

THE DANCE OF RAINBOW COLORS

by Simcha Steven Paull

Gather around my friends. Listen closely to these words of an ancient contemporary Hasidic tale, an archival remnant of the no-longer-esoteric tradition. I'll tell you this story, exactly as I first heard it.

The Vision

It was a mid-autumn morning, many, many years ago. The young and spirited Reb Zalman was sitting upon his meditation stool, contemplating the infinite mysteries of creation. Concentrating deeply upon the stillness of eternity, over and over he pondered the burning question: "How did God create light?" . . .

All of a sudden, in an instantaneous flash an image burst forth — a rainbow colored talis with seven stripes on each side. It danced in radiant light, moving, flowing colors of the spectrum, from ultraviolet to infra-red. A technicolor dreamcoat, with *tzitzis*, glimmering in the mind's eye.

Reb Zalman's entire being was absorbed into the meditation, contemplating: "How did God create light?". Once again an answer resounded from the infinite depths. . . "God wrapped Himself in a Rainbow Talis of Light and it began to shine." In creating light God created humanity and the rainbow aura of the soul, touching and being touched by God.

In another room of the house where Reb Zalman was meditating, voices could be heard, a baby cried and the telephone rang. As quickly as it has appeared, the vision receded. Reb Zalman completed his *davennen*' and hurriedly donned his overalls in preparation for the day's work. But with this vision was seeded the B'nai Or talis.

The Search

Reb Zalman felt a burning determination to find a concretized form for the radiating image of his vision. Soon he was wandering the alleys and streets of Brooklyn in search of a talis maker. He visited many, but nowhere could he find a willing weaver who would spin rainbow colors on a loom. At the Munkatcher Talis Factory, a pious old Hasid responded with indignance. "A rainbow colored talis?", he asked. "What is this you want, a Purim talis? Is this a new sect or something? We don't want to have anything to do with it".

There was no rainbow talis to be found in Brooklyn. Rejected but unrelenting, Reb Zalman resolved to search elsewhere for the talis of his inner vision, the B'nai Or talis of the Children of Light.

To Ville de Montreal, in La Bella Providence of Quebec, he went, via Air Canada, to lead a Shabbos workshop — a "Gigeleh" — at Hillel House. There he knew a man, his last hope, a Jew named Chazin, a *yid-desheh talis-makher*. "A rainbow talis? No!" He too refused — without a second thought. No rainbow talis.

The Original Five

Almost in despair, Reb Zalman frantically looked through the yellow pages for *vetements religieux* — manufacturers of religious vestments. Karen Bilow Vetements Religieux, he found the name, instantly dialing the telephone number. After a brief, succinct conversation, and a favorable response on the other end, he ran into the street, hailed the first passing taxicab, and immediately went to visit the place.

With controlled enthusiasm Reb Zalman showed the people a model rainbow talis. He explained the colors, the size, the *tzitzis*. They agreed to weave five rainbow tallaysim on the very same looms used to manufacture the garb for Catholic Church sacraments.

Legend has it that Reb Zalman kept but one talis of the original five, distributing the remaining four to very special, holy *neshomos*.

The "Talisarium"

A few months later the time drew near for Reb Zalman to go to summer camp. "Religious Environmentalists" at Camp Ramah was the job description. In preparation for the two months of activities, the young Lubavitcher raced through the garment district of Manhattan to various manufacturers. He requested, and received from them remnants, any unused cloth with stripes and colors.

At the camp, Reb Zalman set up a talis manufacturing area — a "talisarium". With his big hands and loving touch, the skilled furrier's son taught the campers to use the rented sewing machine, to sew their own tallaysim — beautiful multi-colored tallaysim of all designs. The "talisarium" was the inaugural do-it-yourself, Havurah-style talis-making venture.

Walking The Rainbow

Years passed — over two decades. There were many *shabbosim* and *yom tovim*, many *talmidim* and congregations, many *neshomos* who danced the ecstasy of the Rainbow. With his *streimel* and big beard, swinging, balancing between heaven and earth, Reb Zalman prayed, danced and walked the Rainbow across North America, teaching, sharing, loving, caring, laughing and holy-making.

Eventually a talis company in Israel began manufacturing the B'nai Or talis, imported into the USA for local consumption. Over the years, the rainbow-colored talis has become a familiar sight, elegantly worn by many at B'nai Or retreats, and in Havurot and Minyanim. From Berkeley to Boston, Mount Shasta to Poughkeepsie, Philadelphia to Toronto; from the cities of Europe to the Holy City of Jerusalem, it covers *huppahs*; adorns *hassan/kallah*, groom/bride; men and women rabbis; young and old. The B'nai Or Rainbow Talis functions as a prayer shawl — a Robe of Light — in which to wrap the Self for prayer, meditation, healing and devotion. (cont.)

Recognizing The Unfamiliar Rainbow

Still, for many Jewish individuals and communities, the B'nai Or talis is often an unknown and unfamiliar sight. Given the total number of talleysim in use today, a rainbow-colored prayer shawl is an uncommon artifact in innumerable religious environments. Seen for the first time, it is conspicuous, sometimes awesome, frightening or threatening, but arousing both curiosity and interest.

But whether it is a familiar personal friend or a rare obscurity, there is no soul that cannot recognize the majestic beauty of the B'nai Or talis. Wherever it is worn, it evokes a sense of esthetic holiness and radiates a mystical quality of rainbow light.

The Story Is Re-Told In Montreal

Recently, a woman walked into Rodal's Bookstore in Montreal and inquired about talleysim. She had heard of, had seen, wanted to purchase. . . "I'm not sure what it looks like, but you don't seem to have it here. . . a rainbow colored talis." "Sorry, we don't have a rainbow talis", sighed the aging Mrs. Rodal, the wife of the learned man people called Rabbi "Roidell".

Purusing the bookshelves, one of Reb Zalman's Hasidim overheard the conversation. He walked over to the two women as they stood leaning over a pile of talleysim. "Rainbow talis! Yeah, there is a rainbow talis!" he almost startled them. "Its called the B'nai Or talis." Hurriedly, he explained about Reb Zalman. . . Rabbi Schachter from Winnipeg. . . Karen Bilow. . . here in Montreal. . . now manufactured and distributed by Talitnia. Not everybody knows about the B'nai Or talis, this is true. But Mrs. Rodal said she was going to order some soon.

The lady who had inquired said she'd come back again sometime in the future. The young Hasid, running off to an appointment, paid for two books with a credit card, and left.

Rainbow Re-Birth

Not everybody knows about the B'nai Or talis, but for many folks it represents a symbol of renaissance, a re-birth of Jewish life and *neshomeh*, a phoenix rising from the ashes of Auschwitz becoming a re-Jewvinated Judaism with depth, richness and multi-cultural diversity. It is a symbol that has grown out of the B'nai Or social organism, extending across the globe wherever Jews pray and celebrate. The rainbow talis has become a living, embodied symbol of hope, holiness and light for all who aspire to live a creative, re-vitalized, spiritualized Jewish lifestyle in today's 1984-and-beyond global culture.

The Story Goes On

The story of the B'nai Or talis is still being told. But this brief ancient contemporary Hasidic tale, of the no-longer-esoteric tradition has its ending, its *piece de resistance*. Once, many, many years after the seed meditation vision, an aging and tiring Reb Zalman travelled across the northeastern states for yet another "gigleleh". The *Zayde* of Havurah movement, the Professor of Davenology, and B'nai Or Rebbe was at a conference to share Torah and song with other *neshomos*, other holy seekers. There was Reb Zalman teaching the crowds to dance. Drinking and dancing and jumping off mountains like Reb Israel; visiting many worlds like Reb Zalman of Liadi; and learning to fly like Reb Nahman; there was Reb Zalman Shalomi teaching the crowds to dance, to walk rainbows.

A young man walked up to the Rebbe to say hello, to ask a question. He too was wearing a rainbow talis, identical to the one he had seen swaying from side to side in devotional fervor. "Where did you get your rainbow talis?", he asked. "I also have one. Yours is just like mine."

"Barukh Hasem", Reb Zalman smiled lovingly. "Yeah, I also have a rainbow talis. Barukh Hashem. . .", he paused. . . "we're both wrapped in the Rebbono shel Olam's Robe of Light."

The *davennen*' resumed. Reb Zalman, with his new friend in close step, once again walked the rainbow. The vision had come full circle: the waving spectrum of colors, the technicolor dreamcoat was radiating right in front of his eyes, dancing the dance of the rainbow. There was the shining light that God had created, embodied in a hitherto unknown young man who had never before heard of Reb Zalman, of B'nai Or. There he stood, covered by the radiant B'nai Or talis. There was the shining robe of rainbow light. . . the shining light that God had created.

At that moment, Reb Zalman saw the fulfillment of his vision. He *understood* that wherever they would meet anywhere on the planet, at any time, his Hasidim would always be able to recognize each other by the talis they wear, the Rainbow Talis of the Children of Light.



SOURCES

This story was compiled from and inspired by a number of sources: Yonassan Gershom's interview with Reb Zalman, "Wrapped In a Robe of Light: The Story of the B'nai Or Talis"; "The History of B'nai Or", a talk given by Reb Zalman at Centre Mi-ca-el, Montreal Quebec, October 1980; and a poem entitled "Reb Zalman", by an unknown author (published in an anthology by Irving Layton). A special thanks to Barry Barkan who taught me the lesson of this story.

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