

Unity vs. Diversity — We Are All Tower Builders

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Noach* (Gen. 6:9 – 11:32)

By Mike Rubin

“Eileh tol'dot Noach....”
“These are the generations of Noah....”

In *Parashat Noach*, God destroys all flesh by a great flood except for Noah and his family and two of every species, all of which are saved in the ark that Noah builds per God's instructions. The Torah describes the descendants of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, and thereby identifies the nations throughout the earth through their lineage. Then the Torah shifts dramatically to the Tower of Babel story, when everyone on earth had a common language and migrated to a common location and decided to build a city and tower “with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we be scattered all over the world.” God sees what they are doing and determines to confound their speech and scatter them over the face of the whole earth, lest “nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.”

In the spirit of Jacob, we wrestle with the paradoxes in the Torah. *Noach* addresses the contrasting ideas of the unity of all that exists versus the diversity of God's creation. The unity of all mankind is so fundamental to the Torah's message that Noah repeats the same theme that was revealed in the story of Adam and Eve. We learned from *B'reishit* that not only did all mankind spring from the common progenitors of Adam and Eve, but that “God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him”.¹ In *Noach*, all human beings are wiped out by the Flood except those that spring from Noah and his wife. Moreover, so that we do not forget the significance, we are told in *Noach* that man shall not shed each other's blood, “For in His image, did God make man.”² The oneness of all mankind, and the innate holiness of the divine image within every human being, is seared within our conscience through this repetition of theme. The Torah tells us that we are all brothers and sisters. No one is superior by birth or more worthy in God's sight.

Why does this need to be repeated in *Noach* when it is already explicit in *B'reishit*? Perhaps one reason is because of the curious passage that immediately precedes the *Noach* parashah and which seems to be part of the Noah story, but which is not within the parashah's historical limits. Noah is first introduced near the end of *B'reishit* at Genesis 5:28 and at Genesis 5:32. We seem to be into the Noah story when we are told that Noah begot

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Genesis 9:6

Shem, Ham and Japheth when he had lived 500 years. Yet, between Genesis 5:32 and the beginning of *Parashat Noach* at Genesis 6:9 is an account that seems to have little to do with the Noah story. It is an account of divine beings taking the beautiful daughters of men as wives, “who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.”³

Could it be that this intervention of other divine beings in the blood lines of mankind upset the divine unity/equality of all mankind, by creating a form of super heroes amongst ordinary human beings? Could it be that the creator’s divine image could no longer be said to be within each person because some were created in the image of other divine visitors? Is this the real reason for the Flood? We read in *Noach* that “The earth became corrupt before God”⁴, suggesting a contamination of the line that God had created. The Flood, then, was essential to begin again so that all mankind emanated from one divine source, shared a fundamental equality from birth, and shared the same spark of divinity manifested through their creation in God’s own image.

As important as this notion is of unity, equality, and similarity, it is also undeniable that the Torah not only sanctions but hallows the diversity of mankind. It is a wonderful twist to find the theme of diversity within the very same parashah that underscores the unity of all mankind. *Noach* addresses diversity through the Table of diverse nations that spring from Noah (through Shem, Ham and Japheth) – “each with its language – their clans and their nations”.⁵

What does the Tower of Babel have to do with any of this? In one context, the placement of the Tower of Babel in the Torah immediately after the vignette on Noah and the Flood seems arbitrary, having little to do with the history of the specific individuals named in the Torah. It is almost like a legend plucked from another culture that got inserted into our Torah. In another context, however, the placement is brilliant, creating a juxtaposition that underscores both humanity's common identity and intrinsic equality, but also the utter necessity of diversity and the virtue of pluralism.

The Tower of Babel story is often commented upon in our tradition as reflecting God's wrath against man for daring to compete with God ("to make a name for ourselves") and reflecting God's fear that man might be successful in this competition ("nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach"). Rashi treats the people in the story as deserving of God’s anger, asserting that the tower builders “spoke blasphemously against the Sole Being of the universe” and that “they came with one plan and said,

³ Genesis 6:4

⁴ Genesis 7:11

⁵ Genesis 10:5

'He [G-d] has no right to select the heavens for Himself. Let us ascend to the sky and wage war against Him.'"⁶

It is notable, however, that the Torah does not indicate that God was angry with or desired to punish the tower builders. In fact, Rashi had to struggle with the question why God would kill the generation of the Flood, while merely dispersing the tower builders.⁷ Rashi's explanation was that, though the tower builders attempted to wage war against God and blasphemed Him, they were spared because "the Flood generation were robbers and there was strife between them. They were, therefore, destroyed. But, these [the tower builders] conducted themselves with love and friendship ... You may learn [from this] that strife is detested and that peace is great."⁸

Do we need, as Rashi does, to rely on God's anger and wrath to justify the dispersion of the tower builders? Isn't it just as reasonable to view the story as evidencing a divine plan that requires diversity and pluralism for successful implementation? Evolution of man (and of the divine) requires diversity of action and approaches, learning from countless successes and failures. Did God confound the tower builders' ability to speak a single language and spread them throughout the earth, because only by doing so could He stimulate the diversity of thought, of spirituality, of creativity that was essential to His evolutionary design?

We are all tower builders. It is in our nature to strive to reach to God. We seek unity with God, for God is in our soul. As we strive for spirituality, we recognize unity with others, because they also were created in God's image. God does not criticize or punish us for being tower builders. Yet, if God created man to be co-creators in the evolution of the divine, then God requires our diversity and uniqueness.

How can God disperse us and stimulate our creativity when the natural tendency of the divine within us is to join with other souls as builders of a single magnificent tower? Did God recognize that He had to confound us, remain a mystery to man, by withdrawing from humanity, while still maintaining a hidden presence? Is the Torah an accounting of God's gradual withdrawal, from the days of Moses who spoke with God face to face, to the prophets who perhaps had visions in dreams, to the destruction of the Temple, where God was said to have a physical presence? If so, doesn't the Tower of Babel story reflect God's blessing rather than God's punishment for man's arrogance? God creates diversity by confounding the speech of the whole earth and by scattering humanity over the face of the whole earth.

⁶ <http://www.tachash.org/metsudah/b02r.html>, page 17.

⁷ *Id.*, page 19.

⁸ *Id.*, page 19.

God's hiding of the underlying oneness encourages men to compete, explore and, for the spiritual, to seek God in many ways.

Arguably, the Tower of Babel story is biblical authority against orthodoxy in approach. The builders of the Tower of Babel were creating a tower of uniformity, with one common language, one people, in one location. Were they seeking to impose one single methodology of reaching God? It was God, Himself, that smashed the bureaucratic tower. Was this evidence that God preferred heterodoxy to the orthodoxy of the tower building bureaucrats? Does the Tower of Babel foreshadow Isaiah, who told us that God said: "What need Have I of all your sacrifices?"⁹, or Micah, who told us that God requires us "Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God"¹⁰

While the charge to the Jewish people is to be a light to all nations and to follow the Torah, might it be that pluralism in conduct and even of worship, is not only a virtue, but a necessary imperative to achieve God's divine plan? As summarized by Rabbi Bradley Artson¹¹, the Rabbis of the Tosefta view *Parashat Noach* as specifying seven commandments binding upon all people, and our tradition is that you don't have to be Jewish to be blessed so long as you observe these seven simple laws. As we grow in wisdom, we need to embrace the diversity and pluralism that God put in motion. As we grow in spirituality, we recognize the unity and holiness of all of God's creation.

⁹ Isaiah 1:10

¹⁰ Micah 6:8

¹¹ (www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Weekly_Torah_Commentary/noach_artson5759.htm)