

What Is the Rainbow Really Teaching Us?

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A few weeks after we got married, my husband and I traveled to Hawaii for our honeymoon, where we had the opportunity to enjoy the island's natural splendor. One thing that stood out for us was the magnificent rainbow we saw in Maui following a rainstorm. It appeared larger, more vibrant and colorful than other rainbows we had seen before. The backdrop of the mountains in Maui and the blue ocean waters made its appearance even more spectacular. My husband was the one who really called attention to it, and I remember he shared with me the inspiration he felt from witnessing this natural wonder. He is certainly not alone in feeling this way. From [rainbow babies](#) to the [LGBT pride flag](#) to the [rainbows displayed in windows](#) during Covid lockdowns, the rainbow has been adopted as a symbol for hope, possibility, and inclusion. Even—and perhaps especially—after dark times, miracles are indeed possible.

In this week's parashah we learn the origin story of the rainbow as a symbol. Following the catastrophic flood in which God destroys nearly every living thing, save for Noah and his family and the animals he brings with him onto the ark, God promises never to bring about destruction on the same scale again. God establishes the rainbow as a sign for this covenant, declaring that it will be a reminder for God always: "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures . . ." (Gen. 9:8-17).

This is truly extraordinary: it is the only time God pairs a covenant with something that is visible in nature to us all. It is not surprising, then, that there is a plethora of commentaries on the rainbow, discussing whether and how we can reconcile the scientific traits of the rainbow with the verses in the Torah; remarking on both the negative and positive significance of the rainbow; and instructing us on what to do

when we see a rainbow including what to say, how we should look at it, and whether or not to call attention to it.

As I delved into commentaries about the rainbow, I discovered some fascinating ideas which gave me a newfound appreciation for why so many of us are drawn to it, and why it carries so much meaning beyond its natural beauty.

To begin, it is helpful to understand the science behind how the rainbow forms. A rainbow results when the sun's rays are refracted by drops of mist or rain into separate bands of color. When we look at regular sunlight we do not see these colors. It is only through the prism of water that we are able to see the vibrant colors inherent in sunlight.

Biblical commentators offered different ways of reconciling this natural occurrence with the notion that God created the rainbow as a covenant after the flood. Some commentators, such as the Ramban, concur with Greek scholars that the rainbow had always been in existence, but after the flood God changes the status of the rainbow by assigning it as a covenant. Ibn Ezra (9:14) offers a different take on this idea. He suggests that the rainbow was always in existence, but that we weren't able to see it before. However, "after the flood God strengthened the sun's light" to enable us to see the rainbow.

This highlights the remarkable quality of the rainbow: the colors are always present but are only revealed to us at a particular time. Specifically, we can only see the rainbow after rainfall, perhaps at a time when its message of hope is most meaningful to us. This serves as an important reminder that there is beauty everywhere; we just don't always have the ability to see it. Especially when we're going through a challenging time in our lives, it's helpful to consider the

beauty that we will be able to see once the sun's rays are shining brightly down again.

It is also interesting to observe the quiet nature of the rainbow, especially as a choice for a sign from God. The rainbow is a beautiful sight; however, it can also easily go unnoticed. There are no loud sounds calling our attention to it, such as thunder. It doesn't even appear immediately in our view—we need to look up into the sky to see it. Perhaps assigning the rainbow as a covenant is God's way of calling upon us to be an active partner; to seek out rainbows and to take time to consider their significance, thus coming closer to God.

Finally, I want to note that the rainbow did not always carry with it a positive connotation. *Keshet*, the word used in the biblical narrative for rainbow, is also the word used for a bow, as in bow and arrow. In the Jewish Publication Society Bible commentary, Nahum Sarna writes that our understanding of the rainbow as a symbol of the covenant is actually distinct from other ancient Near Eastern notions of the bow as a sign of war, military victory, and dominance. Through the story of Noah, Sarna says, "hostility is transformed into a token of reconciliation between God and Man."¹ Ramban also discusses the connection between the rainbow and the bow used in battle, noting that God made the rainbow with its feet bent upward, like an inverted bow, which is similar to what warriors do when they are calling for peace from their opponents.

The notion that the rainbow, a sign for God's covenant, has negative roots, is quite remarkable! What could have been used for war and destruction is turned around, signaling peace and hope for the future. What a powerful lesson. If the meaning of the rainbow can be changed so significantly, we are called upon to consider what else we can turn around in our personal lives or in the world.

May we all merit to have rainbows revealed to us, and to see the ones that are in front of us, throughout our lives. And may we gain strength from the rainbow and its promise of transformation, blessings, and peace.

¹ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 62–3.