

Tower Builders & Tent Dwellers

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Imagine for a moment a world where all people were united; where all people believed in a common cause, and worked together toward the realization, the fulfillment of that cause. A world where people said what they meant and meant what they said, and no one misunderstood or misinterpreted one another. A world in which all people came together to build a great civilization to dwell together in solidarity. Now think about our world; our civilization, our discourse. That fantasy world I described doesn't sound so bad, does it?

As I was reviewing this week's parasha, especially the episode of the Tower of Babel, I had this strange sensation. I know that Tower of Babel was an affront to God; I know this story is cast as the next in a string of human disappointments and failures, right on the heels of the violence filled world that was washed away by the flood. But part of me felt a little nostalgic for the *dor haflagah*, the generation of the Tower of Babel who said to one another *hava nivneh lanu ir*, come let's build a city together. All speaking the same language, they work together; everybody cooperates, everybody participates. In our deeply divided world that solidarity seems really attractive!

But if you peel away that seemingly idyllic surface, there is something much darker, much more vain and narcissistic. I am reminded of Montreal, my wife Sari's birthplace and the Quebec Board of the French Language, a sort of language police that patrols streets, businesses, signage, and labels to make sure that French is the only or the predominant language in the province, even though there are plenty of Anglophones. *Kol ha'aretz safa echad*, the Torah states, the whole world spoke one language. And with that singular form of expression they conscripted the entire society to burn bricks and build, build, build. A tower is erected to the heights of the heavens, not for the purpose of providing housing to the people of the city, not in order to store food to feed people during famines or droughts, not as a school to teach the young or a hospital to care for the sick...every ounce of human innovation was poured into this tower, why? *Na'aseh lanu shem*, so that we can make a name for ourselves. (Gen. 11:5) This first human building project was solely for the purpose of being able to say, 'We did that!' 'We built that!' The problem is, that's all they did, and that's all they built. If you take a look at the four verses that describe the construction of the Tower of Babel, there is not one hint of concern for humanity; not even a suggestion that you could create a name, a posterity, a legacy by creating a caring community not just a concrete one. No thought that this great city that the people of this generation invest in should have services, facilities, or resources to take care of people or enhance their existence intellectually, spiritually, or culturally. In a word, God is missing from the equation.

There is a midrash, in Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (24:7) from around the 8th century, that I remember learning all the way back in Hebrew school. According to this midrash, the Tower had seven levels on the east side, and seven levels on the west side. The builders would haul the bricks up on one side and then descend on the other side. But if one of the builders fell from one of these levels either on the way up or the way down, nobody would even notice. But if a brick was dropped and fell to the ground, delaying the project, then people would stop and *shray gevalt*, they would

cry out, “Woe unto us, when will another brick be brought up in its place?!” This was a society more concerned with bricks and building than people or the sanctity of human life. But that’s not the end of the midrash. It says that a certain person noticed this crazy situation where the builders mourned over the loss of a brick more than the loss of a life. This particular person saw the moral backwardness of this situation, and grieved that this is what has become of mankind. *Ve’ra-ah otam bonim et ha’ir ve’killelam be’shem Elohav...* And this person cried out to God, begging God to interrupt the project and scatter the people.

Who was that person? None other than *Avraham Avinu*—Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people. Abraham, the discoverer of ethical monotheism. Abraham, whose progeny would become a blessing to all the nations of the earth. The midrash implies that God responded to Avraham’s request, forcing them to halt the building project, scrambling their speech, and scattering them far from that city *in Eretz Shinar*.

The modern Israeli parasha commentator Sivan Rahav Meir says that the antidote to the Tower of Babel is the Tent of Abraham. While the tower was tall and grand, Abraham’s tent was low and simple. While the tower was fortified with brick and mortar, the tent was open on all sides. While the tower was erected for fame and notoriety, the tent of Abraham and Sarah was for the purpose of welcoming passersby; strangers who may be tired, hungry, or thirsty and may need respite from the harsh desert. I am proud to be a descendant of *Avraham Avinu* and *Sarah Imeinu*...proud to be a tent dweller rather than a tower builder. And in the spirit of our holy ancestors, may we make names for ourselves not for what we build, but for the people we care for. I still yearn for the purposeful commitment to a project, the unity of effort and determination that is described in the first verses of Genesis 11. But I hope and pray that our society can direct that unity for godly purposes...so that never again will a mud brick be deemed more valuable than a human life.