

## A Tale of Two Covenants: Rainbow and Shmita (The Sabbatical Year)

The following teaching texts come from the Rainbow Day curriculum, available at [jewcology.com/resource/Rainbow-Day](http://jewcology.com/resource/Rainbow-Day) – use the curriculum to incorporate the observance of Rainbow Day into Shabbat Behar, or into your preparation for Shavuot. Rainbow Day, the 27th of Iyyar, which falls this year on May 6-7, is the date when Noah's family and the animals left the ark and received the Rainbow Covenant. The Rainbow Day curriculum includes wonderful resources for children and for religious school classes, as well as midrash and art projects on rainbows, songs and advocacy ideas, garden plans, and more.

1. The story of the flood in *Bereishit* (Genesis 9:12-17) describes the rainbow covenant as a covenant with all living creatures, and with the *aretz*, the Earth or the land:

יב ויאמר אלהים זאת אות הברית אשר אני נותן ביני וביניכם ובין כל נפש חיה אשר אתכם לזרתי עולם. יג את-קשתית נתתי בענן והיתה לאות ברית ביני ובין הארץ. יד והיה בענני ענן על הארץ ונראתה הקשת בענן. טו וזכרתי את-בריתי אשר ביני וביניכם ובין כל נפש חיה בכל-בשר ולא-יהיה עוד המים למבוי לשחת כל-בשר. טז והיתה הקשת, בענן; וראיתה לזכר ברית עולם בין אלהים ובין כל נפש חיה בכל-בשר אשר על הארץ. יז ויאמר אלהים אל-נח: זאת אות הברית אשר הקמתי ביני ובין כל-בשר אשר על הארץ.

And *Elohim* (God) said, this is the sign of the covenant which I am putting between Me and between you and between every living soul which is with you, for generations forever. My bow I have put in the cloud and she will be a sign of covenant between Me and between the Earth. And it will be, when I am clouding over the Earth, and the bow will appear in the cloud, then I will remember My covenant that is between Me and between you and between all soul living in all flesh. And there will never again be the waters for a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow will be in the cloud, and I will look at her, to remember an eternal covenant between *Elohim* and between all soul living in all flesh which is on the Earth. This is the sign of the covenant which I am establishing between Me and between all flesh which is on the Earth.

*This is the first time a covenant is mentioned in the Torah. Something you may not have noticed, but which is so fundamentally important, is that the animals have a place in Rainbow covenant alongside human beings, and that the Earth, or land, is a partner equal to all of them. Use the study sheet on the whole flood story available on [jewcology.com/resource/Rainbow-Day](http://jewcology.com/resource/Rainbow-Day) to go more in depth with these verses.*

2. As in the Rainbow Covenant, the land is a primary partner in the Sinai Covenant of the Sabbatical year or Shmita, read on Shabbat Behar. (Leviticus 25) In Lev. 26:34, God declares that the people will be exiled from the land if they don't observe Shmita, so that the land can "enjoy her sabbaths." For more resources on Shmita, go to [shmitaproject.org/](http://shmitaproject.org/).

ויקרא כה:א וידבר יהוה אל משה בהר סיני לאמר. ב דבר אל בני ישראל, ואמרת אליהם, כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר אני נותן לכם ושבתה הארץ שבת לי-הנה. ג שש שנים תזרע שדה ושש שנים תזמר פרמך ואספת את תבואתה. ד ובשנה השביעית שבת שבתון יהיה לארץ שבת לי-הנה שדה לא תזרע וכרמך לא תזמר. ה את ספית קצירך לא תקצור ואת-ענבי גזירך לא תבצר שנת שבתון יהיה לארץ. ו והיתה שבת הארץ לכם לאכלה לה ולעבדך ולאמתך ולשכירך ולתושבך הגרים עמך. ז ולבהמתך ולחיה אשר בארצך תהיה כל תבואתה לאכל

And *Hashem* (*YHVH*) spoke to Moshe in Mount Sinai, saying: Speak unto Israel's children and say unto them: You will come unto the land I am giving you, and the land will rest, a shabbat for *Hashem*. Six years you will sow your field...and in the seventh year, it will be a *Shabbat Shabbaton* (an ultimate shabbat) for the land, a shabbat for *Hashem*. You will not sow your field...And the "shabbat" of the land (what grows by itself) will be for you for eating...and for your animals and for the wild animal which is in your land...

*The wild animals are also mentioned in the Shmita covenant, and what grows from the land is for them as well as for the people. In this respect, the Shmita covenant is more like Eden, where animals and people share the*

food from the garden. (The rabbis took this very seriously: fields were not allowed to be completely enclosed during Shmitah, and people could only eat and store the foods that were actually growing in the field at that time.) The wild animals, which are explicitly partners in the Rainbow covenant, have a privileged status in the Shmita covenant.

Go to [jewcology.com/resource/Genesis-Covenant-Jubilee-Shmitah-and-the-Land-Ethic](http://jewcology.com/resource/Genesis-Covenant-Jubilee-Shmitah-and-the-Land-Ethic) to explore this relationship in depth. Find more resources on Shmita at [shmitaproject.org/](http://shmitaproject.org/).

3. The following verse from Hoshea (2:20) promises a new covenant with all life:

הוֹשֵׁעַ ב:כ וְכָרַתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עִם-חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְעִם-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְרִמָּשׁ הָאֲדָמָה וְקִשְׁתׁ וְחֶרֶב וּמִלְחָמָה אֲשַׁבֵּר מִן-הָאָרֶץ וְהַשְּׂכָרְתִּים לָבֹטָה.

*V'kharati lahem brit bayom hahu im chayot hasadeh v'im of hashamayim v'remes ha'adamah v'keshet v'cherev umilchamah eshbor min ha'aretz v'hishkavtim lavetach*

I will make a covenant for them on that day, with the wild animal of the field and with the bird of the skies and all crawling on the earth; and bow and sword and war I will break from the land, and they will lay down in safety.

*In the rainbow covenant after the flood, even though the animals and human beings were equal partners, humans were given permission to kill and eat meat, and God told them that “a fear and terror of you” will be upon all the animals. Like the rainbow covenant of the flood, Hoshea foresees a covenant which will include all the creatures of the Earth. Unlike the flood story, however, Hoshea imagines a time when the not only God, but also human beings, have laid down their bow, “so that all may safely rest”. The prophetic vision of Hoshea is also reflected in the Shmita rules about sharing our food with the animals,*

*While the idea of covenant may be hard to teach young children, the image of a world in which the wild animals, along with all people, are safe from war, is easy to talk about. It also makes for a great art project.*

4. The verse from Hoshea has been set to a song, which you can teach and use on Shabbat Behar or Rainbow Day.

*The English translation sung by Amen is: “On that day, I will make a covenant with the beasts and the birds, with all creatures that walk on the Earth, and bow and sword and battle will disappear from the land, so that all may safely rest.” Shimshai’s translation is slightly different. Both are beautiful.*

It is especially good for classroom settings and campfires. There are two places you can listen to this song. Go to [neohasid.org](http://neohasid.org) to see a video of Shimshai singing this song, or go to:

[gabrielmeyerhalevy.bandcamp.com/track/hoshea](http://gabrielmeyerhalevy.bandcamp.com/track/hoshea) to listen to it. This audio-only version comes from the album “Hatevah: Nature—Skin of God” by Amen (Gabriel Meyer Halevy and Amir Paiss).

5. A teaching from the Shalom Center:

Shabbat Behar-Bechukotai, May 3-4, 2013, is when we read in Leviticus 25 about the rhythm of rest for the Earth and human Earthlings—for a year, every seventh year—a commitment that according to Torah came straight from Sinai. It is followed in the Jewish calendar this year by Rainbow Day, the 27th of Iyyar, on May 6-7—the date when Noah’s family and the animals left the ark and received the Rainbow Covenant. Noah’s name means “Restful One,” and both these moments beckon us toward a sacred, restful relationship with Earth.

Shabbat Behar and Rainbow Day also beckons us toward the following week’s celebration of Shavuot (May 13-14), the festival with a double meaning: the fulfillment of both the spring’s wheat harvest and the fulfilling Covenant at Sinai with YHWH, the “Interbreathing” of all life, and the symbol of that covenant in the celebration of Shabbat. Again, rest is the central recollection of the In-Breath/Out-Breath that intertwines all life.

On the other side, there is a foreboding contrast between the Rainbow Covenant, and the pollution of Planet Earth with overburning fossil fuels. The tension between these dynamic relationships in many ways defines the predicament of our time.

“YHWH” Itself—the Holy Name that can only be “pronounced” by breathing—reminds us that we

breathe in what the trees breathe out; the trees breathe in what we breathe out. What we call the “climate crisis” is a dangerous imbalance in those breathings—carbon dioxide and oxygen—in our planetary atmosphere. The “climate crisis” is a crisis in the very Name of God.

The connection between the Sabbatical and Jubilee years and the covenant with Noah and the animals is no mere accident. How so? The covenant of Noah’s time—the first covenant recorded in the Torah—includes the land and the animals as covenant partners with God alongside the human family. This is also the case with the sabbatical/Jubilee covenant: the land is promised her Sabbaths as a condition for the Israelites to settle upon the land, while the people are required in the Sabbatical year, when the land is resting, to open their fences to allow the wild animals in to eat their fill.

The first condition—to let the land rest—is a fulfillment of the promise in the rainbow covenant that God will no longer destroy the land because of humanity: here God promises to exile humanity in order to save the land from being destroyed. The second condition—allowing the wild animals into the fields—is a *tikkun*, a healing, for what happened after the rainbow covenant: even though the animals were partners in God’s covenantal promise not to destroy the earth, they afterwards became fodder for the humans (“like green plants I give you them all”).

Instead, here, in the Sabbatical year, the humans are required to allow their agriculture to go wild and to invite the wild animals to share what grows. This is not only a *tikkun* for the permission granted to human beings to eat animals. It is also a return to the Garden of Eden, where animals and human beings shared the same food.

In the rainbow covenant God promised not to destroy the Earth because of us, but God did not promise that we wouldn’t destroy the Earth. As the oil industry and our oil addiction threaten vast ecosystems, important food sources, and endangered species, we must realize that God’s covenant is not enough to save us. The iridescent colors reflected off an oil slick are like a twisted and distorted rainbow. They remind us that we have reached a point where we can undo God’s rainbow covenant at the expense of our own lives and the lives of other creatures.

This echoes what Rabbi Arthur Waskow taught in The Shalom Center’s early days, when the Center was focused on the dangers of the nuclear arms race. He urged that the 27th of Iyyar, Yom HaKeshet, Rainbow Day, be observed as a day of commitment to end the nuclear danger. Rabbi Waskow pointed out that observers of some H-Bomb tests reported that the mushroom cloud was filled with eerie beauty -- sparks of every color of the rainbow. The Rainbow shattered. As ancient rabbinic midrash warns and a Southern black spiritual sings: “God gave Noah the Rainbow Sign: No more water, the Fire next time.” Whether the Fire is nuclear holocaust or global climate “scorching,” it is a shattered, twisted version of the Rainbow Sign that appears to us in our own inventions, de-creating God’s creation, shattering God’s promise.

These are the worst of times, because the threat is that close and that enormous. And these are the best of times, because we can wake up to our potential for love and righteousness and create a sustainable world, a world that reflects the rainbow covenant as it was meant to be: a promise to honor and cherish all beings, as God does, and so to act in God’s image.

How can we act with vigor to create a planetary Beloved Community? We must address the Pharaohs of Big Oil, Big Coal, Big Gas, which are bringing these plagues upon the Earth, as did the ancient Pharaoh, who through arrogance and stubbornness brought locusts, hailstorms, and death upon his country.

*One of the most effective pro-Earth action groups in calling for an end to the dominion of the Pharaohs of fossil fuel is [350.org](http://350.org).*

co-authored by Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi David Seidenberg ([neohasid.org](http://neohasid.org))