



Building Our Own Towers of Babel

Noah, Genesis 6:9-11:3

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1-55:5

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Humans crave certitude and our sense of security is bolstered when surrounded by that which looks similar. When we see people who look, act and speak like us, we are at ease. When we hear people who believe and think like we do, we find relief.

Difference creates discomfort. It challenges us to think beyond our world and open us up to new things and new perspectives. Difference is a goad that can bring change and not many people like being goaded.

This innate penchant for certitude drives us to imagine that the ideal human society would be one of uniformity in behavior, beliefs and morals. The perfect society, many a religious dogma and political doctrine hold, it is within our grasp if we all would just embrace the correct values. The math is simple: thinking and acting the same way equals everyone getting along.

In this week's Torah portion, humanity seeks to build a city and a tower. Having been explicitly commanded by God to scatter and fill the earth, they try to consolidate around construction. The scale of what is suggested was colossal and required enormous concentration of authority and organization. Through both the building of and the building itself, humanity would be united.

However, there is danger to this vision: it is a unity imposed to achieve a goal. And unity imposed leads to uniformity and uniformity limits. Uniformity insists that there is only one way to do and think and be. Inevitably, this thinking ends up with one group forcing its vision of unity through uniformity on everyone else.

Through God's disruption of this construction, the Bible signals its rejection of this vision and embraces a different one; its vision holds that humanity flourishes where diversity exists. Humanity is just too messy to be held to one way of doing and being. God tried this and it failed. God started with Adam, which means "human", and could not foster a peaceful, harmonious society. Beginning with Cain's murder of his brother Abel,

humanity followed a path that corrupt the earth so badly God felt the need to wash it out and start again. So, God tried a different approach and went with one man, Abram, meaning “the father of many.”

Through the internet and other advances in communication, we have the chance to experience the world - the many-ness of the world - brought to our doorstep. Unfortunately, that same technology also allows us to select what part of the world we allow through the door. And we tend to only let in that which is like us. In essence, we are creating our own towers of Babel. But rather than using the tower’s height to see the fullness of the world, we flatten our view only exposing ourselves to like-minded opinions. To be true to the Bible’s vision, therefore, we must use our technology differently. We must use the ease of acquiring information as a way of broadening our knowledge of the whole world and not just the part with which we are comfortable. One simple suggestion: seek out forums by which we hear and listen deeply to alternate and contrary opinions to our own.

The opening chapters of the Bible are a move from unity through uniformity to unity through diversity. This type of unity cannot be imposed but must discovered; we must develop the vision to see beneath the surface and sense that all of life has one source of beginning and being. To acquire such vision we have to create lenses of respect, patience and tolerance for difference. We must become comfortable with the unfamiliar so that we may eventually see what we all share in common.