**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

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**PARASHAT NOACH**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

The Sign of the Rainbow

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“And God said, This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all generations: I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud, and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. And God said to Noach, This is the sign of the covenant, which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth.” (*Bereishit* 9:12-17)

A rainbow, in technical terms, without reference to the covenant that it represents, is the refraction of the sun’s rays through water. The refraction of the white light creates waves of different length and frequency, producing the colors of the rainbow. The rainbow is presented in the Torah as a sign of the covenant that God made with the world after the Flood. Does this mean that the basic physical laws governing the behavior of light were changed in the wake of the Flood? Opinions are divided with regard to this question.

Some commentators (Rabbenu Nissim in his commentary on the Torah, Abravanel, Malbim) maintain that the rainbow was indeed observed for the first time after the Flood. They explain that the rainclouds after the Flood were lighter than they had been previously, and no longer imposed heavy darkness. Thus, the sunlight could now be refracted through the raindrops.

Radak and Ramban, on the other hand, argue that the rainbow had existed as a natural phenomenon since the Creation, as part of the natural order. The only difference after the Flood was that the rainbow now became a sign of God’s covenant with Noach and his sons, as a promise that there would be no more Flood. Ramban explains:

“The verse seems to suggest that the rainbow had not existed from the time of Creation, but that at this point God created a new phenomenon of a rainbow in the sky on a cloudy day… But we are forced to accept the Greek teaching that the rainbow is formed from the sun’s rays shining in moist air – for a container of water held up to the sun will produce a similar phenomenon. Closer examination of the text affirms this, for God says, ‘I set My bow (*kashti*) in the cloud,’ and not, ‘I am setting…,’ when speaking of the ‘sign of the covenant which I set….’ Furthermore, the word ‘*kashti’* (My bow) suggests [something already known; i.e.,] that the rainbow was something that already existed. Therefore, the text should be understood as follows: The bow which I set in the cloud from the time of Creation, will henceforth be a sign of the covenant between Me and you, such that whenever I see it I will recall the covenant of peace between Me and you.” (Ramban, *Bereishit* 9:12)

This explanation sits well with our understanding of the laws of nature, which are not easily changed. The problem is that it strips the sign of its vitality and power.

I had no idea how this problem might be resolved until my first visit to the Niagara Falls, on the US-Canada border. The fifty-meter vertical drop of the tremendous volume of water into the river below creates a heavy cloud of water droplets, and in the early afternoon, when the sun shines most powerfully on the falls and on the cloud of water droplets, one observes a rainbow that is quite different from the one that appears after rain. It appears very close – seemingly within reach – and its colors are stronger and more impressive than any other rainbow I have ever seen.

Thus, the rainbow did not necessarily have to be a new creation, as Rabbenu Nissim maintains, nor are we forced to accept that the sign given by God was a continuation of the same rainbow that had always existed, as Ramban proposes. The sign could be based on a natural phenomenon that was part of Creation, but it could be more powerful than any rainbow that had been observed until that time. The new, more powerful and impressive rainbow served as a sign of the covenant between God and Noach, and of God’s promise that He would not bring another Flood to destroy the world.

We might perhaps explain this new phenomenon, as observed by Noach, in terms of natural forces and processes with which we are familiar. When Noach emerged from the Ark, the earth was not yet completely dry. The land dried gradually, and we may assume that there was still a vast quantity of water, flowing downwards towards lower areas, creating huge and impressive waterfalls from mountains into valleys. Sights similar to the Niagara Falls would have been common for some time in many different places, and the rainbows over them were brighter, more vibrant and more impressive than the regular rainbows that Noach had seen prior to the Flood, and the rainbows with which we are familiar. These bright rainbows were the sign of the covenant, indicating the victory of the sun’s rays over the heavy rainclouds that had covered the earth during the time of the Flood, signaling God’s promise that He would not bring another Flood to destroy the earth.

Still, we must also address the significance of the sign, beyond the physical phenomenon of refraction of light. In Yechezkel’s description of the heavenly Chariot, we read:

“As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of One who spoke.” (*Yechezkel* 1:28)

The radiance surrounding the likeness of the glory of God resembles the rainbow. The rainbow is something like God’s “fingerprint,” as it were, or signature, confirming His promise.

Chazal teach in many places about the light of the first day of Creation, which was hidden for the time to come. Yishayahu alludes to this special light:

“And the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, on the day that the Lord binds up the breach of His people, and heals the stroke of their wound.” (*Yishayahu* 30:26)

At the beginning of Creation, when God was One and His Name One, on day one, the ‘light of seven days’ shone on the water, which was all that existed. Only a ‘wind from God’ – a great, strong wind – blew over them, creating enormous waves that crashed down into the water. The combination of the light and water that existed then formed the glorious rainbow that surrounded the likeness of God. We cannot imagine the radiance of that rainbow, but a likeness of it remains for all generations – in the heavenly Chariot, and in the sign of the covenant.