

Noah 5783  
The Peril of Unity  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

“You are a flaw in the pattern, Winston.” You are a stain that must be wiped out...When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. The command of the old despotism was ‘You shall not.’ The command of the totalitarians was ‘You shall.’ Our command is ‘You are.’ No one whom we bring to this place ever stands out against us. Everyone is washed clean.”

-George Orwell, from his dystopian book, 1984.

“Everyone one on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated to the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, “Come...let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world” (Genesis 11:1-4).

Orwell’s dystopia has more to do with the Tower of Babel (or *Bavel*), and with us, than we might have realized.

Since we know the end of the Tower story, we know that God does not like the tower, and there’s something about the way the people talk that God also does not like: “If, says God, “as 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” (Genesis 11:5-7). God confounds their speech and scatters them over the earth. And the narrator comes in to tell us that ever since, that tower is known as the Babble Tower, *Migdal Bavel*, not referring to Babylon, but to meaningless speech babble.”

Of course, as soon as this tale hit the shtenders, readers have asked the obvious question: What’s the problem here? Isn’t unity, “*Achdut*,” or “*Achdus*,” a Jewish communal value? Clearly something has gone terribly wrong, and so soon after the Flood. What is it?

I’d like to share some gleanings I took from studying this narrative with my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Elie Holzer, through the lens of the 19th century Hasidic master known as the Mei Shiloach (Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, Poland).

The story of the Tower actually begins with Noah and the Flood. There, and here, God looks down at human society, doesn't like it, and intervenes dramatically. We need to know that these episodes, like the Creation narratives, are "typological stories," also called "foundational myths." They come to teach us something about human life, or God, or both, which is neither Science nor History.

I want to share a few points that the Mei Shiloach makes, in an argument that ultimately goes somewhere I am not going. I think the points alone are interesting enough for us to explore together, and also, I want to make a connection that I think is more important for us right now.

Before the Flood, society has degenerated into a mass of egoistic takers devoid of empathy, each grabbing and stealing one another's spouses and material property. Even Noah lacks empathy, as exemplified by his lack of compassion, nary a prayer, for all of the people and creatures God plans to destroy in the Flood. Noah figures that if all those people and their world are bad, God must be right to destroy them. The next crop of people will be better. How strikingly different Noah is from Avraham, who protests when God sets out to destroy Sodom, a society that displeases God even more than the "babble people" here.

The Mei Shiloach suggests that the post-flood generation wants to do better and they set out with good, even holy, intentions. They have come to understand that all people are responsible for one another, that our fates are bound together, and so they seek to build a society that unifies them against whatever might come to threaten them. They build a city and a tower *שֶׁרָאֵשׁוּ מֵגִיעַ שְׂמִימָה*—whose top goes all the way to Heaven, aiming for the God-conscious "*Achdus*," unity, that the pre-Flood generation so tragically lacked. But they make a terrible mistake, and maybe more than one.

Their first mistake is in the location they choose to build the tower. "Eretz Shinar," the land of Shinar: What is that place? It's a lowland, and in our Bible, "low" carries moral and spiritual implications. Shinar is low; Jerusalem is high, and the Temple Mount even higher. So there's something suspect about the place itself. In the Talmud, we find an idea that Shinar is a valley in which the dead bodies of the people who drowned in the flood had drifted (Zevachim 113). The unity-seeking babble people build their tower over the bodies. What can that possibly mean?

On the one hand, it could be redemptive, as in: "since those people died at God's hand because of their disunity, we will make ourselves so unified that we'll poke at Heaven's gates."

But that's not how the Mei Shiloach sees it. He knows, as we do, that annihilation is most people's greatest fear. He sees the post-Flood generation as so terrified about their worst fear, of what might happen if everyone doesn't speak the same language—metaphorically and actually—that they build their entire society on fear of existential vulnerability. They twist the value of *Achdut* and develop a mindset that cannot tolerate difference, out of fear.

We know what happens in a society like that. Empathy and care for the dignity of human life disappears. People cannot thrive in a society built on fear. A closed society in which we must fear the consequences if we step off the straight path denies the divinity of our creation and forestalls our ability to generate anything original, to exercise responsible agency or free will, to act out of a moral consciousness, or to grow in any meaningful way. We have learned and continue to learn this. That is why here, we strive to learn how we can be more inclusive and encourage people to help us help them to be seen authentically. But the babble people of Shinar do not know that. They think people need to be motivated by fear.

A mindset of internalized fear is the antithesis of what God wants, this Chasid warns us, and it stands in direct opposition to the Temple cult, wherein a person of any gender or nationality who wanted to bring an offering or attend the sacrifices could access the open courtyards and partake of the sacred ambience.

"מי יעלה בהר יי ומי יקום במקום קדשו?  
נקי כפים ובר לבב אשר לא נשא לשוא נפשי ולא נשבע למרמה."  
Who may ascend God's mountain? Who may rise in God's sanctuary?  
One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not used God's name in false  
oaths, nor sworn without conviction."  
(Psalms 24: 4-6)

To be that kind of person you cannot operate from fear. We are called to operate from hope.

Now, we can better understand the related problem of the babbling Tower builders, which concerns their language.

"ויהי כל הארץ שפה אחת" ודברים אחדים"  
"All of the earth had the same language and the same words"  
(Genesis 11;1).

The English doesn't do justice to the Hebrew. The deeper sense of the words is not only that this new society speaks just one language, "לשון," but that there is but one, unidirectional discourse, "שפה," without room for individuality or dialogue. We are talking here about slogans, not thoughts formed in conscious minds with sensitivity or attunement to true and deep perceptions of a life-giving reality. These people spew forth the slogans that spread through cultures built on fear.

We read in our *parashah* that Noah's great-grandson, Nimrod, becomes King in Shinar. Nimrod is described as a גיבור ציד – a mighty hunter by the grace of God. The text hints at something unsavory about Nimrod. Rashi expounds: Nimrod does not only hunt animals; rather, he hunts down and captures words that can manipulate Godly-sounding language and mislead people in his kingdom. He sounds good to his listeners, but the essence of truth is missing from his rhetoric, making it dangerous and destructive.

That is what happens in Shinar. There is no meaningful language, only language that maintains fear and screens out differences and truths some people don't want to hear. As the Mei Shiloach writes, the words are loud, but without substance, "כמו פטפוט וצפצוף" – like the chatter and twittering of birds. And God confounds their language because that is not the kind of *Achdus* God wants.

Speaking of twittering and tweeting, I don't think I have to tell you that what we are seeing in that arena in our country is exactly the kind of conscience-stifling, fear mongering, sloganism that happened in Shinar. As Jews, we should be horrified and outraged by what culture influencers are saying about us in tweets and sloganism more broadly.

American Jews should be very concerned about what is at stake for us. If we do not want to live in a society like Shinar, founded on fear of difference, if we understand how dangerous that would be for our very lives, we must be very aware and feel how we are called to action.

Vote how you will, but exercise your right and vote with your conscience. That in itself will be a Shinar-defying action. However you vote, please use whatever influence you possess, at the polls and elsewhere, to rout out support for statements like that made by a major party leader that "Jewish Americans need to get their act together and support" his presumptive bid for re-election, based on a particular kind of support for Israel he feels we owe him, and we had better do it..."before it is too late." Push back loudly and visibly against these antisemitic tropes, like rhetorically questioning, "Is this a good Jewish character right here?", describing a group of Jews as "very good salesmen," or

referring to a crook who happens to be Jewish and is most certainly not a rabbi as “the rabbi from Iowa.”

As *Forward* Senior Contributing Editor Rob Eshman wrote last week, “[that man] speaks, the memes follow, and antisemitic acts increase...’When the society suffers, it needs someone to blame, someone upon whom to avenge itself for its disappointments; and those persons whom opinion already disfavors are naturally singled out for this role’...By singling out American Jews because they don’t support him or a particular Israeli government,” Eshman adds, “[that politician] painted a crude target on our backs (“Why is Donald Trump Harassing Jews?” Posted on 10/20/22).

Of course, you know it was the former President who said those things, and more. But as problematic as you may believe him to be, as Jews, the source of our problem is not Donald Trump. The former President is surfacing a catastrophically foreboding wave—and he’s riding it. Statements like those, though, *are* our problem, and we must take them seriously. Even moreso, we must take seriously that he is preaching to a large and noisy choir that wants to hear what he is saying and add their voices. We have many people in our country who are afraid about very real problems we all share, and are choosing to respond like the people of Shinar, attempting to build a society that operates from fear. That is very, very dangerous for us.

Thank Goodness the rapper, Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, has been widely censured, at least for the moment, for his very public and provocative antisemitic speech, along the lines of “loving” Hitler and the Nazis, vowing to go “death con 3” on “JEWISH PEOPLE” and referring to Jews as “financial engineers.” He needed to be censured, but of course he and those who agree with him will argue that the censures bear out their false claims of nefarious Jewish power and conspiracy.

The rapper is not the problem either. Nor is antisemitic rhetoric limited to people of one political party. There is plenty to go around. Nor is anti-semitism itself, as an idea, our problem. It’s been around for centuries and we have managed to flourish in spite of it. Our problem is tolerance and normalization of antisemitic discourse and actions that force us into survival mode in which we cannot possibly thrive.

These times call for us to use our voices, not like chattering birds, but like the human beings we are, imbued with conscience and the empathy we cultivate in sacred homes like this one. And these times call for us to use our ears, too.

And don’t wait for the next incident. Act proactively. Take joy in being Jewish. Tell your teachers and employers that you are taking off to celebrate the Jewish holidays. Ask the

charitable organizations you work for not to schedule their events on Shabbat, our holiest day. Wear your kippah. We have a heritage that gives us much for which to be proud.

The people of Shinar got up every day and looked out the window at their worst fear in the form of piles of bones. That has never been the Jewish way. Our way is to look up, with hope, and to take the actions that make that hope real. Our way is to honor the Divine image in all people, to make room for many voices, to hear other people out and to speak from a place of conscience and moral grounding.

We live in tough times. In all likelihood they may get tougher. May God give us the strength to act not from fear, but from knowing and standing up proudly for who we are.