

The True Meaning of the Rainbow; An Homage to Orlando
Parashat Naso, June 18, 2016; 12 Sivan 5776
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

A few weeks ago we were enjoying a lovely se'udah shlishit...a relaxing afternoon Shabbat meal with the Ozur Bass's at their home. It had been raining since the night before and for most of Shabbat, when finally the rain stopped, the clouds parted just enough for a few late afternoon rays of sunlight to shine through and the most glorious rainbow I have ever seen appeared in the sky. Roy G. Biv was present in the sky in all his majesty... You remember Roy G. Biv from middle school science class: The acronym for the colors of the rainbow? Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. The famed author and scientist Isaac Asimov once complained that indigo really didn't deserve to be singled out as its own color in the rainbow, since indigo is so often indistinguishable from its blue and violet neighbors. Well Professor Asimov didn't see this rainbow... Every single color was brilliantly distinguished from the next, in broad, bright bands, painting a perfect arc across the sky.

Now what does a religious Jew do when he or she sees a rainbow? The answer is, say a *beracha!* Yes, there's even a blessing for seeing a rainbow...but there's more. The Talmud records the following practice. Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: *Ha'roeh et ha'keset be'anan*, one who sees a rainbow amidst the clouds, *tzarich she'yipol al panav* must fall on his face, prostrate himself, because, quoting the prophet Ezekiel, the rainbow is *dmot k'vod Hashem*...the likeness of the glory of God. So since the rainbow is a phenomenon that contains something of God's glory, the practice upon seeing one in the sky was to get down on your hands and knees and bow to the ground! But then the Talmud goes on to say: *layti ala bema'arava*: they condemned this practice in *Eretz Yisrael*, *mishum d'chezey k'man d'sagid l'kashta*, because it appears like a person is actually bowing down to or worshiping the rainbow itself. It looks like *avodah zarah*, like idolatry! I have to say, I'm happy this practice was shelved, because it would have been pretty strange to see the Raskin and Ozur Bass families on our hands and knees on the wet pavement, in the middle of their street! Instead the sages council that we should say a blessing: *Baruch...zocheir ha'brit*, blessed is God who remembers the covenant. And some add the words, *ve'neeman bivrito ve'kayam b'maamaro*, calling God trustworthy and a God who keeps His word. Of course that *bracha* refers to the promise God made to Noah's generation, to never destroy the world by flood again.

The dramatic sight of a rainbow has captivated the human imagination for time immemorial. Kids and adults are equally mesmerized by rainbows. Nearly every culture from Greco-Roman to Chinese, Hindu to Norse, and who can forget the Irish pot of gold...all have stories and myths related to rainbows. But I want to go back to the first idea, the Jewish claim that a rainbow contains something of God's essential truth. That a rainbow is so resplendent, so stirring that people were moved to prostrate themselves in awe at the sight of one in the sky! For Jews, the rainbow is an arc that connects heaven and earth, the link between divine and the terrestrial. It is a reversed weapon; the string of the bow toward the earth so that arrows would shoot away from people rather than towards them. The rainbow, according to the 19th Century German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch "in the midst of overcast, threatening clouds announces the presence of light...a reminder that God's preserving grace is still there." In a remarkably advanced scientific observation for his time, Rabbi Hirsch correctly notes in his commentary to Genesis 9:17 that a rainbow is really one white light, or alternatively the entire spectrum of color contained in a pure

white ray before being altered by water droplets. Could this not be meant to say that all shades of mankind are united together in one common bond of peace...all refracted rays of the one spirit of God...?

This week, monuments and government buildings around the world lit up in the colors of the rainbow...Tel Aviv City Hall, the Colosseum in Rome, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Spiral atop One World Trade in New York...all in solidarity with the victims of the largest mass shooting in American history, who were overwhelmingly members of the LGBT community in Orlando. Last week, as we gathered for Yizkor on Shavuot, I had a lovely sermon prepared connecting the memory of Sinai with the memory of our loved ones. But when I stood here after reading the newspaper reports of the bloodshed and carnage that morning, I could not give that sermon. I could not just proceed as normal, as if nothing particularly out of the ordinary had taken place in our country. Perhaps I'll save that sermon for some other time, perhaps I'll never give it. In 1938 Abraham Joshua Heschel addressed a conference of Quakers and said: "This is a time to cry out. One is ashamed to be human. One is embarrassed to be called religious in the face of religion's failure to keep alive the vision of God in the face of man." In 39% of the member states of the United Nations, homosexuality is illegal, even between consenting adults. That's 75 countries where men and women can be imprisoned, tortured, and receive the death penalty solely because of their sexual identity. ISIS hurls people suspected of being gay off the rooftops of buildings. In Iran, homosexuals are flogged. Many endure beatings and sexual assaults by their own family members. Depression, loneliness, and paranoia are rampant. Trust me, there are no gay bars in Gaza City! Some reports are suggesting that the Orlando shooter was himself either gay or struggling with his sexuality...but when your ancestral culture criminalizes you and stigmatizes your family because of who you are, it's clear how that kind of self-loathing can lead to acts of extreme violence.

Last week we became painfully aware that in this country, despite progressive legislation and Supreme Court decisions, and notwithstanding increased social acceptance in this country that that LGBT community is still a major target of violence and murder. In a remarkable piece printed in the Washington Post on June 13th, the Roman Catholic Bishop of St. Petersburg, FL said "sadly, it is religion, including our own, that targets, mostly verbally, and often breeds contempt for gays, lesbians, and transgender people. Attacks today on LGBT men and women often plant the seed of contempt, then hatred, which can ultimately lead to violence." He went on, "These women and men who were mowed down Sunday were all made in the image and likeness of God. We teach that. We should believe that. We must stand for that." Friends, that is also what *we* teach and what *we* must believe. It doesn't matter what anyone believes about the definition of marriage or the interpretation of biblical texts. Contempt, hatred, and violence that is stoked by religion, any religion, is a particularly heinous sin.

In today's Torah portion there was a repetition of the gifts each tribal leader brought to the altar. Every single one of them brought the identical gift, yet the Torah saw fit to repeat that fact 12 times, once for each of the tribes and their leaders. Commentators wondering about that tedious repetitiveness offered the idea that while on the outside each of these gifts looked the same, in truth each of the princes brought them with their own unique inclinations, ideas, needs, life experiences. What made these offerings unique was not their outward appearance but the spirit with which they were offered. Just like the rainbow, a white light refracted into 7 unique colors our tradition teaches that our diversity and individuality is actually secondary to the fact that we

are all just people...One great human family, which is the ultimate cause for unity and mutual respect. The next time you see a rainbow, I hope you'll say a beracha...don't bow down or prostrate yourself. But say a blessing that acknowledges that somehow God's essence and glory is contained in those multi-colored bands of light. May God's glory illuminate once and for all, the darkest, most benighted places in our world.