

Torah Table Talk – Iyun Tefillah

Upon Seeing a Rainbow: Covenant or Caution?

Parshat Noah, Genesis 6:9 - 11:32

**Torah Table Talk is sponsored by Iris and Jeff Kubel
In honor of the 3rd birthday of their granddaughter, Sydney Rebecca Engel**

I. Introduction

At the heart of Jewish prayer are *berachot* (plural of *berachah*). Our liturgy is built around *berachot*; they are also recited throughout the day: before and after we eat, when we perform ritual acts and when we have certain types of experiences using our five senses. The moment we translate this word, however, we run into trouble. The word *berachah* is usually translated, 'blessing.' But what does it mean to 'bless' God? Does God need our blessing? It is simpler to say that a *berachah* is a statement that either begins or ends with the words, *baruch attah Adonai*, and then to explain that there are different times when we recite *berachot*: when performing *mitzvot*, during certain experiences, and when we have reason to be thankful. The role of the *berachah* depends on the context in which it is recited.

One of the loveliest *berachot* in our arsenal is the one we say upon seeing a rainbow. Upon exiting the ark, Noah and his family witnessed a rainbow in the sky. It was accompanied by a promise: "When I bring clouds over the earth, and a bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant...never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood " When we recite the *berachah* upon seeing a rainbow, we celebrate God's promise to preserve the earth but we also remind ourselves of our failure. The rainbow blessing is both an acknowledgement of our covenant and a statement of caution to humankind.

Baruch attah Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who remembers His covenant, is faithful to His covenant, and keeps His word.

Sources and Reflections

1) Connection to the Parshah

"I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you, birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well - all that has come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said: "This is the sign for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set My bow in the clouds and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and a bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant..." (*Gen. 9:9-18*)

2) Context

Prayer is not limited to the synagogue or the dinner table. There are blessings, *berachot*, for all types of daily experiences: hearing thunder, seeing a shooting star, or smelling spices. *Berachot* that engage the human senses are called *birchot hanehenin*, or blessings of enjoyment; they allow us to transform common and uncommon experiences of the world into moments of wonder. All of the blessings for food would fall into this category of blessings since they involve the sense of taste. Only the blessing upon seeing a rainbow, however, is based on a biblical story. While we have blessings for other natural phenomena, no other celestial body is similarly endowed with religious and theological significance in biblical literature.

3) Content

A rainbow is defined as an optical and meteorological phenomenon that is caused by reflection of light in water droplets in the Earth's atmosphere, resulting in a spectrum of light appearing in the sky. While Ramban and others realized that the rainbow preexisted the story of the flood, they believed that it took on religious significance after the flood. In the ancient world, the bow was the preferred weapon of the gods; in the world of the Bible, the rainbow took on a different meaning. It was a sign of promise, a *b'rit*. God laid down his weapons and promised not to destroy the world again with a flood.

4) Concepts

Looking up at a rainbow, we're reminded of God's constancy and love but also the consequences of sin. While a rainbow gives us pleasure and inspires awe, it reminds us of a time when "the earth was filled with lawlessness" and God found it necessary to wipe the earth clean of life. It is no wonder the *Shulchan Aruch* (OH 229) instructs us to make this blessing but not to stare at the rainbow too intently! Commenting on this statement, the *Mishnah Berurah*, suggests: "It is not desirable to tell one's fellow that there is a rainbow, because this involves slander. This is because a generation which is fully righteous does not require the sign of the rainbow." The rainbow inspires wonder and fear. Ezekiel's vision includes a bow of light: "As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain . . . so was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezek. 1:28). As a result the Talmud suggests: "When a man looks at three things his eyes become dim: at the rainbow, at the patriarch (the community leader), and at the priests when they blessed Israel." (*Hagigah 16a*)

5) Halachah L'Ma'aseh: Applying Law to Life

Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: One who sees the rainbow in the clouds should fall on his face, as it says, "As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud, and when I saw it I fell upon my face." (Ezekiel 1:28) In Palestine they cursed anyone who did this, because it looks as if he was bowing down to the rainbow; but one should certainly make a blessing. What blessing does he say? "Praised is He who remembers the Covenant". In a *Baraita* it was taught: Rabbi Ishmael the son of Rabbi Johanan ben Beroka says: One should say: "Who is faithful to His Covenant and keeps His promise." (*Babylonian Talmud Berachot 59a*)

Iyun Tefillah: Meditations on Prayer

From time immemorial, rainbows have been a source of wonder and awe. Sarna writes: "An...instructive parallel exists with passages in Gilgamesh and Atrahasis (Babylonian myths) that relate how, when the gods partook of Utnapishtim's sacrifice, the goddess Ishtar raised her jeweled necklace and swore that she would ever be mindful of the days of the flood and never forget them."

Unlike its mythological parallels, the biblical rainbow served as a reminder and a promise to both humankind and to God. There is no assurance in the Gilgamesh epic as there is in the biblical narrative. The rainbow is a symbol of the first covenant that God makes with human beings; it will be followed by a second covenant with Abraham and the third covenant at Sinai. This covenant, however, is different. Later covenants will involve a partnership between human beings and God while this one is a unilateral promise by God with no expectations from human beings.

What is it we say when we recite this blessing? God keeps His promise. Yet that affirmation comes out of a deep sense of insecurity. We live in a world of hurricanes and tsunamis, not to mention earthquakes and volcanoes. Nature can be cruel and capricious. We have reason to question whether God always remembers his covenant, not to flood the earth. But maybe there is a difference between saying God, "remembers His covenant," and saying that God, "Is faithful to His Covenant and keeps His promise," as Rabbi Johanan ben Beroka suggests below. We combine these two statements in our berachah but originally they were separate from one another. "Remembering the covenant" sounds a lot like the goddess Ishtar in the Gilgamesh epic, while being, "faithful to the covenant and keeping His promise" comes closer to the God of the Bible. For people of the ancient near east the rainbow was a weapon or possibly an adornment of the Gods. For the people of Israel it was a bridge connecting humanity and God. It was the first step in an unfolding relationship.

Encounter

- What is your response to the statement, "God is faithful to His Covenant and keeps His Covenant?"
- Is the Noahide covenant unilateral as suggested above? What responsibilities might it create for humanity?
- Write your own berachah or prayer upon seeing a rainbow? What would you say?

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