

Dear Chavraya,

Today is Flag Day, June 14th, a minor festival in the calendar of America's civil religion. Strangely, I am always aware of it, a residue of having grown up in the post-war era and having attended a public school in a flag-waving town. I have deep feeling for what love of country can mean when held in proper measure, when held in careful balance with love of all people, when rooted in values that affirm the best of who we are in relation to each other as human beings, part of a family of nations. I am wary of flags for the idolatry their adoration can quickly come to represent. I am wary of patriotism and nationalism when allowed to become triumphalism, when love of one's own country becomes disdain, or even hatred of others.

Flags can represent the best of who we are when we attach the best of who we are to them. Our own flag is honored when we honor the flags of others, other nations, peoples, and groups. When brought to a common gathering as representing our own identity among many identities, the flag can be deeply moving, a reminder that we are one among many, each one equally valued, no one more or less important, each with their own place. I am moved to tears when standing in front of the United Nations, filled with the hope and possibility represented by so many flags flying together, each one billowing in the wind of a common spirit.

It is why I was so upset last week when the Washington Dyke march at first barred those who came carrying a Pride flag emblazoned with a *Magen David/Star of David*, so simply known as the Jewish star. The six-pointed star tells of who we are as a people. It is an ancient symbol, though only becoming a recognized emblem of the Jewish people in relatively late time, perhaps earliest in Prague in the fifteenth century. Over time it comes to tell of who we are, of our presence and Pride, etched in the stone of great synagogues, carved into the wood of humble *shtiblach*, or affixed to the holy ark in synagogues great and small, printed on the covers of our holy books and on the banners of Jewish communities and those of our communal guilds. The great Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig taught of the Star's universal hope and significance in his opus, "The Star of Redemption." Of the interlocking triangles, the corners of the one pointing upward represent God, People, World. The corners of the one pointing downward represent Revelation, Creation, Redemption. The star finds its way to the flag of Israel simply because it is a symbol of the Jewish people. When the Nazi oppressors, their memories be blotted out, seized upon our star to degrade, it remained for us a symbol of Pride.

In the moment of reading that Jews with a Star of David upon their rainbow flags were barred from the Washington Dyke parade, I wanted to run downstairs with a marker or a roll of electric tape and fashion the same star upon the rainbow flag placed in our window for Pride month. Whether for lack of time, or inertia, or something deeper, I didn't change the appearance of our flag. While wanting to make a statement of belonging, a statement of solidarity with those of our people denied their place, yet one more expression of anti-Semitism, I came to feel at peace and pleased with our flag just as it is. What could be more pure than the rainbow colors? All part of one whole, they remind us of how we are meant to

be. There is a wonderful expression in Hebrew, *keshet de'ot/a rainbow of opinions*. We are meant to come together with all of our differences, with all of our diverse opinions, ways, and backgrounds, each one needed in the great spectrum of creation's colors, the spectrum of who we are as human beings.

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Naso*, opens with a census of the Levites, each of the Levitical families assigned their own special role as their way of serving in the Temple. So it becomes a reminder that each of us has a special role in serving in the great Temple of the world. *Naso* means to carry, to bear, to raise up. We are each meant to raise up the other has part of our own being counted. The princes of the each tribe bring gifts to the sanctuary in this portion. Each prince is a *Nasi*, a word formed of the same root as *naso*. The leaders is understood to be one who raises up the people, that ultimately all should be on the same level, each one of equal value. Modeling the way that the entire people should be, each of the princes brings the exact same gift to the sanctuary, down to the smallest detail, that none should feel any more or less important than another.

In last week's portion, *Parashat Bamidbar*, the entire community is arranged around the sanctuary, configured by tribes and families. Each tribe camps by its own banner that tells through a symbol upon it something of who that tribe is, something of its own uniqueness. The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that each tribe has its own camp and its own banner, each tribe's insignia teaching of its own unique task and purpose, their own *yi'ud v'tafkid* in this world.

Whether in parading of the colors on Flag Day, or the bringing of rainbow banners to Dyke marches and Pride parades, may each one's flag honor the presence of another's flag. Whether in the pure essence of rainbow colors or emblazoned with a Magen David, may we each celebrate who we are, and so too the one who walks alongside, walking together in common Pride.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor