

‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’

A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 2020

Rabbi Steve Golden

While not the most ancient of the biblical festivals, Rosh Hashanah is a momentous day which the Sages enhanced with diverse spiritual content. The sounding of the shofar is a visceral prop that serves as a metaphor not only to denote our acceptance of G-d’s kingship, but doubles as a call to human introspection and repentance. The textures, flavors, and names of the special *‘yehi ratsones’* delicacies eaten on Rosh Hashanah evening remind us of G-d’s bounty, and prompt those gathered at the table to reflect and pray. Yet, arguably the profoundest vehicle the Sages designed for the New Year festival is the Musaf amidah - the crown of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy.

The Musaf of Rosh Hashanah is among the oldest of all our liturgical texts. It is also the longest of any amidah that we recite during the year. The single middle blessing familiar from Shabbat and Yom Tov now becomes three distinct sections. Each section is built around ten biblical verses that address a specific theme: Malkhuyot/Sovereignty, Zikhronot/Remembrance, and Shofarot/Sounding of the Horn. Together these sections direct the worshipper to concentrate on three aspects of G-d’s supremacy: infinite authority; infinite awareness; and infinite presence.

The middle section, *G-d’s Remembrance*, begins with an introductory passage that segues into a verse about Noah:

וְגַם אֶת נֹחַ בְּאַהֲבָה זָכַרְתָּ. וַתִּפְקְדֵהוּ בְדַבָּר יְשׁוּעָה וַרְחֵמִים בְּהַבְיָאֵךְ אֶת מֵי הַמַּבּוּל לְשַׁחַת כָּל בֶּשָׂר מִפְּנֵי רֹעַ מַעֲלָלֵיהֶם. עַל כֵּן זָכְרוֹנוֹ בָּא לְפָנֶיךָ ד' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְהַרְבוֹת וַרְעוֹ כְּעֶפְרוֹת תַּבַּל. וַאֲצַאצְאִיו כְּחֹל הַיָּם. כִּפְתּוּב בַּתּוֹרָתְךָ וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת נֹחַ וְאֶת כָּל הַחַיָּה וְאֶת כָּל הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בַּתֵּבָה וַיַּעֲבֵר אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁכּוּ הַמַּיִם:

‘Of Noah also You were mindful in Your love, and did remember him with a promise of salvation and mercy, when You brought the waters of the flood to destroy all flesh on account of their evil deeds. So his remembrance came before You, L-rd our G-d, to increase his seed like the dust of the earth, and his offspring like the sand of the sea: as it is written in Your Torah, “And G-d remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all cattle that were with him in the ark: and G-d made a wind to pass over the earth; and the waters subsided”.’

G-d’s solicitous remembrance of the world is thus tied to the end of the flood when G-d’s covenant and love for Creation is symbolized by the rainbow.

The climax, or crescendo if you will, of this great revelation - the Rainbow that was revealed to Noah after the terrible flood - was a sign of hope. And nowhere more emphatically do we find the development of this idea in Scripture than in the vision of Ezekiel the prophet.

Chapter 1 of Ezekiel is a theophany famous for its fantastical imagery, and has ever captivated the human imagination.

Ezekiel, the prophet-priest, was among the Israelite exiles dwelling by the river Kebar in Babylon. There the hand of the L-rd came upon him one day: the heavens were opened and he beheld a divine vision.

The vision begins with a mighty wind and storm clouds accompanied by flashes of lightning and brilliant light. Within was a radiance like burnished brass, glowing in the heart of the flames. Also in the vision he saw the semblance of fiery living creatures with wings, legs, hooves and human hands. The heads of the creatures had four faces, each facing a different direction; one of the faces was human, one a lion's, one an ox's and one an eagle's.

Alongside the creatures there were wheels within wheels, with hubs, rims and spokes. When the living creatures moved, the wheels moved beside them; when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose; they moved in whatever direction the spirit would go; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

Above the heads of the living creatures was a vault, glistening like an awesome sheet of ice. When the creatures moved, the noise of their wings was like the noise of a great torrent or a cloud-burst, like the noise of an army on the move. And above the vault over their heads there appeared a sapphire throne, and high above all, upon the throne, a glowing form, fiery and radiant.

This is perhaps the most extraordinary revelation among the priestly texts in Scripture. It is a vision of a covenant with the entire world: objects animate and inanimate; humans; animals; heavenly beings; earth; sky; water; fire. Yet, once again as with Noah, the experience climaxes with a vision of a rainbow:

Ezekiel 1:28

כַּמְרָאָה הַקֶּשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר יְהִיָּה בְּעֵינֵי בְּיּוֹם הַגִּשְׁמִים כִּן מְרָאָה הַנִּגְהָ סָבִיב הוּא מְרָאָה דְּמוֹת כְּבוֹד־ד' וְאַרְאָה וְאַפֵּל
עַל־פְּנֵי וְאַשְׁמַע קוֹל מְדַבֵּר:”

“Like a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day was the sight of that encircling radiance; it was like the appearance of the glory of the L-RD. When I saw this, I threw myself on my face, and heard a voice speaking to me.”

Ezekiel saw many things in his vision, but only when he got to the rainbow is he reminded of G-d's glory. In the prophet's mind, all creation is a reminder of G-d. The rainbow, however, has an additional dimension: it forecasts revelation. Undoubtedly, everything reminds us of G-d; but the miracle is G-d's connection to the world.

Awareness of this connection with the universe is a foundation of religion. Therefore, the study of natural sciences is crucially important. Our efforts to understand the world around us not only give us tools and techniques to thrive, but they deepen our appreciation of how we are a part of the huge tapestry of Creation. The ancients had their rudimentary methods of assimilating the empirical data they gleaned from contemplating nature. And their science helped them - as our scientific knowledge helps us today - to derive moral imperatives for dealing with human power, freedom, and agency - the very things which make us creatures in G-d's image.

But G-d's glory stands above all. Because of this, some say that G-d is distant and unreachable, but the prophets of Israel taught differently: G-d breaks through the infinite to establish His presence and communicate His will to humanity. So while we stewards of Torah embrace the study of natural sciences, there is another dimension to reality that we also need to ponder: the link between Creator and Creation.

Ezekiel has an epiphany, in which the rainbow figures as the symbol of G-d's permanent covenant and connection with the world. The rainbow is an overwhelming sign of hope. For a moment let's try and see it through the prophet's eyes. The people are dislocated, uncomfortable, depressed, even perhaps in danger. And there is a big storm, with torrential rain, thunder and lightning. Everything is dark and gloomy. And then, all of a sudden, you look up to see the sky clearing, and there it is: the beautiful rainbow! It is a majestic moment, an offer of hope, a huge positive experience.

As we mentioned last year, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, and it is truly not a time to think in narrow ways. Some days in the year we *do* have to think first of those who are nearest to us. There is a definite pecking order: family, friends, community, nation - these are all necessary for a society to function. But on Rosh Hashanah, the sages tried to align our focus with the largest possible aperture, where there is room for everyone in the picture.

The central thought on the New Year is positive. If we allow it, positivity can go a long way to dispel darkness. Sometimes it's only a split second, like the ephemeral rainbow.

So many people over the past few months have been close to desperation, locked up in their homes, losing patience, maybe losing faith. After this long gloomy time of isolation and quarantine, we now have the gift of Rosh Hashanah, a new year that includes a focus on the rainbow, the sign of G-d's compassion, love and connection with Creation - of which we are a part.

A rainbow is intangible, unreachable, and ephemeral. G-d rested His covenant not in something solid and unshakable, but in a bodiless, colorful bow of vapor refracted in the sunlight. By choosing the rainbow, G-d conveyed to humanity that His power can be seen not only in great mountains and mighty oceans—but also in something as insubstantial and transient as a rainbow. This natural phenomenon is suggestive of the glory of G-d Himself, and should inspire within us a sense of awe and mystery.

The rainbow of the Noah story tells us of G-d's promise of covenant with all life, all humanity, and all living creatures. The rainbow of Ezekiel's vision reaffirms G-d's connection with humanity via revelation. These two rainbows read in tandem offer a new perspective during Rosh Hashanah. The beauty of the spectrum of colors beams a message of hope. But the story recalled in our musaf prayer marks the pivotal moment when G-d, as it were, turned over a new leaf as if shocked by mass punishment. Henceforth all life, sinning life and all, "Thou rememberest with love" - in the words of the ancient liturgy.

Thus, on Rosh Hashanah we are reminded that somewhere, over the rainbow, G-d awaits our recognition of His eternal covenant with humanity.

'Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far
Behind me
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
Away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me...'

The lyrics of this beloved song parallel the familiar prayer that ushers in our High Holy Day season:

תכלה שנה וקללותיה...תחל שנה וברכותיה

‘May the year and its woes end...May the year begin with Your blessings’. Amen.

The leadership and staff of the Sephardic Temple joins me in wishing the entire congregation - and community beyond - Anyada Buena Y Dulce/Tizkoo Leshaneem Rabbot/Shanah Tovah!