

Somewhere Over a Rainbow

For whom is the rainbow meant? The commentaries differ in their responses to this question. Ramban, for example, explicitly states that it serves to remind God of the covenant, that Hashem will never again destroy the Earth. On the other hand, Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th Century Germany) suggests that because the Torah terms the rainbow an *ot*, a tangible reminder of the covenant, it is similar to other such items such as Shabbat, brit milah and tefilin. All of these are termed *ot* by the Torah and remind us of God's teachings. So, too, this rainbow is also meant for us. However, even the most cursory reading of the actual text of the Rainbow Brit in *psukim* 8 – 17 clearly yields the notion that the covenant and the rainbow it symbolizes is between and for both God and humankind. One can discern this idea of mutuality at least a half dozen times in the *psukim*.

What does the rainbow symbolizes for us? This is discussed by many homileticians, both medieval and modern. I like the idea (first suggested to me by Rabbi Aaron Rine z"l of Chicago) that ancient civilizations would symbolize peace making by breaking their weapons, similar to the way the US and Russia today destroy their missiles as part of a peace agreement. Thus, the rainbow is a broken bow, or the bow without the string. Further, the bow is pointed heavenward, reminding us that any Divine arrows of destruction cannot be pointed at us. Finally, the rainbow can occur only when there are both light and water. Being part rain and part sun, the rainbow thus reminds us that there will never again be a flood where total rain obscures the light.

Another significant explanation is the one offered by Rashi who writes,

“Between God and all living things,” (v. 16) Between the Heavenly attribute of din – judgment – and between you. For the text should have written, “Between Me and between all living things...” But it means that when the attribute of *din* comes to accuse you, I will see the above-mentioned sign (of the rainbow).

***Din* refers to God’s organizational and judgmental aspects in Creation. Nature has its rules created by God, and these are not often to our liking. The world inexorably goes on, and it is often filled with death, destruction, and pain. I believe Rashi is suggesting that the rainbow reminds God and us that there is *din* in the world, – and the flood was its most extreme example. But the rainbow also reminds both sides of the Divine-human covenant that there is a compassionate side to God – that of *rahamim*, of mercy. Though there will never again be a flood of the magnitude of Noah’s, the forces which caused the flood – both Divine and natural – still exist. The rainbow reminds both God and us that in spite of the pain and sorrow in the world, Divine love and care still can give us strength and heal our wounds.**

Shabbat Shalom!

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