

**Light and Truth:  
Diversity in the Search for Unity  
as Told in the Tale of the Tower of Babel  
Parashat Noach; October 24, 2014**

Newsflash, from this past August: The *Times* of London has set up speakers in its offices, to pipe in not music... but the sound of manual typewriters, clacking away, to inspire its writers and editors with the feel of an old-fashioned newsroom. No word yet on whether this simulated authenticity is having any effect.

But in this look back to the past for some imagined golden age, in this quest for clarity and search for something real, and, of course, with the passing this week of Ben Bradlee, I thought of scenes from the movie version of *All The President's Men*, where the cacophony of equipment was just background to the clash of views and voices, arguments and intense disagreements, all in pursuit of one version or another... of the real story. As *X-Files* later promised us, “the truth is out there.”

When thinking about writers and editors, news and stories, it is tempting to focus on the issue of words. And, at this turn of the Torah, we roll from Creation last week – when God made the world with words – to Noah, to the story of the Tower of Babel this week, which is, as you may remember, essentially about language.

But it is there, in the often ignored story of Babel at the end of this week's portion, that we find one interpretation, one teaching which reveals the words to be but the means to an end, and all of it – all of it – is about the search for truth.

The Tower of Babel is a strange story in many ways. It is, after all, not clear what the people were doing wrong! What's so bad about a building project? Is there something inherently sinful about a skyscraper? Never mind that we suspect the story to be, in its original form, a subtle rebuke of the Babylonian temple cult, and the use of the step-tiered structures known as the ziggurat. As it stands, on its own, its not obvious what the people who gathered together to build a *migdal*, a tower, were doing wrong.

And so it is left to interpretation. Some say it was an edifice complex, that they put the project over people, that they worshipped the material rather than what really matters in human life. But we know that every time we decide to build a bridge over a large body of water, someone is going to fall... so we do, essentially, the same thing. Others say it was a rebellion against God, since the tower had its "top in the heavens" – but that may have been just an idiomatic expression for... really tall.

But then, come and hear, the words of the medieval Italian Renaissance-era commentator Ovadia ben Ya'akov Sforno. In a running commentary, he retells this story, and makes it about something other than what it seems to be on the surface. In the process, he gives us a spirited and spiritual defense of diversity which I would say is a really important message, even to this day!

“A tower, with its top in the heavens. *V'na'aseh lanu shem*. And let us make a name for ourselves.” So we read. And Sforno says: “A name for ourselves. That is, they were making an idol – [using the word *shem*, or name, the way we sometimes refer to God, as in the second line of the *Shema* -- *Barukh shem kvod malkhuto*, blessed is the name]. Sforno again:

An idol, which would be situated in the tower. The fame of its height, and the huge size of the city, will spread among the whole human race in such a matter that this deity will be considered as the deity of deities among humankind, and all will seek it out. The one who would rule over that city would rule over the entire human race, since everyone would seek it out – and this was, indeed, their intent.

So, now, these are not just construction workers, but those with a master plan to rule the world. But, still, one could say that was the goal of any empire. It is not yet clear what was so different about this plot, until we go further.

“Behold, they are one people,... and nothing will be withheld from them” we read. To which Sforno responds:

Normally the counsel of the nations and their plans are nullified as a result of divisions which occur between them, caused by differences regarding faith or lack of a common language. They, however, were one people... and they also accepted one language. Therefore there is no deterrent to prevent them from completing their intentions, and the religion they choose will become universal for the whole human race, so that no one will turn to seek knowledge of the Creator, the blessed One, or to understand that God formed all. The opposite of this will happen when there is division between the nations regarding their strange gods, for each one of them does believe that there is a 'god of gods' with whom all other gods agree...

My friends, this is one of the most interesting defenses of diversity I have ever encountered! I assume – I presume – that Sforno would have approved of a situation of unity if it were unity behind and in support of the One God he followed. But even then I am not so sure. And I am certain that he could not even envision such a situation, this side of the messianic era.

What he opposes, here, though, is unity behind an error, an idol, a god that is not God. And he is afraid of a unity that stifles curiosity, that feels it has arrived at a final place, that gives answers rather than sparking questions. Competing truth claims do not diminish belief, he asserts, but they do inspire questions. The existence of difference... keeps us honest, perhaps... but it makes us keep looking, for sure. We believe what we believe. But maybe, maybe... there is something in what someone else says. Something to be learned from someone else.

We are in the midst, with my oldest child, of the college application process. We focus on where he will be accepted, of course, but there is the other side of the equation – his evaluation of which community is right for him. And he said something wise over the summer, about one of the places he had seen. He was worried, he said, that he would be stepping into an echo chamber... that as much as he is interested in politics and policy, and as much of an overlap of views he might have with that particular place... would it be such a strong force of political correctness that ideas would not truly be tested, competing voices not given a sufficiently safe space?

I was reminded, then, of a comment made to me years ago, just before I left to go to Israel for my junior year of college. Someone said to me: “Israel! Why would you want to go there, to a place where everyone is all the same?” I have to say, I think there was more of an overlap of views, an unwritten consensus of opinion on that campus, than there was where I was going. At least in some ways, I had never encountered more divergence of views in my life than I did during that year where, on one level, supposedly, everyone was all the same.

Let me ask you to try something. Some of you may do this anyway. But almost all of us have favorite sources of news these days. And we know, we are aware... there is a slant to it. Maybe you already do this. But try, for a half hour or so this week... to tune into the “other side,” whichever side that might be. Absorb it, sit with it, listen, let it sink in. Do we hear anything new? Is

there anything to learn? What does someone different care about, think about, get excited about, and why? Maybe... maybe a different voice will help us...keep asking good questions about our own assumptions.

We come in search of the story of our lives. But we won't put the story to bed, we won't find a final truth, until we look at ourselves and the world from many angles, and we are able to hear... many voices.

Light, and truth. I am reminded of two things. That the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, consists of three letters: *aleph*, *mem* and *tav*. These letters are, literally, the beginning, middle and end of the Hebrew alphabet. There is no one view of truth. Truth is not whole, it is not complete, unless it encompasses all, and examines every angle.

And light. We use light as a metaphor for clarity, and for truth. We look back and perceive, perhaps, a golden age, a nostalgic haze. But we know that pure white is a matter of optic perception. Pass a beam through an angled glass, and there, spread out before us, in what looked like monochrome, are revealed... all the colors of the rainbow.

Shabbat Shalom.