SHABBAT SHALOM!

MIDDLE EAST WATER — THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM — A SOURCE OF CONFLICT & OF JOY… MAYIM, MAYIM B’BSASON

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ODE TO THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Baruch Cohen, CIJR, May 8, 2013

This language is poetry, This language, this Hebrew language destined to
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Ben Yehuda Against the world’s indifference.
A brass trumpet blasting the cosmos destined to Thus, this language written with letters of fire is
pour out floods of rage poetry!
Against the world’s abuses and indifference. It is a call from heaven to praise life.

HOW WATER BECAME A WEAPON IN ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Yochanan Visser, Jerusalem Post, Mar.3, 2013
The conflict between the Palestinians and Israel is fought on many fronts nowadays. This is the result of a change in strategy decided on by the current Palestinian Authority leadership in 2008. A 2008 report by The Palestinian Strategy Group, which advises the PA, called “Regaining the Initiative” formed the basis of this strategic overhaul in PA politics vis-à-vis Israel.

According to the report, the negotiation route, standard between 1988 and 2008, was to be shut down indefinitely and terror (termed “resistance” by the PSG) would be replaced by a more sophisticated “threat power.” This would entail the refusal to cooperate and the push for boycotts. Another important element in the new strategy was eliciting more third-party support and ensuring the Palestinian discourse would be the primary viewpoint in the discussion about the “Palestinian national project.”

Cognitive warfare, a form of propaganda, has become a successful element in this Palestinian attempt to elicit third-party support. Disinformation about the Israeli settlements in the West Bank spearheaded this campaign. Today much of the world is convinced that the Israeli settlements are the main reason for the absence of peace. But in many other fields, too, the Palestinian discourse dominates the international attitude toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The dispute about the water resources in the West Bank is a good example. The international community has been wilfully misled by Palestinian propaganda on water issues. Until now much of the literature about the water conflict followed either the Palestinian discourse (vast majority) or the Israeli discourse (small minority).

However, a thesis titled “The Politicization of the Oslo Water Agreement,” written by Lauro Burkart, a Swiss graduate of the Institute of International and Development studies in Geneva gives a more accurate and impartial picture of the topic of the scarcity of water in the Palestinian Authority. Burkart interviewed many key players in the water conflict, Palestinians and Israelis as well as representatives of NGOs and the donor countries. He also examined many original documents such as the minutes of the meetings of the joint Israeli Palestinian Water Committee (JWC)…

Burkart writes: “It is not the Israeli occupation policy but the Palestinian political resistance against joint management and cooperation that is responsible for the relatively slow development of the Palestinian water sector and the deteriorating human rights situation in the Palestinian Territories” and “There is convincing evidence of mismanagement within the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA).” He cites the pro-Palestinian NGO Aman, that concluded that there is “no clear legal separation between the political and executive levels within the Palestinian water institutions. To date there is no real functioning water law. Furthermore the National Water Council is not meeting and not functioning well.”…

Burkart also interviewed Dr. Shaddad Attili, head of the PWA, who was appointed in 2008. Attili, a Fatah member, is responsible for the de facto ending of the cooperation with Israel in order to bolster Palestinian water rights claims. He did this to strengthen the position of Fatah after the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections. This policy is conducted at the expense of the marginalized and peripheral Palestinian population which is suffering from water shortages. Burkart writes that the abundance of donor money allowed Atilli to continue the noncooperation strategy which has lead to a complete stagnation of the water negotiations during the past five years.

One of the results of the refusal to cooperate with Israel is that almost all of the 52 mcm [million cubic metres] of waste water generated by the Palestinian population flows untreated into Israel and the West Bank, where it contaminates shared groundwater resources. Nevertheless, the Palestinians claim that Israel is blocking their waste water infrastructure. The facts are that most of the Palestinian waste water treatment and reuse projects have already received foreign funding and were supported by Israel. The PA, however, has not taken sufficient action to execute those projects. Instead the PA claims Israel is demanding an unreasonably high level of treatment.

A JWC memorandum of understanding from 2003, however, which was signed by both parties, agreed on a gradual process to achieve this standard. Following a meeting in November 2011 between Colonel Avi Shalev of the Civil Administration and PWA officials about the implementation of Palestinian water…
projects, Israel offered to finance water and waste water projects that would serve Palestinian communities in the West Bank. The Palestinians didn’t respond.…

It is obvious that Attili’s non-cooperation strategy is connected to the overall change in strategy vis-à-vis Israel in 2008 by the PA. Water has become a weapon against the so-called Israeli occupation. Unfortunately Attili has been able to convince the international community that Israel is to blame for the slow development of the Palestinian water sector. A good example is Abdelkarim Yakobi, the project manager in the department of water, transport and energy at the Office of the EU representative for the West Bank and Gaza. Yakobi, who was interviewed by Burkart, also blamed Israel for the slow development of the Palestinian water sector. This is strange; if a Swiss graduate was able to get access to all the relevant information, why did the European Union, with all of its resources, not do the same? Had it done so there is no doubt the EU would have found out who really is to blame.

The EU has allocated funds for at least seven waste water treatment plants. It is reasonable to assume that the Europeans would have some oversight on the execution of these projects – so why did they not demand accountability from the PWA? In fact the PA has now been given a free pass to use water as a weapon against Israel. By doing so, the international community is in fact contributing to the aggravation of the conflict and harming the interests of the Palestinian population.

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A PARCHED SYRIA TURNED TO WAR AND EGYPT MAY BE NEXT

*Mitch Ginsburg*

*Times of Israel*, May 9, 2013

Some look at the upheaval in Syria through a religious lens. The Sunni and Shia factions, battling for supremacy in the Middle East, have locked horns in the heart of the Levant, where the Shia-affiliated Alawite sect has ruled a majority Sunni nation for decades. Some see it through a social prism. As they did in Tunis with Muhammad Bouazizi — an honest man who couldn’t make an honest living in this corruption-ridden part of the world — the social protests that sparked the war in Syria started in the poor and disenfranchised parts of the country. And others look at the eroding boundaries of state in Syria and other parts of the Middle East as a direct result of the sins of Western hubris and Colonialism.

Professor Arnon Sofer has no qualms with any of these claims and interpretations. But the upheaval in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, he says, cannot be fully understood without also taking two environmental truths into account: soaring birthrates and dwindling water supply.

Over the past 60 years, the population in the Middle East has twice doubled itself, said Sofer, the head of the Chaikin geo-strategy group and a long-time lecturer at the IDF’s top defense college, where today he heads the National Defense College Research Center. “There is no example of this anywhere else on earth,” he said of the population increase. Couple that with Syria’s water scarcity, he said, “and as a geographer it was clear to me that a conflict would erupt.”…

Syria is 85 percent desert or semi-arid country. But it has several significant waterways. The Euphrates runs in a south-easterly direction through the center of the country to Iraq. The Tigris runs southeast, tracing a short part along Syria’s border with Turkey before flowing into Iraq. And, aside from several lesser rivers that flow southwest through Lebanon to the Mediterranean, Syria has an estimated four to five billion cubic meters of water in its underground aquifers.

For these reasons the heart of the country was once an oasis. For 5,000 years, Damascus was famous for its agriculture and its dried fruit. Since 1950, however, the population has increased sevenfold in Syria, to 22 million, and Turkey, in an age of scarcity, has seized much of the water that once flowed south into Syria.
“They’ve been choking them,” Sofer said, noting that Turkey annually takes half of the available 30 billion cubic meters of water in the Euphrates. This limits Syria’s water supply and hinders its ability to generate hydroelectricity.

In 2007, after years of population growth and institutional economic stagnation, several dry years descended on Syria. Farmers began to leave their villages and head toward the capital. From 2007-2008, Sofer said, over 160 villages in Syria were abandoned and some 250,000 farmers – Sofer calls them “climate refugees” – relocated to Damascus, Aleppo and other cities.

The capital, like many of its peer cities in the Middle East, was unable to handle that influx of people. Residents dug 25,000 illegal wells in and around Damascus, pushing the water table ever lower and the salinity of the water ever higher. This, along with over one million refugees from the Iraq war and, among other challenges, borders that contain a dizzying array of religions and ethnicities, set the stage for the civil war. Tellingly, it broke out in the regions most parched — “in Daraa [in the south] and in Kamishli in the northeast,” Sofer said. “Those are two of the driest places in the country.”

Egypt, Sofer wrote, faces severe repercussions from climate change. Even a slight rise in the level of the sea – just half a meter – would salinate the Nile Delta aquifers and force three million people out of the city of Alexandria. In the more distant future, as the North Sea melts, the Suez Canal could decline in importance. More immediately, and of greater significance to Israel, he wrote that Egypt, faced with a water shortage, would likely grow more militant over the coming years. But he felt the militancy would be directed south, toward South Sudan and Ethiopia and other nations competing for the waters of the Nile, and not north toward the Levant.

As proof that this pivot has already begun, Sofer pointed to Abu-Simbel, near the border with Sudan. There the state has converted a civilian airport into a military one. “The conclusion to be drawn from this is simple and unequivocal,” he wrote. “Egypt today represents a military threat to the southern nations of the Nile and not the Zionist state to the east.”

The day after Israel left under the Oslo Accords, he said, the Palestinian Authority and other actors began digging 500 wells along the coastal aquifer even though Israel had warned them of the dangers. “Today there are around 4,000 of them and no more ground water. It’s over. There’s no fooling around with this stuff,” he said.

Only the two most stable states in the region – Israel and Turkey – have ample water. Turkey is the sole Middle Eastern nation blessed with plentiful water sources. Ankara’s control of the Tigris and the Euphrates, among other rivers, means that Iraq and Syria, both downriver, are to a large extent dependent on Turkey for food, water and electricity. That strategic advantage, along with Turkey’s position as the bridge between the Middle East and Europe, “further serves its neo-Ottoman agenda,” Sofer said.

Israel no longer suffers from drought. Desalination, conservation and sewage treatment have alleviated much of the natural scarcity. In February, the head of the Israel Water Authority, Alexander Kushnir, told the Times of Israel that the country’s water crisis has come to an end. Half of Israel’s two billion cubic meters of annual water use is generated artificially, he said, through desalination and sewage purification.

For Sofer, this self-sufficiency is an immense regional advantage. Israel could pump water east to Jenin in the West Bank and farther along to Jordan and north to Syria. International organizations could follow Israel’s example and fund regional desalination plants, which, he noted, cost less than a single day of modern full-scale war. Instead, rather than an increase in cooperation, he feared, the region would likely witness ever more desperate competition. Sofer said his friends see him as a sort of Jeremiah. But the Middle East, he cautioned, is a region where “leaders wake up every morning and ask what can I do today to make matters worse.”

GETTING DRUNK ON WATER
Last night was the first really good rain of the season here in Israel – and I use the word ‘good’ purposely ….Rain nourishes the land, from replenishing Israel’s drinking water resources to enabling the growth of agriculture. Without rain, we can’t survive — and so it certainly is very good when rain comes along. I would like to talk about how this rain — and water in general — is also good for Israel on a spiritual level. To many, this assertion, too, may appear fairly obvious; after all, our sacred sources are replete with references to the value of water – water symbolizes Torah, rain is viewed as a sign of blessing, and praying for rain is considered the paradigmatic means to cry out to God and deepen one’s relationship with the Creator. I would like to, however, discuss a less well known connection between water and spirituality — namely that water is the source of the deepest form of joy in Judaism.

The classic proof for this connection — that water and joy share an intimate relationship — is the water drawing ceremony that used to take place in the Temple area during the fall festival of Sukkoth. During this ceremony, water was drawn in golden vessels from the Siloah well just outside of the old city in Jerusalem, then accompanied with much fanfare and shofars blasting to the Temple area, and ultimately poured over the holy Alter in an elaborate and majestic way. Celebrations throughout the day before and night (and day) afterwards accompanied this process. As the Talmud describes:

The entire city of Jerusalem glowed with light during this time thanks to golden candlesticks more than 70 feet high filled with golden bowls of holy oil. The greatest Sages would participate joyfully in the celebration, performing the most extraordinary feats. Some of them would bear burning torches in their hands while singing Psalms and other praises of G-d. The Levites would play many various musical instruments, including harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets. The great Sage Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel rejoiced at the water festival by juggling eight lighted torches; he would also kiss the ground as he did head stands, a feat which no one else could do….Sounds like a great party, huh? The Talmud certainly thought so, and thus declared: ”Whoever never witnessed the Simchat Beit Hashoeva – The Joyous Celebration of Drawing of Water - has never in his life seen true joy.”

Now while I am all for a good party, it strikes me that there are at least two problems with the description above. First, isn’t the declaration of the Sages that “one who has not witnessed the Drawing of Water Celebration has never in his life seen true joy” a little exaggerated? Surely there must be other times of great joy in the lives of people; births, weddings and other personal, communal and national celebrations are but a few possibilities. We, of course, can dismiss the statement of our Sages as simple hyperbole, but is there also a way to understand it literally?

Second, and this question is not mine but rather the query of Rabbi Aron Soloveitchik, why is it that water is the source of all this joy? Wouldn’t it make more sense if some other liquid, something more regal – like holy oil — or more celebratory — like wine — was the medium poured onto the Temple’s Alter?

Rabbi Soloveitchik answers as follows: Yes, wine is a source of joy, just as the psalmist says it is. And yes, imbibing it has the power to cause one to celebrate … and that’s the problem. Wine is an outside factor that produces joy, and thus the joy that is produced is often outside the person him or herself. Water, in contrast, does not produce any effect whatsoever on the person. Nor is it something overly special — like olive oil in those days — that one would innately rejoice over possessing it. It was everywhere, as common as … well, as common as water. Therefore, if one was able to appreciate the water — despite it’s mundaneness — well, then, the resultant joy would not have been produced from the outside but rather something that emanated from within the person.

Water is a basic building block of life, and obviously we could not survive without it. But because it is so basic we often forget about just how precious it really is. Being joyous over it, therefore, is not obvious … just as it is not obvious to celebrate all things that are common and part of our everyday existence — our families, our friends, our daily routine, the little moments.
Just imagine, though, if in spite of the fact that feeling uncontrollable joy over these basic things is not obvious we felt such joy nevertheless. Just imagine, if in spite of the fact I always see my family, and I always do many of the same things each day — and thus these things are not special in the sense that they are not unique nor rare — just imagine if I nevertheless always felt a great joy in experiencing them. Just imagine if every time I saw my family it was like the first time (or some other special time) I saw them — like the day I married my wife, the moment my child was born, the reunion with my parents after a long absence.…

And that’s the lesson of water. Yes, compared to wine and oil, its cheaper and less special. And yes, water in itself — unlike wine — does not produce joy. To be able to celebrate water, then, is a very high level; it means one has achieved an existential state of joy, one not dependent on outside forces, not wine nor the occurrence of some special event. No, all such a person needs are the basics in life, the water in life.

Now we can understand the statement of the Talmud much better. They were not saying that someone who never witnessed this particular ceremony never saw true joy in his life; rather, they were saying that someone who cannot find joy in the celebration of water alone — someone who cannot find joy in the common, everyday experiences – well then, this person will never experience true joy — even at uncommon moments. Their joy will be the joy of wine – of needing an outside element — and that is incomplete. If, however, such a person finds joy in everyday living, his potential for joy throughout life becomes unlimited. And that’s something to celebrate.