

Why Are There So Many Songs About Rainbows?

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Dvar Torah Noach

October 28, 2022

As we study this week's parashah, Noach, which covers the familiar story of the great flood, I'm compelled to ask what might seem like a familiar question: "Why are there so many songs about rainbows?" You may know the lyrics from *The Muppet Movie* song "Rainbow Connection," which opens with Kermit the Frog sitting on a lily pad, playing the banjo. It's a pretty idyllic scene until a human comes stumbling into the scene.

Everything we've been reading in the Torah from the start of Bereisheet a couple weeks ago has likewise been going pretty well. Sure, the whole Garden of Eden thing didn't work, out and Cain and Abel also went sideways. But, on the whole, things are pretty good. People are living extraordinarily long lives, hundreds of years in most cases, like Methuselah.

Suddenly, though, the earth is corrupt and The Eternal is determined to destroy it. And, so, the impending *mabul*, or flood—and Noah, a righteous man for his generation, is told to build an ark, bring in the animals two by two and wait it out with his family while the rest of the world drowns in a watery grave. Like I said, righteous for his generation—Noah didn't argue with God or warn anybody; he just started building the ark. But, at least this week's Torah portion has a wonderful, happy ending—one that features a rainbow, or *keshet*.

This morning, I sang with the preschool kids in our Early Childhood Education Center here at TBE. They are so filled with joy and are so innocent. One of my earliest memories, in a preschool not unlike our Early Childhood Education Center, was singing a different rainbow song. It essentially consists of naming the colors in the visible spectrum.

And most of us know the famous Harold Arlen song, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," written for the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, about an idyllic place, "Where trouble melts like lemon drops; High above the chimney tops; That's where you'll find me. ..." There are, in fact, dozens if not hundreds of songs about rainbows, and that's just in English!

At the end of the story of Noah and the Ark and the Flood, The Eternal makes a covenant to never again destroy the earth—and as a sign of that covenant, God produces a rainbow. And all the animals come out marching two by two, and all Noah's sons descend from the ark with their wives and children and repopulate the earth. The end, yay!!! Rainbows!

At least, that's the version we tell our children, so as not to scare them. But when we peer a little deeper at the story, it is a little dark, frightening even. One of the first things Noah did when he disembarked was plant a vineyard, so he could get drunk. Of course, that was after he built an altar upon which he sacrificed some of the animals. Perhaps *that's* what happened to the dinosaurs. ...

And what of the corruption of the earth God so detested? The lawlessness, hatred and murder. As it says in *Kohelet*, there is nothing new under the sun. The flood didn't change anything, the pattern just repeated itself. Indeed, with all the hatred and vitriol and war and destruction, and the disposal mentality with which we now treat our environment, I bet God wishes sometimes that that rainbow promise wasn't made.

It does sound a bit familiar, and perhaps that's why this tale has a happy ending. Because the very destruction God was bent on, we humans seem to do quite well. Why destroy the earth when He can let us destroy it ourselves? Of course, it is allegory and really about the imperfection of human nature, of which we know too well.

As I think about the rainbow and it being the symbol of diversity and pride, one can't not think of the dignity of human rights for the LGBTQ+ community that was hard fought and won in this country, and how precarious these rights now seem given the ominous tone once only heard as quiet snickers at cocktail parties and the disposition of the judiciary at the moment.

And not just for them, but for African Americans whose voting rights and indeed very lives are subject to the whims of slim white racial minorities in states where the memory of slavery and the Confederacy remain alive 157 years after the guns of the Civil War were silenced and nearly 55 years since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

And, more recently, the ugly hatred shown to Asian Americans, attacked openly on the streets of New York by ignorant thugs, who confuse their fellow American citizens for the cause of COVID, owing their allegiance to a certain cable news network.

Together with the stream of immigrants escaping hunger, famine, violence and war, be they from Latin America, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East or Ukraine, they in and of themselves comprise a rainbow.

And then, there are the Jews, those stiff-necked people whom, according to the song “National Brotherhood Week” by the great Jewish satirist Tom Lehrer, everybody hates. Antisemitism has been on the rise for some time now, and we all saw how under the previous presidential administration, despite there being Jews in the closest inner circles at the highest ranks, that permission, through dog-whistle or outright statement, was given to the most extreme antisemitic groups to recruit, organize and march through the streets of our cities like latter-day Brownshirts chanting, “Jews will not replace us.”

Just today, a man who broke into Nancy Pelosi’s home in San Francisco and assaulted her husband fomented the spread of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories online, this just days after the former President warned American Jews on social media that we “ought to get our act together.”

We know that words like that are what led to some “very fine people” creeping out of the back store rooms and from under rocks wearing bedsheets and hoods to escalate their attacks on Jewish Americans. They needn’t hide behind hoods anymore, they are proud to show their faces as well as their hate. It would be bad enough if it were just swastikas and fascist symbols, but now it’s hateful language in the streets and QAnon conspiracy theories about Jews and Israel that fill the Internet. And that’s not all. As we know too well, it’s escalated to actual physical violence. Visibly Jewish individuals, usually men, have been the targets of assault on the street or in restaurants, even here in New York City.

Then, there’s arson of synagogues in Texas, Massachusetts, Kentucky and even New York City. And worst of all, there are attacks on our houses of worship during worship, leading to murder and mayhem in Jewish congregations across the nation: Poway, California; Colleyville, Texas; and, of course, Pittsburgh. If you don’t have to pray protected by armed guards, you don’t know what it is like to be an American Jew in 2022.

This Shabbat is, tragically, the fourth anniversary of that horrible attack on the Tree of Life Congregation, where 11 of our fellow Jews were murdered in cold blood simply for being Jews. And to our dismay, the attacks of Jews have not ceased but increased. And to our disgust, the crazy conspiracy theories fueling the hatred behind the attacks have even been embraced by political representatives of the extreme right, like Marjorie Taylor Greene, who believes Jews controlling space lasers are responsible for forest fires—and she isn’t alone.

Other figures likewise embrace absurdity theories about Jews or blow dog whistles to bolster their bigoted political base. And, on the left as well, demonization of Israel and the Jewish political right to their homeland, called Zionism, have made life on college campuses and in the intellectual and cultural spheres hostile to Jews and specifically those who support Israel, even if critically. The ban of speakers who embrace Zionism by a diverse coalition of law school student organizations at UC Berkeley meant their own dean of students would be unable to speak on their campus.

Is this the rainbow coalition? One that is accepting of everyone? Unless you’re Jewish? Where are we, and what is happening? How is it that the allies in the struggle for liberation and equality have turned on us? How is it that though we have chanted “Sí, se puede!” or “Black Lives Matter!”, when Jews are attacked it is greeted with a shoulder shrug? Don’t Jewish lives also matter? Why do we feel so alone in the march for *our* lives?

The rise of antisemitism isn’t a subject I thought I’d ever be speaking about on the bima, except in a historical context. Growing up, it was never like this, at least not where I lived. But, now, it sometimes feels that we are under assault. Perhaps not here in Great Neck where a majority of the population is Jewish, but we can’t miss that every week there seems to be another incident in the news, another assault, another attack, and the drumbeat seems to grow more insistent from the right and the left.

So it should be no surprise that this week, an unhinged rap music mogul with failed presidential aspirations and what seems to be considerable delusion would feel comfortable saying what used to be the quiet part, out loud. He is even said to have enjoyed reading *Mein Kampf* and wanted to name one of his albums after Hitler, whom he apparently admires. It’s

disgusting, but we can take some comfort in that this is coming from a provocateur who recently wore a T-shirt sporting the words “White Lives Matter.”

After all, Kanye West is no Cornel West. Say what you will about the at-times controversial professor emeritus of African-American studies at Princeton and formerly at Harvard. The latter has the intelligence, academic heft and dialogue with the Jewish community, of which he is at times aligned and at others critical or at odds. Kanye is no Cornel. His anger and hatred of the Jews is the sort of classic canard—that Jews control the media and the entertainment industry, and exploit a certain race or class of people, namely African Americans. And, yes, that relationship between Jewish Americans and African Americans isn’t perfect and has its shameful chapters. But, on the whole, the lie of exploitation in the face of a shared sense of history, fate and the fight for equality among our peoples is a complaint that, like so many other things in our day and age, ignores the truth.

Here, in this very room, in this very synagogue, Dr. King rallied moral and financial support from the Jewish community of Great Neck, and assuredly members of this congregation, to wage that war on racism and inequality. We, the spiritual descendents of those who once sat in these very pews listening to his words, must not allow such bigotry and hatred to linger long in the ears of our countrymen and women.

Here, just two weeks away from the 84th anniversary of Kristallnacht on November 9, we are seeing it happen again in slow motion, here in the United States of America. The next day, Thursday, November 10, the Anti-Defamation League will hold a daylong conference and national gathering called Never Is Now at the Javits Center in New York City. Speakers will include figures like Congresswoman Liz Cheney, actor David Schwimmer, journalist Abigail Pogrebin and FBI Director Christopher Wray to literally just name several. I encourage you to look into it and attend.

A little closer to home, TBE will host an update on antisemitism from the ADL led by Alexander Friedfeld, who works with ADL's Center of Extremism where he monitors anti-government extremism, with a particular focus on the militia movement and the boogaloo movement. To date, he has trained thousands of federal, state and local law enforcement officers on a variety of extremism and domestic terrorism–related issues. That program will be held from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. on Sunday, November 20.

I don’t wish to come across as a complete fear monger. I think that, like the rainbow at the end of this week’s parashah, there are signs of hope. Kanye West has lost his record deal, his business endorsements, his agent and more. And people are indeed beginning to speak out about antisemitism. But posts on Facebook aren’t enough. Neither is hiding in our homes.

We will not be subject to another Kristallnacht, because our community can and does take measures to protect everyone who walks through our doors. We have hardened our facilities, but we must not harden our hearts or our minds. We need to educate ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. More importantly, we must not shrink from our allies in the fight for freedom when they are mistaken. We must remember to speak out against bigotry of all kinds—and especially from among our allies, because we do have our own place alongside them in the rainbow connection, with “the lovers, the dreamers and me.”