Somewhere, Over the Rainbow: Thoughts for Parashat Noah, October 20, 2012

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In this week's parasha, the Torah describes the rainbow as a sign of God's covenant with His earthly creations. It is a testimony that He will never again cause a flood to destroy humanity. It is significant that God chose the rainbow as a sign of His permanent covenant with humans.

A rainbow, after all, is intangible, unreachable and ephemeral. God rested His covenant not in something solid and unshakable, but in a bodiless, colorful bow of vapor refracted in the sunlight. By choosing the rainbow, God conveyed to humanity that His power can be seen not only in great mountains and mighty oceans—but also in something as insubstantial and transient as a rainbow.

A Talmudic discussion about rainbows recognizes that this awesome natural phenomenon is in some way a reflection of God Himself. Rabbi Abba stated that one who stares directly at a rainbow is thereby showing disrespect to God (Hagigah 16a) i.e. it is as though he brazenly looks at God rather than lowering his eyes in humility. The sage Rava taught that one who gazes at a rainbow is obligated to prostrate himself on the ground. These opinions are based on the verse in Ezekiel 1:28 in which Ezekiel's vision of the brightness around God is compared to the radiance of a rainbow. "As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about, this was the appearance of the lightness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face and I heard a voice of one that spoke." The rainbow, therefore, is suggestive of the glory of God Himself, and should inspire within us a sense of awe and mystery.

Indeed, the rabbis have instituted a special blessing to be recited upon seeing a rainbow: "Blessed are You Lord our God King of the universe Who remembers His covenant [with Noah], Who is trustworthy in His covenant and established in His word."

Just as the rainbow should evoke a spiritual response from us, so should other natural phenomena. Jewish law prescribes a blessing upon seeing a falling star,

on experiencing an earthquake, on witnessing lightning and thunder, on observing exceedingly strong winds. On all of these phenomena, the blessing is: “Blessed are You Lord our God King of the universe Who performs the act of creation.”

All of these natural phenomena are reflections of the original act of God’s creation. An alternative blessing which may also be recited is: “Blessed are You Lord our God King of the universe, Whose strength and might fill the world.” The medieval Sephardic author, Rabbi David Abudarham, explained that this blessing praises God who gives nature the power to reveal the ultimate power of the Creator of the universe.

The present custom is to recite the blessing “Who performs the act of creation” over lightning; and the blessing “Whose power and might fill the world” over thunder.

The next time (and every time) we experience the grandeur of a rainbow or other inspiring manifestations of nature,we ought to recognize the spiritual component of these physical phenomena. These are invitations to us to ponder more deeply the mighty wisdom and power of the Creator.

Somewhere, over the rainbow, God awaits our recognition of His eternal covenant with humanity.

Angel for Shabbat