

## The Secret of the Rainbow

*Tzvi H Haber*

The Rainbow is an enigmatic image. After the mabul it was presented to Noach, and to us, as a sign that Hashem will never again destroy the whole world. This would seem to be positive. In fact the Zohar tells us that a bright rainbow will herald the birth pangs of Moshiach, a sign of good things to come.

The Gemara in Chagiga 14b relates that when Reb Yehoshua and Rebbe Yose HaKohen heard about how wondrous it had been when Reb Elazar ben Arach was doresh the Maaseh Merkavah (see whole story there) they had been traveling and they stopped to speak about the Maaseh Merkava as well. Although it was in the summer, the sky filled with clouds and a rainbow appeared, all the angels gathered to listen to them just as people gather around to watch 'shtik' being performed in front of a chassan and kallah.

The Zohar tells us that the colors of the rainbow correspond to Chesed, Din, and the balance between them.

They also correspond to the Avos, and they correspond to the three sounds of the shofar, the tekiah shevarim and teruah. Avraham is Tekiah, Shevarim is Yitzchak and Yaakov corresponds to teruah (Raya Mehemna Pinchas 37)

So it seems to that the rainbow is an overall positive thing.

However the Midrash (BR 35:2) brings a story. Rav Yehoshua Ben Levi was studying Torah with Eliyahu Hanavi and had a question on a quote of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai. Rav Shimon Bar Yochai had passed away already so they decided to go to Gan Eden and ask him. Eliyahu went first and RSBY asked him 'who's with you?'

'The great one of the generation, Reb Yehoshua ben Levi'

He said to Reb Yehoshua ben Levi 'has a rainbow been seen in your days?'

He answered 'yes'

'If a rainbow has been seen in your days then you're not entitled to talk to me'.

The Gemara in Kesubos (77b) adds that in truth a rainbow had not appeared in his day but he didn't want to appear overly righteous.

Although this conversation requires more explanation, but it seems as if a rainbow is not a good sign. Indeed, the Mishna Berura quotes leHalacha that even though there is a blessing to be made on a rainbow, one should not inform others about a rainbow since it is a bad sign. The rainbow signifies that if not for the covenant the world would be eligible for destruction. If there is a tzaddik gamur in the world then he alone is reason not to destroy the world. (Rashi Kesubos Ibid)

So how do we understand the apparently contradictory nature of a rainbow?

The rainbow is a manifestation of Hashem's middos in this world. The Zohar (Ibid) says that depending on where the rainbow occurs, in the sun or in the clouds, it can be a sign of mercy or judgment.

The Gemara tells us that one who looks at 3 things loses his vision- the hands of the kohanim, the nasi and a rainbow. The passuk compares it to looking at the image of Hashem (Yechezkel 1:28), and is thus considered disrespectful. (Ibid 16a)

ויראו את אלקי ישראל - what did they see? A bright rainbow, which represents the Shechina, that is symbolized by yarok, red and white. This is why one may not gaze at a rainbow, for it is like gazing at the Shechina (Zohar Beshalach 476)

So we see that the rainbow is a manifestation of Hashem's presence in this world, a seemingly positive thing, however the manifestation can portend a negative thing as well, that the world should really be destroyed but Hashem is keeping it going because of the promise the Rainbow shows.

Everybody loves their parent and is glad to see them, but if the parent walks into the room while the children are misbehaving – it's the last thing they want to see.

When Moshiach comes he will be heralded by a bright rainbow; Hashem's presence. The Zohar tells us that the Torah says the rainbow is to remember the eternal covenant, now the covenant is not to bring a flood which engenders a dim rainbow, then it will be the promise to redeem the Jews, and that will produce a strong bright rainbow. Both promises have the same underlying assurance – God will not destroy the world. (Zohar Noach 189)

In fact Reb Yehoshua Ben Levi was of the opinion one should bow in the presence of a rainbow; it's the manifestation of Hashem's presence. The Sages of Eretz Yisrael didn't like it because it would look like bowing to the rainbow, but the concept stands (Brachos 59).

With this we can understand why the rainbow was the covenant. It was a manifestation of the Shechina, showing us Hashem's presence after the flood.

Why the rainbow? Why was the rainbow chosen as the covenant?

Rainbow symbolizes peace, a backward arrow, when one wants to signify peace and surrender to an opponent he turns his weapons inward. (Ramban)

*Another pshat from the Ramban based on the Medrash – the rainbow is the manifestation of Hashem's din (from the word kasha) in the upper worlds, however when the din is in this world it is weakened and not as harsh. Symbolized by the rainbow in the cloud which separates the two (IIUC)*

*Chizkuni - the image of blue and red, fire and water together symbolizes peace. Or the manifestation of Hashem as in Yechezkel 1:28*

*Rabeinu Bachya al pi kabala explains that it refers to milah which is called keshes*

*Akeidah – a rainbow happens when part of the world is sunny and part rainy and cloudy, symbolizing that not all will be punished at once. Similarly, Rav Hirsch explains that just as the rainbow covers a wide spectrum of colors, so too Hashem said that I will differentiate between different types of people.*

What changed at the mabul? Were there no rainbows before then?

- 1) The sun got stronger and therefore rainbows are visible (Ibn ezra)
- 2) The pre-existing rainbow will now be a sign (Ramban)
- 3) Maharal explains that everything has a natural reason, but there is a reason why Hashem created the natural order such, and that is the sign (Baer 6)

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, as well as Rav Moshe Shapiro in the name of the Gra, explains:

When Hashem created the world he did so an act of benevolence, to do good for people. Thus the system was set up in a way that Hashem would initiate and give, and the people would follow his commandments. However, the danger with such a system is that there is no room for human initiation. And if people do evil it creates an atmosphere of evil in the world which Hashem does not want to propagate by pouring more bracha into.

Thus Hashem said ‘nichamti’ I regret the way I set up the world. Not that Hashem regretted creating the world, but rather the rules of operation. He therefore brought the flood, which served to purify and cleanse the world.

Now, after the flood, He made new rules. People would have to initiate in their relationship with G-d and effect the bracha coming down onto themselves. It would be a human sponsored system, where people determine what shefa would come down to them. Much like the rain cycle (as my father is wont to say) good pure water creates good enriching rain, contaminated water makes acid rain.

This is symbolized by the rainbow. Rainbows are generally caused by the mist going back up to the heavens, symbolizing the new dynamic – it starts from us.

This is why people lived so long before the flood and life spans shortened after the flood, because we weren’t working off Hashem’s strong and constant bounty, rather off of our own efforts. The tradeoff is that there won’t be destruction, there is a built in mechanism for teshuva and improvement, however if we don’t take advantage we lose the beracha.

There is of course still much Chesed in the world, evidenced by the fact that Hashem will allow the world to keep on running even when the world is doing evil. But the beracha is determined by our efforts.

This is why the bow faces upward – the cycle starts here and is directed upward.

May we all merit to initiate the cycle strongly, and receive the limitless bounty of Hashem.