

The Prophetic Voice

Hebrew Scripture and Public Life

MINICOURSE



SACRED TEXTS
SHARED CIVIC LIFE



*With Benjamin Sax, Ph.D.,
ICJS Jewish scholar*

WEDNESDAYS

APRIL 15, 22, AND 29, 2026

7:00–8:30 PM ET ONLINE



Today's Agenda



1. Deeper Into Jewish Interpretation
2. To Whom Does the World Belong?
3. The Origins of Water
4. The Power of Water
5. Torah as Water; Water as Torah
6. Plenary



Deeper Into Jewish Interpretation

Textual Interpretation: Exegesis vs. Eisegesis



Deeper into Jewish Textual Interpretation: PaRDeS

פּשֵׁט

Peshat

Plain, surface
meaning of the
text

רֵמֵז

Remez

Allegorical or
symbolic
meaning

דְּרָשׁ

Drash

Comparative,
Midrashic
meaning

סוּד

Sod

Esoteric, mystical
meaning



Three Biblical Narratives About Water:

Creation

**The Origin of
Water**

The Flood

**The Power of
Water**

Exodus

**Torah as
Water; Water
as Torah**

To Whom Does the World Belong?

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 35a

Rabbi Levi raised a contradiction: 'it is written: the earth and all it contains is the Lord's [Psalm 24:1], and it is written elsewhere: the heavens are the Lord's and the earth He has given over to humanity [Psalm 115:16]'. There is clearly a contradiction with regard to whom the earth belongs.'

[Rabbi Levi] himself resolves the contradiction: 'this is not difficult. Here, the verse that says the earth is the Lord's refers to the situation before a blessing is recited, and here, where it says that He has given the earth to humanity refers to after a blessing is recited...yet...one is forbidden to derive benefit from this world without a blessing'





The Origins of Water: Creation



The First Word

- The first letter is *Bet*.
- *Bet* is a preposition that requires a vowel to determine its meaning.
- It can mean:
 - “In a...”
 - “In the...”
 - “At a...”
 - “At the...”
 - “When...”



The First Question

Why does G-d begin the Torah with the letter *bet* and not the letter *aleph*?



Looking at the Ineffable Name of G-d

יהוה

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{ה} & + & \text{ו} & + & \text{ה} & + & \text{י} \\ \text{He} & & \text{Vav} & & \text{He} & & \text{Yod} \\ 5 & & 6 & & 5 & & 10 \\ & & & & & & = \text{26} \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{Inverted} & & \text{Yod (10)} \\ \text{Yod (10)} & \swarrow & \swarrow \\ & \text{י} & \swarrow \\ & & \text{Vav (6)} \\ & & = \text{26} \end{array}$$

Looking at the Ineffable Name of G-d

יהוה

Hayah (He was)

Hoveh (He is)

היה

ו

יהיה

Yiheyeh (He will be)

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

I will be

what

I will be

Looking at the Ineffable Name of G-d

יהוה

אדמה

Earth



אדם

Human



דם

Blood

Jeremiah 17:13

מקור מים-חיים את-
”

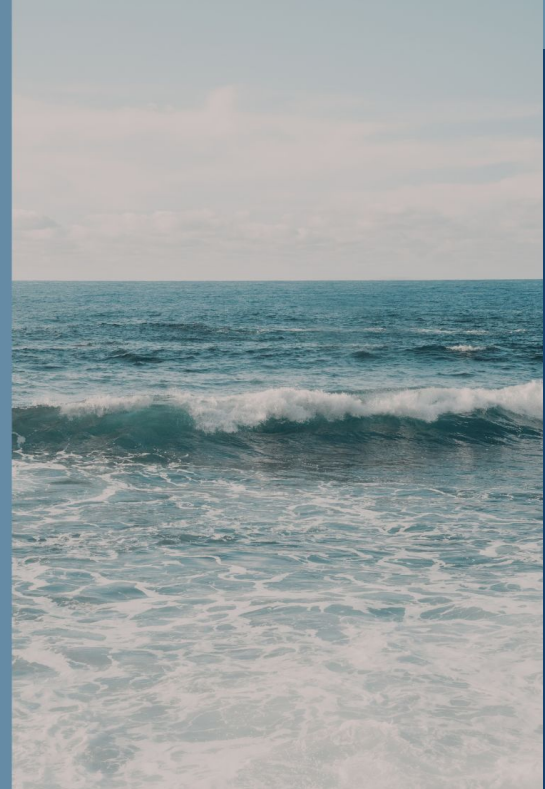
G-d is the Fount of
living waters

@ICJSBaltimore



More Vocabulary

1. The letter *mem* is a preposition meaning “from”
2. The word “*Yam*” means sea.
3. *Yamim* is the plural.
4. Mem+Yamim=**Mayyim**
5. **Mayyim** means “water.”
6. The letter *shin* is a preposition meaning “of”.
7. **Shin+Mayyim=Shamayyim**
8. **Shamayyim** means “the heavens.”



Genesis 1:1-2

בראשית ברא אלקים את השמים ואת הארץ
והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על פני תהום ורוח אלקים
מרחפת על פני המים

When G-d began to create the heaven(s) [*ha-shamayyim*]
and the earth, and the earth was welter and waste and
darkness over the deep and G-d's breath was hovering
over the water(s) [*ha-mayyim*]

Genesis 1:3-5

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר וַיִּרְא אֱלֹקִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב
וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹקִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹקִים לְאֹר יוֹם
וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד

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

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יִהְיֶה רַקִּיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לַמַּיִם
וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הַרַקִּיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לַרַקִּיעַ
וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לַרַקִּיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן

And G-d 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 G-d 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.

Genesis 1:8-9

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹקִים לַרְקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד
 וְתֵרָאֶה הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן

And G-d called the vault Heaven(s) [*Shamyyim*], and it was evening and it was morning, second day. And G-d said, “Let the water(s) [*ha-mayyim*] under the Heaven(s) [*ha-shamayyim*] be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear,” and so it was.

ויקרא אלקים ליבשה ארץ ולמקוה המים קרא ימים וירא
אלקים כי טוב

And G-d called the dry land Earth and the gathering of the water(s) [*ha-mayyim*] G-d called Seas [*yamim*], and G-d saw that it was good.”

Did G-d Create Water?

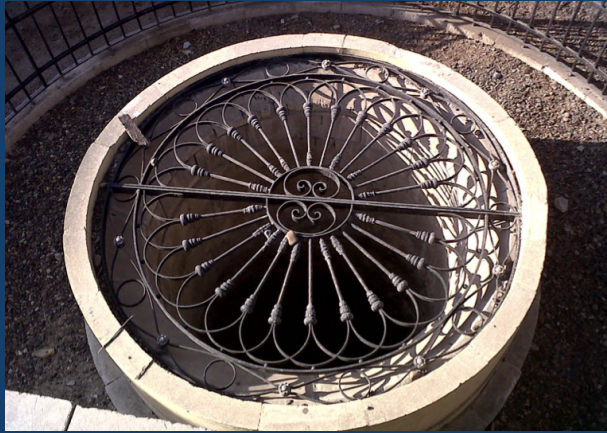


ורוח אלקים מרחפת על פני המים

The breath of God hovered above the surface of the water. (Genesis 1:2)

- In Shabbethai ben Joseph Bass's (1641-1718) *Siftei Chakhamim*, a supracommentary on Rashi's commentary on Genesis, the answer is "no"
- In Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar's (1696-1743) *Or Khayyim*, a mystical commentary on the Torah, the answer is "no" on the *peshat* level, but "yes" on the *sod*.

Let's Meet at the Well

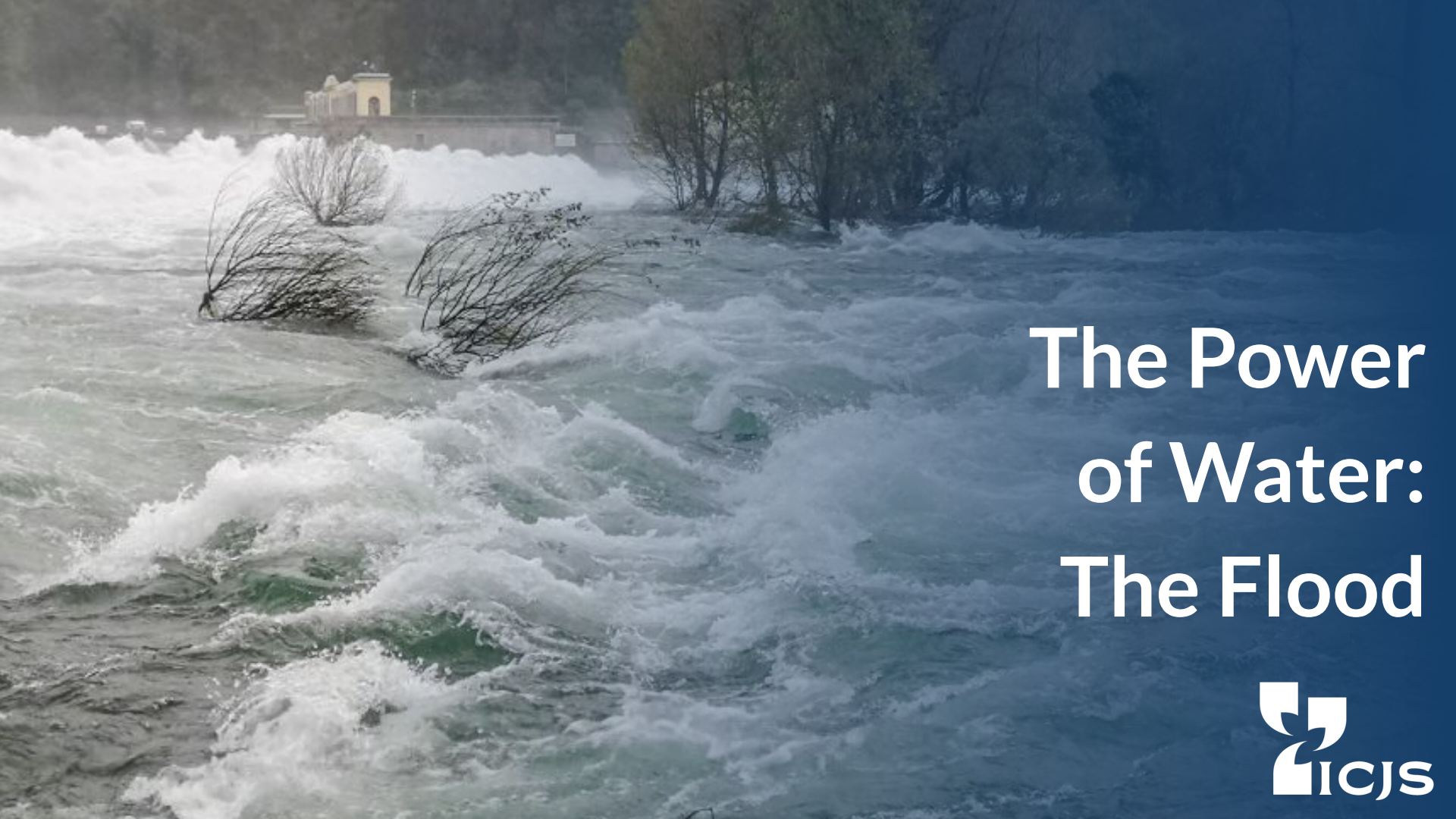


- Eliezer found Rivka at a well and set her up with Isaac (Gen. 24:11-25)
- Rachel met Jacob at a well (Gen. 29:9-11)
- Tzipporah met Moses at a well (Ex. 2:15-22)
- The Israelites met G-d at the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 14:16)

Water, Nature & Torah



1. If, as the Torah teaches, G-d and water existed together before the creation of “the heaven(s) and the earth,” what might the Torah teach us here about the fundamental nature of water?
2. How might this interpretation help us think about how we, as a society, own, commodify, and distribute water?
3. What does it mean to you to “own” or to “have access to” water?



The Power of Water: The Flood

Another Contradiction? The Flood

Genesis 6:5-8

“And the Lord saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart’s devising was only perpetually evil...and the Lord said, ‘I will wipe out the human race...for I regret that I have made them.’”

Genesis 8:21

“And the Lord smelled the fragrant odor and the Lord said in His heart, ‘I will not again damn the soil on humankind’s score. For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth. And I will not strike down all living things as I did.’”

How can humanity’s problematic nature serve as grounds for both G-d’s harsh judgment and for G-d’s overwhelming mercy?



Torah as Water; Water as Torah: The Exodus

The Israelites are the *ivrim*: Those Who Crossover

- Miriam looks over her brother's basket on the Nile.
- Miriam looks over the Sea of Reeds.
- Her name means "bitterness of the waters"
- Ex. 15:20: Miriam is called a prophet.
- Midrashic tradition states that a miraculous well of water (*Be'erah shel Miriam*) accompanied the Israelites in the desert in her honor.



Exodus 15:22

ויסע משה את-ישראל מים-סוף ויצאו אל-מדבר-שור וילכו
שלשת-ימים במדבר ולא-מצאו מים

Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds.
They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three
days in the wilderness and found no water.

Thirsty for Torah



“Water actually stands for Torah, as it is said by 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 second [Monday] and fifth [Thursday] days of the week as well as Shabbat so that they would not let three days pass without Torah.”

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 82a

Water as a Metaphor for Torah



- Torah to Jews is as vital as water to all humans.
- They are both indispensable sources of life. Water makes life grow.
- Without Torah, Jewish life would disappear.
- Torah—like water—must be available to all. We need to study Torah to turn inert letters into living waters.

אין העולם מתקיים אלא בשביל הבל תינוקות של בית רבן

“The world itself rests on the breath of children in school.” (BT Shabbat 119b)

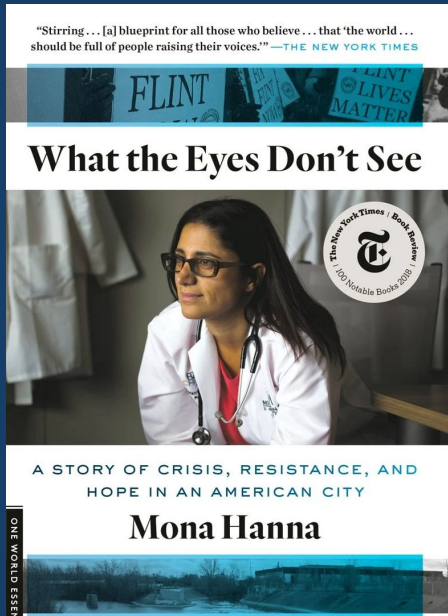
Torah as Water; Water as Torah



If Torah and Water are interchangeable:

- What does this metaphor say about the nature of justice and of an equitable society?
- What does this metaphor say about owning, commodifying, and distributing water?
- What does this metaphor say about our current social and political condition?

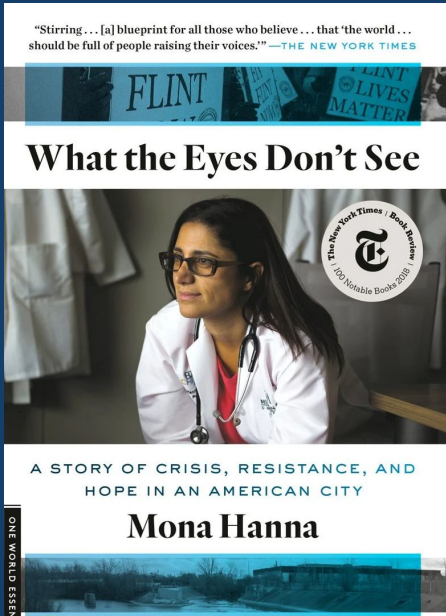
Connecting Our Learning



“When a city doesn’t generate enough tax-revenue because property taxes don’t bring in enough money, poor people who live there are punished with higher utility bills. It’s very regressive thinking, asking poor people to pay a higher share of their income than other residents for basic public health protections like water or adequate plumbing.”

”

Connecting Our Learning



“Flint had miles of old pipes underground that needed repair and replacement. In 2014 the city pipes were leaking between 20 and 40 percent of their load, which meant residents and business owners had to pay for those water loses.

The average annual Flint residential water bill in 2015 was \$864—about \$300 more than in any other city in Michigan. In fact, it was the highest in the nation.

Mona Hanna (p. 80)

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