

Living with Difference

Rabbi Naomi Kalish, Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education and Assistant Professor of Pastoral Education, JTS



Is the story of the Tower of Babel about human unity, or about human diversity? At the critical point when the Torah transitions from the story of Noah and its universal themes to the particular family of Abraham, the Tower of Babel conveys ambivalence about both unity and diversity. In doing so, it provides us with a model for how we can navigate our own complex social dynamics, especially in times of crisis and trauma.

Parashat Noah provides a genealogy of the descendants of Noah's sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—who were born after the Flood (Gen 10:1). In addition to the family lines, the text includes detailed information about their “clans (*mishpehotam*), languages (*leshonotam*), lands (*artzotam*), and nations (*goyeiheim*)” (10:5, 10:20, and 10:31. Verse 10:5, describing the offspring of Japheth, omits a reference to “lands,” perhaps because so many of his descendants are described as being maritime peoples.) Chapter 10 concludes that “from these the nations branched out over the earth after the Flood” (10:32). But the very next sentence, the first of the next chapter, states: “Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words” / וְיְהִי קָל- / הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וְדַבָּרִים אֶחָדִים: (Gen. 11:1). How could it be that everyone had the same language, when we have just concluded a chapter that lists numerous different nations and their various languages?!

The next eight verses tell us how this came to be and how God responded. The conventional reading is that the people wanted to come together to build a tower higher than any of them could have built as individuals, and that God prevented the power of human unity by confusing their speech. However, the idea that God would improve the world by preventing people from understanding one another seems nonsensical. It would eliminate the problem

of extreme collaboration and prompt God's desired outcome of dispersing the people throughout the world, but it would surely create other, even more severe problems. A close reading of the text, however, provides a more sophisticated understanding about how people can navigate the reality of difference and diversity of languages (literal and figurative) and in doing so experience healing and foster peace.

Commentators have debated whether or not the builders of the Tower committed a sin and, if a sin was committed, what it was. Four aspects of the story could be considered mistakes or sins on behalf of the Tower's builders: (1) they spoke one language instead of many according to their clan and location, (2) they wanted to “make a name” for themselves, (3) they wanted to make “a tower that reaches to the heavens,” and (4) they desired to not be “scattered over the face of the whole earth” despite God's command to Adam and later to Noah to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28; Gen. 9:1).

The Netziv (Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 19th c. Lithuania) believed that having one language was not a sin in and of itself but it “caused the first sin”: because they could all communicate, “they agreed to stop in one single place. And this is against the will of God that said to ‘fill the land and replenish it’—that is, to walk to all its places, since the land was created to be settled.” He further explains that the reference in 11:1 to *devarim ahadim*, “the same words” spoken by all of humanity, does not spell out what these words were “to teach us that it wasn't because of the content of the words themselves that the Holy One of Blessing was distressed.” God was alarmed not by *what* they were saying, but by the fact that they “all thought the same thing, and this came to be the problem of the settlement.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sees in the Netziv's interpretation of the building of the Tower of Babel as "the first totalitarianism." "It is a supreme act of hubris, committed time and again in history . . . It is *the attempt to impose an artificial unity onto divinely created diversity*" (*The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 52).

The problem was not all of humanity speaking the same language, rather what it would lead to. God's response to the construction of the Tower did not suggest that having multiple languages was inherently better; this was simply the mechanism that God chose to get the builders to halt their work on the Tower. However, the result of this mechanism was the emergence of a world riddled with miscommunications and limits in understanding. Surely, this would bring about conflict.

In his book *To Heal a Fractured World*, Sacks explores two Jewish conceptions of peace as ways to navigate difference. First, he identifies universalist prophetic visions of peace including Isaiah's "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, Their spears into pursuing hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:4) or Micah's "They shall sit, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, And none shall make them afraid, For the mouth of the Lord of the Hosts has spoken" (Mic. 4:4).

Sacks suggests, however, that rabbinic tradition presented a contrasting model for how to navigate differences peacefully; it can be found in the rabbinic concept and instructions regarding *darkhei shalom*, the ways of peace, often understood as practices for maintaining peaceful community relations. One statement of these principles is found in Tosefta Gittin:

A city that has Jews and non-Jews—the charity collectors collect from the Jews and the non-Jews, in the interests of peace, and they provide for the needs of Jewish and non-Jewish poor, in the interests of peace. One eulogizes and buries non-Jewish dead, in the interests of peace. One comforts non-Jewish mourners, in the interests of peace. (Tosefta, Gittin [Lieberman edition] 3:13-14)

Sacks characterizes *darkhei shalom* as "a programme for peace in an unredeemed world." The rabbis who articulated this program know that "in this not-yet-fully-redeemed world, peace means living with difference—with those who have another faith and other texts. That is the fundamental distinction between the prophetic peace of religious unity and the rabbinic peace of religious diversity, with all the compromise, restraint, and mutual respect that coexistence requires." Significantly, the Tosefta's instructions include practices of caregiving.

Another debate among commentators is who was living at the time of the building of the Tower of Babel (as well as who was involved in its building). Seder Olam Rabbah, a second-century CE Hebrew text that provides a chronology of biblical events from Adam to Alexander the Great's conquests, states that due to long lifespans Noah was both present at the time of the building of the Tower and the dispersion. David Kimchi writes that "Noah, Shem, Eber, and Japheth were also there."

Genesis Rabbah imagines Shem and Eber establishing a yeshiva to which numerous subsequent ancestors studied. My teacher, Rabbi Morton Leifman, of blessed memory, used to emphasize the special power of the classic midrash that suggests that after the *akedah*, Isaac went to this yeshiva to study with his ancestors (Genesis Rabbah 56:11). Rabbi Leifman suggested that Isaac went there following his experience of trauma, to grapple with existential questions and to seek healing. If we imagine that Noah and his children were present at the building of the Tower of Babel, and that *their* children were born to parents who survived the flood, we can understand that they were all grappling with intergenerational trauma. In this created, broken, and unredeemed world in which people are different and struggle to understand one another, practices of caring for one another seem exactly what is needed to establish a sense of shared humanity while doing justice to the variety of human experience. Sitting with people during crisis, listening to them with compassion and empathy, and bearing witness to their subjective and affective experience pave the way toward healing and peace.