



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Noach 5772

By David Singer
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Few things are prettier than a rainbow. The picturesque spectrum of color across an ashen, rain-filled sky elicits feelings of calm, gratitude and awe in even the most jaded of people. But a rainbow is more than just a sight of beauty. The Jewish tradition pushes us to see each rainbow as a prismatic vision of a more perfect world.

We read in *Parshat Noach* that God, discontent with pervasive evil in the world, chooses to unleash a flood and begin Creation anew. After destroying all life on the earth except for Noah, his family and a multitude of paired animals, God makes a covenant with this remnant of humanity. Promising never to repeat this course of destruction, God stretches a rainbow across the sky as a sign of this vow.

In enacting this covenant, God promises, “This is the sign of the covenant that I set between Me and you... for all generations to come.”¹ In Hebrew, the word used for generations is “*dorot*,” and in this verse it is spelled oddly, missing two vowel letters that should normally be included.² This does not affect the word’s meaning, but neither can it go unnoticed.

The medieval French commentator Rashi picks up on this oddity. He teaches that these missing letters indicate that, while the rainbow serves as a reminder of God’s promise to most generations, “there are some generations that do not need the sign of the covenant because they are [already] so fully righteous.”³ Rashi suggests that some generations do not need the reminder; their righteousness demonstrates that they already innately understand that we cannot sit back and count on Divine action to wash away the injustice surrounding us—it is now up to us.

Based on Rashi’s interpretation, the rainbow is not merely a symbol of covenant and God’s promise not to destroy the world; it is a Divine invitation for humanity to deal hands-on with this world’s injustices ourselves. While some generations take up the call on their own, most—including our own—need the reminder. Each of us blessed with privilege of witnessing a rainbow’s beauty is called upon to take personal responsibility for ensuring the eradication of injustice in our world.

In Somalia, for example, millions of people continue to face severe and immediate food insecurity. The direct cause of this famine is drought. But humanity’s hands are stained with the blood of this crisis. The country’s barely functioning central government, undermined by the militant Islamist group Al Shabab, has been incapable of helping its citizens in this crisis, and United Nations’ relief efforts have been severely hindered within this power vacuum. Somalia is a human crisis as much as a natural one,⁴ and the responsibility for fixing it lies with people—not with God.

¹ Genesis 9:12.

² “Dorot” is missing the two vowel *vavs* that are normally included in its spelling.

³ Rashi on Genesis 9:12.

⁴ “Somalia’s Worsening Famine,” *New York Times*, 12 September, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/13/opinion/somalias-worsening-famine.html>

Around the world, we share responsibility for hunger, in a world where enough food is produced to feed everyone. We can see human culpability for hunger in our own government's food aid programs. Developed with the best of intentions, U.S. food aid has, over time, actually played a role in undermining local farm development in the Global South, fostering the perpetuation of conditions ripe for devastation as regularly as each cyclical draught. But there is something we can do to fix this injustice. The U.S. Farm Bill faces revision in 2012. With sufficient pressure on Congress, just reforms can be made to the bill to support food assistance that contributes to—instead of detracts from—long-term food security and resiliency. The rainbow colors up our sky today, reminding us that our opportunity—our responsibility—to act, is now.

Parshat Noach is a call to action, to commit ourselves to the work of bringing justice to those corners of the Earth that lack it, and to inspiring the rest of our community to act hand-in-hand. The rainbow is not merely a symbol of God's covenant with humanity; it is a reminder of each individual's responsibility for ensuring the proliferation of justice in this world. May we all, one day, merit to not need that reminder.

*** Please take action today by signing the Jewish Petition for a Just Farm Bill at www.ajws.org/reversehunger. ***



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