

Rainbow
Parashat Noah
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A collection of unconnected, disjointed thoughts and reactions of this past week.
But first, a reflection on today's parsha.

A couple years ago, at this exact time of year I encountered a rainbow in a way I never had before. It was so close, so vivid, I did not just see it. I crossed the street and put my hand inside it. The sun was shining right through the raindrops and the colors of the rainbow shimmered and danced. There it was in its entirety, arced, all the way to the bottom on both ends. I fully expected to see leprechauns burying a pot of gold.

You may know that there is a bracha for seeing a rainbow, as there is for a number of natural phenomena (hearing thunder, seeing a falling star). The bracha – for the next time you see a rainbow-- is ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם זוכר הברית ונאמן
ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם זוכר הברית ונאמן Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe Who remembers the covenant and is faithful to Your covenant and keeps Your promise.
{More on that covenant and promise in a moment.}



Later I read up on this bracha. How often should we recite it? Every glimpse of a rainbow? How much of the rainbow do we have to see to trigger the bracha? (It turns out I'm a rainbow nerd, and I didn't even know there was such a thing.) And then I read a curious detail. According to Mishna Brurah (an authoritative halachic source) if you see a rainbow, you should not tell your friends. In fact, you should recite the bracha quietly so as not to alert anyone to the rainbow, because "It's like spreading evil tidings."

That's surprising— I have only associated rainbows with positive imagery. What could be the connection between a rainbow and evil tidings?

First appearance of rainbow in Jewish tradition is famously found in today's parsha. What is the function of this first rainbow? It is a sign of God's promise following the flood: "I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing...on earth. Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the world." God further said, "this is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh."

The rainbow, then is a sign of a new covenant – the promise to never again unleash a flood upon the whole earth.

The word that appears in this parsha, and in fact the modern Hebrew word *keshet* can indeed mean rainbow, but originally *keshet* means a bow, as in bow and arrows. Think about what a bow looks like. It's an arc, a half circle. When held normally it's a weapon with its arc down and its ammunition aimed at the earth (or creatures on the earth) below. When God inverts the bow and hangs it in the sky, that weapon is literally and figuratively disarmed. Any arrows it shoots will go straight up, harmlessly into the sky. "I have set My bow in the clouds," God says. This is the weapon of My anger, but I have contained it and rendered it harmless.

And when God inverts that bow, and disarms it, Noah and his family, all that's left of humanity after the flood, should be ready to re-enter the world. With this new covenant, with God's anger neutralized, they feel life can continue.

But here's the thing: that sign that it was safe to restart life is a retooling of the very object that represents God's wrath—a wrath that destroyed almost all life. The bow is a symbol of anger and destruction. And that same bow, turned on its side is a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Notice God does not say, "I wasn't really angry" or "My anger is not so powerful" or even "I won't ever again be angry with humanity". Rather, God acknowledges that anger and its terrible power. God -- *and we* -- are reminded of

that anger with the appearance of every rainbow. God promises though, that despite that anger, to never again allow the flood waters to overrun the earth. So that rainbow I saw, bright and twinkling, well that did in fact harbor a reminder of God's anger – indeed it contained a hint of evil tidings.

When I was a little kid, we colored rainbows in all our art projects – they symbolized peace and contentment and were right up there with smiling suns and unicorns, a general feel-good image. But for over 40 years the rainbow has taken on a more pointed symbolism.

In 1978 artist and performer Gilbert Baker designed the first rainbow flag. He was commissioned by Harvey Milk to create the flag for San Francisco's lgbt pride parade. That flag has become ubiquitous in the years since. And in those years since the rainbow has come to represent, as Baker intended, togetherness and inclusion.

We often think of inclusion to mean recognizing all stripes of humanity. But I would suggest that the inclusion symbolized by the rainbow is even broader than that. The rainbow symbolizes the full spectrum of emotions and characteristics. Anger and peace, destruction and reconciliation are all elements of the bow God hangs in clouds. The promise God makes is not, "I will never be angry again" but "I will balance My anger and not again allow it to wreak total destruction. *I will temper that rage with peace*". All inherent in the same symbol.

The fullness of human experience is expressed in the rainbow. Think for a minute. In our world, a 13-year-old is a child, still maturing and completely dependent on his parents for his most basic needs. And yet today, with no irony, we celebrate the coming of age of a Jewish man. Both are true. The same boy who will need to be driven to his party tonight is a fully competent man who taught us Torah this morning. Both characteristics coexist in the same person at the same moment. So I've been thinking, What else might the rainbow contain?

In Tractate Ketubot of the Babylonian Talmud we read a discussion that may at one time have seemed quaint: what to do when a funeral procession and a wedding procession meet at a crossroad. § The Sages taught: One reroutes the funeral procession for burial of a corpse to yield before the wedding procession of a bride.

We stand today at a metaphorical crossroads, between grieving our tragedy and celebrating a religious milestone within a family, within a community, indeed within the House of Israel. For a moment, for a day, that celebration takes precedence. We can hold both grieving and simcha in our hearts.

My friends, we must.

We are likely to be at this crossroads for a long time.

(Note that the Shulchan Arukh distinguishes between celebration for a general or secular cause on the one hand, and joyous even raucous celebration of

a religious milestone on the other. So I stand with and endorse the decision of leadership to restructure tomorrow's celebration to one of communal gathering.)

One of the more painful themes I am hearing is the refrain that our friends who are not Jewish or connected to Israel do not see our pain or do not want to wade into understanding it. As Liat says, the silence of my non-Jewish friends is deafening. I cannot say she's wrong. And yet...

Three days ago, Minority Leader Representative Hakeem Jeffries addressed a Jewish gathering (where he gave a drash on Parshat Noah way shorter than I've managed) and concluded with the following: "I know that the pain is real. The vulnerability is understandable. But I want the Jewish community to know that you are not alone. You have friends in the African American community. The African American mayor of New York City, the largest city in America, stands with you. The only African American governor stands with you. The African American Secretary of Defense stands with you. And the highest ranking African American ever to serve in Congress stands with you and with Israel today. You have friends."

I have spent countless hours this week in front of my computer. Reading (and responding as I am able) to those of you who shared with me the names of your family in Israel, where they are, how well they are managing to hold on, what

your prayers are for them. When I asked you to share those names and stories with me and I had no idea how important that would turn out to be.

And in those hours in front of my computer this week I have seen online too many beautiful children and young adults whose families ache for them grievously. Heard too many stories. Psalm 77 echoes in my head: “My eyes flow all night without respite; I will not be comforted. Has God forgotten how to pity?”

So imagine my surprise, my delight on Wednesday evening – and this is the final image I want to leave you with – at the first session of this year’s conversion class. Conversion to Judaism. On my way to the synagogue where class meets, I wondered if anyone would actually show up. How is it possible *this week* that someone would want to become Jewish? eager for the first And yet, there they were: The classroom packed with twenty and thirtysomethings fully cognizant of the sense of loneliness, of rage, of anguish, even danger, and ready to stand with us, to weep with us today and to celebrate with us tomorrow.

Child and adult. Prayer and violence. Anger and reconciliation. Friendship and abandonment. Anguish and hope. Eilu v’eilu –they all live side by side in the same community, in the same person, in the same life. Denying one of these truths is like erasing one color of the rainbow. They are all part of the human experience.

<https://images.shulcloud.com/13691/uploads/Noah23.pdf>

