

The Bow After the Water

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Noach 5787: after judgment, a covenant that still holds

Last week we opened Bereishit and began again. This week the world that was begun is nearly unmade, and then remade under a sign.

The Torah does not linger on spectacle. It tells us that the earth was filled with violence, that Noach walked with G-d, that he built the ark as he was commanded, that the waters rose, and that they fell. Then, in the fifth aliyah of the parsha — the portion for Thursday of this week — G-d speaks to Noach and to his sons a word that is not about the flood at all. It is about what comes after.

"And I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall not be cut off again by the waters of a flood, and there shall not again be a flood to destroy the earth" (Bereishit 9:11).

A covenant, not a mood

The rainbow is not a decoration. It is the sign of a brit — a covenant. G-d says He will set His bow in the cloud, and when the cloud covers the earth He will look upon the bow and remember the everlasting covenant between G-d and every living creature (Bereishit 9:12–16).

Rashi, on the word "My bow," notes that the rainbow was already part of the created order, but that from this day it was designated as a sign. The Midrash and the commentators argue about whether rainbows existed before the flood. What they agree on is the point that matters for us: the sign is not the power. The covenant is the power. The bow is how the world is reminded.

We live in a season of clocks and deadlines. Israel votes on 27 October. Brazil's runoff is 25 October. Lists file surplus-vote agreements by Friday 16 October. Those dates are real, and they matter. But Noach's portion puts a different kind of date underneath them. After the waters, G-d does not say "for this generation" or "until the next reckoning." He says "everlasting." The political calendar turns. The brit does not.

Why after the destruction?

Why give the covenant after the flood rather than before? One answer is mercy: the world that has already seen judgment needs a promise that judgment will not be the last word. Another answer is honesty: a covenant spoken into a world that has never broken is untested. Spoken into a world that has been broken and remade, it is a claim about the future that costs something.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 108a–b) and the Midrash treat the generation of the flood as the paradigm of violence without boundary — chamas. The remedy is not only survival in wood and pitch. It is a new moral floor: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of G-d He made man" (Bereishit 9:6). The covenant with the bow sits beside that floor. Life is protected because the image of G-d is not optional. The bow in the cloud is the sky's reminder of the same truth the law writes on earth.

Walk with G-d, then step out

Noach is called a righteous man, perfect in his generations; "Noach walked with G-d" (Bereishit 6:9). Rashi famously contrasts this with Avraham, who walked before G-d. The point is not to diminish Noach. It is to mark a stage. In the ark, walking with G-d meant obedience when the world outside was ending. After the waters, walking with G-d means planting a vineyard, building a household, and living under a sign that the world will not be erased again.

That is the move from Tishrei into Cheshvan. The festivals are behind us. The ark of the chagim has opened. We step onto dry ground that still smells of rain, and we are asked to live as if the covenant is real — not only when the cloud is beautiful, but when it is ordinary.

For a country under a cloud

This Shabbat falls ten days before Israel's election. The country is arguing about partners, thresholds, and surplus seats. Those arguments belong in the civic square. They do not belong in the place where we confuse a campaign with a covenant.

Noach's rainbow is not an endorsement of any list. It is a refusal to let the last flood be the last word about the world. If G-d looks upon the bow and remembers, we are asked to look upon one another and remember that every person bears the image for which blood is forbidden. That memory does not cancel politics. It sets the floor beneath politics.

For the table

The Torah gives Noach a sign he did not invent and could not cancel. Perhaps that is the lesson of this Shabbat: after the water, the work is not to rebuild the flood. The work is to live under a promise that outlasts our fear.

A question for the table: when you see a rainbow — or when you remember one — what do you want it to call back to mind: the storm that was, or the covenant that remains?

Or a second question: what is one ordinary act this Cheshvan that would treat another person's life as bearing the image of G-d?

Shabbat shalom.

Sources checked on Sefaria: Bereishit 6:9; 9:6; 9:8–17; Rashi on Bereishit 6:9 and 9:13; Sanhedrin 108a–b (generation of the flood). Election dates and surplus-filing deadline (16 Oct) are civic calendar facts already verified in this week's short pieces; they are named here only as timing, not as campaign claims.

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