

The New Era of Humankind

The end of the flood harkened of new beginnings, as God commands Noach to leave the ark. The Torah records his departure (Bereishit 8:18):

“So Noach went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him.”

Rashi notes that the listing separates Noach from his wife. Noach was concerned about being involved in the propagation of humanity, as the threat of possible destruction would still be a relevant factor. Therefore, Noach concluded that any notion of intimate relations was off the table.

After Noach constructs an altar and offers sacrifices, God instructs Noach with the very activity he was attempting to avoid (ibid 9:1):

“And God blessed Noach and his sons, and He said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

God then proceeds to lay out a basic framework for how humanity should now function. There would be dominance over the animal kingdom. Meat would be permitted. Social cohesion would begin to emerge, as murder was prohibited, and the idea of law and order came into being. The blueprint was in place.

Yet God did not address Noach’s concern in this first directive. Only after this sequence does the Torah now record a second address to Noach (ibid 9:8-9):

“And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: ‘And I, behold I am setting up My covenant with you and with your seed after you.’”

As we know, this covenant meant God would no longer consider destroying humanity, removing the potential threat. As well, God notes that the rainbow would serve as the sign to remind humanity of this covenant.

Rashi links the first directive to the second:

“[I] Agree with you, for Noah was afraid to engage in propagation until the Holy One, blessed be He, promised him never to destroy the world again, and so He did. He ultimately said to him, ‘Behold I agree to make a confirmation and a strengthening of a covenant for My promise, and I will give you a sign.’”

Rashi’s explanation is difficult to comprehend. What does it mean that God “agreed” with Noach? If He knew Noach’s concern about propagation was relevant, why then wait to offer the

covenant second in the sequence? In other words, the order should have been to **first** establish the covenant, and **then** instruct Noach in how to build society. If Noach was hesitant to engage in the task of populating the land, why would God direct him to do this first?

It could be tempting to think that Noach's resistance was problematic, a proposed defect in his personality. Yet, God's accession to Noach, as Rashi puts it, challenges this assumption. God does not appear to be criticizing Noach in any way.

The function of the rainbow is also challenging to understand. Why is there a need to "strengthen" the covenant? Is God's promise insufficient?

The end of the flood meant the restarting of civilization, a new opportunity for humanity. The destruction of civilization sent a powerful message to Noach. Humanity had discarded the idea of existence being a gift and a privilege. Now that there was a second chance, the rules would be clear. If humanity functioned at the proper level, engaged in building society and unleashing its power of creativity and imagination, then God would never consider any type of annihilation. On the other hand, if humanity abrogated that which separated it from the other species on the planet, descending into a chaos of instincts and repulsive behavior, then the natural result should be their destruction. If humans were philosophers, this balance would be clear, and there would never be a need for a covenant. In a sense, people would endorse destruction if they so deserved it. Thus, God first presents Noach with the blueprint first, as He was demonstrating the ideal state of humanity. A covenant should never be needed if humanity could reach this plane of existence.

Yet, as demonstrated by Noach, this was an impossible ideal. Humans have a basic level of self-importance. People need to believe there is an inherent value to their existence, contributing mightily to some basic level of feeling significant. If that insecurity was removed, then humanity was in the right place to begin maximizing its potential. The covenant brought about this result. The fact that God told humanity that there was no possible threat of destruction elevated the status of human being, demonstrating that they must be critical to the Divine plan if this guarantee was in place. The covenant brought to light the psychological boost required to restart civilization.

God "adds" the rainbow to the covenant, a method of strengthening the deal. Let's take the assumption that the rainbow was not "created" after the flood, but always existed, as being part of nature. A rainbow is a natural phenomenon; God sought to superimpose onto this natural item an important idea that reflected His relationship with humanity. There are echoes of the mechanism of halacha, Jewish law, in the addition of the rainbow to the covenant. Jewish law often takes the physical, a palm frond or unleavened bread, and creates a new abstract designation, replete with its own set of rules. The palm frond is elevated to lulav, the unleavened bread to matza. Each carries with it a panoply of deep and important ideas, and a large part of the commandment involves the understanding of the rules and objectives. The rainbow serves as the

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prototype. It was not the rainbow that was the essence here, as it is possible God could have chosen something else in nature as the “reminder”. Rather, when a person sees a rainbow, the object is no longer a refraction and reflection of light. There was a new idea attached to the rainbow, and when a person reflected on this idea, the unique status afforded humankind was on full display. The process of thinking, the investment of the person in beyond the physical, would appear then to be the primary objective of creating this sign.

Noach’s exit from the ark meant he now had the responsibility to create a new age for humanity. Armed with the proper rules, and secure in the knowledge of the unique status through God’s investment, meant the path to success was open. When Noach, and future people, would look at the rainbow, they would see and understand something unique beyond the colors. Thus, humanity was set to thrive, and Noach was now ready to get to work.