The Tower of Babel Revisited: Thoughts on Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

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The story of the Tower of Babel is generally described as an attempt by arrogant human beings to build a tower as a sign of rebellion against God. God punishes them by confusing their language and scattering them throughout the earth.

Yet, a consideration of the text may lead us to an entirely different explanation of the story. The Torah informs us that "the whole earth was of one language and of uniform words. It came to pass, as they migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there... And they said one to the other: Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top shall reach to the heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered all over the earth."

At first glance, the people in this story seem to be living in an ideal state. They all speak the same language, they are unified in word and thought. When they realize that the population was growing and scattering away from the main center, they decide to build their city with a tall tower and make a name for themselves so that they not end up scattered all over the earth. They thought that their tower would be visible even to those who moved away, thereby maintaining a central focus and a sense of unity among all the people.

According to this reading, what was their sin? Why did God come down and confuse their languages and cause the people to be scattered?

The story could be understood as a divine critique of a society where everyone speaks the same language and thinks the same thoughts. These are the qualities of a totalitarian system, where individuality is not valued and not tolerated. The leaders in the land of Shinar feared that they would lose control if people started to move away from their direct authority. Therefore, they decided to build a tall

tower to remind everyone where the center of authority remained. Even if people moved away, they were to look to the tower and to the totalitarian control it symbolized.

God did not approve of this totalitarian and authoritarian model for society. He confused the languages and scattered the population. He wanted to foster a world with different ways of speaking and different ways of thinking; He wanted to foster individuality and personal responsibility. He wanted authority not to be centralized in one small clique, but dispersed among many individuals in many localities.

Diversity within humanity is a positive quality. It enables human beings to see things from different perspectives, to offer unique insights, to reflect their ideas in different languages and idioms. In the process, all of humanity is enriched. If we all spoke the same words and thought the same thoughts and were under the control of one small powerful group, humanity would be vastly impoverished culturally, spiritually and intellectually.

The great Israeli writer, S. Y. Agnon, noted in one of his short stories ("Between Two Towns"): "The good Lord created a vast world, with many people in it whom He scattered wide, giving each place its singular quality and endowing every man with singular wisdom. You leave home and meet people from another place, and your mind is expanded by what you hear."

The builders of the Tower of Babel were guilty of trying to stifle the individuality, freedom and creativity of humanity. This was a sin against humanity--and a sin against God's hopes for humanity.

Angel for Shabbat