



The Rainbow Covenant: Establishing a Relationship with the Earth A Source Sheet and Discussion Guide

Part I: The Rainbow Covenant

בראשית ט:ח-יז

ח. ויאמר אֱלֹהִים אֶל נֹחַ וְאֶל בְּנָיו אִתּוֹ לֵאמֹר:

ט. וְאֲנִי הִנְנִי מִקִּים אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם וְאֶת זֶרְעֲכֶם אַחֲרֵיכֶם:

י. וְאֵת כָּל נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אִתְּכֶם בְּעוֹף בְּבַהֲמָה וּבְכָל חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ אִתְּכֶם מִכָּל יִצְאֵי הַתְּבֵה לְכָל חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ:

יא. וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם וְלֹא יִכָּרֵת כָּל בָּשָׂר עוֹד מִמִּי הַמְּבֹול וְלֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד מְבֹול לְשַׁחַת הָאָרֶץ:

יב. ויאמר אֱלֹהִים זֹאת אֹת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין כָּל נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אִתְּכֶם לְדֹרֹת עוֹלָם

יג. אֶת קִשְׁתִּי נֹתַתִּי בְּעָנָן וְהָיְתָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵין הָאָרֶץ:

יד. וְהָיָה בְּעָנְנֵי עָנָן עַל הָאָרֶץ וְנִרְאָתָה הַקִּשְׁתַּת בְּעָנָן:

טו. וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין כָּל נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה בְּכָל בָּשָׂר וְלֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד הַמַּיִם לְמְבֹול לְשַׁחַת כָּל בָּשָׂר:

טז. וְהָיְתָה הַקִּשְׁתַּת בְּעָנָן וְרֵאִיתֶיהָ לְזָכֹר בְּרִית עוֹלָם בֵּין אֱלֹהִים וּבֵין כָּל נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה בְּכָל בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאָרֶץ:

יז. ויאמר אֱלֹהִים אֶל נֹחַ זֹאת אֹת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר הִקְמַתִּי בֵּינִי וּבֵין כָּל בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאָרֶץ:

Genesis, chapter 9, verses 8-17, Judaica Press translation

8. And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, saying:

9. "And I, behold I am setting up My covenant with you and with your seed after you.

10. And with every living creature that is with you, among the fowl, among the cattle, and among all the beasts of the earth with you, of all those who came out of the ark, of all the living creatures of the earth.

11. And I will establish My covenant with you, and never again will all flesh be cut off by the flood waters, and there will never again be a flood to destroy the earth."

12. And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant, which I am placing between Me and between you, and between every living soul that is with you, for everlasting generations.

13. My rainbow I have placed in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Myself and the earth.

14. And it shall come to pass, when I cause clouds to come upon the earth, that the rainbow will appear in the cloud.

15. And I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and between you and between every living creature among all flesh, and the water will no longer become a flood to destroy all flesh.

16. And the rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will see it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and between every living creature among all flesh, which is on the earth."

17. And God said to Noah: "This is the sign of the covenant that I have set up, between Myself and between all flesh that is on the earth."

Discussion Questions:

1. What strikes you about the covenant that G-d makes in this text?
2. Who are the parties to this covenant?
3. What does G-d promise?
4. How does it differ from the covenants we are more familiar with – the covenant with Abraham and the covenant at Sinai?

Part II: Not To Destroy the Earth

רמב"ן בראשית פרק ט פסוק יב

(יב) זאת אות הברית אשר אני נותן ואמרו בטעם האות הזה, כי הקשת לא עשאו שיהיו רגליו למעלה שיראה כאלו מן השמים מורים בו, וישלח חציו ופיצם בארץ (תהלים יח טו), אבל עשאו בהפך מזה להראות שלא יורו בו מן השמים, וכך דרך הנלחמים להפוך אותו בידם ככה כאשר יקראו לשלום למי שכנגדם. ועוד שאין לקשת יתר לכונן חצים עליו:

Ramban (Nachmanides), Commentary on the Torah

translated by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, Shilo Publishing House, New York, NY, 1971, p. 136 to Genesis 9:12 (see p. 1 for Gen. 9:12)

"...Now commentators have said concerning the meaning of this sign that He has not made the rainbow with its feet bent upward because it might have appeared that arrows were being shot from heaven, as in the verse, 'And He sent out his arrows and scattered them' on the earth (Psalms 18:15). Instead, He made it the opposite of this—[with the feet bent downward]—in order to show that they are not shooting at the earth from the heavens. It is indeed the way of warriors to invert the instruments of war which they hold in their hands when calling for peace from their opponents. Moreover, [with the feet of the bow being turned downward towards the earth, it can be seen] that the bow has no rope upon which to bend the arrows." [Brackets inserted by the translator.]

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat, Commentary on Parshat Noach, 5769

Available online at <http://www.ohrtorahstone.org.il/parsha/5769/noah69.htm>

"The 12th century Biblical commentary Ramban (Nahmanides) has a striking explanation for the symbol of the rainbow: ancient cultures fought their wars with the bow and arrow, and the side which surrendered, pursuing peace instead of war, would express their will to do so by raising an inverted bow that the enemy could see. Similarly, G-d places an inverted bow in the heavens as a sign that He is no longer warring against humanity...

Whatever the symbolism, it's clear that the rainbow is a half-picture, lacking a second half to complete the circle of wholeness. G-d can pledge not to destroy humanity, but since He created humanity with freedom of choice, He cannot guarantee that humanity will not destroy itself..."

קהלת רבה (וילנא) פרשה ז

א [י"ג] ראה את מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו, בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר לו ראה מעשי כמה נאים ומשובחין הן וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי, תן דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי, שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריך....

Midrash Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Raba (Vilna edition), 7:1:

"See God's work, for who can straighten out what he made crooked? (Ecclesiastes 7:13) When Hashem created Adam, He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, "See my

works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I created, I created for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy my world—for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it...”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth
Address to The Lambeth Conference, July 28th, 2008, *available online at*
<http://www.chief Rabbi.org/UploadedFiles/Articals/lambethconference28july08.pdf>

“The covenants of Abraham and Sinai are covenants of faith. But the covenant of Noah says nothing about faith. The world had been almost destroyed by a flood. All mankind, all life, with the exception of Noah's Ark, had shared the same fate. Humanity after the Flood was like the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The covenant of Noah is not a covenant of faith but a covenant of fate.

God says: Never again will I destroy the world. But I cannot promise that *you* will never destroy the world -- because I have given you free will. All I can do is teach you how not to destroy the world. How?

The covenant of Noah has three dimensions. First: 'He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God, He created man.' (Gen 9:6) The first element is *the sanctity of human life*.

The second: Read Genesis 9 carefully and you will see that *five times* God insists that the covenant of Noah is not merely with humanity, but with all life on earth. So the second element is *the integrity of the created world*.

The third lies in the symbol of the covenant, the rainbow, in which the white light of God is refracted into all the colours of the spectrum. The rainbow symbolises what I have called the dignity of difference. The miracle at the heart of monotheism is that unity up there creates diversity down here. These three dimensions define the covenant of fate. “

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשה לג

ויצא יצוא ושוב ר' יודן בשם ר' יודה בר' סימון התחיל משיבו תשובות, אמר לו מכל עוף שיש כן לא תשלח אלא לי, אמר לו מה צורך לעולם לך, לאכילה לקרבן, ר' ברכיה בשם ר' אבא אמר לו הקב"ה קיבלו שעתיד העולם ליצרך לו, אמר לו אימתי, אמר לו עד יבשת המים מעל הארץ עתיד צדיק אחד לעמוד וליבש העולם ואני מצריכו להן הה"ד והעורבים מביאים לו לחם ובשר וגו' מלכים א', יז (ו)

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 38:4, Judaica Classics Library translation (see also Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b)

“ 'AND IT WENT FORTH TO AND FRO' R. Judan said in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: It began arguing with him [with Noah]: 'Of all the birds that you have here you send none but me!' 'What need then has the world of you?' he [Noah] retorted; 'for food? for a sacrifice?'⁶ R. Berekiah said in R. Abba's name: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him [Noah]: 'Take it back, because the world will need it in the future.' 'When?' he asked. 'When the waters dry off from on the earth' (ib.). He replied: 'A righteous man will arise and dry up the world,⁷ and I will cause him to have need of them [the ravens],' as it is written, And the ravens ('orbim) brought him bread and flesh, etc. (I Kings XVII, 6).

Discussion Questions:

1. If G-d makes a covenant with all the earth, does that imply an obligation upon humanity to protect the earth as well? What part do humans play in the covenant being established?
2. The destruction of the earth in the time of Noach was related to inappropriate actions on the part of humanity. How are those actions similar to or different from our actions today?
3. What can we learn from the story of Noach about protecting the earth?

Part III: The Lesson of the Rainbow

The Pentateuch, vol. 1: Genesis, translated and explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch. Rendered into English by Isaac Levy from the original German, Judaica Press, Gateshead, England, 1989. To Genesis 9:15, p. 182

"For is the rainbow anything else but the one pure complete ray of light, broken up into seven degrees of seven colours, from the red rays nearest to the light to the violet, most distant from the light, losing itself into the darkness; and from the one to the other are they not all rays of light, and combined all together, do they not form the one complete pure white ray? Could not this perhaps be meant to say: the whole manifold variety of all living creatures from the 'most alive Adam, the 'Adam, 'red one,' 'Man,' nearest to the godly, down to the lowest, humblest form of life in the humblest worm, 'every living soul that is in all flesh' (v. 16)...God unites them all together in one common bond of peace, all fragments of one life, all refracted rays of the one spirit of God, even the lowest, darkest, most distant one, still a son of the light?"

יחזקאל א:כח

כְּמַרְאֵה הַקֶּשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר יְהִי בְעָנַן בַּיּוֹם הַגֶּשֶׁם, כֵּן מַרְאֵה הַנְּגִיעָה סְבִיב--הוּא, מַרְאֵה דְמוּת כְּבוֹד-יְהוָה; וְאֶרְאֶה וְאֶפְלַע עַל-פָּנָי, וְאֶשְׁמַע קוֹל מִדְבָּר.

Ezekiel 1:28, Judaica Press translation

"Like the appearance of the rainbow that is in the cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brightness round about; that was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord, and when I saw, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice speaking."

ספורנו, פירוש לבראשית ט:יז

ז. 'וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל נֹחַ זֶאת אוֹת הַבְּרִית'--זאת הקשת השניה היא אות הברית, ועליך ועל כל כיוצא בך מוטל להתעורר בהראותה, ולהעיר בני הדור לשוב להשכיל להיטיב.

Sforno, commentary to Genesis 9:17, translation by Jonathan Neril

"And G-d said to Noach: this is the sign of the covenant'--this is the second rainbow [of a double rainbow], which is the sign of the covenant, and it is incumbent upon you and all who go out [of the ark] with you to [spiritually] wake up in seeing it, and to awaken the people of the generation to repent, to be wise, and to do good."

Discussion Questions:

1. Given what we know about the importance of rain in Israel, what kind of practical message does the rainbow send?
2. What is the significance of the rainbow from a spiritual perspective?
3. What lessons can we learn from the rainbow which will help us grow in the coming year?