

GOD'S RAINBOW OATH.

The rain unfolds like sheets upon a corpse
as, desperate, the drifting Noah tries
to save the few while piloting his ship's
hull through the graveyard sea where all else lies.
He weeps, cruel irony that all this flood
became the instrument of utter death,
for he has more than once in wonder stood
as rain's touch let the parched ground utter breath.
But then his ark beneath an arc finds peace,
its many colors comfort in the sky,
which only days before had made life cease;
it covenants that earth will no more die.

And when I've felt like one among the dead,
I've watched God's rainbow oath and hoped instead.

I wrote this poem – a sonnet – a short while after a deep personal crisis. This was a time in our lives when I was beginning to feel like one among the dead, unsure if my family and I would come through the storm surrounding us or we would succumb to the rising flood waters. I remember walking outside on a Shabbat afternoon when our troubles were relentlessly unfolding. A torrential rain was just ending as the sun forced its way through the dissipating clouds, and sure enough the full arc of a luscious rainbow stretched across the sky above my house. Gazing silently, I imagined Noah and his family – the last remnants of the old, dead world and the sole founders of the brave new world ahead of them – gazing silently. The colors of the first rainbow shone against their faces. I thought

of the promise that God, the wearied, humbled, violent parent of corrupt humanity, whispered into Noah's ears as the rainbow sign beckoned to him, like God's arm, outstretched in comfort and consolation after the traumatic flood:

"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 the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." (Genesis 9:13-15)

I watched and listened to God's rainbow oath. At least for that fleeting moment, rather than continue to despair I hoped instead.

An amazing phenomenon, the rainbow. The random encounter between sunlight and raindrops high in the atmosphere results in a gigantic refraction of the light, with the rain acting as a natural prism to produce that ribbon of multicolored celestial highway. If we strip a rainbow of its artistic and poetic significance, if we denude it of any religious meaning which has been imputed to it, a rainbow is nothing more than the result of blind physical forces built into nature, amazing though those forces are, in and of themselves. However, our human dance with rainbows is, as it were, built into nature as well, for that dance emerges from a place so deep in the ancient heart of human striving. Consider our capacity to wonder at a rainbow's beauty, to be comforted by its covenantal symbolism, and to be inspired by the messages of hope woven by our many traditions around it. I

can't tell you if God literally placed rainbows in the heavens as a sign promising us that the world would never again return to the watery chaos of the great flood in the time of Noah. I can tell you that when I look at a rainbow, the storm-tossed ark of my own life finds a peace and a calm beneath the arcing majesty of that rainbow's many colors. As it were, I hear and see God's promise of redemption emerging from the deluged wreckage of my own anxieties and foibles. The clarity of hope is mine, even if only for a moment, and I feel as if I too, like my ancestor Noah, am ready to walk out into whatever lies ahead in the world.

Perhaps this is why our Jewish ancestors created this specific blessing to be recited upon seeing a rainbow:

You are praised, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe: You remember the covenant with Noah, whose promise of life to humanity You fulfill without fail.

God's promise of life to us humans -the children of Noah – is not a one-time thing.

It is a leap of faith that we take with God upon every breath, every day; even and especially in the worst crises that humanity suffers, whether they are diseases imposed upon us from without or disasters that we bring upon ourselves from within. We will continue for some time to struggle through the dark devastations of COVID and the consequences of our democracy drifting away. I urge each of us

to identify our rainbows – real and metaphoric, religious or secular, individual or collective, at which we can look up to find solace and inspiration.

And when we feel like those among the dead
We'll watch God's rainbow oath and hope instead.