

## Tower of Babel - Noah 5779

This morning we read once again about the Tower of Babel - the story that explains how people first came to speak different languages from each other. It's ironic, I suppose, that here it's pronounced 'babble' while I know it as 'Babel.' Tomato, tomato. But still. Here's the story:

*Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." 5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 6 And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*

It's not immediately clear what the people did that was so wrong.

There's a Midrash that picks up on all that talk about bricks. If a man fell off the tower, everyone would keep on working, but if a brick fell off, the people would cry, 'Oh, how soon can we get another?' [Is this a prefiguring of the way Pharaoh behaves to the Israelites? I think perhaps the bricks have something to say about tyranny...). If so, the punishment fits the crime, with the babble and the scattering simply reflecting the confusion that was already there.

The sf author Ted Chiang writes a story based on this Midrash (*Stories of Your Life and Others* - it's a great read and I won't give away the punchline, just a quotation). The main character muses: *Perhaps men were not meant to live in such a place. If their own natures restrained them from approaching heaven too closely, then men should remain on the earth.* If so, then the sin was mixing up

things that shouldn't be mixed together. As it says in the Hallel - *hashamayim shamayim lehashem/veha'aretz natan livnei Adam.*

But as ever a close reading of the text yields results:

10:5 - *From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations.*

10: 20 - *These are the sons of Ham, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.*

10:31 - *These are the sons of Shem, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.*

So *the whole earth had one language and the same words* is therefore just not true! Rather, the building of the Tower of Babel represents the first human attempt at a project - a communal undertaking around which a community forms. The people elect to reject their individual identities and instead coalesce around something singular. One language with the same words, one tower with its top reaching up to heaven. The original babble of diversity is homogenized into a system where words have one meaning and one meaning only; the complexity of the horizontal is replaced with a simple vertical.

And this is the sin - it's in the way that the people of the Babel narrative chose to establish their identity and create the lens - both in language and in construction - through which they would perceive reality.

The problem is that in a perceived reality, everything is subjective. Why does the Torah specify 'one language and the same words' - surely if there's one language all the words must be the same?! To tell us that there were no choices about meaning either. Things meant one thing and one thing only.

And this kind of mindset gives rise to some very human evils.

The first is arrogance.

In Hebrew the word *shem* means not only 'name' or 'essence' but 'reputation'. When the people express the wish *na'ase lanu shem* - let us make a name for ourselves - they are talking not about what they want to be, but what they want others to think of them. And this is not a safe way for a human being to establish themselves.

And the second is fear. The Babel mindset is one of terror; terror of what 'they' will say, terror of not being big enough, terror of diversity, terror of multiplicity. By setting up their rigid structures - in all senses - they defeat the purpose of God's plan for humanity, which was for it to be diverse and widespread. And that is why multiplicity has to be re-injected, just as was the plan in the first place, and God knows this, and hence the natural, messy, *human* order of things is restored.

We should note that the thing the people fear most - *lest we be dispersed* - does in fact come to pass. Parashat Noah is not short on irony.

How does all this apply to us today?

Well, we too live in diversity and there are those who feel this is a bad thing. And so we too see those perceived, subjective realities towering all around us. And just like the paradox I just expressed, they go to create insecurity and fear.

But there is a lesson too about how we choose to build community. The tower represents a project that destroys rather than consolidates; the bricks are stuck together with mortar but the people are scattered. How many times do we see this around us as well? The voyage into space, the huge piece of architecture, the city-wide initiatives - how often these fail because the project is achieved but the relationships that were meant to sustain it are destroyed?

Either way, the Tower of Babel represents a fundamental kind of human failure. Perhaps this is why it appears in the same Torah portion as the Flood. We recognize that the 'wickedness' that gave rise to the Flood is undesirable; we need also to learn that misplaced urges for simplicity and misconceived human projects can be, in their way, just as damaging.

Which brings me to my final question.

We read about how the people are punished, but not that the tower is destroyed. What happened to it after it was abandoned? Did it just gently fall to pieces? Or is it still there, somewhere? If so, I wonder whether it looks rather like the statue in Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*. You know how much I love an excuse to read a good poem: I'll end with this. Perhaps today we can hear it as a commentary on the Tower of Babel and the lessons it still holds for us about what is truly important for human beings to flourish and thrive.

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert... near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;*

*And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*