before the [Heavenly] Court — They say to the poor: Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah? If he says: I

Gnomologia (1732). Both convey a vivid image of something that would not be burdensome if there were not too much of it, but the straw version is the one that survived and became a cliché.

³ Avraham Tziyoni, Tel Aviv, pp. 196-203.

⁴ Different rules apply to the manner in which liquids and solids respectively become Tameh and in turn transfer Tuma to other substances and objects.

⁵ One of the means by which "rain water" is Halachically transported to an arid area in order to fill the primary pool in a Mikva that in turn gives Halachic credence to pools of water originating in other ways, e.g., tap water, is to carry it in frozen form from places where it naturally occurs in that manner.

⁶ Aggada is contrasted with Halacha, with the former comprised of anecdotes, homiletic interpretations of verses, philosophical considerations, in contrast to the latter which is made up of strictly legal discussions. Occasionally Halacha and Aggada dovetail; but for the most part they remain separate aspects of the Talmudic discussions.

was poor and worried about my sustenance, they would say to him: Were you poorer than Hillel?

It was reported about Hillel the Elder that every day he used to work and earn one Tropaik (half a Dinar), half of which he would give to the guard at the House of Learning, the other half being spent for his food and for that of his family. One day he found nothing to earn and the guard at the House of Learning would not permit him to enter. He climbed up and sat upon the skylight to hear the words of the living God from the mouths of Shemayah and Avtalion — They say, that day was the eve of Sabbath in the winter solstice and **snow** fell down upon him from heaven. When the dawn rose, Shemayah said to Avtalion: Brother Avtalion, on every day this house is light and today it is dark, is it perhaps a cloudy day? They looked up and saw the figure of a man in the window. They went up and found him covered by three cubits of **snow**.⁷ They removed him, bathed and anointed him and placed him opposite the fire and they said: This man deserves that the Sabbath be profaned on his behalf.

Iyun Yaakov⁸ is stymied by the last line of this Baraita, whereby a justification for violating Shabbat in order to save someone's life needs to be qualified in terms of Hillel's obvious commitment to Tora study. It sounds as if had Hillel not had the reputation that he had already established, then it would not have been proper to save his life on Shabbat. The commentator wonders why the text implies such a thing since the Halacha provides that one saves even a baby's life, where there obviously is no prior indication of what sort of life s/he is going to live. He suggests very creatively, but I am not sure Halachically correctly, that since Hillel could be viewed to have engaged in extreme self-destructive behavior to the point of almost dying by exposing himself to the elements in the dead of winter, that this might have been considered a reason not to violate Shabbat on his behalf. Consequently, the text explains that his sin of endangering himself⁹ was mitigated by the profound devotion to Tora study that obviously was informing his dangerous course of action.¹⁰

⁷ A cubit (Amah) is equivalent to 1 ½ feet. Three cubits would then be 4 ½ feet. It is not unreasonable to assume that this amount is an exaggeration at least to some extent, since it would be highly unlikely that someone remaining under this amount of snow for this amount of time would be still alive. However, the point of Hillel's readiness to engage in self-sacrifice in order to be able to listen to words of Tora remains however much snow actually covered him.

⁸ A commentary appearing in the collection Ein Yaakov (Talmudic Aggadah and numerous commentaries upon it) written by Rabbi Jacob Back Reischer (The Shevus Yaakov), who lived between 1670 and 1733.

⁹ The Tora's basic position regarding the importance of engaging in life-affirming behavior is stated in VaYikra 18:5: Ye shall therefore keep My statutes, and Mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

While there are major exceptions to this principle, e.g., during the time of religious oppression or three particularly fundamental negative Commandments, i.e., the prohibitions against murder, idolatry and sexual immorality—see e.g., Sanhedrin 74a; RaMBaM, Mishneh Tora, Hilchot Yesodei HaTora 5:2,3, for the most part, Jewish tradition affirms life in this world rather than in the next. Consequently, someone who needlessly and willingly ends his life is considered to be committing a major sin.

¹⁰ A counter example that comes to mind is that of R. Akiva, described in Berachot 61b. Despite the fact that the Romans had decreed that anyone caught teaching Tora will be executed, R. Akiva endangers himself nevertheless,

I believe that there is another, more positive way to understand the Talmud's comment at the end of the story. This past Yom HaKippurim, I spoke about how the basis of Pikuach Nefesh (the value of saving a life even if it means violating Shabbat or Yom Tov) is that it is better to violate one Shabbat in order that the person whom we save will be able to observe so many more Shabbatot or Yomim Tovim in the future. Of course, one never really knows what the future will bring and how an individual will act. So we give everyone the benefit of the doubt, approach the future optimistically, and project that additional Tora and Mitzvot will most certainly be carried out if only one is given more time to live.¹¹ In the case of Hillel, the Talmud stresses that it was obvious to those who saved him what his potential and commitment to Tora already was and will hopefully continue to be, establishing a paradigm for other cases of Pikuach Nefesh, where we hope that Hillel's example will be replicated. But as we all know too well, there is no such thing as a sure thing when it comes to a person's beliefs and lifestyles. As the Talmud states, (Berachot 29a) It was taught: Do not believe in yourself until the day of your death (i.e., whatever patterns of behavior a human being establishes, they can always be changed and even reversed as long as one is alive). Behold Yochanan, the High Priest, served as the High Priest for eighty years (!) and in the end, became a Sadducee. Nevertheless, there is no reason not to give a person the benefit of the doubt and assume that he will aspire to great spiritual things, just as we claim similar potential aspirations for ourselves during the Days of Awe.

We could modestly extend Hillel's battle with snow to our own struggles over the past few days, particularly those of us who refused to allow ourselves to be discouraged from coming to shul due to:

- a. Thundersnow resulting in downed trees and powerlines
- b. Sometimes even having trees join us in our dining rooms as "uninvited dinner guests", as the Kolatch's put it so understatedly,
- c. Managing for several days without power causing us to scramble to figure out how to stay warm and meet our responsibilities to our families and those who depend upon us and our professions and jobs,
- d. Helping those who needed shoveling, getting supplies, sharing power and warmth,
- e. The absence of an Eiruv
- f. Traversing unshoveled walkways and streets, etc.

is eventually caught by the authorities and executed as one of the Ten Martyrs. An obvious distinction between R. Akiva's actions and that of Hillel is that whereas R. Akiva was teaching Tora to others in the interests of helping the Jewish people continue its religious traditions (see the parable that R. Akiva presents to his acquaintance Piphus ben Yehuda to explain his ostensibly reckless behavior), Hillel, at least at this point of his career, was concerned with only his own development.

¹¹ The connection between this idea and the Penitential Period is that during the Ten Days of Repentance, we are also making the case that if we are afforded one more year of life, we will improve and devote ourselves that much more diligently to complying with God's Directives.

While all of this may not be literally equivalent to allowing 4 ½ feet of snow to fall upon us, we are nevertheless demonstrating in a manner similar to that of Hillel the value that we give to Tefilla B'Tzibbur both today, and hopefully throughout the coming years.

On Shabbatot like today, there is an extra sense of doing the right thing stemming from our rising to the challenge and coming to shul even though there are plenty of justifiable reasons not to have done so. However, we should keep in mind that participating with our friends and neighbors in communal prayer not only on Shabbat, and not only when it is somewhat daunting to do so, but also during the week, is always a value and should be engaged in as much as possible even when the source of adversity is not the weather conditions, but our simply “not feeling like it” .

Why should only postal delivery be categorized as:

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”¹²

But it is also important to note, that while any and all Mitzvot are important, and communal prayer, Tefilla B'Tzibbur, is certainly one such important Commandment about which we each make choices regarding what to do and how well to do it, Tora study was the particular focus of the Gemora in Yoma that recounted Hillel's Mesirat Nefesh (personal sacrifice) involving snow in order to try to obtain new insights from outstanding teachers. While Tefilla B'Tzibbur is not only a value with regard to an individual engaging in prayer within its most effective context—praying at home might be convenient, but usually not as inspiring or metaphysically effective as praying in shul with a Minyan--but that it also expresses how we care about the others in the community who depend upon each of us in turn to enhance the prayer experience, I believe that the Mitzva par excellence for personal change and development is Tora study, what Hillel was engaged in atop the roof of the Beit Midrash.

¹² Inscription on the James Farley Post Office building in New York City, derived from a quote from Herodetus' Histories, describing the courier service of the ancient Persian Empire, to which we have a reference in TaNaCh:

אסתר פרק ג

(יג) ונשלוח ספרים ביד הרצים אל כל מדינות המלך להשמיד להרג ולאבד את כל היהודים מנער ועד זקן טף ונשים ביום אחד בשלושה עשר לחדש שנים עשר הוא חדש אדר ושללם לבוז:

And letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey .

אסתר פרק ח

(י) ויכתב בשם המלך אחשוורש ויחתם בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרים ביד הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשתרנים בני הרמכים:

And they wrote in the name of king Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, riding on swift steeds that were used in the king's service, bred of the stud ;

Tora study is what potentially changes us; it's what gives us new insights and broadens our horizons as it broadens our understanding of God and His Tora. In the words of Meiri on the story of Hillel:

בית הבחירה למאירי מסכת יומא דף לה עמוד ב
לעולם יהא אדם שוקד על דלתות התורה וחפץ בלמודה. ולא יורה היתר לעצמו להתנצל
בהתרשלותו מתוך עושר ורוב עסקים, **ולא מתוך עוני וצרכו לבקש טרפו** אלא יתן לכל דבר
מקום כפי הצריך לו ואין לו התנצלות מצד רוע טבעו ותכונת מזגו מצד תולדתו שמ"מ הבחירה
בידו והרשות נתונה לו להכניע יצרו ולהחזירו למוטב

A person should always frequent the doors of the house of Tora study and desire to learn. And he should not give himself excuses to avoid his Tora study responsibilities neither by his self-indulgences because of wealth or preoccupations, nor as a result of poverty and his need to look for means of support. But rather he should give each aspect of his life its proper place as is necessary. He also cannot use as an excuse his evil nature or his personality as the result of his nature, because at the end of the day, the choice is his and it is within his ability to control his inclinations and restore himself to the proper path.

Just as our ancestors so long ago are notably and memorably quoted at the end of Parashat Mishpatim to have committed themselves to carrying out what had already been revealed to them in terms of the Commandments as well as whatever might be presented to them in the future within the context of Tora observance, when they stated in Shemot 24:7 "Na'aseh VeNishma", (We will do—what we have already learned, and we will continue to learn—so that we can do even more) our coming together this morning under difficult conditions to not only pray together, but also to hear words of Tora via the Tora reading as well as the Dvar Tora, should symbolize our respective commitments to continue to make sacrifices by sometimes inconveniencing ourselves, and positively embrace the idea of continually growing in our religious knowledge, commitment, and Mitzva performance, whatever the obstacles and challenges with which we may find ourselves confronted.

Yeyasher Kochechem and let us rely on this and similar experiences to push ourselves to even higher levels in our eternal pursuit of spiritual self-improvement and living in accordance with the Derech HaShem.