

# INTELLECTUAL BELIEFS

*by Shlomo Katz*

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## Noach

Rashi, commenting on the verse, "Noach was perfect in his generations," cites a famous dispute among the Sages: "Some interpret this verse favorably -- how much more so would Noach have been righteous had he been in Avraham's generation! Others interpret this unfavorably -- had he

been in Avraham's generation, he would have been nothing."

R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz z"l (the "Alter of Novardok") writes that the Sages do not disagree regarding the fact that Noach was righteous, nor is it their intention to compare Noach's righteousness quantitatively with Avraham's righteousness. Rather, Chazal's disagreement is regarding what motivated Noach. One view says that Noach searched for the truth, and therefore he was righteous. And, if he found the truth while living among the degenerate people of his time, how much more certain it is that he would have found the truth in Avraham's generation!

The other view contends that Noach was motivated to be righteous only because he was repulsed by his contemporaries' immorality. Their degeneration forced Noach to take a stand, so-to-speak. Not so, had he lived in Avraham's time, when immorality was not so prevalent. In that generation, Noach would have remained indifferent.

The Alter explains further: A passenger may ride in the first class compartment of a train, but that alone does not tell us whether he is a wealthy person. In wartime, one may ride first class simply to avoid the soldiers and refugees who are packed into the train's coaches. On the other hand, if one rides first class in peace-time, when there are plenty of seats in the cheaper coaches, that is an indication that one has money to spend.

Similarly, it is undisputed that Noach was objectively righteous. He "rode first class." What the sages question, however, is whether he rode first class to avoid the other passengers or because that is where he truly wanted to sit.

(Madregat Ha'adam p.7)

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### **An Astonishing Midrash**

*"Two-by-two they came to Noach"* (7:9) these are the days when the complete Hallel is recited.

The days when the complete Hallel is recited outside of Eretz Yisrael are the first two days of Pesach, the two days of Shavuot, the nine days of Sukkot and the eight days of Chanukah. These days are alluded to in the above verse as follows:

"Two-by-two" alludes to the two days each of Pesach and Shvauot.

"They came" has a gematria of nine, and alludes to the nine days of Sukkot.

Finally, "to Noach" has the same gematria as "Chanukah."

(Binat Nevonim)

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### **How can the rainbow be a sign?**

How can the rainbow, a predictable natural phenomenon, be a sign of the covenant between G-d and man that G-d will not bring another flood? The following are among the answers offered by the commentators:

R' Avraham ibn Ezra z"l (12th cent.) writes: The physical laws which cause a rainbow to appear first came into existence after the flood. (Ibn Ezra: Bereishit 9:13) [Most commentaries disagree with this.]

R' Ovadya Sforno z"l (15th cent.) writes: The rainbow referred to in this parashah is the not the rainbow with which most people are familiar (called a "primary rainbow"). Rather, it is a so-called "secondary bow," whose colors are the mirror image of a primary rainbow. Scientists have been unable to explain why a secondary bow occurs. (Sforno: Bereishit 9:13) [Today the reason is understood.]

R' Yitzchak Abarbanel z"l (16th cent.) writes: The physical laws which cause a rainbow to appear existed from creation, but there had never been a rainbow before the flood. This was due to a difference in atmospheric conditions before and after the flood. (Abarbanel: Bereishit 9:13)

Maharal z"l (16th cent.) explains: The scientific explanation is the immediate reason why a physical event occurs. The Torah's explanation is the ultimate reason why the event occurs. (Be'er Hagolah, Part VI) [Note: Maharal was addressing Chazal's explanation of eclipses, not rainbows, but the same principles apply. In essence, Maharal teaches that science explains "how"; the Torah explains "why."]

R' Yehonatan Eyebchutz z"l (18th cent.) writes: The Torah is not referring to the regular rainbow but to a techelet/blue-colored rainbow. This is a sign of G-d's covenant because of the similarity between the Hebrew words "techelet" and "kelayah"/"destruction." (Ya'arot Devash I:12)

R' Pinchas Eliyahu Horowitz of Vilna z"l (19th cent.) writes: There is no reason why parties who wish to make a sign between themselves cannot choose an existing natural object to be that sign. Something is a "sign" because people decide to treat it as such. There are three reasons why a rainbow is a fitting sign that G-d will not bring another flood:

1. Since the rainbow appears near the end of the rain, it reminds us that G-d will soon stop the rain because of His kindness, even if we are not deserving.
2. The rainbow represents G-d's glory, as it is written (Yechezkel 1:28), "Like the appearance of a bow that would be in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of brilliance all around. That was the appearance of the glory of Hashem." A king does not show his glory when he is angry.
3. The rainbow represents a warrior's (G-d's) bow turned away from the enemy (man), showing that the battle is over. (Sefer Haberit, Part I, Essay 10, Ch. 12)

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***"Noach walked with G-d." (6:9)***

Rashi comments: Noach walked with G-d because he needed G-d to support him.

R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz z"l (the "Alter of Novardok") explains in what way this is a praise of Noach. Noach used all of his abilities to serve G-d, until he had nothing left to give. The rest was up to G-d.

Chazal say that a person could never defeat his yetzer hara without Hashem's help. First, however, one must use all of his own forces to fight the yetzer hara.

Chazal say that Noach was a believer and a non-believer, and the waters of the flood had to push him into the ark. This means that he believed in his ability to use his own strength against the yetzer hara, but was not confident in receiving Hashem's assistance. His contemporaries, on the other hand, would have been content to accept Hashem's help, but they were not interested in using their own efforts.

This is why the same flood-waters which pushed Noach into the ark pushed his undeserving contemporaries away from the ark. In fact, concludes the Alter, this is true of every test from Hashem. Precisely the same test which elevates the worthy person puts down the unworthy person.

(Madregat Ha'adam p.6)

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### ***"Let us build us a city, and tower with its top in the heavens . . ." (11:4)***

What was the intention in building this tower? R' Yehonatan Eyebchutz z"l (1690-1764) explains: The generations following the flood feared another deluge, and thus sought places of refuge. One such potential refuge was the moon.

The ancients understood, however, that the earth's atmosphere which they believed to be five miles thick made launching a spacecraft difficult. They therefore hoped to build a tower that would penetrate the atmosphere so that they could launch their escape-craft from its top.

(Tiferet Yehonatan)

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### **R' Yehuda ben Kuraish z"l late 9th - early 10th centuries**

R' Yehuda was one of the earliest grammarians to teach that Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic words all stem from similar roots. Although different in their development, these languages are strongly related and therefore exhibit the same grammatical forms. This means that the Targum (Aramaic translation) can shed important light on the meaning of the Torah, and R' Yehuda admonished the Jews of Fez not to disregard the reading of the Targum together with reading of the Torah in Hebrew, as instructed in the Talmud (Berachot 8a).

R' Yehuda strongly rejected the literal interpretation of verses that assign human qualities to the

Creator. He uses the maxim "the Torah speaks in the language of man" to explain all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic (the attribution of human characteristics and feelings, respectively, to non-humans, in this case, G-d) verse of Tanach.

R' Avraham ibn Ezra praises R' Yehuda's work, Sefer HaYachas, also called Sefer Av V'eim, a dictionary of Semitic tongues which has been lost. Ibn Ezra counts R' Yehuda among the "Elders of the Holy Tongue," and instructs that his works be treated with respect.

R' Yehuda also composed liturgical poems for Yom Kippur. He lived in Tahort, Tunisia. (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim, p.49; Shem Hagedolim: Erech Av V'eim)

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