Noah 5781

Social discourse today is the demonization of people who hold different opinions –

The world seems a terribly divided place right now.

In Israel, demonstrators calling for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's resignation have been flooding the streets. In America, identity politics are on the rise. White supremacists pitted against Black Lives Matter. There's a rise of anti-immigrant far-right parties across Europe. Here in Canada no single party won a majority in the 2019 election, leaving important issues such as how to cope with climate change unsettled. And we seem regionally divided: Liberals shut out of Alberta and Saskatchewan, Conservatives doing very poorly in Montreal and Toronto, Bloc Quebecois rising to third place.

Division and difficult times, such as a pandemic, inevitably bring calls for unity. Israelis, exhausted and frustrated by three elections in less than a year formed a "unity government" which brought together Netanyahu and Gantz, the leader of Likud and the leader of what had been the largest opposition party. The divisions in Canada have been called a "national unity crisis."

Unity is almost universally understood as a good thing. We have the United States, the United Nations. Abraham Lincoln gave a famous speech when he said, "United we stand, divided we fall." Or as the great American statesman Benjamin Franklin put it, "We must, indeed, all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

In this week's Torah portion, Noah, we also have an example of the power of unity. We have the story of the Tower of Bavel, or "Tower of Babble."

Even though we are all familiar with the basic story, I'd like to read the story to remind us of the details. I'm using the JPS translation:

> Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard." Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as

mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord 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 there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus, the Lord scattered them from there 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; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

What was it the people were doing that got God so upset? Is wanting to make a name for yourself really such a bad thing?

The midrash understands "make a new for yourself" as meaning idol worship. It's not that God felt threatened by people who might want to make a name for themselves, to get a reputation for accomplishment. But idol worship – in the Jewish tradition that's one of our top three worst sins. And maybe that's why God chose to confuse the languages – it was punishment for engaging in idol worship.

At the beginning of the story it sounds like we have an ideal situation: one language throughout the land. Everyone got along. They were united by a common goal. They hated argument and relations between people were peaceful.

Naot Deshe, a 19th century commentator, asks "What kind of peace is this that leads to such a serious sin, to idol worship?" He said they were united by love of a thing, not by love for each other. And love of a thing is not good, it doesn't endure, it's love in the wrong direction.

So, he says that God confused the languages as a test. Would the people manage to show some love for each other, and find a way to continue working together, even after they had the confusion of the language barrier to deal with? And the answer of course, is no, the peace wasn't genuine, it was based on the love of a

thing, and that love is so shallow it dissipated, and the people dispersed when it was no longer easy.

There's a midrash that says the people were so in love with the thing, and had so little love for each other, that if a person fell to their death, they didn't care. But if a brick fell, they would cry because it took so much effort and energy to get the bricks that high up.

I'd like to suggest a different reason for the confusion of the languages. What if it wasn't a test, and it wasn't a punishment, but rather it was a way to lead the people to solve the problem on their own?

The people were united to an evil end. They were not only of a single language; they were of a single mind. There were no dissenting opinions, no one questioning what they were doing, no one arguing about the path they were going down. Lemmings running over a cliff with no one to say, "turn around!"

God appreciates dissenting voices. God respects dissenting voices. One of the most powerful moments in the Torah is when Abraham argues with God over the fate of the people of Sodom – "Would you destroy the righteous with the wicked?" Moses dissents from God's plan to wipe the people out and start over with just Moses and his descendants. And God approves.

Maybe what happened is God broke up the unity, and then there were some dissenting voices – someone to say, "what a minute, what are we doing here?" Perhaps he convinced others that idol worship was a bad thing. And God didn't need to scatter the people, they scattered themselves, having decided against going down the path of idol worship.

For us to flourish as a society, we don't need a false unity where no one questions anything. One of the saddest things about social discourse today is the demonization of people who hold different opinions. People on the right who think people on the left are idiots and people on the left who think people on the right have no hearts. Political correctness runs amok in some circles, leaving people afraid to speak up and say what they really believe.

In the Jewish community we can see this most strongly around the issue of Israel. There are people who feel we shouldn't criticize Israel. There are people who define support for Israel as meaning you can't criticize Israel, it's not our place. There are those who say J-Street is disloyal, there's no room for those Palestinian lovers in the tent of the Jewish people.

We don't need the false unity of speech control that ensures everyone thinks alike and no one steps out of line. The kind of unity we need is to be unified by a great, grand, lofty goal – but then to allow dissenting opinions and listen to different voices.

If you read the teshuvot from the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards on the Rabbinical Assembly website, you'll see that many of the rulings are accompanied by both dissenting opinions and concurring opinions. Why a concurring opinion? Sometimes a rabbi will agree with the conclusion of a teshuvah, but they don't agree with the logic, or they would apply the ruling differently. We value these different voices, even though we're unified by our love of the Jewish tradition and our desire to serve God and the Jewish people.

Unity by itself is neither good nor bad. Unity brings greater strength. As it says in Ecclesiastes, "a three-fold cord is not easily broken." That strength can be applied for good or applied for evil.

It's up to us to foster the right kind of unity. To be united in a desire to make the world a better place, even as we may disagree on what's the best way to do that. It's fun to joke that a camel is a horse designed by a committee, but the truth is that many of mankind's greatest ideas and successes are driven by committee, by groups of people working together sharing different points of view.

And perhaps the joke about the camel is not a criticism – after all a camel is far better suited to its desert climate than a horse would be.

Shabbat shalom