

Babble

We are coming up on Shabbat Noah, October 12-13. This third year of our triennial cycle of reading Torah brings us, in Genesis 11, the famous story of the Tower of Babel.

You will recall that, following the Great Flood, all the humans on earth had a single language, and they decided to build a tower whose top would reach the sky. The goal was to achieve fame and avoid having humanity scattered over the entire earth.

In a literal reading, the first goal doesn't make sense; since everyone was in the same place, who would acknowledge their fame? I think this goal should be united with the idea of reaching heaven: the idea was to have a name as great as God's. As for the second goal, a united humanity in perfect communication might see itself as having Godlike power.

In the end, of course, humanity is scattered over the face of the earth, speaking a multitude of languages. The illegitimate goal of becoming like God is frustrated in a welter of misunderstanding.

We might read this as a "pourquoi tale," explaining the origin of different cultures, ethnicities and languages. We might also read it as explaining the origin of rivalry, war and hatred.

I think of this story as an admonition for us human beings to know our place. Our aspirations should be human, not godlike. Indeed, when we work together, nothing human is out of our reach and we can accomplish great things. But that involves dedication and mutual understanding about ideals and materials. Learning to speak meaningfully with one another is an art that we haven't yet mastered—even when we speak the same language!

We can also learn from Babel that nothing material can reach the "sky," whatever that is. Science continues to teach us that the "sky" recedes the farther we go to reach it. (The sky is really the limit, but we haven't reached it. What does that tell you?)

In our time, even in our own country and our own families, people persist in talking past each other. Listening to one another becomes ever harder as we try to keep up with the flood of words and images that capture our attention and distract us from necessary work.

Learning to listen better, and to speak "with," instead of speaking "to" or even "at" other people are skills whose necessity is conveyed by our story of the Tower of Babel. An early lesson and a simple lesson that is eternally relevant.

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