

Don't Just Do; Just Be – Parashat Noah 5782

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I should be honest. There are times when I give a sermon, and on my way home, Sharon looks at me and says, "You're one to talk!" I think this is going to be one of those times. But that's okay because it just means I need to listen to my own preaching. It's good sometimes to dispel the notion that I have it all figured out, and everyone should just be like me. If we're talking about the idealized me, I'd like to be more like me, too.

My topic is the title of an essay by Jonathan Malesic, which appeared in the New York Times a couple weeks ago: "The Future of Work Should Mean Working Less." I am not the poster child for "working less", but I take solace in knowing I'm not the only one; but we'll get to that.

First, let's talk about the Tower of Babel. Most of us probably knew the story before we chanted it this morning.

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. ... They said to one another, "Come let us make bricks and burn them hard. ... Come let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves. ..." The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built and 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. ... Let us, then, go down and confound their speech, so they shall not understand one another." Thus the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth, ki sham ballal Adonai s'fat ko ha'aretz, and the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Nine of the most recognizable verses of the Torah, but what is the purpose of this story? Is it just an effort to explain how we can all come from a common ancestor but not speak the same language? And what was so wrong with what they were doing? A kindergarten teacher would have given out gold stars for all the cooperation in building such a beautiful structure. How great would it be if everyone spoke the same language, especially if it was English! It is written like a children's story, but is there some larger lesson the Torah is trying to teach?

Of course there is!

The 20th-century scholar E. A. Speiser says this is one of those stories where the Bible tries to separate Israelite culture from the rest of the Ancient Near East. He looks at *Enuma Elish*, a Mesopotamian Creation Epic, which has many parallels to the biblical story. That narrative ends with the lesser gods building a sanctuary for Marduk, the head god. They said:

Let us build a throne, a recess for his abode! ...

Like that of *lofty* Babylon. ...

Let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name it “The Sanctuary.”

Speiser hears those words in the background when the people of Babel say, “Come let us make bricks and burn them hard. ...”

For one whole year they molded bricks [*Enuma Elish continues*]
When the second year arrived,
They raised high the head of Esagila equaling Apsu
They set up in it an abode for Marduk, Enlil, and Ea
In their presence they adorned it in grandeur.

Speiser assumes the biblical author knew this other story and thought: What a waste of energy and human capital to fashion all those bricks and spend all that time to construct an edifice; and for what? For God? Our God is much bigger than any palace. Our God doesn't need a physical structure. Our God lives in the heavens; and we would do better to meditate on Shabbat – what Abraham Joshua Heschel, thousands of years later, would call a Palace in Time – than to try to build some fancy palace.

The ancient Rabbis didn't know of *Enuma Elish*, but they picked up on the Torah's critique. Midrash Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer imagines how the massive project messed with people's priorities. If one of the laborers fell from the tower and died, they paid no attention; but if one of the massive bricks fell, they sat down and wept and said, “*Oy lanu! Woe is us! Eimatai ta-aleh acheret tachteha*, When will another brick come to take its place?” The sin of Babel is that they became obsessed. This isn't a way to serve God. It isn't how we build community – just build, just work, just to “make a name for ourselves.” That's a critique we might understand. I busted my hump all week, and for what?!?

It is interesting because the Torah also includes a sacred building project; it just doesn't come until Exodus. The Tabernacle is God's palace, which our Israelite ancestors worked very hard to build. But there is an important difference, an intentional difference. Alongside the commandment to build the Tabernacle, we are commanded multiple times to observe Shabbat. As the commentaries explain: you might have thought God's sanctuary was important enough to take precedence over Shabbat; but no, even the Mishkan, even God's abode, has its limits. “Six days you shall work ... but the seventh day is Shabbat; it belongs to God.”

The Tower of Babel is a cautionary tale about limits, about boundaries – between heaven and earth, between work and leisure, between productivity and healthy living. And we have to hear the message because our society is losing sight of those same limits. And this moment of nearly-post-pandemic may provide opportunity for change.

Jonathan Malesic asks us to consider three values related to the future of work: dignity, compassion, and leisure.

Dignity is the notion that we are more than our careers. He talks about a friend of his who was an accomplished and ambitious academic before she became ill and had to suspend her career. It was difficult because she enjoyed her work; she felt passionate about her research; and she was well-respected in her field. But circumstances required a lifestyle change. She took up sketching and painting.

And she learned to appreciate that even without her professional work, she was still the same person. She had dignity. Because self-worth did not come from her job; it came from the innate fact that she was a human being created in the image of God.

Compassion is a reminder that we depend on so many other people to make our lifestyles possible. Think of the grocery workers and delivery drivers who risked their well-being at the beginning of the pandemic so we could stay home and be safe; or the people for whom telework was impossible; or the people who don't get paid if they stay home when they or a family member are sick. Not everyone could sit on their computers during work hours to hunt for vaccine appointments. We have to show compassion to the people upon whose work we depend.

And we have to appreciate the value of **leisure**. Because even when we are not working, we are too busy. We can't have Shabbat because our children have activities. We don't do free time well; even our vacations are overly planned. We feel this need to *schedule* and *do*, and we have forgotten how to *be*. We think Shabbat gets in the way but, as Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it, Shabbat "is not an interlude but the climax of living." We need to make leisure a priority. We need to set an example for a society that has lost its way. Instead of walking away from Shabbat so we can better keep up and be like everyone else, we must figure out how to bring the beauty and peace and mindfulness of Shabbat to those who have been missing out.

For those who are looking at your watches, I promise we will finish well before noon. But what if we didn't? What else do we have planned for today? What if we were a few minutes late to the next appointment because we took a moment to breathe or to finish a conversation that carried over? And not just on Saturday. Why does it always feel that the *next* moment, the next project, the next appointment is more important than what we are doing right now?

I've already confessed that I haven't figured it all out. But we must recognize the problem. And we must take the disruptions of the pandemic as our opportunity. Maybe quarantine was the modern equivalent of confounded speech. And like our biblical forbears, we need to resolve to try something different. Beginning today – don't just *do*; just *be*. Shabbat shalom.