



--- Briefly D'var Torah ---

Thursday, October 15, 2026

Noach: Genesis 6:9-11:32

Rabbi Busch

The Meaning of Nine Verses

Nine verses. The passage so often called “The Tower of Babel” is composed of just nine verses in Genesis 11, which is found at the end of Parashat Noach. (Here is the actual verses (<https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.11.9?lang=bi&aliyot=0>) A short recap would be: All humanity speaks one language. They combine in one place and start building a city with a tower. God then decides to wreck the construction, confuse their language, and scatter the people across the earth. But really, it is only nine verses, so please take a moment to read the original.

There are lots of explanations about the Tower of Babel story. Off the cuff, you may have heard:

- It is a Biblical explanation of why there are different peoples and different languages.
- It is a critique of urban life, as Genesis is seen as valuing rural existence.
- It is a description of the hubris of humanity’s attempt to storm heaven and be like God.

Since the Torah doesn’t come with author’s footnotes, we are left with lots of layers of commentary, but no true source for the original intent of Genesis 11. At each Shabbat morning Torah Study, we are reminded to remain open to a range of readings of any biblical passage.

The 20th Century German Scholar Rabbi Benno Jacob has a creative read of The Tower of Babel. Rabbi Jacob criticized labeling the passage that way. He wrote that the familiar title forces our interpretation to assume that Genesis 11 is warning against large human endeavor, or trying to be God-like, or showing hubris. He gives a couple of different understandings, but I find one particularly meaningful.

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Benno Jacob wrote:

"In reality the characteristic feature of that generation is anxiety... They do not want to penetrate the heavens, but to gather closely on earth for fear of becoming lost..."

This anxiety is so understandable, not only to that ancient mythic generation and not only to our own, but across human existence. We each wonder if we matter; if anyone notices us and will remember us in our absence. Human efforts to establish our individual significance range from building edifices to creating great art; from founding organizations to acting out in anger. Some of these responses are positive, others fraught with emotional response.

Just possibly, the brief nine verses of The Tower of Babel (sorry Rabbi Jacob) themselves indicate the desire to matter and the fear of disappearing. If the story was longer, it might speak to an unrealistic human sense of security. I hope most of us are fairly secure in our identity and existence most of the time. However, our fears and misgivings are real. And let's not just blame technology and modern society. We see such anxiety deep back in the ancient Torah itself. Let us not fear being spread out and confused by Divine action. Rather, let us read this story as an acknowledgement that our emotions have deep roots; and yet we can be reassured by the very many people we remember. And that our human worth is real, even if our names are not known broadly. Genesis 11 reminds us to know our value and not get caught up in our fears.

