

“HALF A RAINBOW”

The story of Noah culminates in a promise to humanity that God will not destroy the world again. This promise, symbolized by the rainbow, contains a chilling omission. God does not promise that we will never destroy ourselves.

For all the blessings of modernity, the shadow stalking humanity is the knowledge that we can actually destroy ourselves. “Saving the planet” is a misnomer. The planet does not need to be saved. We do. The earth, the ground, the dust, will remain. Life on earth is in danger from our folly and cruelty. After the flood Noah gets drunk because he cannot face up to what has been done. It is our urgent mandate to stay sober, in every sense of the word, so that we can cope with what we are able to do.

Rabbi Joshua of Kutna pointed out long ago that the rainbow was a half circle. He assumed that was because we have only the power to do half of what we wish in the world -- our free will is limited. But perhaps the half circle represents God’s promise to us -- I will not destroy you. The other half is our promise to God -- we will not destroy ourselves.