

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

## The Tower of Babel: Diversity is Better Than Conformity

This week's Torah portion, *Noach* (Genesis 6:9-11:32) includes the story of the Tower of Babel. While we can find similar versions of Biblical stories in other literature from the Ancient Near East (including a number of flood stories, which is the main theme of this week's *parashah*), scholars have yet to find any parallels to the Torah's Tower of Babel. Since this unique and extraordinary passage is only a few verses, let's take a look at it in its entirety:

**Genesis 11:1** *Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. 2. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3. 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.*

*4. 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."*

*5. Adonai came down to look at the city and tower that man had built.*

*6. And Adonai 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. 7. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."*

*8. Thus Adonai scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. d 9. That is why it was called Babel, because Adonai confounded the speech of the whole earth there; and from there Adonai scattered them over the face of the whole earth.*

At the first reading, one may react with astonishment that God would purposely confuse humanity by imposing on us different languages and scattering us to different parts of the globe. Certainly there would be tremendous advantages if we all shared one language. Wouldn't the world be much better off if we shared one culture and lived in a single nation? But then again, what if there was only one culture? One dominate political party? Only one accepted (and legal) point of view?

Nearly 800 years ago in France, Rabbi Chizkuni looked at this passage and recognized the arrogant plans of the tower's builders for what they were, a power play for world dominance: "Come, let us make a name for ourselves, from this stronghold, we'll be the strongest in the world and we'll be able to dominate and rule over all things" (*Perushei Chizkuni to Genesis 11:4 sv: v'na-a-se*).

Chizkuni personally experienced a 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe dominated by the Catholic Church, one in which mobs were encouraged to terrorize Jews and armies were organized to “liberate” the Holy Land from the Muslims. He understood that that the “dream” of absolute unity could quickly devolve in the nightmare of intolerance; that conformity and unity could lead into a dictatorship in which diversity and individuality would be crushed.

Ideologues, whether political, social, religious or nationalistic, frequently fantasize about conquering the world and unifying humanity into a “catholic” or universal family. The Torah’s story of Babel exposes the monstrous consequences of such a forced unity. Like all would be despots, they sought fame, glory and power; and heaven help anyone who got in their way.

Perhaps, the unique history and perspective of the Jewish people is why the Tower of Babel story only appeared in our ancient writings. Our family has always lived among dominant cultures. Our ancestors were squeezed by the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Persians and Assyrians. Later generations found themselves caught between the Greeks and the Romans, even later generations were traumatized both by the Catholic Crusaders and the Muslims, and in the modern era, Jews were slaughtered by both Nazis and the communists. Each of those major powers were sworn enemies of one another. Each pursued the dream of controlling the world. And the Jewish people alone were witnesses of and victims to their madness. It was the Jewish insight that saw each of those “dreams of unifying might” as simply the newest versions of the Tower of Babel. Our history has confirmed that diversity is better than conformity.

As we conclude this brief review of this ancient story, let’s end with an appropriate phrase, one that is not Hebrew or English. Still, I think that even though it is in another language, you’ll have no problem understanding its timeless wisdom and virtue: ***vive la difference!***

*Shabbat Shalom!*

*Rick*

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