



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

After the flood

This week is an opportunity to extend our knowledge of a familiar bible story, perhaps known since childhood: Noah's ark. You may already be familiar with what God said to Noah before the building of the ark. We can readily recall that God expressed disappointment in the wickedness of the human race and revealed the divine plan to destroy the earth in a flood. But what were God's words to Noah after the flood, after Noah and his family and animals had come out of the ark? Read them for yourself in Gen. 9:1-17.

God's post-flood speech can be divided into three parts: God commands, God makes a covenant, God gives a sign of that covenant. Note that the words that begin each section are also used to end each section. God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Read Gen. 9:1-7).

Then God said to Noah and to his sons..."I'm establishing my covenant with you and your descendents..." (Read Gen.9:8-12).

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant..." (Read Gen. 9:13-17).

Having created the world in Gen.1, God sets out to re-establish the world in Gen. 9. What do you notice as you compare these two stories? Perhaps you noted the similarity of some of the creation language, and that in each case God establishes the human race from a single human being. Both Adam and Noah are blessed and commanded to 'be fruitful and multiply.' Noah, however, is given an additional set of commandments prohibiting unlawful killing. Most importantly, while the relationship between God and Adam is presumed, God enters into a covenantal relationship with Noah and his descendents, promising that never again will a flood destroy the earth. What else in the text caught your attention?

And what of the rainbow? Why might this be chosen as the sign of the covenant? Many have sought a meaning in its shape and colour. One Light of Torah reader, for instance, remarks that he has always viewed the rainbow's reach across the sky as suggesting the connection between heaven and earth, a fitting sign of God's reconciliation with humanity.

When we delve into the tradition, we find the idea,

recalled by the medieval Jewish Torah scholar Ramban, that the shape of the rainbow resembles an archer's bow. When an arrow is released, the bow faces a certain way. If we imagine an angry God shooting arrows at the earth (as suggested by Psalm 144:6), the bow would face a different direction to what we see in a rainbow. Thus the rainbow signifies that an era of peace displaces retribution and anger.

Ramban himself, however, is not satisfied with this explanation. After all, humankind has not changed its ways all that much. Rather than speculate about the rainbow's form or color he prefers to focus on the fact that, as stated in the text, it is given as an assurance of God's unfathomable mercy despite human sin. •

Table topic: Despite the disturbing actions of God in this Torah portion, Noah's ark is ultimately a story about a compassionate God who does not give up on a rebellious people. Do you agree?

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.