

## Tower of Babble (Gen. 11:1-9)

A. Last time: Two Creation Stories—>This time: Two Destruction Stories (Jews read the Flood and the Tower of Babel together)

### 1. Beginning of the Story:

וַיְהִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים

#### a. How do we read it?

##### i. Translations (11:1)

Now all the earth was of one language and one set-of-words. (Fox)-lit. “lip”

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. (KJV)

And the whole earth is of one pronunciation, and of the same words. (Young’s Literal Translation)

Now the whole earth had one language and few words.(RSV)

At one time, the whole Earth spoke the same language. (The Message Bible)

What we call the text: Scripture/ Old/New Testament/ Torah

##### ii.. Assumptions we approach the text with(Gary Porton): (handout)

- Every part of the Torah was written in a **precise** way to teach something. (letter shape/ # of words in verse/ spaces)
- Everything in the Torah is **interrelated**.
- There can be **multiple interpretations** for a single verse.
- Correct interpretations are grounded **in** the text (Scripture= “Torah”- the teaching).
- Study and interpretation are a **sacred act** (bringing God’s presence into the world).

SHOW TIKKUN: NO VOWELS OR PUNCTUATION ( like manuscript--no chapter, verse)

How do you deal with reading a story you can’t pin down? What do you do with the holes in the story?

## II. Close look in Study Pairs/ Hevruta (Aramaic word from the Hebrew root for friend, haver)

### A. Read text closely with a friend

1. Read not to pin it down but to open it up

2. Best tool is the question, like: Why this word? What does this mean?

Why the repetition? What is missing that should be there? Etc.

3. Genre: Is this story’s beginning a Utopia (like Garden of Eden?) or a Dystopia (like Handmaid’s Tale/ Parable of the Sower/ 1984/ etc.): Are we seeing unity or uniformity?

III. Come back together— go through text and questions.

A. Repeated words:

- a. all the earth (5x), language (5x), one (4x), build (3x), spread out (3x), name (shem)- 2x and there (sham) - 5x,
- b. Buber's *Leitwort*: "making a meaning available without articulating it explicitly"
- c. Repeated scattering (vs. 8 and 9)

B. Tower vs. scattering (location/ presence of God)

C. Name (shem) vs. place (sham)-- identical word in the text

D. Plurals (people, God)

E. Existence of many languages before (Gen 10:5) From these the maritime nations branched out.

[These are the descendants of Japheth] by their lands—each with its language—their clans and their nations.

B. Commentaries

1. R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah (Berlin, 1816-93) (writing in Czarist Russia and foreseeing communism)

"And the same words - The text did not explain what those words were, rather, it leaves as a hint, as explained in midrashim. But the words themselves are not explained by the text, it just tells us that they were the same words, to teach us that it wasn't because of the content of the words themselves that the Holy One of Blessing was distressed. They were what they were, and in its simplicity there is not sin, and on the contrary all appears well. But here what happened is that all thought the same thing, and this came to be the problem of the settlement."

"We must understand why they (the builders) feared some people leaving for another land. This was certainly related to the "one speech" among them. They feared that since not all human thoughts are identical, if some would leave they might adopt different thoughts. And so they saw to it that no one left their enclave. Anyone who deviated from the "one speech" that was among them would be sentenced to burning, as was done with our ancestor Abraham. What emerges is....they decided to kill anyone who did not think as they did.

It is inconceivable there would be only one city in the whole world. Rather they thought all cities would be connected and subsidiary to that one city in which the tower was built." The skyscraper would serve as a watchtower from which to monitor the residents and keep them in line.

2. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Based on Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 24)

"Come, let us build us a city and a tower." Many, many years were spent building the tower. It reached so great a height that it took a year to mount to the top. A brick was, therefore, more precious in the sight of the builders than a human being. If a man fell down and met his death, none took notice of it; but if a brick dropped, they wept, because it would take a year to replace it. So intent were they upon accomplishing their purpose that they would not permit a woman to

interrupt her work of brickmaking when the hour of travail came upon her. Moulding bricks, she gave birth to her child, and tying it round her body in a sheet, she went on moulding bricks.

3. Martin Buber (Vienna, b. 1878)

Not before a man...can say I, can he...to God-- Say Thou. And even if he does it in a community, he can only do it "alone."

4. Judy Klitsner (Jerusalem, b. 1957)

The defining lines of the Babel narrative are purposefully blurred. The text's ambiguity on the question of whether the people sinned against God or against one another points to a complex truth: the people's suppression of their unique selves lay at the root of their disengagement from God. In tyrannizing one another by extinguishing the divine spark of individuality, the tower builders made standing before God impossible.

E. Form/ Content: (handout) **Having multiple translations, interpretations, and voices looking at a text creates a multi-vocal text. How do we think about that? How might the story itself inform this?** Is there one way to understand it? A right way? Can a text mean more than one thing? (How do you deal with what you can't control-- same problem as text.)

F. How is multiplicity a blessing/ curse?

1. For texts?
2. People?
3. Show page of Torat Hayyim with central text and commentaries around it.
4. What are its limits?

IV. Questions for reflection and conversation

- A. Do you think there is one way to tell this story? Should there be? What do we gain or lose by having many possibilities/ translations/ interpretations?
- B. Is difference bad or good? Many languages bad or good? Safer or more dangerous? Would it be better if we all spoke the same language? Why or why not?
- C. Is the scattering of the people a blessing or a curse?
- D. What might a diversity of religions mean in the context of this story?

My fast today:

Fasting: The Mishnah in [Ta'anit 4:6](#) lists five events that occurred on the 17th of Tammuz: Moses broke the [tablets of law](#) he had been given on Mount Sinai, the priests in the First Temple stopped offering the Tamid (daily) sacrifice because Jerusalem was besieged and they ran out of sheep, the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Romans in the Second Temple Period, a Roman general named Apostomos burned a Torah scroll, and an idol was erected in the Temple by the Romans.

The minor fast also begins a [period of mourning](#) that lasts through Tisha B'Av, the major fast day that commemorates, among other things, the destruction of both the First and the Second Temples. During this three-week period some people abstain from listening to music, getting married, and cutting their hair.