

***Talk to Congregation Beit Simchat Torah
Pride Shabat 2012, New York City***

by Kate Bornstein

Good shabbas.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this Pride Shabat. My mother is looking down at us, kvelling. My father and brother are looking down at me and cracking up.

I asked Rabbi Kleinbaum what the haf Torah was for tonight. She told me it was the bit about the end of Noah's voyage through the flood that wiped out humanity. There's a rainbow at that end of that voyage, and of course the rainbow means so much to us as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, queers, and all the hundreds of sex-and-gender identities that can't possibly be squeezed into the five letters, LGBTQ.

Nonetheless, as over-used and commercialized as it's become, we all do love our rainbow. I want to take the opportunity to tell you a Torah story that explains just why the rainbow is such an important symbol for us all. I'm going to pick up from just a few chapters before Noah set sail with no rainbows in sight. Let's pick up a few verses into the Book of Genesis.

God is sitting there in heaven, having made nearly everything there is, including the heaven he's sitting in. He's made stars and oceans and planets and light and mountains and bunny rabbits and marijuana. He even made a guy he called Adam, who had a lovely time to himself in God's most perfect world. But after a few years, Adam says he's lonely. And God thinks to himself... something is missing. Being God, no sooner does He pose himself a problem, He solves it.

God gets the bright idea to create a woman named Lilith. She's a hot babe, because this is one smart God, and Lilith is one hot butch top. She pushes Adam down on the ground, and boy howdy, she rides that cowboy. Well, cool as God is, way back in those days, he was not having any part of that. Most people don't know this next part, but God had it in the back of his to make Adam another guy and Eve another gal—he was all for mixing things up. But right now, he had to handle the Lilith situation. So, He turned Lilith into a demon, and created Eve.

Eve was also a hot babe. But God didn't make the same mistake twice. Unlike Lilith, God made Eve cute and more of a bottom... and a little naive to boot, which is how nearly all femmes are seen to this very day: cute, but dumb.

OK... stuffy as he was, back in those days, God really loved Adam and Eve. He loved them with all His heart, and remember this is God's heart so it's a really big heart, and He loves them with all of it. He says to them,

"Look what I made for you. It's a beautiful garden. There's everything you could possibly want to make yourself happy with. There's birds, and waterfalls, and lily pads, and chipmunks, and over there..." God pointed with a Godly forefinger, "that's a whole acre of marijuana."

"All of this is yours," God continued when Adam and Eve finally managed to quiet down their excitement at the idea of chipmunks and lily pads. "All I want is your happiness. I've created harmony, and you are part of it, so you get to do anything you want to do. Anything at all. Well, there's one exception."

Adam and Eve looked at each other nervously. God continued, reassuringly.

"You can do anything, touch anything, play with anything, heck, you can even fuck anything." God paused and looked down at His shoes, and kicked the dirt with his toe. Then he continued in a low, rumbling God voice.

“There’s just this one little exception. Do not eat the fruit of that tree.”

He lifted another Godly finger and pointed to an awesome tree. No, really, it was an awesome tree. It changed color every time you looked at, every time you blinked, that tree changed color. It was silver and gold, then red and blue—always two colors, of all of God’s infinite colors—it even turned itself into black and white.

Only one thing stayed the same about the tree: it was always cloaked in two colors that were exactly opposite one from the other. Red and blue, cool and warm, bright and dull.

“That’s a really cool tree,” says Adam.” What’s it called?”

“Yeah, it’s so pretty,” says Eve.” And the fruit looks so delicious.”

Did I mention the fruit? Some people think it was an apple. To say that the fruit of that tree was an apple would be like saying the Taj Mahal is a No-Tell Motel, which in fact it was, only with fancier architecture. So yes, maybe the fruit looked like an apple, but oh what a scent it had, oh what a taste! It was sour and sweet all at the same time. That fruit smelled at once sun-kissed and rain-washed. The fruit from that tree always tasted like two opposite tastes, and smelled like two opposite smells. Nothing like that existed in the garden—everything else just was what it was. This tree was a true wonder!

“It’s called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” muttered God, “and if you know what’s good for you, don’t eat the God-damned fruit.”

Of course, Eve did not know what was good for her, because she hadn’t eaten the fruit yet—so it was really easy for a sexy, attractive serpent to seduce her into taking a great big bite of that delicious fruit—the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And because Eve was so gosh darned cute, Adam was an easy mark to take the next bite and that’s exactly what he did. And once they swallowed, the two of them blinked and looked at each other.

“You’re a man,” said Eve.

"You're a woman," said Adam.

"It's hot today," said Eve.

"Yes, it's always either hot or cold," agreed Adam.

"I'm happy," said Eve.

"I'm sad," Adam replied.

"You're naked," said Eve.

"Right—we're clothed or we're naked," said Adam.

"And it's bad to be naked," gasped Eve.

"We'd better get dressed so we can be good," agreed Adam.

Well, the two of them scrambled to find some clothes. They found two medium sized fig leaves. Fig leaves? Really? Well, you know the rest. God finds them out. He's heartbroken. He casts them out of the garden with lots of curses.

And for the rest of time ever since then, humanity has been looking at the world in terms of two-and-two-only choices: right or wrong, good or evil, young or old, black or white, rich or poor, man or woman, sane or insane, homo or hetero, transgender or cisgender, and on... and on... and on... and on.

And the rest of the Torah is humanity trying to live within the curse of the knowledge of good and evil. And there's begetting and more begetting, and then there's you and me and we're still trying to solve the world's problems under the influence of the fruit of that God-damned tree. God warned us against either/or morality. Thank goodness there was a way out, and God gave us the way out of either/or morality the very day Noah first set foot on solid land: it was the rainbow.

All we ever needed was our rainbow back, and God was cool enough to give us that after all. Please, let's thank God for that gift. Let's thank God by seeing rainbows in everyone we meet with radical wonder and radical welcoming.

I'd like to close with a prayer. When I was a little boy, I made up prayers every night. Every night, I prayed different ways for God to change me into a girl, and hey—look! It worked! Well, I'm working on a new prayer now, and I'd like to offer this prayer as my wish for you, my most cherished family:

May all your deeds be Mitzvahs.

May you find the fulfillment of your Desire in Sabbath.

May your power increase with every shred of power

you use in service to another.

May you realize the goodness in yourself

by admiring the goodness in others.

May yours be the face of your most cherished Deity.

May you come to respect yourself, whether or not

anyone else gives you the respect you wish for.

May you know your own worth to humanity

whether or not anyone else knows this about you.

May you walk always beneath rainbows where you are met

with radical wonder and radical welcoming.

So say we all... Amen.