

Parshat HaShavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

## PARASHAT NOACH

Two Covenants to Preserve the World

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### A. THE NATURE OF GOD'S COVENANTS

Several covenants are forged between God and people in Sefer Bereishit as well as later on in the Torah. In every instance, with the exception of the covenant in our parasha, the covenant is made with a forefather of the Jewish nation, or with the nation as a whole. But the covenant that God makes with Noach and his sons as they emerge from the ark (9:8-17) is a covenant with all of humanity; not only humanity, but also with "every living thing that is with you, with the birds and the animals and every creature of the earth with you, from everything that comes out of the ark to all the creatures of the earth" (9:10). If we add to this covenant what appears in previous verses (8:21-22), "And God said to Himself: I shall not curse the ground again because of man... for as long as the world stands, sowing and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will not cease," we find that the covenant includes even the ground and the cycle of seasons upon it.

The first appearance of the term "covenant" (berit) in the Torah is not at the end of the story of the Flood – the covenant of the rainbow – but rather at the beginning of that story, when God first speaks to Noach (6:13-19):

"And God said to Noach: The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is full of corruption because of them, and behold, I shall destroy the world. Make yourself an ark ... And behold, I shall bring a flood of water upon the earth to destroy all living flesh from under the heavens; everything that is in the earth will die. AND 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. And of all living things, of all flesh, you shall bring two of each into the ark"...

What is this covenant that God promises to establish with Noach in 6:18?

### B. THE PRIMORDIAL COVENANT

The act of Creation included within itself a covenant between God and His world. God did not create the world to be chaos, and He will not go back on His intention and His actions – not even when "all flesh has corrupted its way." According to the Midrash Ha-gadol (Bereishit 6:18) and Abarbanel (6:18), this covenant is included in the very act of Creation, since this act contained an unconditional Divine commitment not to annihilate it. According to the Netziv (Ha-Amek Davar, 6:18) and U. Cassuto (Mi-Noach ad Avraham, pp. 46-47), this commitment is included in the blessing that God bestows upon Adam and Chava immediately after their creation. Either way, there is a covenant concerning the existence of the human race within its necessary framework – the world.

What are the ramifications of this primordial covenant (whatever its source) for our understanding of the story of the Flood? We are accustomed to think that the absolute annihilation of humanity and of all of Creation was avoided solely by virtue of Noach's righteousness. This turns the salvation described in our parasha into something coincidental, for if the generation had not contained a man as righteous as Noach, then nothing would have remained of Creation. But according to the commentators quoted above, who claim that a primordial covenant was made concerning the preservation of Creation, this is not correct. Because of that original covenant, it was imperative that the Flood would not destroy everything, and that a descendant of the human race would remain, capable of reviving humanity.

Why, then, does the Torah highlight Noach's righteousness at the beginning of the story of the Flood (and present this as the reason that he would be saved from the Flood)? It was Noach's righteousness that gave him the merit of being selected for the task of fulfilling the covenant with all of humanity. The choice of survivor from whom the whole of humanity would be built up anew was not arbitrary, but rather in accordance with a moral criterion. This was at the same time both a fitting reward for his righteousness and an expression of hope that the new humanity that would emerge in the future from this righteous person would follow a better path than its predecessor.

Nevertheless, the selection of Noach contains an element of necessity that is independent of the actions of the subject in question. This absolute and necessary basis arises from the original covenant between God and His world.

### C. GOD'S FIRST MESSAGE TO NOACH VS. HIS SECOND MESSAGE

Upon close examination, we find that these two reasons for Noach's salvation – the necessity of preserving a remnant of Creation based on God's first covenant with it, and the reward appropriate for the righteous man of the generation – are what differentiate between God's two speeches to Noach prior to the Flood, speeches that follow closely upon each other – 6:13-22, and 7:1-5.

Despite the proximity of these two speeches in the text, a considerable period of time divides them. Their practical purpose also differs, requiring in turn certain technical differences between them. Nevertheless, there is much similarity to be found in the general framework of the two speeches: their respective introduction and conclusion are very similar ("And God said to Noach" / "And God said to Noach"; "And Noach did all that God had commanded him" / "And Noach did all that God had commanded him"). Likewise, both contain a double command concerning entering the ark – one command concerning Noach and his household, the other concerning the representatives of all types of animals. This similarity in the general framework finds expression in linguistic similarities in the relevant passages.

But it is specifically here, in the corresponding and similar passages, that we find some differences between God's two speeches to Noach:

#### (1) The Reason for Saving Noach

The most important difference concerns the REASON WHY NOACH IS TO ENTER THE ARK in each of the respective passages. In the first speech, he is told (verse 18) that he is the

subject of the primordial covenant: "And I shall establish My covenant – with you." Noach is commanded to build an ark into which he will enter when the Flood comes, but he is told nothing of the reason for his selection. He is given a task – to act for the salvation of humanity and the animal kingdom – and this task is given one reason only: the fulfillment of the covenant. Hence it is of no importance why it is specifically he who is chosen for the task rather than anyone else.

It is only in the second speech, when Noach is commanded to enter the ark seven days before the onset of the rain, that God tells him (7:1), "Come – you, and all of your household – into the ark, FOR I HAVE OBSERVED YOU TO BE RIGHTEOUS BEFORE ME IN THIS GENERATION." It is only now, when the text addresses the MERIT of being saved (rather than the task of arranging for salvation, as in the first speech), that God approaches the question that hangs in the air: Why has the Divine choice singled out Noach, rather than someone else? And here the answer is given, with emphasis: "Come, YOU" – specifically you, rather than someone else, "for I have observed YOU to be righteous before Me in this generation" – and therefore you are worthy of being saved from punishment (and of fulfilling the covenant with Creation.)

The fact that the first speech makes no mention of the reason for his specific selection, while only the second speech provides such a reason, indicates that priority is awarded to the consideration of fulfilling the covenant over the moral consideration of saving the righteous person from punishment.

## (2) The Name of God

The first speech refers to God by the name E-lokim, and the second refers to Him by the Tetragrammaton. Chazal explain that the former signifies God's attribute of strict justice (din), and the latter signifies God's attribute of mercy (rachamim). In the first speech, God reveals to Noach within His attribute of justice, as burdening him with the obligation of fulfilling the ancient covenant. Therefore, this speech demonstrates no special closeness or Divine grace towards Noach. But the second speech, which addresses Noach as a "righteous man before God," reflects Divine grace and the attribute of mercy; it is through the attribute of mercy that Noach merits to be saved from the punishment of the Flood.

## (3) The Number of Animals

In the first speech, Noach is commanded to bring two of every kind of animal into the ark, male and female, with no distinction between different types of animals. In the second speech, he is given an additional command that did not appear previously: he is to take "seven of each, male and female" of the pure animals (7:2), while "of the animals that are not pure, two - male and female".

Rashi (following Bereishit Rabba 34:9) explains that seven pairs of each pure animal were needed "so order that he would sacrifice an offering from among them when he emerged." This explanation is based on the narrative when Noach leaves the ark (8:20): "And Noach built an altar to God, and he took OF ALL THE PURE ANIMALS AND OF ALL THE PURE BIRDS, and offered offerings upon the altar." If so, why is Noach given this command only in God's second speech to him?

When God appears to Noah within the attribute of justice, placing the obligation upon him to fulfill the covenant, no distinction between pure and impure animals is appropriate, nor any thought of future offerings. The only issue at stake here is the preservation of Creation, in order that the covenant be fulfilled. Therefore (6:19), "Two of each shall you bring into the ark, to preserve them with you, they shall be male and female" – in order that the animal kingdom will be able to be rebuilt. In the second speech, in contrast, God – with His attribute of mercy – anticipates Noah's future desire to offer a sacrifice upon leaving the ark, and therefore prepares for this eventuality.

#### D. COVENANT OF THE RAINBOW VS. THE PRIMORDIAL COVENANT

What, then, is the great innovation of the covenant of the rainbow, forged with Noah and his sons after they leave the ark? After all, there had been an earlier covenant forged with Adam and the world at the time of Creation, and the contents of the two covenants are similar – that Creation will not be destroyed.

The covenant of the rainbow does indeed represent a return to the fundamental covenant with Creation, but it contains several expansions and additions, of which we shall address three.

##### (1) Explicit Mutual Commitment

In the covenant of the rainbow, God places His relationship with humanity upon an explicit basis of mutual commitment – something that was not clear in the earlier covenant. God does not obligate Himself to Noah and his sons until He has clearly indicated their part of the deal. Therefore, God's detailing of the human obligation to maintain the world (9:1-7) should be seen as an intrinsic part of the covenant of the rainbow.

Just as God commits Himself in this covenant not to destroy all living things, so man himself must commit himself to treat them with respect and responsibility. He is forbidden to scorn the lives of animals by eating limbs from their flesh while they live (9:4), and he is likewise prohibited from ending human life – his own or that of someone else – through an act of murder; a murderer must be brought to justice (ibid. 5-6). These commitments are both preceded and followed by God's blessing and command to man: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth... and you shall be fruitful and multiply and swarm over the earth, multiplying within it".

##### "(2) There Shall Not Be Another Flood"

The Divine commitment in the covenant of the rainbow is broader than that of the first covenant. Not only will the world not be utterly destroyed, but no Flood like the one that occurred (which did not violate the original covenant, for Noah and his sons, as well as representatives of all species of animals, were saved) will ever visit the world:

"And I shall establish My covenant with you, and all flesh will not be cut off again by the waters of a Flood, AND THERE SHALL NOT BE ANOTHER FLOOD TO DESTROY THE WORLD." (9:11)

What makes this expansion necessary? Why is the original covenant, by virtue of which Noah and his sons were saved, insufficient? Immediately after Noah exits the ark, we are told:

"And Noach built an altar to God, and he took from all the pure animals and from all the pure birds, and offered offerings upon the altar." (8:20)

What is the significance of this act? We may interpret Noach's motive in two ways. On the one hand, this may have been an offering of thanks, offered by Noach with great joy over his salvation at the end of the Flood (Radak and Chizkuni). On the other hand, it may be an expression of great distress, expressing a plea that God reveal Himself in response to this distress. The reasons for this state of mind are not difficult to imagine: Noach has just emerged from the ark into a world of ruins, following a trying year during which his former world was erased. The land is indeed dry and it is possible to tread upon it, but Noach is unsure of his steps – he is uncertain as to the possibility of rebuilding life from the start. The ruins of an entire world lie around him; what is the point of the effort to build a new world, to bear children and raise them, to construct a new material culture, when all of these may once again be destroyed? In his great distress, out of existential uncertainty, Noach turns to God through the offerings in order that God will reveal Himself, encourage him and promise him that the world will continue to exist in the future.

How are we to choose between these two explanations for Noach's motives? As a general rule in Tanakh, when the reasons for an act by a certain character are not explicitly stated and are not obvious in themselves, we may learn more about them from the continuation of the story – i.e., from the result of that act. The assumption is that the act was directed towards achieving that result.

What, then, is the result of Noach's act of offering sacrifices?

"And God smelled the sweet fragrance, and God said to Himself:

I shall not curse the land again because of man...

Nor shall I smite all living things again as I have done." (8:21)

It was for this purpose, then, that Noach offered his sacrifices – in order to arouse God's mercy upon him in his great distress, and so that God would reveal to him His decision:

"And God said to Noach and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you... and all flesh will not be cut off again by the waters of a Flood, nor shall there be another Flood to destroy the world." (9:8-11)

As Rashi comments:

"Noach was hesitant to engage in procreation, until the Holy One promised him that He would not destroy the world again".

" .3I Have Placed My Rainbow in the Cloud"

In the covenant with Noach and his sons, God does not stop at the commitment that there will not be another Flood, but also adds a "sign of the covenant." The description of the rainbow as a sign of the covenant occupies six out of the ten verses comprising the section on the covenant (9:8-17), and two Divine utterances are devoted to it (one in verses 12-16, and

another in verse 17). These facts point to the great importance of this sign, but why in fact is it so important?

Its significance flows from its symbolism, which we shall discuss below, but in addition it also arises from the psychological need of Noah and his children, survivors of the Flood, for some strengthening of their faith in the possibility of rebuilding the world. The verbal commitment is not sufficient to provide the necessary encouragement. They need a visible sign that will appear from time to time and serve as a guarantee for the preservation of the world that they are gradually reconstructing (see Rashi 9:9.)

What is it about the rainbow that makes it a sign of the covenant that there will not be another Flood? Ramban sees it as a symbol of peace between heaven and earth, between God and His world. The Flood was a kind of war, as it were, that God declared against His world. The water that descended upon the earth from the windows of heaven were like arrows of war that were directed against all of existence. And now, suddenly, God declares a "ceasefire." The earth will still admittedly need rain, but this will be rain of peace and blessing, not arrows of death any more. For this reason (9:14), "and it shall be, WHEN I BRING A CLOUD OVER THE EARTH" – when you mortals are terrified, fearing the return of the Flood, "and the rainbow will appear IN THE CLOUD" – it is specifically within the context of rain that the symbol of peace between God and His world will appear, relieving man's fear.

Chizkuni provides an even more profound understanding of the symbolism of the rainbow. A rainbow, when it appears in its entirety, stretched over a large area, is one of the most wondrous, breathtakingly beautiful and powerful sights in nature. At the same time, the rainbow is not tangible. We see that in the prophet Yechezkel's vision of the Chariot, he says (1:28), "Like the sight of a rainbow that appears in the cloud on a rainy day – so was the appearance of the glow around, and it was the vision of the image of God's glory." Based on this verse, Chizkuni comments on the words "My rainbow":

"It is a great sign, for it is My image, as it were, as it is written [Here he quotes the verse from Yechezkel]... And if I wished to destroy them when there is much rain, then I would not show them the image of My glory, for it is not customary for a king to show himself among his servants when they are reproached by him".

According to the Ramban's explanation, the rainbow symbolizes a ceasefire and declaration of peace between God and His world. According to the Chizkuni's explanation, it represents the actual presence of God in the world after having made peace with His servants. He appears among them at the time when He brings down rain.

Thus the rainbow teaches us about the content of the covenant that is now being made between God and the world. This content is concentrated in one impressive sight that arouses wonder in the heart of everyone who sees it.

The commentators discuss a further question pertaining to the rainbow. Some understand the verses to claim that God miraculously created the phenomenon of the rainbow at that moment. However, the Ramban points out that a simple experiment will show that a rainbow is created by light refracted through water, and if so, it is a natural phenomenon that had been present since Creation! The Ramban goes on to prove that the verses, when read carefully, do not contradict the scientific view. He continues:

"Whether the rainbow was created now or whether it had always been a part of nature, the reason for it representing the sign remains the same".

We have claimed there that the covenant between God and Noah was not entirely new, but rather an expanded revision of the primordial covenant, contained in the very act of Creation. At this point it turns out that even the sign of the covenant that God gives Noah – the rainbow appearing in the cloud – is not new, but rather had existed all along. Even prior to the Flood, it seems, the rainbow had symbolic meaning. It expresses the presence of God's glory in His world while rains are falling. Up until the time of the Flood, the rainbow symbolized the connection between God and the world only implicitly, just as the entire primordial covenant contained in the act of Creation was not made explicit. But in our parasha, when the covenant is formulated explicitly and in expanded form, even the rainbow becomes a defined and explicit sign of that same expanded covenant, and it assumes a new symbolic meaning for the world after the Flood: it is a symbol of peace and reconciliation, coming after the destruction of the world and allowing humans to rebuild it.

We have discussed three ways in which the covenant of the rainbow expanded on the original covenant of Creation. These all reflect one fundamental difference between the two covenants. The covenant of Creation was of necessity a one-sided act on the part of the Creator, for there could obviously be no reciprocity before anything had been created. The Ibn Ezra explains that the word "berit" (covenant) is derived from the root "b-r-i" or "b-r-r," meaning "agreement, something chosen by both." The act of Creation, by definition, could only be unilateral. It is perhaps for this reason that the term "covenant" is not used in the story of Creation. But the covenant forged after the Flood arises from a plea on the part of man that the covenant be renewed and expanded, and from God's positive response. This, then, is the first covenant in the Torah forged between God and man, containing mutual connection and bi-lateral commitment out of "agreement" – it is indeed "something chosen by both".

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(