DEBAR TORAH: SOMETHERE OVER THE RAINBOW—Z. EDINGER—

After the flood, God promised Noah that He will never again use a flood to destroy the world.

And Noah opened his mouth, and he brought forth the rainbow, to memorialize His promise to humanity. The implication of the verses in our parasha (chapter 9, verses 9-16) is that God reassures the rainbow to serve as a symbol of His promise not to flood the earth.

Indeed, this is the plain understanding opounded by Ibn Ezra (12th c.). Rainbows were created after the flood, while Noah (10th c.) interpreted these verses differently: rainbows were not created after the flood, rather they were chosen as a symbol to remind us of God’s promise. At first glance this debate seems to have little significance, but in fact this debate is about whether our understanding of Creation should conform to scientific knowledge.

In the ancient world, rainbows were understood to be a supernatural omen or message from the gods to mankind. Sama describes them as ancient symbols of “divine holiness and hostility.” In the words of EDUARDS “ancient peoples thought that it was a messenger of a god (bo), and entertained many vain beliefs about it. The Torah purified this concept of all its superstitious elements and reformed it into a beneficial concept. The ancients likely used the rainbow for distraction and soothing, since they believed it to be the messenger of a god. The Torah refined this by saying that the rainbow is nothing but a symbol that there will never be another Flood.”

The Torah here upholds ancient accepted belief and informs us that the rainbows are not an evil omen but a divine symbol of peace.

Beginning with Aristotle, rainbows began to be understood as natural occurrences that appear when light refracts through water molecules in the air. If so, how could rainbows have been created only after the Flood? Were there no rainbows during the generations between Creation and Noah?

Did the natural world undergo some kind of essential change?

Because of these questions, most medieval scholars sided with Noah interpreting the verses in our parasha to mean that the rainbow was given symbolic meaning after the flood, and not that it was actually created after the flood.

NAHMANS (13th c.) comments on Genesis 9:12 are notable. Well known for his supernatural understanding of biblical miracles, NAHMANS often criticizes NAHMANS’s rationalistic tendency to interpret miracles as being a part of the natural order. Quite amazingly, however, here NAHMANS comments:

Against our will, we must believe the words of the Greeks that the rainbow comes about as a result of the sun’s rays in the rain air, for the rainbow appears in a cloud of water placed in the sun. Then he interprets the verse in the same way that Noah did. Genesios (Rabid 14th c.) goes so far as to quote NAHMANS’s Mekoroth (“הנהויה”) in describing the rainbow as a natural occurrence.

Why do all these medieval commentaries feel the need to reference Greek scholars? Why must they remind us that rainbows are natural phenomena? The answer lies in the history of science and the medieval world.

A renewed interest in science and philosophy arose during the golden age of Islam. This included the study of optics and rainbows. This interest spread from Islam into Christendom. Islamic theologians and scholars, such as Al Kindi (9th c.), Ibn al Hazm (10th c.), Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 11th c.), and Ibn Badis (12th c.), as well as Christian theologians of the 12th c., interpreted the description of rainbows as a natural occurrence.

Why do all these medieval commentaries feel the need to reference Greek scholars? Why must they remind us that rainbows are natural phenomena? The answer lies in the history of science and the medieval world.

A renewed interest in science and philosophy arose during the golden age of Islam. This included the study of optics and rainbows. This interest spread from Islam into Christendom. Islamic theologians and scholars, such as Al Kindi (9th c.), Ibn al Hazm (10th c.), Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 11th c.), and Ibn Badis (12th c.), as well as Christian theologians of the 12th c., interpreted the description of rainbows as a natural occurrence.

For Jewish scholars of the era, these scientific studies could not be ignored. If rainbows could be created using a jar of water, how could anyone believe that the rainbow was a supernatural miracle created to remember God’s promise? For this reason most medieval commentaries felt compelled to disagree with Ibn Ezra, the rainbow was not a supernatural sign, but rather a natural phenomenon that had been present since the world was created.

This Fall, instead of teaching a weekly Talmud class on Tuesdays, Rabbi Soloveichik will be delivering major lectures and shiurim on select Mondays and Tuesdays, with Mondays devoted to history topics, and Tuesdays focused on Torah and Talmudic subjects.

Dates will be announced in advance, so it is more important than ever for participants to subscribe to Shearith Israel’s emails, and specifically, to Rabbi Soloveichik’s email distribution for alerts and updates on these classes at shearithisrael.org/join-our-email-lists.

OPEN BET MIDRASH

Most Weekday Evenings | 5:15 pm until Evening Services
Learn your way: join a havruta, hear a deborah, or simply pick a sefer from the shelf.
Season Premiere
Friday Night Lights
Next Friday Night, October 19 | Following Evening Services
As Shabbat begins earlier and the nights grow longer stay
around for a bit after Friday evening services for an inspiring
shiru delivered by Rabbi Soloveichik. There’s no better way
to transition from the workweek to Shabbat!

PTTS Shabbaton &
Young Couples and Families Luncheon
Shabbat Morning, November 3
Jr. Congregation with a Torah Reading begins at 10:30 am
Luncheon begins after Morning Services
Young families will form meaningful bonds at our inaugural
PTTS Shabbaton. Our Hebrew School students will be
preparing in class for this big day when they are invited to
take center stage in our Junior Congregation on Shabbat
morning, with a Young Couples and Families Luncheon
to follow.

To register or sponsor the luncheon, go to
shearithisrael.org/ptts-csi-luncheon.

Special Opportunity for CSI Teens
We are looking for a few experienced Junior Congregation
participants to mentor some of our PTTS students to help
them prepare for this special event. Contact Yona Glass at
yyglass@shearithisrael.org if you would like to help a PTTS
student master their part. This is a rewarding and fun chance
to support our PTTS students, and can also be used to fulfill
community service hours.

Community Announcements
We welcome the following new members to our growing
Shearith Israel family:
Orna Shulman
Adam and Dara Kritzman Towne
(Adam is the son of Madelane and trustee, Stan Towne)

Women’s Services This Week
All women and girls welcome
This Shabbat | 9:00 am | Little Synagogue
Featuring Barbara Sason, who became a Bat Mitzvah
Shearith Israel’s women’s services are conducted by and
for women and are an opportunity for women to lead
prayer, read from the Torah, and perform the mitzvot
associated with our services. We welcome the opportunity to
celebrate momentous occasions—such as a girl becoming
Bat Mitzvah or a bride before her wedding—in the context
of our Service.
If you are interested in learning more about our Women’s
Services, please contact Mrs. Lisa Rohde at
lirohde-csi@yahoo.com.

NEW CLASS:
Entering the Land: The Book of Joshua
Rabbi David Silber | Sundays | 10:00 am - 11:30 am
(Tuition is $275, but FREE for Shearith Israel members)
This class by Drisha Founder and Dean and Covenant
Award educator Rabbi David Silber will study the book of
Joshua carefully from a literary perspective, exploring core
biblical questions: what does it mean to be a disciple, and
how can a student turn into a teacher? Can anyone replace
Moses? Does Joshua fulfill the Torah’s commands about
conquest of the land? What can this teach us about war and
the possibility of peace?
Rabbi David Silber is the Founder and Dean of Drisha
Institute for Jewish Education. He received ordination from
the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. He received
the Covenant Award in 2000. He is the author of A Passover
Haggadah: Go Forth and Learn, published by JPS in 2011,
and the newly released For Such a Time as This: Biblical
Reflections in the Book of Esther, published by Koren
Publishing in 2017 (Hebrew).
Free registration at shearithisrael.org/silber.

Youth Team Meet-and-Greet for CSI Parents
with our new Youth Groups Leadership Team,
Nat Bernstein & Daniela Bernstein
Monday, October 22 | 7:00 pm
Hosted by Zoya Raynes & Naftali Friedman
Address will be provided upon RSVP.
Shearith Israel parents, get to know our new youth groups
leaders, Nat and Daniela, at this meet-and-greet hosted by Zoya
Raynes and Naftali Friedman. We are confident that our youth
will benefit from these two energetic, creative, and
inspiring role models. Light dairy dessert will be served.

RSVP at shearithisrael.org/meet-and-greet.

A Community Dinner Featuring
Shearith Israel Member and Author, Scott Shay
in Conversation with
Rabbi Meir Soloveichik
Friday Evening, November 9 | Following Evening Services
Religion can be both inspiring and distressing. And many
critiques of it are simultaneously compelling and dubious. In his
new book, In Good Faith: Questioning Religion and Atheism,
Scott Shay examines atheist arguments with a refreshing modern
eye in this comprehensive look at our most fundamental
questions about faith and reason.

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/scott-shay.
Scott A. Shay has had a successful business career spanning Wall
Street, private equity, venture capital, and banking. Throughout
his life, he has also been a student of religion and how religion
ought to apply to the world outside of the synagogue, church, or
mosque, also authoring the best-selling title, Getting Our Groove
Back: How to Energize American Jewry.

Note: Books can be ordered from Amazon.com or other vendors—if
you have them shipped directly to the Synagogue to arrive before
Thursday, November 8, Scott will inscribe the book to you prior to
Shabbat and give it to you at the dinner.