

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2015

II. THE TOWER OF BABEL

July 10, 2015

Shabbat shalom!

The story is easily told. The great Flood had finally come to an end. Only Noah and his family survived, along with enough animals to repopulate the world. The people make their way east to the land of Shinar, apparently somewhere in Babylonia. Once there, they decide to build a tower. “Let’s make a name for ourselves,” they say, “or we will be scattered all over the earth.”

We humans seem to be genetically wired to build towers – the higher the better. We cheer when our 2-year-old first puts one block on another, though we cheer a bit less when our 4-year-old, in the restaurant, starts stacking those little containers of jelly. In high school we stack soda cans, and the stacking game called Jenga is popular with all ages. As adults we build skyscrapers, and take pride if our country has the highest one of all [that distinction now belongs to Dubai, with the first skyscraper exceeding more than half a mile high].

In the Torah story, God stopped the building project, and did precisely what the people were trying to avoid: He scattered them over the face of the Earth, and moreover confused their languages so that they could no longer understand each other. As God is quoted as saying in Torah, “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.” The Hebrew verb for confusing their language is “*baval*,” and so the unfinished tower became known as the Tower of Babel.

Why would God do such a thing? Wouldn’t God be tickled that the people wanted nothing more than to reach up to Heaven? Wouldn’t God be thrilled that everyone was cooperating in this building project, and everyone could understand each other and work together in peace?

We know from our own experience that miscommunication and lack of communication are the cause of so much strife and imbalance in the world, both personal and global. But if communication is so desirable, why would God take it away from humanity?

What more could God have asked of humanity? The Torah is silent on what really bothered God about the Tower project, leaving it to us to fill in the blanks.

One possibility: Maybe they weren't using proper safety procedures, like hard-hat yarmulkas. We have a tradition in the Midrash that the Tower was 7 miles high, though one version actually says it was 27 miles high, making for very dangerous working conditions.

On the other hand, working conditions didn't seem to be a consideration. A tradition recorded in the Talmud says that the Tower was becoming so high it took a year to bring bricks up to the top; if a worker died, no one cared, but if a brick dropped, everyone wailed because it would take such a long time to bring up a replacement. The sin, in other words, was callousness, as the project became much more important than the people trying to build it.

Or maybe the sin was in ignoring God's command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth – since they all seemed to want to live in one place, speaking their one language.

Nachmanides, in the 13th century, looks at the verse, “Let us make a name for ourselves,” and points out that the word “name” in Torah is often a reference to God. He retranslates: “Let us make a God for ourselves,” or “Let us make a God *of* ourselves,” as if the crime was idolatry, or maybe the arrogance of thinking that if they could get to Heaven, they would be gods. The problem, in other words, wasn't that communication was bad; it was the builders' motivation that God had to reject.

Then there was Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno, a 16th century Italian rabbi who had experienced the Inquisition first hand. Sforno wrote that the real crime was precisely to think that the best world would have one religion; one point of view; one accepted political way of doing things. The builders, he wrote, believed that differences of opinion, controversy and diversity of belief were dangerous and unacceptable. They opposed freedom of thought or discussion. Those who questioned their views or authority were to be crushed. So when God saw that the tower builders were crushing freedom of thought and discussion, it became necessary to intervene and to scatter humans – and confuse their languages – precisely so that the world would be diverse.

Put another way, God saved humanity from catastrophe by destroying the tower and dispersing us around the world. Perhaps the real message of the story

has to do with helping us understand that our differences in language, culture and tradition all represent significant strengths and blessings for humanity.

As Vivian Paley wrote, in describing her experiences with one of the nation's first integrated kindergarten classes, "homogeneity is fine for a bottle of milk, but not for a classroom, and not for society."

Today we again face the same threat – our tendency towards uniformity. We have witnessed a surge of ethnocentrism and xenophobia, as more and more of us want only to embrace our own kind, rather than embracing one another. Our society, it seems to me, is growing increasingly more insular around one's particular region or religion, one's ethnicity or family. Too many of us still see the "other" as inconsequential, with the result that we are more prone to act towards the "other" in ways that hurt us all, whether passively by turning a blind eye or deaf ear to their suffering or actively by throwing sticks or stones, or something much worse.

If our strength lies in our diversity, that lesson has not yet been learned by David Azoulay. David Azoulay is an Israeli who happens to be one of the top members of the Israeli government; he holds the title of Minister of Religious Services, and of course he is strictly Orthodox. In a country where over 80% of Jews consider themselves not to be religious, Azoulay, in a radio interview this week, said he did not consider Reform Jews to be Jewish. "The moment a Reform Jew stops following the religion of Israel," he said, "there is a problem. I cannot allow myself to call such a person a Jew." He was then asked about Reform Judaism in the United States, and he responded that "these are people who try to fake their Judaism and do not carry out the religious law properly."

He's the one who just a couple of weeks earlier said – in the context of trying to reduce the rights of women praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem – "Reform Jews are a disaster for the people of Israel." As the Minister of Religious Services, of course, he should be looking out for the well-being of all Jews, not just those who are strictly Orthodox. He doesn't understand that our strength lies in our diversity, and always has; that Judaism has always had diversity, all the way back to the days of Torah when prophets and priests vied with each other for power and authority.

Such insistence on homogeneity will not help Israel, and Prime Minister Netanyahu was right to reject Mr. Azoulay's remarks, and describe them as not reflecting the position of the government. Yet it was Netanyahu who brought

several ultra-Orthodox political parties into the government as partners in his governing coalition, and Netanyahu who sanctioned the reassertion of monopoly control by strictly Orthodox rabbis over state-recognized religious affairs in Israel. Just last Sunday, as one example, Mr. Netanyahu's cabinet decided that jurisdiction over the country's rabbinical courts would be moved from the Justice Department to David Azoulay's Religious Ministry, and that the Chief Rabbinate would be given even more power over certain functions of conversion, marriage and burial rights.

There's been a firestorm of protest, of course, from Reform and Conservative bodies in Israel and the U.S. over the last couple of days, and major bodies like B'nai B'rith and the Anti-Defamation League have strongly disassociated mainstream Judaism from such hateful remarks. I urge you to read up on what's been going on.

And more than that, I urge you to add your action and your voice.

Here's the peroration: There is an organization called ARZA – the word means “the Land,” referring to Israel – and it stands for the Association of Reform Zionists of America – an organization under the auspices of the Reform Movement which expresses our love for Israel but also work mightily to protect the rights of Reform Jews and the good name of Reform Judaism in Israel. Outside of Israel, ARZA has grown to be the most powerful and influential Zionist body in the world. For the next Zionist Congress this November – the first in 5 years – ARZA won more seats than any other entity. ARZA has strong influence on the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National Fund and other agencies that oversee so much of Israeli life – in health care, education, labor policies and also in religious affairs. ARZA's strength is the greatest counter on the scene providing a buttress against Israel becoming a true Orthodox theocracy. Our membership here at Temple Beth Or is woefully underrepresented in ARZA, but I cannot overstate the importance of joining this splendid and important organization – a grassroots body worthy of our support. Just go to ARZA.org...

To return for a moment to the Tower of Babel: I think the teaching is clear: When we see the “other” as inconsequential, despite being of one human family, we become more prone to act towards the “other” in ways that hurt us all. This is true in our personal families; it is true among the family we call the People of Israel, and it is certainly true of humanity as a whole. The world is indeed a confusing place, but somehow we must continue to try to understand each other, and learn again to work towards common goals.