

Keep Digging Wells for Equitable Water Rights

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Historian Char Miller writes that a 1951 *Look Magazine* expose “ripped San Antonio for its indifference to those for whom an ‘inside faucet is an item of envy.’”ⁱ I heard the story decades later from social justice icon Fay Sinkin, now of blessed memory. The article had exposed a harsh reality: Mexican American residents of San Antonio’s west side were forced to source their clean water—for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and bathing—from trucks that would deliver water daily, meaning that they would only have as much water as they could carry each day. Raw sewage ran in the streets, creating not only vile living conditions and spreading deadly diseases.

Fay Sinkin led a group of women to the mayor’s office in protest. The city’s chief executive treated them dismissively, saying, “Why don’t you ladies put your gloves back on, go home, and cook supper for your husbands?” Fay later said: “So we put our gloves back on. We went home. We cooked supper for our husbands. And then, we cooked that mayor’s goose!”

The day I heard this story, Fay was talking about the role of women in San Antonio’s public life, not water rights. Still, the latter part stuck with me. I was shocked that, as late as 1951, sewage ran in the streets not far from where I lived. I also assumed that—by the time I heard the story, more than four decades later—access to clean water and sewage was universal in the United States. In my mind, the only remaining problem in Fay’s story was women’s inequality.

I suspect that many Americans are unaware that unequal access to clean water and sewage was ever an issue; or, if it was, that it was long since resolved. We were disabused of that fantasy, or we should have been, with the deadly crisis in Flint, Michigan some years back.

Still, I needed to be reminded of the details even of that well-publicized horror. Rabbi David Spinrad explains in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*: “For many, the mass lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan marked a moment of awakening. Fifty-seven percent of Flint residents are African American, and 40 percent live below the poverty line. Nearly one hundred thousand people, including nine thousand children, were exposed to lead when the water source was switched from the Detroit Water Authority to the Flint Water System....

“Flint fell under state control in 2011 because of its desperate economic conditions, leading to a 2014 decision by then-governor Rick Snyder to appoint an

unelected emergency manager, Michael Brown. Both are white. In a cost-cutting move, Brown switched the city's water supply from Detroit's treated water to the untreated water of the Flint River. In treating the river water, the city failed to add a corrosion inhibitor, causing lead to leach from the city's pipes. For eighteen months, polluted, discolored, foul-smelling, and foul-tasting water that had traveled through aging, lead-leaching pipes was continuously directed into predominantly African American homes. Residents suffered rashes, hair loss, illness, and death from Legionnaire's disease, and the number of Flint's children with dangerously elevated blood lead levels doubled, even tripling in some neighborhoods.”ⁱⁱ

We may be tempted to imagine the disaster in Flint to have been isolated, that it is an exception to otherwise universal access to clean water and sewage nationwide. Rabbi Spinrad tells us we would be wrong: “Nationwide, African American and Latino households are nearly twice as likely to lack complete plumbing than white households. Indigenous households are nineteen times more likely. The proportion of Native American, African American, Latino, or Pacific Islander residents in a census tract is correlated with the percentage of homes that lack complete plumbing. Race, ethnicity, and language spoken have the strongest relationships to slow and inadequate enforcement of the Safe Drinking Water Act of any sociodemographic characteristics.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Contemporary Americans who are privileged to have access to clean water and sewage need only turn on the faucet or flush the toilet. In ancient Israel, by contrast, water was a scarce and precious commodity, as illustrated in this week’s Torah portion. Rabbi Spinrad points us to our patriarch Isaac, who is parched after the Philistines “stop up the wells” dug earlier by servants to Isaac’s father, Abraham. Isaac tries again, reopening “another well that had been dug by Abraham’s servants. The herdsmen [of that place] quarrel with Isaac’s herdsmen over access to this well, leading Isaac to name the place Esek, which...means ‘contention.’ Later, Isaac’s herdsmen dig a second well,” but again the herdsmen of Gerar object. Isaac calls that one “Sitnah,” meaning “adversarial.” The story concludes when “Isaac then digs a third and final well, and no quarreling ensues. Relieved, Isaac names the place Rehoboth, meaning ‘open spaces.’ He exclaims, ‘Now the Eternal has granted us *ample room* and will make us fruitful in the land.”^{iv}

Rabbi Spinrad admits that “citing the Torah for examples of systemic racism would be retroactive overreach,” even as he reminds us that “we are grounded in a foundational Jewish identity as migrants. As Jews, we see ourselves as the perpetual other and respond accordingly.”^v Reading about our own patriarch’s

struggle to gain access to water, repeatedly thwarted by people then dominant in the land, we may empathize with low-income Americans, particularly people of color, who are similarly deprived of proper plumbing by people in power.

Rabbi Spinrad shares the commentary of Nachmanides, who understands Isaac's first two wells as referring to the first and second temples, since both the wells and the temples are destroyed as the result of conflicts. The commentator says that "the name of the third well, Rehoboth, alludes to the future, messianic era Temple that will one day be built without conflict or hatred."^{vi}

With Rabbi Spinrad, we may wonder whether poor people of color must await messianic redemption before they will enjoy the kind of access to clean water and sewage that you and I take for granted. He quotes Vice President, then-Senator, Kamala Harris, and Dolores Huerta, who claimed in 2020: "'The United States needs a \$1 trillion investment to meet our collective water infrastructure needs over the next 25 years, which would create millions of family-sustaining jobs'"—not only in minority communities, but also in rural areas.^{vii}

No, achieving universal access to clean water and sewage need not await the coming of the messianic era, at least in the United States. While there may be good reason not to spend \$1 trillion, a matter for legitimate debate, there can be no argument that all Americans deserve equal access to complete plumbing. Let us urge the leaders of our nation to follow the example of our patriarch Isaac: Keep digging away at the problem, until every resident of this land has access to clean and safe water.

Amen.

ⁱ Char Miller, *On the Border: An Environmental History of San Antonio*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001, p. 8.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi David Spinrad, "Digging Isaac's Third Well: Water and Systemic Racism," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 36-37. The sources of the facts Rabbi Spinrad cites are found in endnotes in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Spinrad, p. 36.

^{iv} Genesis 26:12-22, Spinrad, pp. 37-38. Emphasis Spinrad's. Translation of "Esek" is cited by Rabbi Spinrad from Ramban to Genesis 26:20. Translation of "Sitznah" is mine.

^v Spinrad, p. 38.

^{vi} Spinrad, p. 38, Ramban to Genesis 26:20.

^{vii} Spinrad, p. 39.