

Noah and Smart Phones

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

The Tower of Babel, a story of only 11 verses in our Torah portion, Noah, describes humanity's attempt to reach the heavens by building a zigarat, an extremely tall tower. God is not at all happy about this act of hubris and reacts by dispersing the people all over the world. Before this, people spoke a common language which allowed them to band together to create this tower. The result of their scattering is a confusion of their speech and this is the presumed origin of the many languages spoken around the world today. According to a midrash, the people's arrogance is very clear:

"'Come,' they say, 'let us make a tower, place an image on its top, and put a sword in its hand, and it will seem that it is waging war against [God].'"¹

According to Rabbi David Segal,² "hubris wasn't their only

¹ *B'reishit Rabbah* 38:6

²²² - See more at: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/noach/babel#sthash.L2YADGot.dpuf>

transgression... the 'Babel builders' disobeyed a direct command of God. After the Flood, God blessed Noah and commanded him and his offspring: '[to be] fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'

Rather than filling the earth, these people settled in one valley.

Rather than being fruitful, they devoted themselves

single-mindedly to a self-aggrandizing construction project."

Now as Rabbi Segal points out, "God doesn't...hate buildings, even grand ones. [After all,] the Israelites in the desert

built the Tabernacle... King Solomon oversaw the Temple's

elaborate construction in Jerusalem. But certain works

of human hands elicit God's wrath: the Tower of Babel and

the Golden Calf [being two examples]. Divine approbation of

human building hinges on intention. It's not the technology itself,

but how we use it that determines God's response.

The trouble begins when we let technology—

the works of our hands—undermine our values and

eclipse our humanity. According to midrash, the Babel builders

lost their respect for human life in their fervor to scrape the sky:

The builders brought bricks up on one side and came down

on the other. If a man fell down and died, no heed was given

to him. But when a brick fell down, they stopped work and wept, saying, 'Woe unto us! When will another be brought up in its stead?'"³ In other words, the technology became way more important than the people. A wasted brick upset them far more than a lost human life.

We tell ourselves that we would never allow technology to become more important than a human life. But think about how much time we spend in front of computer screens and with our heads buried in smart phones.

We don't even stop when we are driving our cars, despite the fact that, according to one study, texting and driving is now a leading cause of death among teenagers—causing more deaths than those resulting from drinking and driving. And perhaps just as important as the loss of life, we have seen a reduction in our ability to empathize with each other as a result of our devices.

According to a recent University of Michigan study,

³ *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 24

over a 30-year period there has been a 40 percent decline in empathy among college students, with most of the decline taking place after the year 2000. We communicate with people more than ever, but this communication involves less and less face to face interaction. And it is by making eye contact and observing another person's tone and reactions that we develop empathy and intimacy according to Sherry Turkle, a professor of Science, Technology and Society at MIT and the author of *Reclaiming Technology: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. In a recent New York Times Op Ed piece,⁴ Turkle tells us of an experiment conducted at a device-free outdoor camp: "After five days without phones or tablets, these campers were able to read facial emotions and correctly identify the emotions of actors in videotaped scenes significantly better than a control group.

What fostered these new empathic responses?

They talked to each other." One fifteen-year-old girl, out to dinner with her dad, reacted as follows to the fact that

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/opinion/sunday/stop-googling-lets-talk.html?_r=0

her dad pulled out a phone to supply “facts”

to their conversation: “Daddy, stop Googling.

I want to talk to you.” Turkle says that studies demonstrate

that even the presence of a phone on a table changes the nature

of a conversation between two people, both in terms of

what they talk about and how connected they feel.

“People keep the conversation on topics where they won’t mind

being interrupted. They don’t feel as invested in each other.”

Engaging directly and face-to-face with another human being

means that you have to exhibit patience that

your electronic device does not demand of you.

If you are on a tablet, a computer or a phone, and you are bored

by what you see or hear, you can switch to something else

with the ease of a click. Not so with people.

One young woman told Turkle that she “shies away

from conversation because it demands that one live

by the rigors of the ‘seven minute rule.’ It takes at least

seven minutes to see how a conversation is going to unfold.

You can't go to your phone before those seven minutes are up...[This young woman] admits that she doesn't have the patience to wait for anything near that kind of time before going to her phone. In this she is characteristic of what the psychologists Howard Gardner and Katie Davis call the 'app generation' [which] tends towards impatience, expecting the world to respond like an app, quickly and efficiently."

I think we really need to ask ourselves:

What are we doing to ourselves and our society?

What kind of a generation of young folks are we raising?

Will we like the builders of the Tower of Babel end up unable to communicate with one another, dispersed not by distance or by language but by the world of apps?