

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

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While we might fear a gun or worse, an atomic bomb, the people of the ancient Middle East feared the archer and his bow and arrow. The first evidence of bows and arrows goes back 8,000 years before the development of written language. Shooting arrows plays a role in several Biblical stories, perhaps most famously in the ruse David and Jonathan work out to warn David whether or not King Saul is positively disposed towards him at that moment. Jonathan is to shoot several arrows into a field. If they land near the serving boys, then it is safe for David to join the family at the Rosh Hodesh dinner, but if Jonathan shoots them far beyond the boys, then David will know that Saul has been raging against him and that he should not approach.

The Middle Bronze Age, during which many of the stories from the Torah are set, saw the introduction of chariot-born archers. Archery was essential to the role of the light, horse-drawn chariot as a vehicle of warfare. The ancient [Nuzi](#) texts detail the bows and the number of arrows assigned to the chariot crew. We know the Israelites feared these chariots from the story of the Exodus, when it was the approach of the Egyptian chariots that sent a panic through the camp, causing the Israelites to flee. And it was the demise of the chariot-born archers in the sea that marked the Israelites' freedom. The Assyrians and Babylonians, conquerors of the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom respectively, were also known for their chariot-born archers.

For an ancient Israelite, the bow was primarily a symbol of war. As Ramban explains, this accounts for part of the power of the rainbow symbol. In the case of the rainbow, the bow is turned away from the people; a backwards arrow signifies peace to the opponent.

The rainbow is also God's promise to never again destroy the earth. It is God controlling God's own power, God using a covenant, a contract, or a treaty to limit God's own power. In the past, God had been free to alter the course of nature, but now God, with the rainbow, promises, "So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." God further promises: "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 along all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." The Gaon of Vilna notes that the cycle begins on earth with the water evaporating into the environment and becoming clouds, but that it then recruits a remembrance in God and protection for the earth. For the Gaon of Vilna, that was also the cycle of prayer and mitzvot, a cycle which begins with us but elicits a divine response.

Today the rainbow is a very positive symbol. We think of "somewhere over the rainbow" as being a place of peace and harmony. It was a cantor's son, Harold Arlen, born Hyman Arlick, who in 1939, as the clouds of war were gathering over Europe, wrote the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," thus winning the Academy Award that year for best song. His father used the melody for some of

the prayers he led at Temple Adath Yeshurun, in Syracuse, New York, but more than that, I think the song expressed the yearnings of Jews at that time, yearnings for a place far away from the dangers of the Nazi menace that was encircling them.

The rainbow in the Middle Ages was also a mystical sign. The Zohar saw the colors of the rainbow as representing the attributes of God and the brightness of the rainbow as being associated with the coming of Messianic times. It is this hope for a better future and focus on inclusion that is behind the diversity rainbow.

Making treaties where we agree to limit our own power is taking a risk. And yet, without the ability to make such treaties, we would only escalate, never de-escalate, the threats to our continued existence. In the 20th century, we saw positive response to the nuclear disarmament treaties. More recently, a treaty attempted to halt the escalation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East by delaying Iran's nuclear program. The United States has also historically been part of agreements which, despite limiting our sovereignty in various ways, have created international standards with the goal of making the world a safer and more just place.

The mood of the current administration is against any of these limitations which we might place on ourselves, even for the sake of saving our planet, but perhaps the reminder that God did this, might alert us to their importance.

In our personal lives, at work and at home, as mentors and as parents, we follow God's example, placing limitations on our own power so as to allow others to

develop fully. In that way, we are imitating God, whose *tzimtzum*--whose contraction as it were--created space for the universe. Thus, the rainbow is a reminder not only of God's promise, but also of God's example.