

The Idolatry of The Tower of Babel

Parashat Noach (Genesis 11:1-9)

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Shabbat Shalom! Last week, we began reading our Torah over again, learning about the creation of the world, and very importantly, God creating human beings בצלם אלהים, “in the image of God.” In our Torah this week, Parashat Noach, we read our tradition’s flood narrative, with God destroying all inhabitants on earth except for Noah, his family, and many animals chosen to survive. Later in our Torah portion, after the flood, generations later, we find humanity resolving to do something bold together: build a tower all the way to the sky. These people, all of humanity at this point in the history of the young world, had settled in the valley of Shinar. They all spoke the exact same language:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה | “And they said, come...

נִבְנֶה-לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמַיִם | “Let us build a city and a tower with a top that reaches the heavens...”

וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָנוּ שֵׁם | “And let us make for ourselves a name.”

כִּי-אִם-נִפְּוֶץ עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ: | “Or else we will be scattered across the earth.”¹

You may remember the rest of the story from there. God finds out about their plan, confounds their speech, and scatters them, all of humanity, across the entire earth.

¹ Genesis 11:1-4

Although the story of the Tower of Babel is only nine verses long in our Torah, it has inspired centuries of discussion and debate on one key question: why did God decide to destroy the tower? Many interpretations of the story point to the people's decision to build the tower all the way to the sky, perhaps challenging God's powers of creation with their own creative project. Others point toward the idea that the people themselves expressed: "וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָּנוּ שֵׁם; Let us make a name for ourselves." This line of interpretation identifies an important characteristic of this story - the pompousness, the hubris, the arrogance of the people. "Let's show how smart we are, how creative, how amazing we are by building ourselves this tower."

And yet, making a name for ourselves, creating something strong and beautiful for future generations, these are very Jewish things. We are a people that remember. We will close this service here tonight by remembering those who have come before us. It is a Jewish custom to name children after family members who have died. The Holocaust memorial and museum in Israel is named Yad Vashem, literally meaning “a memorial and a name”, inspired by the words of the prophet Isaiah:

I will give them, in My House

And within My walls,

A monument and a name

Better than sons or daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name

That shall not perish.²

We are a people and a tradition that knows the power of a name and the sacred act of remembering a name. So if it was only for the act of creating something through which to memorialize themselves, the question remains: why did God destroy the Tower of Babel?

² Isaiah 56:5

A bit of Midrash, a rabbinic story created to understand our Torah on a deeper level, could provide us with another answer, and an answer relevant for the current moment we find ourselves in right now. In Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, we read:

“There were no stones with which to build the city and tower. So what did they do? They baked bricks like a builder would do, until they built it many cubits high, and it had steps on its east and west sides. The people took the bricks up on the eastern staircase, and they went down the western staircase. If a person fell and died (while working) they paid them no heed; but if a brick fell they sat down and wept, and said: ‘Woe is us! When will another brick come around again?’”³

This Midrash finds fault among the people not for their decision to build the tower, but in how they built the tower, weeping over fallen bricks, but not the death of fellow human beings. In their attempt to connect heaven and the earth, they overlooked the preciousness, the holiness, the godliness of other human beings. Instead they gave their attention and praise to the bricks used to build the tower. The Tower of Babel, this Midrash implies, was destroyed because the people valued objects over people. In short, idolatry. Idolatry is what brought the tower to its demise.

³ Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 24:6

Now, if the Jewish tradition is one that finds holiness in the remembrance of names, it is also a tradition that is famously against idolatry. Traditionally, this prohibition is against worshipping other gods. But, if we take this idea from Genesis that every human being is created in the image of God, endowed with nishmat chayim, with the breath of life from God, then prioritizing objects and things over human beings is more than just rude, disrespectful, or degrading - it is idolatry. It is the worship of other things in place of our fellow human beings, our fellow individuals who carry with them the image and breath of the Holy One.

It seems obvious, that, of course, we should prioritize the health and wellbeing and the love and care of other human beings over mere things. And yet, we see examples of this form of idolatry all around us. It would be easy to draw a connection between our story and its warning against idolatry to the new renovations happening at the White House right now. More than \$300 million, collected from individuals and corporations attempting to gain access and favor with the administration, will build...a new ballroom?⁴ All while more than 5,000 Washington DC residents, neighbors of the White House, suffer from homelessness.⁵

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/10/21/us/politics/trump-white-house-renovations.html>.

⁵ <https://community-partnership.org/homelessness-in-dc/>.

But to only focus on the idolatrous nature of this project and this administration would let us off the hook. Because we see idolatry in our culture around guns in this country, choosing to worship the language of the 2nd Amendment and the look, feel, and mighty power of a revolver or AK-47 over the safety of children, parents, teachers, and all people. We see idolatry in the takeover of AI, choosing the convenience this technology offers while its facilities pump pollution into our most vulnerable communities. We see idolatry across our city, the wealthiest city in the world, with bright and shiny ads streaming across Times Square, while thousands of our neighbors struggle with homelessness and hunger. And we can even see it in our homes. I'm sure I wouldn't be the only one whose phone, laptop, or TV takes my attention away from loved ones, from real life. The idolatry we witness surrounding us in the world seeps its way into our daily lives, priming us toward the valuing of things, mere objects, over the depth of our loving and caring relationships.

Each and every day, we have the opportunity to see the holiness, the godliness, in other people. To do that, we must recognize the ways in which idolatry surrounds our lives, and make the decision: will we be like our ancestors who cherished objects over humans? Or will we choose a different path, one that cherishes humanity above all else? And perhaps, just perhaps, we can start making that choice this Shabbat, our weekly reminder of our inherent goodness and the need for us to rest and reconnect with ourselves and our community. And if this commitment is renewed on this Shabbat, may it continue throughout this year and for years to come. Shabbat Shalom!