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## LIVING WATERS

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**SUMMARY** – In the Jewish tradition water plays an important role and is replete with references to its life giving and life sustaining function. The opening chapter in the book of Genesis (the creation story) pictures water as a primeval substance from which heaven and earth were created. In the patriarchal age, not only wells are a source of contention, but also the place where Isaac and Jacob found their brides. The Moses' stories are incomplete without their connection to water. The Rabbis taught by quoting Biblical texts that living Torah compared to living water. They saw water as both life- giving on one hand and destructive on the other hand. For the Jewish mystics water represented the duality of the masculine and feminine principles.

**Keywords:** water, Torah, Kabbalah, living waters, well, mikve, rivers of Eden, upper and lower worlds

Water is the most precious substance on earth, extraordinary for its remarkable aspects and unique properties. All living things require water. The Hebrew word for life, *chaiim*, is composed of two words: *chai*, living, *yam*, sea. Life is living water, and water is the matrix for spiritual and biological processes.

The Talmudic sages use often water as a symbol when they speak about the Torah (the Pentateuch). Just as water is needed to develop life in all its manifestation, the ethical teachings of the Law educate human beings to live in a society based on reciprocal respect, under the law of divine justice and in harmony with nature. "Why is Torah compared to water? As it says: 'Let all who are thirsty come to water' (Isaiah 55:1) For just as water leaves a high place and flow to a low place, so too does Torah knowledge flow away from those who are arrogant toward those who are humble" (Ta'anith 7a). Hence, we study the Torah not only for the purpose to gather knowledge, but to get to know ourselves, as Torah like water reflect our image and water like Torah sustains body and soul.

Water is not only the source of life in the physical world, but also represents the primeval matter of the spiritual world. According to the sages, everything in the material world has its mayor image in the upper worlds: "The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters" (Genesis 1:2) In the beginning, the world was formed of a single unit made of waters, only in the second day of creation God separated the waters into upper and lower spheres: "God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water that it may separate water from water'" (Ibid., 1:6). Finally, in the third day He gathered the water in one place and earth was revealed and gave life to other forms of life - birds, fish and the leviathan (Bereshit Rabbah 12:5). The Hebrew word for water is *maim*. The sages divide this word into *ma*, meaning "what", and *mi*, "who". Thus, the word *maim* consists of two basic and existential words: "what?" and "who?"- "What meaning does my life have?" "What is my purpose in life?" "Who am I?", "Who created the universe?". The existence of the universe implies a creator, as it says: "Lift up your eyes upon high and see, who (*mi*) created these (*ele*)?" (Isaiah 40:26). The combination of *ele* and *mi* forms the word *Elohim*, God (*Zohar*, introduction, 1:3). Thus, the question itself implies the answer, as "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim His handiwork" (Psalms 19:2). In the *Zohar* the upper waters, which are closer to God, are equated with the masculine principle, while the lower ones with the feminine one. The heavens are nominated also as "the waters of before creation", "water into water", the giving source, the blessing of the sweet water and Divine pleasure. The lower waters represent "the bitter waters of after creation", "water into earth", the oceans, the desire to pursue physical pleasure but also the capacity to receive and conserve these waters, and then make a wise use of this vital resource.

The Talmud describes: "In the beginning the universe was made of water into water, then He transformed the water into ice, and then the ice into earth" (Hagigah 77a). The Hebrew word for

heavens is *shamaim* that is composed of *sham*, “there”, and *maim*, “waters”: wherever we are, we cannot escape from seeing them constantly and remember the origins of the universe. *Shamaim* can also be read as *esh*, “fire” and *maim*, “waters”. This implies that only in the upper sphere two opposite elements as fire and water can be unified, as it says: “fire kindles water” (Isaiah 64:1). We find this image in the Bible, in the description of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. The Talmudic sages compared it with the act of creation: “Water conceived and gave birth to gloom, fire conceived and gave birth to light, breath conceived and gave birth to wisdom. Just as water descends amidst thunder and lightening, so too was the Torah delivered on Mount Sinai amidst thunder and lightening” (Shemot Rabbah 15:22).

The purpose of the division onto upper and lower region is to enable humanity to practice free will; however, this same separation is seen as the origin of dissention. Mankind can either choose sweet - upper water, symbol of health, joy and life, or bitter-lower water, symbol of sorrow, tears and death. However, this is an apparent separation, required in order to enable the physical world to exist. It is based on duality and in the interaction between polarities: positive-active-masculine forces and their counterpart negative-passive-feminine ones. Nevertheless, all creation remains connected to the Prime Cause, to the One. “I call heaven and earth as a witness that I have set before life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore, choose life so you and your children may choose to live in holiness (Deuteronomy 30:19).

A rabbinical story contrasts the Sea of Kineret (Galilee) and the Dead Sea. The first one is the source of drinking water and fish while the second one is so salty that it has no trace of living creatures. The sages explain the difference: while the Sea of Kineret receives its water from the melting snow of the Golan Heights which flow into the Jordan River and then stream down into the Dead Sea; the Dead Sea holds these waters and consequently they evaporate as they lack the vital movement established when there is a giving and receiving relationship. From this story we learn that only a giving-receiving relationship, can guarantee life in all its manifestations. The principle of transmission guides not only human relations, but also the relation between God and humanity, humanity and the creation. We learn: “Moses received the Law from Sinai and gave it to Joshua, Joshua gave it to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, the Prophets to the People of the Great Assembly...” (Abot 1:1). Furthermore, the mystical and secret part of the Torah is compared to the profound depths of the oceans and is called Kabbalah, translated as “to receive”, or “acceptance” and “parallel”. The relation between these words can be understood as the following: it is not enough to receive knowledge (the Law); one has also to accept it, and then compare it with other means of interpretation.

The main purpose of mankind is to be a mediator between the material world and the spiritual one, when the two realities are distanced from one another, the lower waters become bitter, polluted and corrupted. As it says: “At the time when God created Adam, He took him around the trees of the Garden of Eden, and he said to him, ‘Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Everything that I created, I created for you; take care that you do not damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it afterwards!’” (Koheleth Rabbah 7).

The Garden of Eden is the source of all waters in the universe. From this supernal-inactive and contemplative world four rivers flow down out of one: Gihon, Pishon, Hiddekel and Euphrates. The Rivers bear the stream of Life out of the Garden to our universe by imposing structured margins to this undifferentiated fluid and thus, enable it to flow. They connect the upper region with the lower one and suggest that the separation of heaven and earth is temporary and in the world to come all waters will merge and unite into the Divine Oneness. The calm and cool waters of Eden symbolize also the highest mind consciousness of *chokhma*, “wisdom”, the first spark of a thought: the “force”, *choakh*, to ask “what”, *ma*. Then this initial thought takes a form and become a “river”, which has the capacity to elaborate this knowledge into a structured system called *binah*, “intelligence”. The human attempt to grasp God’s wisdom can be a dangerous experience. In the Talmudic language it is described as entering in the *pardes*, “orchard”, symbol of divine knowledge. “Four men entered the orchard: Rabbi Akivah, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, and Acher. Rabbi Akivah warned them: when you see pure marble, don’t cry ‘water, water’. Despite this, one cast a look and died; one looked and lost his mind, one tore the shoots (became irreligious), and only Rabbi Akivah came out well” (Hagigah 14:15). Here three sages out of four saw an illusive image and paid the price. The term *pardes* is also an acronym of the four different levels of Torah’s studies: *pshat*- literal interpretation, *remez*- hinted information in the text, *drash*- homiletic interpretation, *sod* –the hidden secret, the mysteries of creation; the Kabbalah

teachings that are compared to deep waters capable to penetrate the surface of appearance and reveal Torah's codes. These four methods of reading are compared to the four rivers of consciousness and pure balsam, which come out from Eden and hasten to reemerge with the Source and thus, celebrate the union of upper and lower waters. "You visit the earth, and water it; you greatly enrich it with the river of God, which is full of water" (Psalms 65:10).

If the Garden of Eden is the water source, and the rivers are the system of pipes, our universe is the cistern that receives this water. For this reason, water, in all its possible manifestations, is the main subject in many biblical episodes, Jewish rituals and holidays. The examples that will be presented hereby show the strict connection between ethical conduct and the presence or lack of water. If on one hand, water is symbol of Divine blessing, prosperity, purity, knowledge and love, on the other hand, it can be the main reason for dissention or battle. When undrinkable or polluted it is symbol of unjust and immoral behaviour. This last aspect is well represented in the story of the Great Flood where it is clearly stated that the earth was immersed in water in order to purify it from corruption: "...and the earth was filled with violence..."(Genesis 6:11).

When Hagar escaped from Abraham's tent, a wellspring appeared miraculously in the desert, and beside it an angel who gave her a prophetic message - the birth of a son. The Hebrew word used here for spring is *'ain*, which means also "eye" (Ibid. 16:7). This denotes that Hagar experienced a vision, due to the benevolent eye of God who heard her prayer; indeed, her son will be named Ishmael, meaning, "God listened". Hagar returned to Abraham's tent, gave birth to Ishmael and years later Hagar and Ishmael were sent away to the desert of Beersheba. When no water remained in their skin-bottle, Hagar cried out, and once again the angel reassured her that God listened to their voice. "And God opened her eyes and she saw a well" (Ibid. 21:19). The sages explain that the well was there, under her eyes, but she wasn't aware of its existence. The verb used for "open" is *pakah*, which means also "to began to understand", "to become wiser", in fact, the term mentioned here for well is *beer*, that also means "to clarify", "to explain". In the same chapter, immediately after, Abraham reproved Abimelech because his servants stole his well (Ibid. 21:25). Abraham took seven lambs as a sign of a covenant and proof that it was he who sunk the well and not the servants of Abimelech. They took an oath to restore peace between them. From that time this place was named Beersheba, which means "the well of the oath" or "the well of the seven". This story demonstrates how easily the scarcity of water in the region can be object of conflict. The wisdom of Abraham and the cooperation of Abimelech prevented further conflict. Moreover, in the symbolical sense, we learn that one cannot claim property resulting from other peoples' work or knowledge. The aim should be to seek for new insights and fight stagnation. From the depth of the earth comes a constant supply of fresh and clear water. For this reason: "We do not anoint kings except by a well, so that their kingship shall flow forth." (Kherithot 5b). A proper treatment of a well is of great importance, hence it is emphasized in many others episodes. The way that one behaves beside the well demonstrates his integrity, altruism and spiritual level. For this reason Eliezer, Abraham's servant, imposed this kind of test to Rebecca. He had to find a proper bride for Isaac and he finds her beside the well. The woman, who was willing to serve him and his ten camels with water, was the right one (Ibid. 24:17). Eliezer understood that she was spiritually fit, and Rebecca was immediately rewarded with gold jewelry. Meanwhile, Isaac was praying beside the well, Beer- lahai- roi, the same place where Hagar's prayer was answered (Ibid. 24:62). After Abraham's death, God will bless him there (Ibid. 25:11). The death of his father, Abraham, broke the fragile peace established with Abimelech. Isaac found that the Philistines had filled his wells with earth (Ibid. 26:15), so that his servants tried twice to sink a new one, but the shepherds of Gerar fought with them. For this reason, the first well was called "Contention" (*Esek*) and the second one, "Harassment" (*Sitna*). Only after the third well was not fought over, it was named "Ample-place" (*Rehovot*). Immediately afterwards Isaac and Abimelech made a peace treaty in Beersheba. Isaac's servants successfully dig a new well (Ibid. 26:32). His son, Jacob, arrived at a well covered by a rock, and saw how the shepherds had to gather together to roll off the heavy stone in order to water their sheep. Jacob rolled off the rock for Rachel and her flock. He recognized in her his soul mate and immediately kissed her. The verb used for "kiss", *vaishak*, can be read also as "giving to drink". Father as son; found their love beside a well. Jacob proved to have not only physical strength, but by removing the rock he showed his capacity to uncover and reveal the hidden deeper life.

However, one can see that as the biblical stories develop, there are more difficulties in dealing with a well. The open ones of Abraham's period were closed at his grandson time. The level of tension increased and consequently, there are more reasons for conflict.

Joseph, Jacob's son, will be thrown by his brothers in "an empty pit without water" (Ibid. 37:24), but full of snakes and scorpions (Shabbat 22). The text emphasizes the lack of water, symbol of life. Afterwards, Joseph will be able to interpret Pharaoh's dream of the seven cows coming out from the Nile. This river sustains life in Egypt; the seven thin cows that ate the fat ones alluded to a period of scarcity (Ibid. 41:4).

In the book of Exodus the Nile's water became a symbol of death: the Pharaoh gave order to throw every Israelite first born male in its waters (1:22). Nevertheless, the Pharaoh's daughter, who went for a bath, found the floating chest and saved Moses (Ibid. 2:5). When Moses rebelled against Pharaoh's authority he found refuge in the "land of Midian beside the well" (Ibid. 2:15). There, he noticed a group of shepherds molesting the daughters of Jethro. Moses not only helped them, but also watered their flock and later he was given Tzipora, the daughter of Jethro, to be his wife. Unlike the meeting of Isaac and Jacob with their soul mate, the description of Moses encounter with Tzipora lacks romance and shows people becoming more violent as they struggle for basic existence.

When Pharaoh refused to allow the people of Israel to leave Egypt, Moses turned the waters of Egypt into blood (one of the ten plagues, Ibid. 7:17), and the Egyptians had to sink wells near the Nile for drinking water. As further punishment "no rain came pouring down upon the earth" (Ibid. 9:33).

In the book of Genesis, God punished corrupted humanity with the Great Flood. The Nile's waters had become polluted and undrinkable because of immoral conduct. Only after the tenth plague were the People of Israel allowed to leave Egypt. When the last of the persecutors were drowning, the Israelites experienced an event that defied the laws of nature: the parting of the Red Sea (Ibid. 14:21). They had to overcome the fear of the deep waters and while walking the sea split in twelve dry level paths, one for each tribe (Tmura Hashalem 5). Only then, the people could sing "The Song at the Sea". In the book of Genesis, God said: "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together in one place" (1:9), and the dry land was revealed. In a symbolic way, we find here the same image of a new creation, the birth of a nation. In fact, the Hebrew name for Egypt is *Mitzraim*, which means "narrow (*tzar*) waters (*maim*)". The fetus leaves the narrow place of the womb through the waters into a new life. The People of Israel, no longer slaves, left the slavery condition, walked through the waters and discovered freedom in the desert. Moses was the "obstetrician", in fact, the Hebrew name Moshe means, "to draw out". According the book of Exodus, the Israelites walked in the midst of the sea but on a dry land (14:22). Water represents also the unconscious mind while the dry land the conscious state. In the magical moment of the sea crossing, they came in contact with the most profound parts of self - "a maidservant saw miracles on the Red Sea which even Ezekiel and the prophets did not envision" (Mechilta 3). In a Talmud story, Moses argues with God saying: "If you split the sea, you will go against the natural order of things. Who could trust you? Indeed, you would be contradicting your own promise to keep the sea and the land separate" (Shemot Rabbah 21:6).

After crossing the sea, the Israelites continued to the wilderness of Shur, and experienced the lack of water. They walked for three days and could not find water (Exodus 15:22). Even, when they found water at Marah (Bitterness), it was undrinkable and bitter. The people complained and talked against Moses, so God instructed Moses to sweeten the water with a piece of wood and thus, restored the Israelites faith on Him. The Talmudic sages explain: "The three days without water stand for three days without the teachings of the Torah. This had a bad influence on them, so it was legislated that Torah should be read three times a week, in the second, fifth and seventh day. Torah as water is indispensable for life, as it says: 'all who are thirsty go and drink water' (Isaiah 55:1)" (Baba Kama 82a). In other words, just as water has no taste unless one is thirsty, so the Torah is meaningless, unless one studies it. The problem of finding water in the desert persists, and the people become more and more aggressive with Moses, who feels that his life is threatened (Exodus 17:4). They already regret leaving Egypt, and once again God comes to Moses' rescue. God instructed Moses to hit the rock and water flowed. The place was named "Trial" (*Massah*) and "Quarrel" (*Meribah*). The people tempted God, as they wanted to see if He was still with them and quarrelled with his servant, Moses. When they arrived at the desert of Sinai, God instructed the Israelites to purify themselves, to immerse in water and to wash their clothes before receiving the Torah (Ibid. 19:10). This is a symbol of conversion of the heart, as God says: "I swore to you, and entered into a covenant with you...and you became mine. Then I immersed you in water..." (Ezekiel 16:8-9). This ritual called *mikveh* will be the most important part in the process of conversion to Judaism, symbolizing a new birth, a radical and internal change of the self (Kherithot 9a).

Moses ascended Mount Sinai and received the written Torah including the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablet (Exodus 31:18). The written Torah is fixed and unchangeable, not a single word or letter can be altered, so it is compared to a rock. However, the meaning of the written text was frequently enigmatic and needed interpretation. Moses explained the difficulties in understanding the written text through oral communication. The oral tradition passed on by word of mouth from master to disciple as fluid water. The various levels of interpretation gave birth to a variety of knowledge. The oral Torah is flexible and adaptable as a river, wide and deep as the oceans, a pool of wisdom through which one can bathe and discover the living waters of Eden. According to the sages, the written Torah is finite, but it contains God's infinite knowledge. By studying the Torah, a person's mind becomes united with the Living Source and thus enables the waters flow down to earth. It is told that the great sage, Rabbi Akiva was a simple unlearned shepherd who felt that at the age of forty Torah study was hopeless. One day he observed water dripping onto a rock and noticed that the steady trickling had made an impression in it. Akiva said to himself: "If drops of water can mark a rock, then even I can study Torah" (Abot Rabbi Nathan 6). He became one of the most important and remarkable masters. Moses himself was elected by God to receive the Torah because of his modesty: only a man who does not pretend to be full of knowledge can acquire new information, and be open to other points of view. As it says: "Just as water does not keep well in a vessel of silver or gold but in the commonest utensil, so the Torah resides only in a person who makes himself as an earthenware utensil" (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:19). Or as presented in another Talmudic statement: "No one, when suffering from thirst is ashamed to ask an inferior person for water. So with the words of the Torah, a great scholar must not hesitate to ask a less learned one to teach him one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter" (Midrash Tehillim 1:18). On the other hand, one has to be careful not to come in contact with a failing spring or with the "seething waters", or stormy waters that symbolize all the negative elements that prevent a person from concentrating on his studies, prayers or good deeds: "Over us would have swept the seething waters" (Psalms 124:5).

After Moses received the Law from Sinai, many of the rituals as well as the holidays needed water. For example, the Levitical priests were required to hold specific rituals in the Temple that required washing with water: every object that comes in contact with impurity was to be washed (Leviticus 11:32), and also a person (Ibid. 22:6). The High Priest had to wash before certain rituals (Ibid. 16:4; Numbers 19:7) and special ablutions were demanded from him and the people on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 11:40). A person who ate unfit food had to wash himself and his clothes (Ibid. 17:15); all sacrifices were to be washed (Ibid. 29:4). Furthermore, God instructed Moses to place a brass basin for water between the Tent of Congregation and the altar (Exodus 30:18; 40:7).

The scarcity of water in the Bible lands was not only a motive for dispute among the people but it was also involved in warfare strategy. In a siege, it was common to cut off a city's water supply as Jehosaphat did with the wells of Moab (2 Kings 3: 19-25). The main source of water is rainfall, so droughts were seen as punishment from God as predicted by the prophets (1 Kings 17:1; Jeremiah 14:1-6). Conversely, rainfall is a physical manifestation of a God-humanity relationship; therefore, it is not to be taken for granted. Even in the Garden of Eden "God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground. And a mist would go up from the land and water the face of the ground" (Genesis 2:5-6). The sages explain that the grass did not grow up because there was no man to pray for the rain and thus, unite the upper world with the lower one (Hulin 59b). The relationship between God and humanity is expressed as a male-female relationship, a giver and a receiver: "From when do we pronounce the blessing on rain? From when the groom (the rain) goes out to meet the bride (earth)" (Ta'anith 6b). Only when men fulfil the will of God, the rain that falls is *berakha*, blessed. The sages affirmed that on Succot festival, the feast of Tabernacles (September/October), humanity is judged for water, so it was the appropriate time to begin to pray for rain. On this festival, the important celebration of "the pouring of the water" was held in Jerusalem's Holy Temple. Throughout the year, the daily offering was accompanied by pouring wine on the altar and only on Succot was water added. This shows that water was considered the more precious liquid as compared to wine. The water ceremony was preceded by an all night celebration in the Temple's courtyard. A joyous procession accompanied with musicians, dancers, jugglers and singing made its way to the Spring of Shiloah and brought water to the Temple's altar. Symbolically, the lower-feminine waters were brought up and then merged with the upper-masculine ones, in a sacred union. It is said that one who did not see the joy of the water-drawing celebration, has not seen joy in his life. On the concluding day of this festival, the eighth day, Sh'mini Atzereth, it is used to say the prayer for the rain, a rain bringing- mercy, light, blessing, happiness, song, life, redemption, and abundance. The prayer includes references to water in the life of the people of Israel, it is recited: "Remember Moses

drawn forth in a basket from the water. They said: 'he drew water and provided the sheep with water'. At the time your treasured people thirsted for water, he struck the rock and out came water. For the sake of his righteousness, grant abundant water".

One cannot conclude a water discussion in the Torah and Judaism without speaking about the *mikveh*, ritual bath, or better, a gathering of "living waters". It is a community pool connected to a natural source used for spiritual purification by completely immersing the body into it. Men use it before Shabbat, holidays or whenever they feel the need to "wash away" sins while women use it after their monthly period or the night before the wedding ceremony: "She must count seven days, and she must then purify herself" (Leviticus 15:28). A woman's cycle parallels the moon's cycle, since every month a moon is born anew. The *mikveh* represents the womb, by immersing into the waters one returns to the prenatal state in order to be born again, to a new day. Symbolically one returns to the primordial moment of Creation, to the first universal moment, to the upper world from which the soul originates, to the waters of Eden, to the Fountain of life.

"God created this world to correspond with the upper world; and all things in the upper world have their counterparts in this world; and all things in this world have their counterparts in the sea; and all is a unity of one" (Zohar).

The Jewish view of water recognizes a strict correlation between its physical and spiritual functions as being a real sustenance for body and soul. This is the motive that persists throughout all the Holy Scriptures: "Just as new waters flow from the well each moment, so does Israel sing a new song each moment (Midrash Tehillim 87). Each manifestation of water has its spiritual message and unique sound: the seas proclaim God's might, the mysteries of creation, the veiled and revealed knowledge, the deepest part of the self, the unconscious mind. The rivers are the canals of transmission, the capacity to flow with life events, the capacity to concentrate the mind and choose a direction, the promise for eventual tranquillity. The silent sound of the well is symbol of our hidden potentiality, one's humility and expression of love, kindness and generosity. The rains express God's blessing and gift that depend upon man's actions and connection to the ways of God. And finally, the dew that is never withheld, expresses the unconditional love of God to humanity, the promise for redemption (*Perek Shirah*, "Nature's Song").

It is appropriate to see the conclusion of the discussion of water as God's blessing and promise of peace to all the people of the earth. In the Jewish tradition, this is the meaning of the messianic time—a period of renaissance to all nations, a time of revelations and a brotherhood of all people. Every one will have a thirst for spiritual knowledge, love and union with the Source, "the Fountain of living waters" (Jeremiah 2:13); "As the hart pants after the water brooks, so pants my soul after You, O God" (Psalms 42:2). The prophet Ezekiel saw in his vision God's House where waters poured from under the threshold promising the unlimited flow of His blessings upon the people (47:1-12).

And there is hope for the realization of Isaiah prophecy in the immediate future: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea...and the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unblocked. And the lame will leap as a deer, and the tongue of the dumb one will sing. For the waters will flow in the wilderness, and rivers will rise in the desert. And the dry land will float as a pool, and the thirsty ground will spring forth water. And peaceful herds will gather in the place of jackals, and it will be lush with grass and foliage. And there will be a highway there, and it will be the way, it will be called the Way of Holiness" (Isaiah 11:9, 35:5-8).