מפרשים

Classical Commentaries

RAMBAN

Why does a rainbow seal God's promise after the flood?

Genesis 9:12

The rainbow serves as a visible sign of the covenant of peace between God and all living creatures, whether understood simply as a natural phenomenon existing since creation or, as Chazal teach in Bereshith Rabbah, as a symbol tied to the attribute of justice (middat hadin) called "kashti," hinting at din (judgment) on high. When this bow appears in the clouds at a time when humanity's sins might bring judgment, it signifies that G-d's mercy will temper that justice, recalling the covenant and showing compassion to the inhabitants of the earth—paralleling the sign and covenant of brit milah (circumcision). AI SUMMARY

"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."

THIS IS THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT WHICH I MAKE. — It would appear from this sign that the rainbow in the cloud was not part of creation and that now G-d created a new thing by making a rainbow in the heavens on a cloudy day.

Now commentators have said concerning the meaning of this sign that He has not made the rainbow with its feet bent upward because it might have appeared that arrows were being shot from heaven, as in the verse, And He sent out his arrows and scattered them on the earth. Instead He made it the opposite of this — [with the feet bent downward] — in order to show that they are not shooting at the earth from the heavens. It is indeed the way of warriors to invert the instruments of war which they hold in their hands when calling for peace from their opponents. Moreover, [with the feet of the bow being turned downward towards the earth, it can be seen] that the bow has no rope upon which to bend the arrows.

We must perforce believe the words of the Greek [philosophers who maintain] that the rainbow is a natural result of the heat of the sun falling upon damp air for even in a vessel containing water which stands in the sun there is the appearance of the rainbow. When contemplating the language of Scripture we will understand that it is so, for He said, I have set My bow in the cloud, [the use of the past tense indicating that He had already set it so from the beginning and it is not a new creation]. He did not say, "I set in the cloud," even as He said, This is the sign of the covenant which I make. Moreover, the word kashti (My bow) — [in the possessive form] — indicates that He possessed the bow previously. Therefore, we shall explain the verse thus: "The rainbow which I have set in the clouds from the day of creation will be from this day on a sign of covenant between Me and you; whenever I will see it I will remember that there is a covenant of peace between Me and you."

And should you want to know how the rainbow can be a sign, the answer is that it has the same meaning as the verse, This stone-heap be witness, and this pillar be witness; likewise, For these seven ewe-lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that it may be a witness unto me. Every visible object that is set

before two parties to remind them of a matter that they have vowed between them is called a "sign," and every agreement is called a "covenant." Similarly, in the case of circumcision, He said, And it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and you, because of the agreement that all seed of Abraham be circumcised to serve Him with one consent.

Moreover, when the above-mentioned rainbow is seen in its inverted form, [namely, with the feet of the bow turned downward], it is a reminder of peace, as we have written. Thus, whether the bow was a newly established phenomenon or one that always existed in nature, the significance thereof as a sign is the same.

Our Rabbis however have a profound secret in this section. They have said in Bereshith Rabbah: "I have set 'kashti' (My bow) in the cloud. This means, 'My likeness, that which resembles Me.' But is that possible? It is possible only as the straw resembles the fruit. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth. Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Shimon, 'This is like one who had in his hand some heated flour which he wanted to cast upon his son, but [because of his compassion for him] he cast it upon his servant.'"

There in Bereshith Rabbah it also says: "And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between G-d — this alludes to the attribute of Justice on high. And every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth — this alludes to the attribute of justice on earth. The heavenly attribute of justice is stern; the earthly one is sparing."

And you already know the saying of the Rabbis concerning one who gazes at the rainbow: "Whosoever takes no thought for the honor of his Maker would have been better off had he not come into the world." And if you will be worthy to understand the words of the Rabbis, you will know that the explanation of the verses is as follows: My bow — [kashti shares a common root with the word kasheh (hard, stern)] — which is symbolic of the attribute of justice, set in the cloud, shall be at the time of judgment for a token of the covenant.

And it shall come to pass when I bring clouds over the earth — meaning that when G-d will not make His countenance shine upon the earth on account of the sins of its inhabitants— "My attribute of justice will be seen in the cloud, and I will remember the covenant in a remembrance of mercy, and I will have compassion on the little ones that are on the earth." Thus, this token and the covenant are like the token of circumcision and the covenant thereof, and the language of the verses is very appropriate for the subject.

And thus the Rabbis in the above Midrash have explained the expression between G-d as referring to the attribute of justice on high, which is gevurah (strength), and that which is upon the earth as being the attribute of justice on earth, which is a kindly attribute, conducting the world together with the attribute of mercy, for Scripture does not say "that which is in the earth," [which would have alluded to "the earth above"], but only "that which is on the earth." I have already hinted at the secret of the Rabbis concerning the name "earth."

But Rashi wrote, "Between G-d— between the attribute of justice on high and you." But our Rabbis did not intend to imply this interpretation in their Midrash.