

## The Tower

The Torah presents us with three cautionary tales after the expulsion from Eden—Cain and Abel, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. We can easily identify the problem in the first two stories. Cain murders his brother. The generation of Noah was awash with violence, in particular violence against women. But the problem in the Tower story is harder to identify. The people speak one language and set to work, apparently harmoniously, to build a tower. They want to make a name for themselves, lest they be scattered over the earth. What is the problem here? God seems rather like a petulant tyrant, threatened by the scope of human accomplishment.

The key to the story, as always, is in the details. In particular, we need to examine the human motivation in the narrative. Why did the people want to make a name for themselves? Did their motivation effect the way they went about building the structure?

The Torah clearly states the motive: the people feared being scattered. They had wandered together into the Valle of Shinar, and they wanted to stay together, make community together, build a tower as the center-pole of their community. What is wrong with that?

The answer to this question takes us deep into God's intention for humankind. God clearly expresses the Divine intention from the start, and then again when creation is re-started after the flood. "*Pru u'revu u'milu et ha-aretz*" God commands. The Divine prime directive is often translated as "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." To my ear, the term "multiply" feels too arithmetic here. A better translation would be, "Be fruitful and generative and fill the earth". As we have seen in the Creation story itself, God has invested the created world with substantial creative power. All of creation is to create, to innovate, to bring forth unimagined new forms, to transcend itself. As a creature within creation, the human is directed to create, to be fruitful and generative. The prime directive to humankind is to create and fill the earth.

The people of Babel do innovate. Lacking stone and mortar, they made bricks of clay and burned them hard in the sun. But their technological

ingenuity was in the name of control, not creativity. Note that the Hebrew word for bricks, *livanot*, comes from the Hebrew root meaning white. The people were taking the blood (dam) red (adam) earth (adamah), and scorching the color out of it. Their building was not motivated out of the desire to witness to the grandeur of life, but rather to resist being scattered.

Why is scattering important to God? What is the role of scattering in the prime directive to be fruitful and generative? We find an answer in the biologist, Ursula Goodenough's book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*.

Happily for us, our planet is anything but homogeneous. Instead it offers, and continues to generate, a seemingly endless diversity of environmental parameters: arid and humid, fresh and salty, aerobic and anaerobic, with and without other kinds of organisms. A collection of such parameters that generates the opportunity for habitation is called a niche. Organisms that attempt to populate a niche must be able to operate in that context; genes that improve this possibility will be selected for, and genes that hinder this possibility will be selected against. Thus there is no such thing as "fittest" kind of organism. We can only talk about how an organism propagates in a given niche, how its life strategies have become adapted to the niche... So because we have an endless array of niches, with tectonics and glaciations to stir things up in the long term, tides and seasons and weather to modulate things in the short term, we have an endless array of organisms (p. 77-8).

We learn from Goodenough that scattering nurtures innovation and diversity. Scattered peoples adapt to diverse environments. Diverse environments call forth sundry world-views, varied cultures, unique opportunities to create.

The tension between the Divine Intent and building plans of the people of Babel is captured in the competing images of the vertical--building a tower to the heavens—versus the horizontal--scattering over the face of the earth. God's intention moves the people more deeply into Creation, exploring the potential of Creation through evolution. In the Divine

plan, transcendence unfolds over (horizontal) time and place through diversification and evolution. The people of Bavel resist such scattering and diversification. They wish to move above the created order of things, to transcend time and remain in place through human technology. With the Tower they will reach the heavens and make an immortal name for themselves.

We should note here that the divine plan is transcendence through humility, through staying close to the humus of the earth. A scattered humankind would produce a multitude of cultures, a diversity of worldviews. Diverse worldviews ultimately presents a challenge to any one particular worldview. Diversity humbles human arrogance reminding a person that one's point of view is limited, partial, and incomplete. In this light, listen to the Torah verse that introduces the Tower story, "The whole earth was of one language and one set of words." The people had achieved unity through narrowing the categories of thought. The people of Bavel resisted diversity. While diversity humbles the individual, the people wanted to glorify themselves, extol their achievements., to build a tower to make a name for themselves.

Whenever we create with the conscious intent to make a name for ourselves, this additional intention serves to separate us from the creative presence that is working within us. At our best, we are a vehicle for creativity, a vehicle for life's celebrating and transcending itself. When we use our creativity for self-aggrandizement, we have pulled ever so slightly, or grossly, out of the creative flow. The creation becomes about us, the human creator, instead of about Creation.

Naturally, there is a tendency of ego to want to aggrandize itself, to make a name for itself. Ever threatened by its own ephemeral nature, the ego quite naturally seeks to concretize itself, to have accomplishments on which to hang its name. The artist quite naturally is tempted to make the art about ego rather than about creativity.

The people of Bavel portray the dangers of creativity in service to the human ego. In the Midrash, the rabbis amplify the danger ego directed creativity poses to society. The Midrash tells us that when a human fell from the tower the people did not mourn. But when a brick fell they

were overcome with grief. The building project had become such a compulsion for the people that bricks had become more important than people

We all know this tension in our work lives. There is a job to be done, and we cannot always divert ourselves to attend to the human needs of our work colleagues. Yet, we also know how easily we become so consumed in the project that we are unduly insensitive to people's needs and feelings. This is no easy question. We note how narrow and challenging the path that God has set out for us. We do need to work together, we cannot simply indulge every human need. And yet a balance must be struck between the task at hand and the human needs of those who do the work. The Midrash on the Tower story suggests that work teams more readily lose this delicate balance to the extent that the workers look to the project to make a name for themselves.

We have explored the motivation of the people working on the Tower. Now let's see how God behaves. The Torah tells us that the God came down to look at the city and the tower that man had built (11:5). The Rabbinic commentators tell us that God came down to look because the city and the tower were not in themselves a problem for God. Rather, God needed to look closely at the way the tower was being built, at the intention the people had in building the Tower. What did God see?

From this up-close perspective, the violence that God observes is subtler than in the earlier Genesis stories. No worker is being beaten. Nobody is being killed or even enslaved. And yet the project is such that each of the workers is dehumanized in the process. We have the first example of what Marx would later call "alienated labor". God does not see people engaged out of their humanity, integrity and creativity. God observes that the work on the Tower is more about the creators than about Creation and creativity. As stated earlier, when people create to make a name for themselves, rather than being in service to something larger than ourselves, they separate, ever so slightly, from the creative process and thereby open a break—a disconnect from fellow workers, the world and God. The people are not working together. They have become automatons to the project.

So God simply makes more evident the pattern of behavior that was already in place. People were not truly hearing each other; they were not responding to the humanity in the other. So God confounded their language so that the people were not able to *listen* one to another at all. God only made the disconnect more evident.

Evenso, God's intent is a little peculiar here. Observing the Tower God says, "Behold, 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"? We are reminded of God's discomfort in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever.

God seems intimidated by human potential. Perhaps. Another way of looking at these passages is to consider the importance of limits and humility for the human psyche.

We have seen earlier, in the Flood story, that the degenerate generation at the time of Noah was marked by the existence of men who set out to make a name for themselves (Genesis 6:4). God notes the scheming of that generation, and observes that the *devising thoughts* of the human heart were evil. The human is not evil, nor is the human heart considered evil. Rather, when the human begins to scheme and fashion to his own end, and not in service to Creation, violence is the inevitable consequence.

The violence in the Tower narrative is truly holy mischief. The people experience their creative potential, the pure creative potential of life itself. In their creative awareness, the people touch an aspect of their being that is not limited by time and space—that transcends time and space. So they set about to build a monument to that transcendent aspect of human nature—a monument in time and space. They turn mud into bricks and build a tower in the midst of a level plane, a grand plan to make a name for themselves that will persist through time. All humans feel that draw to immortality that vanquishes time.

The wisdom of the Tower narrative tells us that true transcendence is not dominance over time and space, but giving one's life over to the creative process that moves through time and space. Transcendence, ironically, will not be found in raising ourselves up above the face of the earth, but rather in humility, in staying close to the humus and the creative process that courses through it.