



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Noach

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October 25, 2014

Noach

**The Mystique of the Rainbow**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most beautiful lessons in life can be learned from a phenomenon described in this week’s Torah reading – the rainbow.

Rainbows – with their mesmerizing colors – have mystified humans throughout the ages and been the subject of much lore and speculation. Of course, the Talmud has weighed in on the subject as well.

The rainbow, it teaches, was created at twilight, right before the first Shabbat of genesis. What then is the significance of the rainbow that emerged over 1,600 years later, after the great Flood, as a sign of God’s promise to Noah never to drown the entire world again?

What’s the connection between these two rainbows – the original one and the one that appeared after the Flood?

Five fascinating commentaries explaining the uniqueness of the rainbow, coupled with the Dubner Maggid’s parable of yet another bow – the archer’s – teach us the mystery of the keshet and its personal relevance to our lives today.

What we learn from all that is that the rainbow represents a paradox. It is a unique mix of light and clouds; it is radiance cloaked. Every human being in existence – every element of our lives – is analogous to one of its colors, and it is our job to harmonize all the hues of our lives into one beautiful rainbow.

The antithesis of the harmonious rainbow is a devastating flood. But finding the bright sun even in the murky cloud results in the most beautiful of phenomena – the glorious rainbow.

This applies today more than ever: as floodwaters rage around the world – the outbreak of Ebola, ISIS, Hamas, Iran, and now the latest attack in Jerusalem this week – we have the rainbow to give us direction.

## THE MYSTIQUE OF THE RAINBOW: SUNLIGHT WITHIN CLOUDS

### 1. Target Practice (Anecdote)

The Dubner Maggid was famous for his *meshalim* – parables – which always would, without fail, hit the bull’s eye. With a short absorbing story, he could illuminate a Torah idea, lighting up the eyes and the minds of all who listened.

The Vilna Gaon once asked him how it was that he was able to tell such wonderful parables which always seemed to hit the mark. The Dubner Maggid replied with... a parable:

There once was a prince who desired greatly to become a master archer. One day while he was traveling he came to a small village, where an archery contest was in progress. The prince noticed that one of the contestant’s accuracy was almost uncanny. Every single one of his targets were pierced exactly in the center.

The prince asked this marksman par-excellence how he was able to constantly achieve such striking results. This was the sharpshooter’s reply: “Well, first I aim my bow at a large tree. Then, once the arrow hits the tree, I run up to it and paint the circles of the target around the arrow, placing the arrowhead directly in the bull’s eye.”

Said the Dubner Maggid to the Vilna Gaon:

“I do the same. First of all, I find an interesting story and it becomes an arrow in my quiver. Then once I shoot it from my bow and it implants itself in the mind of my listener, I look for a relevant verse or Torah thought with which to paint around it. Thus I always manage to place the parable directly in the bull’s eye.”

## 2. The Creation of the Rainbow

This is a great parable in general, but in particular today, when we read the portion of Noah. Why?

The Hebrew word for an archer’s bow is *keshet*. *Keshet* is also the Hebrew word for a rainbow. And today’s portion is when the rainbow is first mentioned in the Torah.

Was the rainbow created after the Flood?

As we are about to see, though the Torah first mentions the phenomenon of the rainbow in *Parshat Noach*, it had actually existed from the beginning of time.

## 3. Parshat Noach

This week’s Torah reading relates how God found only one righteous man in an entire corrupt generation – a man named Noah – and told him to build an ark to save himself, his family and a selection of animals from a forty-day Flood which was about to destroy the earth.

Noah did just that. The deluge stormed and raged and returned the world to its pristine state. All that was left was the life and livestock on Noah’s ark.

Once Noah and his ark-mates disembarked from this biblical yacht onto an empty earth, God said to Noah:

*“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.” 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. My rainbow I have placed in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of a covenant between Myself and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I cause clouds to come upon the earth, that the rainbow will appear in the cloud. And I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and between you... and the water will no longer become a flood to destroy all flesh. 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.”<sup>1</sup>*

After the destruction of the world via the Flood, Noah and all of the survivors were petrified that it would happen again. God said that the rainbow would be a sign of His assurance, His remembrance of the promise to never again destroy the world through a flood. Indeed, a special blessing is recited every time one sees a rainbow – *Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who remembers the covenant, and is faithful to His covenant, and keeps His promise.*

But what exactly is the meaning of the rainbow? Why did God choose it as the sign of assurance? And, most importantly, what can the rainbow teach in our personal lives today?

#### 4. The Rainbow

The Talmud<sup>2</sup> states that ten things were created during the twilight of the first Friday – on the eve of the first Shabbat. And one of these things was the *keshet*, the rainbow.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 9:8-16.

<sup>2</sup> Mishna, Avot 5:6; Pesachim 54a.

This begets an obvious question: If the rainbow existed from the beginning of time – from the sixth day of creation at any rate – why was it considered a sign only after the Flood, over 1,600 years later? If the rainbow was always there, then what was unique about the rainbow that appeared after the Flood?

Before we delve into the answers to these questions, let us remind ourselves something we all probably learned in school – how exactly is a rainbow formed.

When the sun shines down upon the world after the rain, the moist droplets in the atmosphere capture a reflection of the sun's rays. When they refract the shining light back outward, we see a multi-colored arch that is the rainbow.

When it is overly cloudy, rainbows cannot be seen, because the moisture requires a certain consistency to refract and project the sunlight in order to produce the rainbow. But, after a rain (or near a waterfall), when the sun comes out to shine while the soft mist is evaporating upward, the perfect medium is created to reflect and project the light of the sun – and the rainbow is born.

This, of course, leads us back to the question we raised above: If the rainbow is a natural phenomenon that results from the sun's rays hitting the droplets of moisture in the atmosphere, and this natural phenomenon was created at twilight of the first Friday eve (a whole 1,600 years prior to the Flood), what exactly constituted the unique sign of the rainbow in our Torah reading?

Five biblical commentators struggle with this question and offer different answers.

## 5. The Five Commentators and their Answers

1. *Avraham Ibn Ezra*: Though the sun shone from the beginning of creation, its light was not bright enough to produce the refraction needed for a rainbow. In other words, the "light bulb" was too weak.

After the Flood, the sun achieved a new level of candle-power and a newfound brightness. This new light was powerful enough to be refracted by the moisture droplets. This is what gave birth to the rainbow.

2. *Nachmanides a.k.a. Ramban*: The rainbow always existed, even before the Flood. Only now God turned it into a symbol and sign of His covenant with Noah and all living creatures.<sup>3</sup> In other words, nothing fundamentally changed with regard to the rainbow – the only thing new was the divine covenant designating the rainbow as a sign that such devastation would never occur again.

3. *RaN*: Before the Flood, the rainbow could only exist in moist or wet atmosphere, but not in a dense medium, such as a cloud. After the Flood, God said, “*My rainbow I have placed in the cloud,*” and then, even in a dense space such as a cloud, the light of the sun could be refracted into the beauty and colors of the rainbow.

4. *Abarbanel*: Prior to the Flood, the droplets in the atmosphere were too coarse and thick to capture, retain and reflect light, thus there were no rainbows. But after the Flood, all of the atmosphere became more refined and subtle, achieving an adequate receptacle for the sunlight.

5. *The Akeidah*: Before the Flood, though rainbows may have existed, the earth itself was covered in a cloudy density, preventing human beings from actually seeing the rainbow. Following the Flood, this density dissipated and so the rainbow emerged.

Without getting into the nuances and intricacies differentiating one opinion from another, there is (at least) one common denominator running through all of the five opinions: The rainbow was created during the twilight of the first Friday eve, but its inner meaning was revealed only after the Flood.

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<sup>3</sup> Ramban brings scriptural proof from Genesis 31:51.

## 6. The Twilight

As mentioned, ten things were created during the twilight of the first Friday, on the eve of Shabbat. And one of these was the rainbow. Why were these ten things specifically created then?

Various biblical commentaries<sup>4</sup> explain that these ten things were created after Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, so as to provide ten additional tools for humankind to bridge the schism that emerged as a result of that first sin.

What was that schism?

Prior to the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, heaven and earth were one, matter and spirit were seamless, body and soul were meshed into one homogenized unit. After consuming the forbidden fruit, the two dimensions of existence – physicality and spirituality, the holy and the mundane – became disconnected. Suddenly, one could touch a human body without feeling the Godly soul therein. Suddenly, one could devour a piece of flesh without realizing that at its core dwelt a divine spark. Suddenly, one could work hard, earn money, be successful, yet all of that would be divorced from its spiritual purpose.

Indeed, one's work, success, career and money could be at odds with one's soul and spiritual wellbeing. What we do no longer was who we are.

This was the schism created by the consumption of the forbidden fruit.

So, now in the Garden of Eden, as Shabbat was quickly approaching, the dilemma arose: How to bridge the schism? What tools could God provide man to bring back harmony and remove the dissonance?

During twilight, right before Shabbat set in (when all the work would cease and all creation would be complete), God created ten unique instruments to help repair this seismic rupture. And one of them (the fourth on the list) was the rainbow.

How does a rainbow repair the rift between matter and spirit born of the first sin, the eating from the Tree of Knowledge?

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<sup>4</sup> See Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Shemini (p. 304-5). Sichat Shabbat Parshat Behar-Bechukotai 5737 (Sichot Kodesh pp. 764ff);



## 7. The Message of the Rainbow

If you notice the language of the Torah, God is pressing emphasis on the word *cloud*. He says that you won't just see a rainbow in the skies, but ... *it shall come to pass, when I cause clouds to come upon the earth, that the rainbow will appear in the cloud ... 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.*

The Torah uses this unique language no less than four times, each time God saying that the rainbow will appear in a cloud.<sup>5</sup> What is the meaning of this?

The rainbow following the Flood was unique. It was composed of two opposite extremes:

- On one end of the spectrum, the sun – complete light and revelation, an analogy for God's infinite light, shining everywhere, revealing everything, illuminating all
- On the other end, the cloud – the epitome of shrouded concealment, complete suppression, darkness and secretiveness

These two symbols are analogous to the spiritual and the material, the divine and the mundane – the split between soul and body.

## 8. The Split

On one hand, life can be full of sun, of the soulful moments of pure light and warmth, of moments of utter joy. But, on the other hand, life can seem full of dark clouds, when the good seems concealed, when nothing shines and everything is depressing.

Before the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the sun and cloud were two parts of one seamless whole – a light and its translucent cloak:

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<sup>5</sup> See Ohr Hatorah, Noah p. 648ff; Derushim LeShavuot p. 107ff.

the sun shining through the cloud and the cloud enveloping and adding its own mystique to the sun. The body and soul worked in harmonious unison. They were one.

But after the eating from the Tree, the sunlight weakened (as the Ibn Ezra explains) and the cloud darkened (as the Abarbanel and the Akeidah write), giving birth to the schism between sun and cloud, light and cloak – creating a fractured and duplicitous world, dividing matter from spirit, earth from heaven.

Once this division manifested itself – between an ego-centric life and a God-centric life – it was just a matter of time before things would devolve and spiral out of control, pitting man against man, ultimately leading to a “corrupt world” filled with crime, immorality and violence, as we read in this week’s portion.<sup>6</sup> That is when *God saw that man’s wickedness on earth was increasing. Every impulse of his innermost thought was only for evil, all day long.*<sup>7</sup>

This inevitably led to man’s destruction. The schism had widened to the point that led to the great Flood.

## 9. Bridging the Schism

How to bridge the schism and make all harmonious once again?

The rainbow.

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

The rainbow will show you that even in the clouds of life, even in the darkness, the sun will shine through, and you can find light.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 6:11-13.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 6:5.

The rainbow will show you how to channel the sunlight of heaven even into the cloudiest situations of earth.

The rainbow, in other words, is cloaked radiance in perfect balance. And the result is a cornucopia of beauty, a poetry of light, a symphony of divine colors.

## 10. Color War (Story)

Once upon a time the colors of the world started to quarrel: all claimed that they were the best, the most important, the most useful, the favorite.

Green said: "Clearly I am the most important. I am the sign of life and of hope. I was chosen for grass, leaves, trees – without me, no animal could live, nor could a man breathe. Look out over the countryside, and you will see that I am in the majority."

Blue interrupted: "You only think about the earth, but consider the sky and sea. It is the water that is the basis of life and is drawn up by the clouds from the deep sea. The sky gives space and peace and serenity. Without my peace, you would all be nothing."

Yellow chuckled: "You are all so serious. I bring laughter, gaiety and warmth to the world. The sun is yellow, the moon is yellow, the stars are yellow. Every time you look at a sunflower, the whole world starts to smile. Without me, there would be no fun."

Orange started next to blow her trumpet: "I am the color of health and strength. I may be scarce but I am precious for I serve the needs of human life. I carry the most important vitamins. Think of carrots, pumpkins, oranges and mangos. I don't hang around all the time, but when I fill the sky at sunrise or sunset, my beauty is so striking that no one gives another thought to any of you."

Red could stand it no longer; it shouted out: "I am the ruler of all of you. I am blood! Life's blood. I am the color of danger and of bravery. I am willing to fight for a cause. I bring fire! I am the color of passion and of love, the red rose, the poppy and the poinsettia. Without me, the earth would be as empty as the moon!"

Purple rose up to his full height; it was very tall and spoke with great pomp: "I am the color of royalty and power. Kings and queens have always chosen me for I am a sign of authority and wisdom. People do not question me. They obey."

Finally, Indigo spoke, much more quietly than all the others but with just as much determination: "Think of me. I am the color of silence. You hardly notice me, but without me, you all become superficial. I represent thought and reflection, twilight and deep water. You need me for balance and contrast, for prayer and inner peace."

And so all the colors went on quarreling, each convinced of its own superiority. Their quarreling grew louder and louder. Suddenly, there was a startling flash of bright lightening! Thunder rolled and boomed! Rain started to pour down relentlessly. The colors crouched down in fear, drawing close to one another for comfort.<sup>8</sup>

And then, as they all huddled together, they saw the most beautiful, soul-stirring, heart-warming sight: a glowing rainbow of the most sublime colors. When they looked closer they realized that it was their embrace of one another, their cosmic hug, that created this profound rainbow.

It could be said that each and every one of us has moments in our personal lives that emulate the sun, and moments that are reminiscent of clouds. It also could be said that each and every human being is like another color in the world's master portrait.

Schisms and dissonance occur when we think that the sun shines alone and the clouds float alone. Ugliness results from thinking that each color is in solitary confinement, envious and in competition with the next color.

The message of the Flood is that apart we destroy each other. But when we huddle together – both in our personal lives and on the cosmic level – then out of the storms of existence we create the most beautiful rainbow of the divine. Such a rainbow is a true and everlasting sign from God that never again will a flood wipe out creation.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://rainbowpetsitting.com/story.htm>

Existence (clouds) infused with its divine purpose (the sun) is blessed with perpetuity.

## 11. A Parable, A Rainbow

As the opening anecdote about the Dubner Maggid illustrates, a parable is similar to a rainbow – it is a bridge between the light of an idea (the sun) and the destination of that light (the cloud).

A parable is the bridge between one thing and the next. A bow is the arch that connects the infinite possibilities of existence with the practical implementation of everyday reality. The rainbow is the Velcro that binds the light of the sun with the mystery of the cloud.

Today, though we need not fear an actual flood as per God's promise, sadly the ripples of the schism created by the eating from the Tree of Knowledge are still very much with us. They are felt in heartbreaking ways, swelling into a global deluge of another sort:

- The ongoing tensions in Israel, under constant threat from its surrounding and internal enemies, as reflected in the latest attack in Jerusalem this week
- Ebola rampaging through Africa and spreading to the shores of the West
- Hamas and ISIS terrorizing the Middle East
- Israeli hikers buried under an avalanche

Consumed by self-worship ready to trample on anyone that doesn't do as they do, these jihadists unleash a modern-day flood of blood and evil that is now sweeping the world. This darkness must be stopped before it consumes any more life.

As partners with God in creation, it is our job to bring the rainbow into the world, to show how indeed we can make the sun shine even in dark clouds.

We do this by applying the remedy that God Himself gave us. Instead of separating body and soul, we learn to bridge and unite them.

Practically this means when we go to work, we see our jobs as not only work, but as a means of implementing Godliness in our everyday life. We see money not simply as money, but as a tool to support the world and build institutions and individuals of light. We see food not only as necessary calories and nutrients, but as a means to elevate the sparks of creation. Every time we do this, we unite body and soul – we produce a rainbow and prevent a devastating flood, replacing it with a flood of color and light.

May it be God's will that the ultimate rainbow – the ultimate bridge between heaven and earth, sun and cloud, body and soul, man and God – be revealed and may it shine above us at this very moment! Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!