

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT NOACH

The Rainbow

By Rav Amnon Bazak

I. The Covenant and the Sign of the Covenant

The word “covenant” (*brit*) appears in the Torah for the first time at the beginning of *Parashat Noach*:

God said to Noach: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is full of violence because of them, and behold, I shall destroy them, with the earth. Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood... And behold, I shall bring a flood of water upon the earth to destroy all flesh with the breath of life in it, from under the heavens – all that is in the earth will die. But I shall establish My covenant with you, and you will come into the ark – you and your sons and your wife and the wives of your sons with you.” (6:13-14, 17-18)

God commands Noach to come into the ark and thereby be delivered from the utter destruction of every living thing by the Flood. But what “covenant” is God referring to?

According to Ibn Ezra, the reference here is to an oath that is not explicitly mentioned in the text, in which God had promised Noach that he and his family would be saved from the Flood. However, the literal text would seem to lean in favor of the interpretation of Ramban, who explains that here God promises Noach for the first time that He will save him and his family from the Flood, and this promise is formulated in the language of “establishing a covenant.”

Still, it is difficult to ignore the repetition of this expression later on in the *parasha*, after the Flood is over:

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: “Behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your progeny after you, and with all the living creatures which are with you – the birds, the animals, and all the beasts of the field with you, of all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the field. And I will establish My covenant with you, and all flesh will no longer be cut off by the waters of the Flood, nor will there be another Flood to destroy the earth.” (9:8-11)

Following the Flood, God expands the personal covenant with Noah and his family and turns it into a covenant with all of humanity – that is, Noah’s descendants. Just as Noah and his family were saved from the Flood by virtue of the personal covenant that God promised to establish with them, so all of mankind will henceforth benefit from this covenant, and God will not bring another Flood to annihilate them. The covenant is no longer directed specifically and personally towards those who entered the ark; it is a covenant with “all that go out of the ark.” God expands the ark, as it were, to the dimensions of the entire world, and the whole world will now enjoy the same special protection that existed for the ark in the face of the Flood. The emphasis on the special covenant which is now forged with all of humanity finds expression, *inter alia*, in the fact that the word “covenant” appears in the parasha seven times, making it a “key word” in the text.

At the same time, owing to the eternity of this covenant, the personal promise given within the framework of the personal covenant is not sufficient, and God establishes a “sign” of this new level of covenant:

And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant which I forge between Myself and you, and all living creatures which are with you, for all generations: I have set My bow in the cloud, that it may be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall be, when I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the cloud, that I shall remember My covenant between Me and you and all living creatures of all flesh, and the water shall not again become a Flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow will be in the cloud, and I shall see it and remember the eternal covenant between God and all living creatures of all flesh which is upon the earth.” And God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh which is upon the earth.” (9:12-17)

The rainbow, then, is the “sign of the covenant” between God and humanity, and it serves a special purpose – it “reminds” God of the covenant when He sees it: “And it shall be, when... the bow appears in the cloud, that I shall remember My covenant... And the bow will be in the cloud, and I shall see it and remember the eternal covenant...” The rainbow is a phenomenon

that God has established in nature, but this permanence is required, as it were, by God, as a “reminder” not to bring another Flood to destroy the world.

Obviously, this cannot be understood literally. “There is no forgetfulness before the Throne of Your glory” – God needs no reminders. It is more reasonable to suggest that the rainbow is mainly a calming signal to humanity, announcing that they need not fear another Flood. In any event, conceptually the rainbow is not meant to lead a person to any sort of action; rather, it tells him that God sees it and will not bring another Flood.

II. The Rainbow

Why is it specifically the rainbow that is chosen as the sign that there will not be another Flood?

The commentators suggest different directions in interpreting the significance of the rainbow. Chizkuni refers us to the concluding verse of the unit describing the Divine Chariot at the beginning of *Sefer Yechezkel*, which is the only other place in all of *Tanakh* where the word “*keshet*” (bow) is used in this sense: “Like the appearance of the blow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness around; it was the appearance of the likeness of God’s glory” (*Yechezkel* 1:28). On the basis of this verse, Chizkuni argues that the rainbow represents God’s manifestation in the world, and this manifestation in and of itself proves that there will not be another Flood:

If it were My intention to destroy them when there is heavy rain, then I would not show them the likeness of My glory, for a king does not show himself among his subjects when they are censured by him.

The problem with this interpretation is that it is theologically complicated; it suggests that God is reminded of His covenant by looking at something that resembles “the appearance of the likeness of God’s glory,” a problematic assertion.

Most of the commentators maintain that the sign of the rainbow is related to the more common meaning of the word “*keshet*” in *Tanakh* – the

bow as a weapon. Furthermore, this is no ordinary bow, it is God's own bow: "I have placed My bow in the cloud." What does this mean?

In several places in *Tanakh*, we find the bow mentioned as a weapon of God. Examples include such verses as, "I bend Yehuda for Me as a bow" (*Zekharia* 9:13); "He has drawn His bow like an enemy" (*Eikha* 2:4), and others. Arrows, too, are invoked metaphorically to describe God waging war (see *Devarim* 32:23, 42, among other sources). In the context of our *parasha*, it would therefore seem that the (rain)bow symbolizes the weapon by means of which God brought the Flood.

Indeed, it is highly symbolic to liken the rain of the Flood to arrows released with great force from a bow. The same idea arises from the prophecy of *Chabbakuk* (3:9-10):

Your bow is made bare, sworn are the rods of words, Selah; You cleave the earth with rivers. The mountains have seen You and they tremble; the rush of water passes over; the deep has sounded its voice and has lifted its hands on high.

Accordingly, Ramban explains that the sign of the bow expresses the "end of hostilities," since the curved side of the rainbow points heavenward, while the open side – opposite the direction in which the arrows are released – points towards the earth:

For the rainbow is not fashioned with its legs facing upwards, so as to appear that it is used for shooting from the heavens... Rather, it is fashioned in the opposite manner, showing that it will not be used for shooting from the heavens. This is the manner of combatants – to reverse it [the bow] in their hands in this way when they call for peace to their opponents.^{1[1]} Furthermore, the rainbow does not have a bowstring upon which to place arrows.

However, it may be that the bow represents a cessation of hostilities in a slightly different sense. The word "*kashti*" (My bow) does not appear by itself in our *parasha*; in all three instances in which it is used, it appears along with the word "cloud" – and it is this combination that represents the sign of the covenant: "I have set My bow in the cloud, that it may be a sign of the

1 [1] This resembles the custom for handing over a knife: the person holding the knife turns the blade towards himself, holding the handle out towards the receiver.

covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall be, when I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the cloud, that... the bow will be in the cloud, and I shall see it and remember the eternal covenant..." Hence, it is not the rainbow alone that is the sign of the covenant, but rather its appearance in the cloud. Clouds appear in *Tanakh* as a screen or covering – for instance, for God's glory,^{2[2]} for the covering over the Ark of the Covenant,^{3[3]} and for the *Mishkan*.^{4[4]} Setting the bow in the cloud therefore symbolizes the act of "covering" or "hiding" the bow, a sign of a ceasefire, like returning a sword to its scabbard. God covers one of His weapons of war and promises not to use it any more.^{5[5]} When clouds fill the sky and the rainbow appears, it is a sign that the bow is still "covered;" it will not be used against all flesh.^{6[6]}

III. The Rainbow vs. Circumcision

The special nature of the rainbow as a covenantal sign between God and mankind relates to another subject. There are many similarities between the unit in our *parasha* dealing with the rainbow and the unit in *Parashat Lekh-Lekha* (chapter 17) that deals with circumcision (*brit mila*). The main similarities may be set forth as follows:

2 [2] "And God's glory rested upon Mount Sinai, and cloud covered it for six days" (*Shemot* 24:16)

3 [3] "A cloud of incense shall cover the *kapporet* which is upon the Covenant, that he shall not die" (*Vayikra* 16:13)

4 [4] "And on the day that he erected the *Mishkan* the cloud covered the *Mishkan*" (*Bamidbar* 9:15)

5 [5] This also explains the *midrash*: "And the bow will be in the cloud and I shall see it" – for I have drawn My sword and brought a Flood with it, but from now on, I see it, that it is not drawn" (*Pesikta Zutreta* [*Lekach Tov*], *Bereishit* 9:16). The setting of the bow in the cloud means that the bow is perceived as "not drawn."

6 [6] We shall not elaborate here on the famous question of what exactly in the natural phenomenon of the rainbow was introduced in the wake of the Flood. Briefly, in Ibn Ezra's view, something new was actually introduced into nature: "If we were to believe the Greek scholars, [who claim] that the rainbow is created by sunlight, then we must say that God strengthened the light of the sun after the Flood, and this is a correct interpretation for one who understands" (Ibn Ezra on *Bereishit* 9:14). He therefore understands the words, "I have set My bow in the cloud" to mean, "Behold, I have right now set My bow in the cloud" (*ibid.* 13). Ramban rejects this interpretation: "We are forced to accept the Greek teaching that the rainbow appears as a result of the sunlight shining in the moist air, for in a vessel that is holding water, placed in the sun, the likeness of a rainbow appears. And if we look more closely at the wording of the text we can understand this, for God says, 'I have set My bow in the cloud.' He does not say, 'I place in the cloud,' as when He says, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I set.' The word '*kashti*' ('My bow') indicates that previously God possessed the bow already. Therefore, we must understand the text as saying, 'The bow which I set in the cloud from the day of Creation will, from this day onwards, be a sign of the covenant between Me and you, for so long as I see it I shall be reminded that there is a covenant of peace between Me and you.'" In Ramban's view, then, the natural phenomenon had indeed existed since the six days of Creation; what was new at this stage was the significance that was now attached to it. From this point onwards, this natural phenomenon would serve as a sign that God would not bring another Flood.

| <i>Parashat Noach</i> | <i>Parashat Lekh-Lekha</i> |
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| 1. In both units, God announces a special covenant that He is about to establish with people: | |
| "I shall establish My covenant with you" (9:11) | "I shall establish My covenant between Me and you" (17:10) |
| 2. In both units, the covenant forged between God and man is given a sign: | |
| "And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I forge between Myself and you'" (9:12) | "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you" (17:11) |
| 3. Both covenants are eternal: | |
| "And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I shall see it, to remember the eternal covenant" (9:16) | "And I shall establish My covenant between Me and you, and your progeny after you for all their generations, as an eternal covenant" (17:7) |
| 4. In both covenants there is an emphasis on the connection to the phenomenon of " <i>karet</i> " ("cutting off"): | |
| The covenant of the rainbow will prevent the "cutting off" (<i>hakhrata</i>) of the world: "And I shall establish My covenant with you, so that all flesh will no longer be cut off by the waters of the Flood" (9:11) | The covenant of circumcision works the opposite way: whoever does not fulfill the covenant will be cut off (<i>karet</i>) from the world: "An uncircumcised male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin – that soul will be cut off from its people, and he has violated My covenant" (17:14) |
| 5. In both units, the giving of the sign is preceded by the blessing of fertility: | |
| "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1) | "And I shall multiply you exceedingly... and make you exceedingly fruitful" (17:2-6) |
| 6. Both covenants involve a change that will apply from that point onwards: | |
| "Nor will there be another Flood to destroy the earth" (9:11) | "Nor will your name be called Avram anymore" (17:5) |
| 7. In both units, the words "covenant" and "flesh" appear several times. | |

These parallels serve to highlight the fundamental differences between the two covenants, which involve three main areas.

First, the rainbow is a sign for humanity in general, and the covenant is "between me and all flesh that is upon the earth" (9:17). The covenant of circumcision, in contrast, is forged with Avraham, and it pertains only to the

progeny of Yitzchak: “I shall establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant for his progeny after him” (17:19). The word “flesh” (*bassar*) is used in the two units in almost opposite senses: the covenant of the rainbow is forged with “all flesh,” in the inclusive sense, while the covenant of circumcision is limited to the progeny of Avraham and Yitzchak and is dependent upon the circumcision of “the flesh of your foreskin.” In this way, God creates a special bond with a specific group within humanity.

Second, the universal covenant of the rainbow relates to the entire world, which is referred to in this covenant as “the earth.” The covenant expresses the connection between all of mankind and the entire world: “I shall establish My covenant with you (1) and all flesh will no longer be cut off by the waters of the Flood (2), nor will there be another Flood to destroy the earth” (9:11). The Flood will not come again to destroy mankind, nor to destroy the earth – suggesting that the entire world is meant for all of mankind. The covenant of circumcision, which is limited to *Am Yisrael*, is likewise connected to a more limited geographical area: “I shall give you and your progeny after you the land of your sojourning – the entire land of Kena’an – as an eternal possession” (17:8).

Third, there is no human partnership in the sign of the rainbow; it is performed entirely by God: “I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth” (9:13). The covenant with the children of Avraham, in contrast, creates a special bond that requires action on man’s part. Therefore, the descendants of Avraham and Yitzchak are commanded to actively set the sign of the covenant in their own flesh: “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you” (17:11).

Of course, these three differences are interrelated. God forges a fundamental covenant with all of mankind throughout the entire world, and this covenant “obligates” God, primarily, not to destroy the world again. This covenant, more than anything else, symbolizes the universal bond between God and the world. The covenant of circumcision, on the other hand, is a unique covenant with the descendants of Avraham, awarding them the right to the land. This covenant is on a higher level, and is also more demanding: it requires man to engrave a sign on his own body, and whoever violates this requirement is punished with “*karet*.” But the reward that comes with this covenant is also much greater: “I shall give you and your progeny after you the land of your sojourning – all of the land of Kena’an – as an eternal possession, and I shall be their God.” (17:8)

We may therefore say in summary that the appearance of the rainbow is a universal message, and for this reason the rainbow can be seen anywhere in the world. The rainbow is a sign for all descendants of Noach – that is, all of mankind. In contrast, we find that circumcision is a sign that expresses a special bond with God that was attained by the group of Avraham’s descendants – a special group among the descendants of Noach. This special bond involves far greater commitment, but at the same time it promises greater closeness to God.

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