



Noahide Laws & Lifecycle Course



Festivals VI: Cheshvan & Kislev



***Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy
Certification Program***

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Festivals VI: *Cheshvan & Kislev*

Introduction

Following Sukkot and the conclusion of the month of Tishrei, we enter the months of Cheshvan and Kislev. Cheshvan contains no holidays, yet its relationship to Kislev is important for reasons that we shall see.

Cheshvan / MarCheshvan

The 2nd month of the New Year (and 8th month over all) is Cheshvan. Cheshvan is commonly referred to as *Marcheshvan*, which literally means “bitter Cheshvan.” Why is this month called bitter? One reason is because it is the only month with no holidays. Another is that a number of tragic events happened to Israel in this month. For example, on the 5th of Cheshvan the Chaldeans murdered the sons of king Tzidkiyahu, blinded him, and took him into captivity. On the 15th of Cheshvan Yarovam ben Nevat aroused God’s wrath against Israel.

However, *mar* may also refer to the flood of Noah. According to most chronologies of the flood, the rains began on the 28th or 27th of Cheshvan. Curiously, Cheshvan is called *Bul* in Melachim I 6:8. Many commentaries explain that this term *Bul* is derived from the word *Mabul*, which means flood. *Mar* can also mean “a drop of water,” as we see from Isaiah 40:15. Of course, Cheshvan is also the start of the rainy season in Israel, and *mar*, meaning “drop,” may be an indication of this quality.

Kislev

The month of Kislev follow Cheshvan. Kislev is famously known for the holiday of Chanukah. Beginning on the 25th of Kislev, Chanukah commemorates the Jewish victory over the Seleucid Greeks and the miracles wrought for Israel in their fight for religious freedom.

Given that Chanukah is an entirely rabbinic holiday commemorating a Jewish victory, it has no relevance to Noahides and should not be observed. However there is a major historical event that occurred in Kislev which is of extreme importance to Noahides.

The Timeline of the Flood

It is very difficult to pin down the exact chronology of the events of the flood. Nevertheless, most commentaries agree that it began at the end of Cheshvan (on the 27th or 28th of that month) and ended one year later, with Noah emerging from the Ark on the 28th of Cheshvan.

Upon Noah's exit from the Ark, he had much to do:

And Noah built an altar to God. He took from all of the pure animals and all of the pure fowl and he sacrificed burnt-offerings upon the altar.¹

It was only after these offerings that God was appeased:

And the Lord smelled the sweet savor, and the Lord said in His heart: "I will not again curse the ground any more on account of man; for the thoughts of man's heart is evil from his youth;² neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done.³

Upon making this decision, God blessed Noah and his family, and stuck a new covenant with mankind:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that teems on the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea: into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be for food for you; as the green herb have I given you all.⁴

At this point, God completed the commanding of the Noahide laws with the seventh and final commandment:⁵

Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat.⁶

¹ Gen. 8:20.

² This curious statement will be discussed below.

³ Gen. 8:21.

⁴ Gen. 9:1-3.

⁵ This is according to Maimonides in [Hilchos Melachim 9:1](#). Tosafos, as mentioned in a prior lesson, however, holds that all seven were commanded to Adam. In the times of Noah the details of the seven *mitzvos* were only modified and reaffirmed. Either way, this covenant marks an important point in the commanding of the Noahide laws.

God then gave mankind a sign of this covenant:

*And God spoke unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying: 'As for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you, and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the fowl, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that go out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. And I will establish My covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood; neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.' And God said: 'This is the token of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.' And God said unto Noah: 'This is the token of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth.'*⁷

When did all of this occur? According to most commentaries, it couldn't have been on the 28th of Cheshvan, the day that Noah emerged from the ark. The building of the altar and preparations for the sacrifices would have taken at least a few days. Therefore, the covenant of the rainbow was most likely given on or shortly after the first day of Kislev.⁸

Curious Things...

The events surrounding Noah's exit from the ark are riddled with mysteries. Particularly striking is this passage:

⁶ Gen. 9:4.

⁷ Gen. 9:8-17.

⁸ See [Sefer Todaah](#), *Hakdama* to Kislev.

*And the Lord smelled the sweet savor, and the Lord said in His heart: "I will not again curse the ground any more on account of man; **for the thoughts of man's heart are evil from his youth,**⁹ neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done."¹⁰*

This passage seems to state that, because man is inherently evil, he not culpable for his actions. At a minimum, culpability for his actions is not at such a level so as to warrant destruction of the earth. Yet, this cannot be the correct understanding of this passage. Consider what is written before the flood:

*And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, **and that every impulse of the thoughts of his heart was evil, always.**¹¹*

The "evil in man's heart" cannot be both the reason for bringing the flood (as stated before the flood) and the justification for never again bringing a flood (as stated after the flood)!

The relationship of these two verses is one of the most difficult concepts to understand in the Torah, and many commentaries have wrestled with it. To be clear, there are two issues at play:

- 1) What does it mean that "... every impulse of the thoughts of his heart was evil, always?" Is man inherently evil? It is a difficult proposition to entertain in light of everything else that we have learned. And,
- 2) How do we resolve the first use of this phrase (pre-flood) against the second (post-flood)?

A particularly attractive interpretation of these two questions is offered by the [Bina Le-Ittim](#).¹²

B I N A H
L E I T T I M

The Torah writes:

*And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.*¹³

⁹ This curious statement will be discussed below.

¹⁰ Gen. 8:21.

¹¹ Genesis 6:5.

¹² Cited in R' Yehudah Nachshoni's *Hagos B'Parshios HaTorah* on *Parshas Noah*.

¹³ Gen. 1:31.

The Midrash explains:

R' Nachman bar Shmuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rav Shmuel bar Nachman: ... "And, behold, it was very good." This refers to the evil inclination. But, is the evil inclination "very good?" If not for the evil inclination, man would never build a house, take a wife, reproduce, or conduct any business. So too said Solomon: "[And I saw that all labor and all skillful enterprise] spring from man's rivalry with his neighbor."¹⁴

When the Torah states that ...*for the thoughts of man's heart are evil from his youth, and ... that every impulse of the thoughts of his heart was evil, always*, it is referring to man's evil inclination, the *yetzer ha-ra*.

Before the flood, the world only used the *yetzer ha-ra* for evil. Its desires were only to be indulged and enjoyed. After the flood though, when Noah offered his offerings to God, God saw that the *yetzer ha-ra* was once again being used as a tool for good. This is why, before the flood, God criticizes man for his *yetzer ha-ra*. After the flood, however, the reference to the desires of man's heart is actually in praise of man.

What, though, does it mean that Noah, in offering the sacrifices, was using his *yetzer ha-ra* for good? We will discuss this further in our live class.

The Meaning of a Rainbow

God's choice of a rainbow as the sign of his renewed covenant with man has been the subject of many interpretations, some of which are more fanciful and creative than others. Here is an anthology of the approaches of the classical scholars of the Torah:

- **Talmud Chagigah 16a** - *Anyone who does not care about his Creator's honor, it would be merciful for him had he not been created. In other words, better off that this person was never created. Who is such a person? Rabbi Abba says this is one who stares at a rainbow. As it says, 'Like the appearance of the rainbow that will be in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brilliance all around.'* (Ezek. 1:28) *That was the appearance of the similitude of God's honor.'* According to this Gemara, God's presence is manifested somehow in the appearance of a rainbow. Just as one may not stare at any manifestation of the *shechina*, the divine presence, so too one may not stare at a rainbow. To do so is to slight God's honor. This passage also tells us that staring at a rainbow damages one's sight.

¹⁴ Ecc. 4:4.

- ***Bereshis Rabbah 35:2 & Kesubos 77b*** – When [Eliyahu HaNavi](#) was studying Torah with [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi](#), they encountered a difficulty in a statement of [Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai](#), the author of the Zohar. Since Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was no longer living, the two of them ascended to *Gan Eden* to ask Rabbi Shimon for clarification of his words. Eliyahu approached Rabbi Shimon first. Rabbi Shimon asked him: “Who is this with you?” Eliyahu HaNavi answered: “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, one of the great ones of his generation.” Rabbi Shimon turned to Rabbi Yehoshua and asked: “Has a rainbow ever been seen in your generation?” Rabbi Yehoshua answered: “yes,” to which Rabbi Shimon replied: “If a rainbow has been seen in your generation, then you are not fit to learn from me!” The commentaries explain that the fact that a rainbow had appeared in Rabbi Yehoshua’s generation indicated that his generation was worthy of destruction. Therefore, Rabbi Yehoshua was not of sufficient righteousness or purity to speak to the holy Rabbi Shimon. The *gemora* in [Kesubos 77b](#), however, tells us that a rainbow never appeared in the generation of Rabbi Yehoshua. Why then did Rabbi Yehoshua tell Rabbi Shimon that a rainbow had appeared? The *gemora* explains that Rabbi Yehoshua did not want to be seen as haughty.
- **[Rashi to Gen. 9:14](#)** – Based on the Midrash, Rashi explains that when God desires to bring punishment upon the world, he places the rainbow as a sign of the covenant, as a reminder that He will not destroy the world. Therefore, the appearance of a rainbow is not a good sign. Rather, it is a sign that things are not right between God and the world and, was it not for the covenant; God would again destroy the world! In fact, the *Mishnah Berurah*,¹⁵ the most widely accepted interpretation of the Shulchan Aruch today, states that if one sees a rainbow, even though it is something upon which we bless, one should not inform others because it is not a good sign.
- **[Nachmanides \(the Ramban\)](#)** – The Rainbow appears like a bow without a string. Instead of aimed from heaven downwards, it is upturned, away from the earth. This symbolizes that God does not “hold destruction over the earth.” Furthermore, the unstrung bow is a sign of peace. The Ramban further writes that we see that rainbows are a natural phenomenon caused by water refracted through moisture. Therefore, they must have existed since the beginning of creation. It was only after the flood that a particular meaning was assigned to the rainbow. This is implied by the verse’s wording: “I have **set** my rainbow...,” implying that the rainbow already existed. This is also the opinion of [Rav Saadia Gaon](#).

¹⁵ 229:1.

- [Ibn Ezra & Radak](#) – The rainbow did not exist prior to the flood.
- [Chizkuni](#) – The appearance of opposite colors together symbolized a resolution of opposite ends. Blue against red, for example symbolized the resolution of fire and water, of mercy and harsh judgment.
- [Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch](#) – Rav Hirsch, a stunning and exceedingly deep thinker of 19th century Judaism, offered the following interpretation of the rainbow:¹⁶

Perhaps, the appearance of the rainbow's colors is closest in meaning [to the actual meaning of the rainbow] than all these aforementioned interpretations. By it, our attention is repeatedly drawn to the fact that, despite all the variances in the degrees of the development of mankind, God would never again decree the downfall of the entire human race. Rather, the differences and varieties found among humanity would serve as the basis for mankind's gradual education towards its godly purpose. For the rainbow is nothing other than a single, pure ray of light broken into seven degrees of seven colors. [It ranges] from the red rays nearest to the light to violet – the most distant from the light and the nearest to darkness. Yet, from one to the other, are they not all but rays of light, and do they not all combine to form a single, pure, white ray? Could this not, perhaps, be intended to say that the whole array of living creatures, from Adam, the most alive and whose name means "red one," the nearest to God, all the way down to the lowest, humblest worm in whom there is a living soul of flesh, and even more so all of the variety and shades of humanity among the races of mankind – from the brilliant intellectuals to those in whom there is hardly a glimmer of the spiritual - that God unites them all in a common bond of peace. All are fragments of one life; all are refracted rays of the one spirit of God. [Is not] the lowest, darkest, most distant one not still a son of the light? Thus we see later on that our sages describe the different spiritual and moral degrees of the righteous using the metaphor of degrees of light; from the bright illuminating rays of the sun to the gleam of the menorah in the temple. All is light, yet it only appears different according to the difference of the material, [as it is written:] "There are seven groups among the righteous... and their faces shine like the sun,¹⁷ like the moon,¹⁸ like the firmament,¹⁹ like lightning,²⁰ like the stars,²¹ like the blossoms,²² and like the menorah²³ in the holy temple."²⁴

¹⁶ Commentary of Rav Hirsch to Gen. 9:16. Editor's translation from the original German.

¹⁷ See Song of Songs 6:10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Dan. 12:3.

²⁰ Nahum 2:5.

²¹ Dan. 12:3.

It is important to note that all of the above interpretations embody that quality that we have seen so many times in this course: paradox. The rainbow, a sign of peace, potential, and resolution, is also a sign of warning and displeasure. These apparent opposites both exist simultaneously, underscoring the complex relationship between God and his creation. God is both merciful father and true judge, the immanent and the transcendent, the destroyer and creator, the giver of life and one who decrees death, the God of light, dark, and all of the colors in-between. Perhaps, the expression of this complicated paradox is part of the full meaning of the rainbow.

While the month of Kislev holds “The Festival of Lights” for Jews, for Noahides it holds a “Festival of Colors,” a contemplation and celebration of the meaning of this Noahic covenant.

The Noahide Covenant vs. the Noahide Laws

We must make a careful distinction as to what the first of Kislev commemorates. It was on or about the first of Kislev that God gave man permission to eat meat, blessed Noah and his sons, and guaranteed that He would no longer destroy the world on account of man. These are the main messages commemorated on the first of Kislev.

However, it should not be a commemoration of the giving of the Noahide laws. Even though the Noahide laws were completed (or modified to their final form, according to some)²⁵ at this time, their binding authority today is from Sinai, not from the covenant with Noah. It is not appropriate to commemorate the first of Kislev as a time of the giving of the Noahide laws – that honor belongs to Shavuot, the commemoration of the revelation at Sinai. Recall that Sinai is the basis for modern observance of the Noahide laws, not the Noahic covenant.

²² A poetic reference to the prophets. See Psalm 69:1.

²³ Zech. 4:2.

²⁴ This statement shows up in many places. See *Midrash Tebillim* 16:12; *Pseikta d’Rav Kehana*, 27:2.

²⁵ See note 5, above.

The First of Kislev

It is an appropriate custom of Noahides (yet not an obligation) to acknowledge the first of Kislev as the day upon which the Noahic covenant was struck. Prayers should reflect this fact and should mention the rainbow as a sign of God's promise. They should also mention the hope that all man will return to God.

Meat-centered communal meals on the 1st of Kislev commemorate the permission to eat meat. In particular, communal barbecues in memory of the sacrifices that Noah offered are appropriate (and fun!).

Of course, Torah study should focus on the meaning of the covenant and of God's promise.