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The Tower of Babel

And everyone on earth had the same language
and the same words.[1]

At the beginning of time, after the devastation of the flood has given way to a new chance for humans to thrive, the Torah gives us a new story of creation. In this new story, the Torah asks us to imagine a world very different from ours, a world where everyone has the same language and can communicate with each other freely, without any effort or obstacle. No miscommunication, no cultural divides, no translation issues, no misunderstandings. Sounds nice, doesn't it? So nice, in fact, that it was not just in ancient times that people imagined such a world. This vision of a monolingual utopia was the dream of Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, a Polish Jewish doctor from Bialystock who in 1887 created Esperanto, an invented international language that he hoped would ensure that "all nations would be united in a common brotherhood."[2] Maybe some of you, like me, remember learning a few words of Esperanto in the 1960's or 70's, when the dream of internationalism was briefly revived. Dr. Zamenhof believed that a universal language would lead to perfect mutual understanding and, eventually, world peace. Although it is estimated that more than 100,000 people have learned Esperanto over the last 137 years, and there are even some native speakers of the language, we are not the first to notice that world peace has not exactly been the result.

It turns out that speaking the same language does not actually eliminate misunderstandings. Sociolinguistic theory—the branch of anthropology that deals with how people communicate—explains why. An old model of communication through speech made an analogy to sending letters to each other. Under that model, when we speak, we send a message that the other person receives, and then they respond with a speech message that we receive, without anything getting in the way. We receive each message purely as intended, our replies are received equally clearly, and nothing about ourselves or the person with whom we are communicating influences the content or reception of our messages. In turns out that this model vastly understates the interactivity between two people when they speak with each other. When we speak with another person, we are constantly reshaping our message in response to the verbal and non-verbal cues we are receiving from our conversational partner. And our partner is hearing us through the screen of all they have previously experienced and thought about the subject at hand, as well as the verbal and non-verbal cues they are receiving from us. The result is that the meaning of our speech is constantly being negotiated through the interactions that we have with the other person. It is never clear and unambiguous on its own.

This is both what makes conversation so rich and rewarding AND what gives rise to misunderstandings between people, even when they are speaking the same language. We see

[1] Genesis 11:1.
[2] https://www.genekeyes.com/Dr_Esperanto.html

this all the time in our everyday lives. Someone else summarizes to us what they heard us say, and we are shocked to discover that it varies radically from what we intended or thought we were saying. (I should know; you wouldn't believe what people have gotten from my sermons!) We say that somebody "just doesn't speak my language" or that they "can't hear what I'm saying." A common language alone does not guarantee either perfect clarity or mutual understanding, and we certainly have experienced that enough in this country in recent times, when even though most of us are speaking English, we often feel like we just can't comprehend what other people are saying or in what context their words make sense. Unfortunately for Dr. Zamenhof and for all of us, a single language does not necessarily lead to peace in our time or any other.

You may have noticed that the Torah says something else about the world at the beginning of time. The people had not only the "same language" but also the "same words." Since every single letter of the Torah is thought to be significant, seemingly repeated phrases should prompt us to ask what different things that repetition might be adding to our understanding of the story. The ancient rabbis argue that while the "same language" refers to speech, the "same words" refers instead to the ideas the people shared.[3] That is to say that in addition to all speaking in the same way, they all shared the same opinions and beliefs. Again, we might have thought that this uniformity of thought would lead to peace between them, since they all agreed. Isn't disagreement the source of strife and its absence the source of harmony?

Well, it turns out that uniformity of thought tends to lead not to harmony but to stagnation and stasis. When everyone thinks alike, progress becomes very difficult, and societies fall behind, and even fall apart. In fact, it is the onslaught of new ideas from diverse sources that drives innovation and growth, whether it is in science, politics, or religion. That is why, far from being a drain on society, immigrants actually make us more innovative; as Professor Zeke Hernandez from the Wharton School puts it, "immigrants are different in useful ways."[4] Those differences have produced wide-ranging effects on American life that would never have happened without the infusion of new thoughts from other places and cultures. We have seen the same thing happen within Jewish life right here at GJC, where new ideas about equality between Jews of different genders, different sexual orientations, and different racial and ethnic backgrounds disrupted established patterns of thought and action and have made us a more vibrant community. We are most certainly a work in progress, but without allowing these new and different ideas to enter into us, we would never have even set foot on the road to change and to the harmony between us that it promises to foster.

Despite the history that shows us that a common language does not lead to peace and that a uniformity of belief does not lead to harmony, we still see in our time that people do sometimes fall into the belief that a common language would solve all of our problems, that if

[3] Bereishit Rabbah 38.
[4] The Truth About Immigration: Why successful societies welcome newcomers by Zeke Hernandez (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2024), page 45.

only they could communicate their ideas clearly enough, no one could possibly disagree with them. And we still see people argue that if only there were a uniformity of belief, if only everyone would finally admit that what I believe is self-evidently true and that what you think is simply, I'm sorry, wrong, all would be well, that it is only the clash of different beliefs that stands in the way of progress. These are attractive fantasies, but they fail in the light of human experience.

The rabbinic tradition stands starkly against the idea that uniformity of language and belief is the recipe for salvation. Instead, the ancient rabbis mine a variety of tongues to try to understand both Torah and the world, from the Biblical Hebrew in which the Torah is written to the quite different Rabbinic Hebrew that the rabbis knew, and from the Akkadian of the ancient near east to Ancient Greek and the rabbinic Aramaic that they learned in exile in Babylon. One of the greatest sources of insight into Torah, in fact, for traditional commentators comes from translations of the Torah into other languages (Aramaic, Greek, Medieval French, and so on), because the different languages provide, in their understanding, different points of view that reveal different facets of meaning to learn from. And of course, the rabbinic project of the Talmud and their approach to Torah study in general relies precisely on disagreement rather than uniformity of belief. Argument requires disagreement, and it is through argument that the rabbis believed we could bang the words of Torah together to produce sparks of divine light.

The rabbis would have been shocked by the idea that uniformity of language and belief could ever lead us to harmony and peace. Instead, they would have argued, those very things that some think are the source of salvation can lead us in quite the opposite direction.

> They said, "Come, let us build us a city,
> and a tower with its top in the heavens,
> to make a name for ourselves,
> lest we be scattered all over the world."[5]

Back at the beginning of time, the people use their supposed perfect understanding of each other and their imagined complete agreement with each other's ideas for the purpose of trying to elevate themselves, perhaps even over God. The midrash translates what the rabbis imagine these people to be thinking:

> They said: "How arrogant of God to select the upper reaches for God and to give us only the lower reaches. Instead, let us come and make a tower and craft an idol at its top, placing a sword in its hand, and it will appear as though it is waging war against God."[6]

[5] Genesis 11:4.
[6] Bereishit Rabbah 38.

For the rabbis, the people in this story demonstrate the opposite of the attitude of gratitude that they think should be human beings' basic posture, as we live in a world that we did not create but that nonetheless offers us all kinds of blessings. Instead of feeling thankful for the world they received, the people are resentful and jealous of God for not giving them God's realm in addition to their own. They even point a sword at the divine, daring God to defend God's self from them!

This is midrash, but even in the Torah text, the people seem to set themselves up in opposition to God, and they use their common language and common beliefs to attempt not only to make themselves the highest tower in the world but also to make a name for themselves that no one will forget. They are motivated not only by hubris but also by its shadow, the fear that nothing they do or accomplish will really last. This fear is corrosive and robs them of their basic humanity, as the midrash teaches:

> Rabbi Pinhas said: There were no stones there with which to build the city and the tower. What did they do? They baked bricks and burned them like a builder, and built with them until they built it 49 miles high, and it had ascents on its east and west. Those who took up the bricks went up on the eastern ascent, and those who descended went down on the western descent. If a person fell and died, they paid no heed to them, but if a brick fell, they sat down and wept, and said: "Woe is us! When will another one come in its stead?"[7]

In addition to the fact that their goal is to make a name for themselves by challenging God, their methods for achieving that goal show that they come to disregard the value of human life entirely. Neither their common language nor their common beliefs has led them in the direction of harmony and peace. Instead, they have become monstrous. In trying to become more than people, they have become less than human. But God is watching, and now God reacts.

> God came down to look at the city and the tower
> that the people had built, and God said,
> "If, as one people with one language for all,
> this is how they have begun to act,
> then nothing that they may propose to do
> will be out of their reach."[8]

The people seem to believe that God is in the heavens and they are on earth, and only by an extreme act of will can either God or they breach the boundary between them. They also seem to believe that they can judge God without any danger that God might be also judging them. In this passage, God demolishes both beliefs in one stroke. God easily and without effort

[7] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 24:6.
[8] Genesis 11:5-6.

"comes down" to see what these human beings have made of the gift of language with which they have been blessed; the boundary between the upper and lower worlds is like nothing to God. And God takes the step of "coming down" to see with God's own metaphorical eyes the city and tower the people have made because God is acting as a divine Judge, setting a standard for human judges to follow, as the midrash teaches:

> Was it necessary for God to descend to see [the city and the tower]? Is not everything obvious and revealed before God, as it is said: "God knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with God" (Daniel 2:22)? Rather, [God descended] in order to teach people never to render a decision against another or to testify concerning any matter unless they have witnessed it.[9]

Plainly, upon seeing it up close, God is disappointed with the use the people of made of the divine gifts that have been given to them. They have taken advantage of their power in order to both denigrate God and dehumanize their fellow human beings, and God is clearly worried that they will think up new ways to defy God's will and to mistreat each other. Giving the people a single, shared language and through it allowing them to develop universally shared beliefs has produced the opposite of the peace and harmony that God could reasonably have imagined could be humanity's new future. After the destruction and desolation of the flood, God set a multi-colored bow in the clouds as a sign of divine care, saying, "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures."[10] But the people who built the city and tower, with their hostility both to God and to their fellow human beings, have broken that covenant, emptying the rainbow of its colors and putting out its light. God must take drastic action to get the world back on track, but God has already promised that there will be no more floods.[11] So God comes up with a different plan.

"Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there,
so that they shall not understand one another's speech.
And God scattered them from there
over the face of the whole earth.[12]

God's idea is simple. If the people's arrogance and disregard for each other's humanity stem from their shared language and shared cultural beliefs, then those are what must be changed. The midrash notices that God seems to be talking to someone here, and it imagines that God calls to the angels:

[9] Midrash Tanchuma Noah 18:14.
[10] Genesis 9:16.
[11] Genesis 9:15.
[12] Genesis 11:7-8.

> Rabbi Shimon said: The Holy Blessed One called to the seventy angels that surround the throne of glory and said to them, "Come, let us confuse their speech!"[13]

In rabbinic thought, the multiplicity of languages, nations, and cultures in the world is always represented by the number seventy. So the use of the seventy angels here is significant. God decides to differentiate the people into all the languages, nations, and cultures of the earth, increasing their diversity exponentially. As another midrash says:

> God called to the angels and told them to descend below, and each one [would teach] each family a different language, so that this family would not understand that family.[14]

For good measure, God separates these newly differentiated peoples into different lands, scattering them over the face of the earth. And God does all of this differentiation and scattering in the name of peace and harmony.

> That is why it was called Babel [*Bavel*],
> because there God confounded [*balal*]
> the speech of the whole earth.[15]

At the end of the story, the people who built the Tower of Babel inhabit a world far different from the one they originally knew. Instead of one language that they all share, they speak a multiplicity of languages that are mutually unintelligible. Instead of one set of beliefs that they hold in common, there are multiple sets of diverse beliefs that are spread unevenly among them, often clashing with each other. And instead of one place in which they are all gathered, they are spread out across the face of the earth. The play on words here at the end of the story emphasizes that the tower and the whole episode are to be known by the way the story ends: with confusion. The Tower is the Tower of Confusion, the people are the people of Confusion, and God is the Confuser in Chief.

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, but the Tower of Babel is a far different story of creation than the one we are used to reading at the very beginning of the Torah. The creation story in the first chapter of the Bible emphasizes separation and clarity. Day is separated from night, water from land, land from sky. Plants, birds, fish, and animals are all carefully demarcated in different, non-overlapping zones. And human beings are created to occupy a very specific sphere of influence and told what to eat and not to eat, what to do and not to do, in unambiguous, clearly understandable terms. By contrast, the story of the Tower of Babel is one of confusion and overlap. The clear communication and the lack of ambiguity that seem to be the guiding principles of creation turn out in the Tower of Babel story to

[13] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 24:8.
[14] Midrash Aggadah Bereishit 11:6b.
[15] Genesis 11:9.

actually become the problem, the things that lead humanity astray. And diversity and disagreement are the solution that is meant to lead humanity back to itself.

It is often said that the narratives at the beginning of the Torah are "just so" stories that are intended to offer simple answers to basic questions like, "How did the earth come to be?" or, in the case of the Tower of Babel, "Why are there so many languages in the world?" But the rabbinic tradition is clear that the Torah does not exist just to tell us what happened in what order or to justify the current arrangement of society.[16] Instead, it is trying to teach us values by asking different questions. Not "How did the earth come to be?" but maybe "What is the relationship between different parts of creation?" And not "Why are there so many languages and cultures in the world?" but perhaps "What is the relationship between diversity and virtue?"

To take the story of the Tower of Babel seriously is to confront the idea that the divinely inspired blueprint for peace and harmony on earth is difference and confusion, the very kind of diversity that we struggle so much with even today, in the world, in this country, and here in this community. How does diversity and difference, and even confusion and lack of understanding, lead us to peace and harmony? When we encounter difference, we are forced to realize that ours is not the only way of understanding a concept or issue. We are encouraged to use our curiosity to try to grasp how other people see things. The more difference we encounter, the greater number of perspectives we acquire, and it is this multiplicity of perspectives—NOT a steady reinforcement of our own way of seeing—that leads us to the wisdom necessary to create peace in a diverse world. When we encounter confusion, we are forced to realize that the clarity with which we have viewed an issue is an illusion. The reality of human life is untidy, and if we want to find harmony, we have to work our way through the many different and competing and overlapping ways that people understand the world. We have to find our way through the maze of human difference until we reach, not perfect clarity, but instead a solution that will, more or less, take account of the needs and perceptions of most, but perhaps not all, of the people concerned.

This is what the rabbinic tradition urges us to do, with its tradition of argument and debate probing all sides of an issue to what sometimes seems like an almost ridiculous degree. This is the lesson I am asking all to learn from the story of the Tower of Babel. It is exactly the opposite of the approach being taken by nearly everyone who addresses issues of public concern in this country right now. Instead, they attempt to rebuild the Tower of Babel, to enforce uniformity of language and of belief, to insist that the solution to difference is for everyone to listen to them and ignore those who disagree, to challenge even God to constrain

[16] See how Rashi (the greatest medieval Torah commentator) interprets the very first verse of the Torah (Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning…"), which seemingly lays out the order of creation: "The Torah does NOT come to teach us the order of creation by saying what comes first." Instead of this literal recounting of what happened, Rashi argues, the aim of Torah is to teach us the relationships between different aspects of creation. Another way of saying this is that the Torah teaches values, not events; it is not a history but rather an instructional text about morality and ethics.

their faith in their own righteousness and their demonization of everyone else. There is a reason that God takes a world of uniformity and creates a world of diversity, because God believes in the power of human diversity to lead to harmony among us. We have to repay God's faith in us by having faith in the vision of the aftermath of the Tower, a world of beautiful and amazing difference that shines brighter than the rainbow and that is the marker, the sign, and the promise of peace.

L'shanah tovah!