

# Erev Mishpatim 5779

## Snowy Sabbath

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It is not every year that snow falls on Northwood so that we kabbalat Shabbat - welcome in the Sabbath with the glory of white at least still adorning our gardens and trees, if not our treated streets and pavements.

For school children today was an absolute boon, unless of course you were one of the few whose schools defied the odds and were prepared for the eventuality. For those with jobs to accomplish or attend to, it will have been a day to curse flaky white stuff.

It of course provides a rabbi with the opportunity to switch off the news and delve into what our Sacred Texts and Commentators make of the stuff.

There are so many references to snow in the Tanakh in its natural state, but did you know that God created earth with snow, or at least by combining it in the shape of a chemistry experiment.

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 3:8

From what source was the earth created? The Eternal One took of the snow which was beneath God's Throne of Glory and threw it upon the waters, and the waters became congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed, as it is said, "He saith to the snow, Be thou earth" (Job 37:6).

Snow is mentioned in relation to its brightness (e.g. Daniel 7:9) and as a colour comparable to wool or as antonym to fire or crimson (e.g. Shabbat 89b:2). Snow is seen as burning like fire (Tosefta Chagigah 2:2) and can be otherwise fearsome, countered by the wearing of bright and in particular crimson garments.

Perhaps best-known in Torah (Num 12:10) is the comparison of Miriam's skin stricken by tza'arat, commonly translated as leprosy but perhaps better as a discolouration of the skin or eczema akin to snow-flakes. Indeed this Tza'arat was such a concern that it has its own Sidrah!

Yet snow is also attributed with purificatory characteristics:

Purge me with hyssop till I am pure; wash me till I am whiter than snow (Psalms 51:9).

Her offspring were purer than snow (Lamentations 4:7).

And later halakhah suggest that, 'one can immerse your hands in snow if there is enough as needed for a Mikveh for purification (Litzur Shulchan Aruch 40:7).

Mystically, snow is found in the Zohar (1:6b:6) as a metaphor for the Supernal Court on high.

However, on this Shabbat I find the most evocative citation too be a relatively well-known rabbinic tale (Yoma 35b).

The Sages taught: A poor person, and a wealthy person, and a wicked person come to face judgment before the Heavenly court for their conduct in this world. To the poor person, the members of the court say: Why did you not engage in Torah? If they rationalizes their conduct and say: I was poor and preoccupied with earning enough to pay for my sustenance and that is why I did not engage in Torah study, they say: Were you any poorer than Hillel, who was wretchedly poor and nevertheless attempted to study Torah?

They said about Hillel the Elder that each and every day he would work and earn a half-dinar, half of which he would give to the guard of the study hall and half of which he spent for his sustenance and the sustenance of the members of his family. One time he did not find employment to earn a wage, and the guard of the study hall did not allow him to enter. He ascended to the roof, suspended himself, and sat at the edge of the skylight in order to hear the words of the Torah of the living God from the mouths of Shemaya and Avtalyon, the spiritual leaders of that generation.

The Sages continued and said: That day was Shabbat eve and it was the winter season of Tevet, and snow fell upon him from the sky. When it was dawn, Shemaya said to Avtalyon: Avtalyon, my brother, every day at this hour the study hall is already bright from the sunlight streaming through the skylight, and today it is dark; is it perhaps a cloudy day? They focused their eyes and saw the image of a man in the skylight. They ascended and found him covered with snow three cubits high. They extricated him from the snow, and they washed him and smeared oil on him, and they sat him opposite the fire to warm him. They said: This man is worthy for us to desecrate Shabbat for him. Saving a life overrides Shabbat in any case; however, this great man is especially deserving. Clearly, poverty is no excuse for the failure to attempt to study Torah.

I always imagine the Shoah in winter, never with the sun shining brightly. Perhaps this is because nearly all photos are in black and white but largely as it would be unfitting to the subject. I see the harshness of winter, of snow not as a plaything but as destructive. As I listen to the Survivor Speakers this week at [Northwood Holocaust Memorial Day Events](#) this was the scene in my mind.

And as the temperatures plummeted, the snow fell and the wind blasted, my thoughts turned to the homeless for whom sanctuary such as that provided by Watford Council and New Hope's Severe Weather Emergency Protection might literally be a life-saver.

I love the rabbinic tale of Hillel and also love its narrative that there are special, remarkable people on this planet and of course they use their story to emphasise the importance of Talmud Torah - of studying Torah. Yet, I feel the snow impels me towards the more universal teaching: every life is to be saved from the snow even if one need override Shabbat to that affect.

Let us not end quite so negatively but bring back the halakhic source that I would rarely cite in support of a Liberal Jewish interpretation! 'One can immerse your hands in snow if there is enough as needed for a Mikveh for purification.' Whilst snow might signal dangerous payments and roads and the need to remain warm indoors, let us never lose the excitement of youth. May we close our eyes and recall times we gathered snow in our hands as a ball, found a carrot to place as a nose, rolled until we were covered in it or hurtled down a slope on its surface. May those pure thoughts brighten and warm us as we kabbalat Shabbat, welcome this snowy Sabbath.