

Noah - The Iconic and Ironic Tower of Babel
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The tower which will become known as the Tower of Babel, is part of a large collective project. When the descendants of Noah - which the tradition calls the **Generation of the Dispersion-דור הפלגה** (the GOTD) - migrated to the valley in the Land of Shinar they declared (Gen. 11:4):

הָבָה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ שֵׁם כִּן נִפּוֹץ
 עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ.

*Come! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens, and let us **make ourselves a name**, lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth!*

They have one overarching goal: they want to stay in place and not be dispersed throughout the world. In order to achieve that goal, they embark on a three-stage plan:

1. Build a city.
2. Build a tower whose top reaches the sky.
3. And thereby make a name for themselves .

While many traditional commentators see their project as an attempt to storm heaven,¹ we should take the GOTD at their word: they want to stay put. However, this desire goes against God's *dispersal directive*. Recall that when God blessed Adam and Eve at the end of Creation, he said to them, **פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ** - *Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth* (Gen. 1:28²). And he reiterated this blessing verbatim when he blessed Noah and his family upon leaving the ark (9:1). In other words, *it was God's fervent desire that humanity spread out throughout the world*.³ But the GOTD was not interested in that. For reasons that are not disclosed here, they wanted to remain together in one geographic location and not spread out. They figured that the best way to do that was to engage in the collective project of building a habitation, a city. What better way to keep people together and to maintain their dependence! No matter how strong or weak, every capable individual in that population would have had a role in the project, either as builders, or purveyors of materials, or carters, porters, woodworkers, cooks, wheelwrights, or in the myriad other roles that go into a massive collective undertaking. If everyone is involved, everyone would be dependent on each other. And who would want to leave that? Thus, the building of a city was an ingenious way to guarantee a future of communal cohesion. Moreover, by building the tower (most likely at the center of the city, because where else

would you build it?) the GOTD would **make a name** for themselves.⁴ Let's explore that idea. The phrase **לַעֲשׂוֹת שֵׁם** does not occur frequently in the Bible, but wherever it does it seems to refer to a **reputation**. For example, in the very next story, God says to Abraham, **וְאֵעֱשֶׂה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְהָיָה בְרַכָּה** - *I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing*. In other words, God will make Abraham have a great **reputation** throughout the world. That **reputation** (of moral rectitude, fierce loyalty to God, self-reliance, and more) will translate into blessing for him, for his descendants and for all the families of all the earth. Here are two other places where we find this idea:

2 Sam. 7:9	וְעָשִׂיתִי לְךָ שֵׁם גָּדוֹל	God says to David, <i>I will make you a great name</i> . God denies David the permission to build a temple, and this is God's consolation.
Isa. 63:12	לַעֲשׂוֹת לּוֹ שֵׁם עוֹלָם	God made an <i>eternal name</i> for himself during the Exodus and the splitting of the sea, which made God's reputation everlasting.

But if their purpose in building the tower was to establish their **reputation** then *to whom did they want to convey that reputation*? If all humanity lived in the city, who else would they need to impress? The answer: posterity. It was one thing for them to build the city to keep themselves from dispersing. But how would they ensure that their descendants would stay put? **Through memory**. Herein lies the meaning of the tower. **While the city is the main project, the tower is the main monument to the memory of the project**. Here we differ with those who consider the tower to be a monument to human hubris or collective self-aggrandizement. Rather, **the tower was intended to be a monumental structure that will communicate the people's story**. Presumably, when people see it or make their pilgrimage to it, or even ascend to its summit, they will retell the story of the great project. They will experience cohesion. And **most importantly** they will rededicate themselves to the proposition of the founders: to stay in this place. **Thus, another layer of meaning to the phrase וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ שֵׁם is that we will make ourselves a monument or memorial to inspire the coming generations to perpetuate**

¹ This is what Rashi says in his comment on Gen. 11:1: **They came with one plan, saying: "He has no right to select the heavenly regions exclusively for Himself; let us ascend to the skies and make war upon Him"**. This is based on midrash Gen. Rabbah 38:6 in which R. Eliezer imagines that: **the generation of the Dispersion said: 'How arrogant of Him to select the upper reaches for Himself and to give us the lower reaches. Instead, let us come and make a tower and craft an idol at its top, place a sword in its hand, and it will appear as though it is waging war against Him.'**

² The blessing to the first couple includes, **וּכְבַשְׁתָּהּ-subdue it** followed by the directive to rule over all the creatures.
³ And by the way, all creatures as well, see v. 8:17, where God instructs all animal life, **וְשָׂרְצוּ בָאָרֶץ וּפְרוּ וּרְבוּ עַל הָאָרֶץ-to swarm the earth and be fruitful and multiply on the earth**.
⁴ The Torah does not go into detail about the shape or engineering of this structure. Some readers identify it as a ziggurat, a pyramid shaped structure that served as a worship site. But there is no mention of worship here. One could imagine that if God was objecting to the tower, he would have destroyed it. But he does not.

this city for all time. It is important to reiterate that God does not regard the construction of the city or the tower as evil. If that were the case, we would expect God to punish the GOTD more demonstratively like the way he destroys Sodom and Gomorrah in just a few chapters. But here there is no fire and brimstone. Here there is only a disruption in their ability to communicate with each other when God divinely and deliberately *multiglottofurcates*⁵ the entire population! Without the ability to connect and communicate with each other, the people disperse, abandon their project and leave it unfinished. How ironic! In wanting to create an exalted name for themselves, these high-minded adults will forever be known by a **two-syllable baby-word of bilabial plosives: Babel!**

And, speaking of the story's irony regarding speech, **הָבָה-come now**, let us offer more examples: When the people of the GOTD declare their project, they use the word **הָבָה** (as in: **הָבָה נִבְנֶה**) **twice**. First they say: **הָבָה-נִבְנֶה לְבָנוִים** **-Come now, let's brick some bricks** and then they say: **הָבָה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ** **-Come now, let's build us a city and a tower**. When God decides on a course of action he comically imitates them. He also says: **הָבָה-נִרְדָּה וְנִבְנֶה שָׁם שְׂפֹתָם** **-Come now, let's go down and confound their languages**. God conveys his intent to confound their language by imitating their language! He uses their word against them! And pray tell, what should we make of the lofty, lyrical, and luxurious way they elocute their project: **הָבָה נִבְנֶה לְבָנוִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרָפָה** **-Come-now! Let us bake bricks and let us burn them well-burnt!** That's poetry! Imagine, say, if Robert Frost opened *The Road Not Taken* with: **Once I was walking in a forest and came upon a fork in the road** rather than: **Two roads diverged in a yellow wood/And sorry I could not travel both. The Babel story is about words and language.** The instigators of the tower project consciously speak in a higher register to demonstrate the power of language. The people of the GOTD flatter themselves for being able to comprehend such language and they



experience high honor for being invited to join the project in such an elegant way. But the irony is that what starts out in poetry ends up as gibberish. At the end of the story, God

makes it so that they can't even hear, let alone comprehend each other (11:7): **אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ**.

One more fascinating block of irony in the story: **וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלֵּבנָה לְאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֹר הָיָה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר** **-For them brick-stone was like building-stone, and raw bitumen was for them like red mortar**. Explanation: there are two different building methods mentioned here, one that was common in



Mesopotamia and the other that was common in ancient Israel. **Mesopotamian buildings were commonly built with bricks and bitumen. Israelite structures were commonly built with stones and mortar.** From the vantage point of the narrator (and the audience too) the people building the tower were using a durable building technology that was similar, but not identical to the one that they use in ancient Israel. And isn't that interesting? It's kind of like the way languages can be similar to one another but not identical. **What we have here is a central motif, building methods, that is really a metaphor for language. Just as different building methods accomplish similar objectives with different materials, different languages accomplish similar objectives with different 'building blocks' - i.e. words and sentences - and different adhesives - i.e. syntax and grammar.**⁶

Something of a Summary: When God creates the world, he wants humanity to spread out and fill the earth. The dispersal of the GOTD to different regions, climates and topographies will result in the emergence of unique societies. Each of these will differentiate and individuate to meet their unique challenges. That was the divine plan from the beginning. But the GOTD had lofty ambitions. They wanted to create a cohesive and uniform society and remain in a specific area. We wonder if their inherited memory of cataclysm was so traumatic that it prevented them from exploring and settling their world. In wanting to stay put, they were opting for the security of their own urban Eden, where all their needs were met, their security was guaranteed, and everything around them was homogenized, equalized, regularized, and normalized. God did not want that. God wanted the infinite possibilities of human creativity. God delights in that. And God also delights in **multiglottofurcation!** And God loves a good story too!

Shabbat Shalom! שַׁבָּת שְׁלוֹמִים! שַׁבָּת שְׁלוֹמִים!

Buen Shabat! Feliz Sábado! Bon Sabbat! Buon Sabato!

Счастливого субботы! Ānxīrì Píng'ān (安息日平安)!

Shabatto Sharōmu (シャバット・シャローム)!

शब्बत शालोम! Hyvää sapattia! Sabato Njema! መልካም

ሰባሰባ! (Melkam Senbet!) Isabatha Elihle!

Geseënde Sabbat! Maligayang Sabado!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Ami Petter-Lipstein and family to commemorate the yahrzeit of her father, Phil Petter, z'l.

⁵ In keeping with the theme of language, and the implicit love of words in this story, why shouldn't I invent a word to mean *cause a multiplication (multi) of different branches (furcate) of languages (glotti)*? Other possibilities: **Glottodiversify** and **de-unilinguize**.

⁶ See Edward L. Greenstein's fascinating article on this subject at thetorah.com entitled, **Language is Baffling: The Story of the Tower of Babel**.