

Emuna and Ashira, Water and Wine

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 2 October 2026

Nisuch HaMayim, Nisuch HaYayin, and the Two Cups of Sukkot

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Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · Jerusalem | Pittsburgh Roots · Talmid · covenantal writer

Today is Hoshana Rabbah, the seventh day of Sukkot, and in the Temple it was the last morning of the water libation. Water was poured on the altar on all seven days of the festival and not on the eighth (Mishnah Sukkah 4:1). Tonight Shemini Atzeret begins in Israel; tomorrow we stop pouring water and start asking for rain. So today is the day to set down what the water teaches.

On Erev Sukkot I sat in a class by Rabbi Tamir Castiel at Beit Chabad Katamon (youtu.be/nTKSn58z3SE). The title was a question: *What is above reason?* Rabbi Castiel was teaching from a sicha of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on the water libation. I left with a page of notes, and with two words that have stayed with me since: *Emuna* and *Ashira*. Water and wine.

The teachings here belong to the Rebbe and to Rabbi Castiel, who opened the sicha for us. The connections, and any mistakes in them, are mine.

Two cups on one altar

The Mishnah describes it closely. Each of the seven mornings of Sukkot, through Hoshana Rabbah, a golden flask of three log was filled at the Shiloach spring and carried up to the Temple. The priest went up the ramp of the altar and turned to his left. Two silver cups stood there, each pierced at the bottom. The wine cup had a wide opening and the water cup a narrow one, so that both would finish draining at the same moment (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9).

Wine was poured on the altar all year, with the offerings. Water was poured only on Sukkot. And the celebration of the season was named for the water, not the wine: *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah*, the joy of the place of drawing. “Whoever has not seen the joy of the place of drawing has never seen joy in his life” (Mishnah Sukkah 5:1). The prophet had promised it: “Joyfully shall you draw water from the wells of salvation” (Yeshayahu 12:3).

That should surprise us. Scripture says wine “gladdens the human heart” (Tehillim 104:15). Water has no taste. Why is the greatest joy of the year about the cup with no flavor?

Wine: the service that tastes

Begin with the wine, because it is the cup we know. As Rabbi Castiel taught it from the Rebbe's sicha, wine has taste, and so it stands for serving G-d through understanding. I grasp why the mitzvah is good, the grasping warms me, and the warmth moves me to act. This is the pole I keep calling *Ashira*: the cup of wine, the service that has flavor, where the mind tastes what the hand does.

It is real service, and precious. G-d wants our minds and our hearts, not only our hands. A Judaism without wine would be thin and dry. But the class pointed out the limit built into it. Service through taste is always measured by the one who serves. I receive as much of the command as my mind can contain, and no more. A teacher shrinks his wisdom to fit the student's mind, so the student gets only what he can take in. The wine is sweet, but it is poured to my size.

Water: Emuna above reason

Water has no taste. In the Rebbe's reading it stands for *kabbalat ol*, accepting the yoke, and for *emuna*, faith that stands above reason: I do this because I was commanded. Rabbi Castiel put it through the old contrast of student and servant. A servant who carries out his master's word may not understand it, but what gets done is the master's will exactly as the master meant it, untrimmed. That is why *na'aseh*, "we will do," comes before *nishma*, "we will understand" (Shemot 24:7). Doing brings down the absolute will without cutting it to fit us.

In my notes I circled *haratzon hamuchlat*, the absolute will. Beside it I wrote: *above reason: in place of reason, in faith*. Emuna is not against reason, and it is not reason switched off. It is what stands where reason cannot reach, and carries a person when reason runs out.

That is why the joy belongs to the water. Joy that rests on taste fades when the taste fades. Joy in the yoke is joy in being bound to the Infinite, and it does not fade, because it never depended on how much we understood. It belongs to the simplest Jew and to the most learned in the same measure.

Draining together

Here is the thing the Mishnah's two cups teach with their two openings: neither cancels the other. The water does not make the wine unnecessary. Both were poured on the same altar, from the same hand, and they were built to finish at the same moment.

Emuna without Ashira can become a service that never lets itself be touched, faith that never tastes. Ashira without Emuna becomes a service that stops the moment the taste goes, and a mind that serves only itself. The Sages ordered the Shema the same way: first a person accepts the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven, and only then the yoke of the mitzvot (Mishnah Berakhot 2:2). The water comes first and carries everything; the wine is poured on top of it. Understanding still belongs in the service. It simply rests on something firmer than itself.

Water by night, wine by day

The class brought a detail of law. Water poured at night is valid after the fact; wine is valid only by day. The Talmud, discussing when we begin to mention rain, speaks of the water libation as done "even at night" (Ta'anit 2b).

The Rebbe read this as a teaching about the soul. Day is when everything is visible. Service through understanding needs daylight, because it depends on seeing, and wine is a daytime cup. Night is concealment, the hours when we do not see and G-d seems hidden. Emuna still works in the dark. The yoke does not wait for clarity. Anyone who has lost someone, lain awake, or kept faith through a year that made no sense knows the value of a service that is still valid at night.

The class added one more distinction: wine went with the offering a person brought, while the water belonged to the day itself. Nobody makes the day; it comes from Above. The wine is what we bring. The water is what we are given.

The Sadducee's feet

Why was the crowd so tense at the libation? Because once a priest poured the water over his own feet, and all the people pelted him with their etrogim. From then on they called out to every priest, "Raise your hand!" (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). The Talmud tells us he was a Sadducee, a man who accepted only what he could read for himself and rejected the Oral Torah the libation depends on (Sukkah 48b).

As Rabbi Castiel read the story in the class, the Sadducee was not only rejecting a law. He was ranking the two cups. *I understand everything; I have the wine. I don't need the water. The yoke is for the feet.* So he poured it on his feet.

The people answered him with their etrogim: the fruit with both taste and fragrance, the finest thing they held. The class read it as the people's own understanding thrown back at him. *Our wine also rests on the water. You don't get to be the head that assigns faith to the feet.*

That scene says something about a free people. In a covenant no one is the head while everyone else is the feet. The yoke of Heaven is the one yoke that frees a person from every other master, because it belongs to no man. At the foot of Sinai the whole people said *na'aseh v'nishma* in one voice. The water at the altar was poured for all Israel.

The hundred over our heads

My notes also have an arithmetic line. The letters of the word schach, שכך, add up to a hundred: samekh is 60, kaf is 20, and final kaf is 20. From the samekh I drew an arrow down the page to the Clouds of Glory.

The link is old. "I made the children of Israel dwell in booths," says the Torah (Vayikra 23:43), and Rabbi Eliezer taught that those booths were the Clouds of Glory (Sukkah 11b). The Talmud even takes the rules of schach from a cloud, the mist that "rose up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground" (Bereishit 2:6; Sukkah 11b). So our roof is a kind of cloud, and a cloud is water rising. The tasteless water poured on the altar and the covering over our heads are closer than they look. On Sukkot we do not only pour Emuna; we sit inside it.

A hundred is a whole. Rabbi Meir taught that a person should say a hundred blessings every day (Menachot 43b; Devarim 10:12). The custom on Rosh Hashanah is to hear a hundred sounds of the shofar, and, as Rabbi Castiel taught, the hundred of the schach is those hundred sounds returning to us, a connection already drawn by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the maamar *Basukkot Teshvu* (5736), which cites the Pri Etz Chaim for the gematria. The hundred that went up as sound on Rosh Hashanah comes back as a roof on Sukkot. What we cried out in the Days of Awe is now overhead, and it covers the whole person. You cannot stand halfway under a sukkah and have it count.

Carrying both cups home

The class set the libation inside the arc of the season. Elul clears the ground. The shofar is the cry beneath words, before any taste of understanding. Yom Kippur reveals the point in the soul that never left, but it stays high, above everyday life. Sukkot brings it down. *Teshvu*, "you shall dwell" (Vayikra 23:42), means settling in. My note to myself said: *write about making turns.*

Teshuvah is a turn. At dawn, after the night of dancing at the Beit HaSho'evah, the water-drawers reached the eastern gate, turned their faces to the west, and said: "Our fathers who were in this place stood with their backs to the Sanctuary of G-d and their faces to the east, bowing to the sun.

But we, our eyes are to G-d” (Mishnah Sukkah 5:4). They turned away from the bright thing that seems to rule because it can be seen, in the dark before sunrise, on their way to draw water with no taste.

That is Emuna. And then, in the full light of morning, the wine was poured beside it. That is Ashira. Sukkot asks us to carry both cups into the dwelling: faith that is valid in the dark, and understanding that tastes the day, draining together on one altar, in one life.

This morning was the last morning of the water. Tomorrow morning, on Shemini Atzeret, the pouring stops and the asking begins: Tefillat Geshem, tomorrow’s prayer for rain, and *mashiv haruach* in Musaf. For seven days we gave the water with no taste. Now we ask for it back, for the whole year.

Kid-table

1. In the Temple on Sukkot they poured water on the altar, and wine too.
2. Wine has taste, like doing a mitzvah because you understand it. Water has no taste, like doing a mitzvah because G-d asked.
3. The two cups were made to finish at the same time. We need both.
4. Water could be poured even at night. We can keep faith even when things feel dark.
5. The letters of the word schach add up to 100: 60 + 20 + 20, like the hundred shofar sounds.

Sources

- Mishnah Sukkah 4:1 (the water libation on all seven days)
- Mishnah Sukkah 4:9; Sukkah 48b (the two cups; “Raise your hand”; the Sadducee and the etrogim)
- Mishnah Sukkah 5:1; Yeshayahu 12:3 (Simchat Beit HaSho’evah)
- Mishnah Sukkah 5:4 (“our eyes are to G-d”)
- Tehillim 104:15; Shemot 24:7; Mishnah Berakhot 2:2
- Taanit 2b; Yerushalmi Sukkah 4:7 (the water libation valid “even at night”)
- Vayikra 23:42–43; Sukkah 11b; Bereishit 2:6 (booths as Clouds of Glory; schach and the mist)
- Menachot 43b; Devarim 10:12 (a hundred blessings)
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe, maamar *Basukkot Teshvu* 5736, sec. 3 and n. 24, citing Pri Etz Chaim, Sha’ar HaSukkot (schach and the hundred sounds of the shofar)
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Likkutei Sichot vol. 2, Sukkot (in English: “Two Offerings: Water and Wine,” *Timeless Patterns in Time*), as taught in a class by Rabbi Tamir Castiel at Beit Chabad Katamon:

[Watch on YouTube](#)

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