RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY כנסת הרבנים

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See the Rainbow, Beware the Rainbow

Parashat Noaḥ 2026/5787 | Rabbi Noam Kornsgold*

A. A Sign of the Covenant

1. Genesis 9:12-13	1. בראשית ט:יב–יג
(12) God further said, “This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. (13) I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.	(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים זֹאת אוֹת־הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר־אֲנִי נֹתֵן בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אִתְּכֶם לְדֹרֹת עוֹלָם: (יג) אֶת־קַשְׁתִּי נָתַתִּי בֶּעָנָן וְהָיְתָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵין הָאָרֶץ:

2. *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 229:1 [R. Joseph Karo, 16th century, Spain/Safed]	2. שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים רכט:א
One who sees a rainbow says, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who remembers the covenant, is faithful to His covenant, and fulfills His word.” And it is forbidden to gaze at it excessively.	הרואה הקשת אומר ברוך אתה ה’ אמ”ה זוכר הברית נאמן בבריתו וקיים במאמרו ואסור להסתכל בו ביותר:

Discussion Questions:

- According to the Torah (source #1), what is the rainbow supposed to cause us to remember? Who is doing the remembering: humanity, God, or both?
- How does the blessing add to or alter the biblical account? Why do you think the rabbis required a blessing specifically over seeing the rainbow?
- Is it primarily a symbol of hope, or does its appearance also remind us of destruction and judgment? Based on the prohibition in the *Shulḥan Arukh* (source #2), how would that source answer this question? Explain the stricture of the *Shulḥan Arukh*.
- What is the difference between seeing the rainbow as a beautiful phenomenon and seeing it as a sign or portent of something else?

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B. Seeing, But Not Looking

3. ***Mishnah Berurah* 229:1, 5** [R. Israel Meir Kagan, 19th-20th centuries, Lithuania]	3. משנה ברורה רכט:א, ה
(1) One who sees a rainbow, etc. - It is not proper to inform his fellow that there is a rainbow, on account of [the prohibition against] spreading an unfavorable report.	(א) הרואה הקשת וכו' - ואין כדאי להגיד לחבירו שיש קשת מטעם מוציא דבה.
(5) And it is forbidden to gaze, etc. - One who gazes at it excessively will have his eyesight dimmed. Rather, one should see it and recite the blessing.	ואסור להסתכל וכו' - והמסתכל בו ביותר עיניו כהות. אלא רואהו ומברך.

4. ***Zohar*, *Beshalaḥ* 33, 66b**	4. זוהר, בשלח לג, דף סו עמוד ב
Anyone who gazes at a rainbow is like one who gazes at the Divine Presence, and it is forbidden to gaze at the Divine Presence.	כָּל מַאן דְּאִסְתַּכַּל בַּקֶּשֶׁת, כְּמַאן דְּמִסְתַּכַּל בַּשְׁכִינָה, וּלְאִסְתַּכְּלָא בִּשְׁכִינְתָּא אָסִיר.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the "unfavorable report" alluded to by the Mishnah Berurah (source #3)?
- What are the negative consequences of not being allowed to share the sight of a rainbow with another person?
- How do you understand the distinction between seeing the rainbow, which is necessary in order to recite the blessing, and gazing at it, which is prohibited?
- What does the *Zohar*'s (source #4) comparison between the rainbow and the Divine Presence suggest about what the rainbow represents?
- Explain the connection between the *Zohar*'s observation and the second comment of the *Mishnah Berurah* (source #3).
- Taken together, do these sources treat the rainbow as something negative, something sacred, or both? How can those ideas coexist?

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C. Spreading the Sighting

5. ***Ḥazon Ovadiah, Berakhot*, p. 472 (OḤ 229:1:1)** [R. Ovadiah Yosef, 20th-21st centuries, Iraq/Israel]	**5. חזון עובדיה, ברכות, עמ' תעב (או"ח רכט:א:א)**
However, in *Sefer Berit Kehunah*... he wrote that the widespread custom is that anyone who sees a rainbow in the sky informs his fellow so that he may recite the blessing over the rainbow. This is contrary to what the *Kaf ha-Ḥayyim* wrote... in the name of the *Ḥayyei Adam* [that one should not inform his fellow], whose words are not convincing. For, on the contrary, we give thanks to God, blessed be He, who in His kindness established this covenant not to destroy His world. And it is preferable to inform another person so that the living person may take it to heart to return to God, blessed be He, and improve his deeds, etc.	אבל בספר ברית כהונה...כתב, שהמנהג פשוט שכל הרואה קשת בענן אומר לחבירו כדי לברך ברכת הקשת, ודלא כמ"ש הכה"ח...בשם הח"א, שאין דבריו נראים. שאדרבה אנו נותנים תודה להשי"ת אשר בחסדו כרת הברית הזאת שלא להשחית את עולמו, וטפי עדיף להגיד לזולתו כדי שהחי יתן את לבו לשוב את השי"ת, ולהטיב את מעשיו וכו'.

***Discussion Questions*:**

- Why does R. Ovadiah Yosef (source #5) reject the explanation of the *Mishnah Berurah* (source #3) and others, vis-à-vis informing someone about seeing a rainbow?
- What does each position assume about the primary meaning of a rainbow: a reminder of divine judgment, a sign of God's covenant, or both?
- What seems to be R. Ovadiah Yosef's (source #5) concern? What is he trying to increase in the world through his ruling? When something can be understood both negatively and positively, should we emphasize the danger it represents or the religious opportunity it creates? Does your answer change based on the people surrounding you (e.g., kids vs. adults)?
- Which position do you find more persuasive, and what does your answer depend on? What will you do next time you see a rainbow?