



Dear Friends,

Parashat Noah relates two formative stories: the story of the Flood, and the story of the Tower of Babel. These stories are familiar from childhood. They seem easy to understand, replete with colorful illustrations of the well-known events. But don't let the simplicity fool you. The words are just the accessible, simplified layer. Underneath, deep layers of hidden truths may be found. Infinite Divine wisdom is "translated" into language that we, humans, can understand. But once "translated", it all becomes limited, narrow, finite, and even superficial.

Parashat Noah leaves us with more questions than answers. It reminds us that we do not really understand how the world works; we do not know what God wants from us; in fact, we don't know anything about God; we don't know why things happen - good or bad; we don't know the inner logic - if there is one - that makes the world turn.

Are we, humans, one big disappointment? What did Noah do to find favor, and warrant being saved from the Flood, while the rest of humanity perished? Is there any chance that we may survive the fate that awaits every living thing (to this day)?

We do not know the answers to these questions - not about God, nor about the grand plan (if there is one), or anything about justice, reward, and punishment.

Every time we think we understand the big picture - those sweet sweet moments of clarity, snaps of "Eureka" - we can expect bitter disappointment to follow: God descends to the tower we have built - metaphorically speaking - and knocks it over, leaving behind emotional ruin and tiny broken shards scattered all over our lives.

As they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard". Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, "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." The LORD came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the LORD said... "Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. (Bereishit 11: 1-8)

Every generation builds its towers - towers of scientific theories, philosophical ideas, religious doctrines, and sublime culture - and the next generation comes along and dismantles it with great contempt, and builds new ones of its own. And God? I don't think God is angry; I think He finds it all quite amusing.

Every ideology is a human attempt to create a "single language"; to make sense of the chaos in our heads; to try and explain, organize, and catalog reality for ourselves. This structures we create gives us a sense of victory of wisdom over chaos, until it crumbles (and it will!) and leaves us confused and afraid. In fact, We are in the midst of such a period right now: All the "isms" - socialism, communism, capitalism, humanism, nationalism - have all let us down. Most of them crumbled, others will also crumble in due time. If it has an "ism" at the end, know that a new Tower of Babel emerged with words instead of bricks and mortar.

Mental building blocks are manmade and breakable. They are like empty carbohydrates - delicious, possessing the calories to give us a rush of energy, followed by a crash of hunger and emptiness.

Both stories in this parasha invite us to stay close to the ground - to the sweet and simple essence of the earth. The answers we seek cannot be found on high: **The heavens are for God, and the earth He gave to human beings.** (Psalms 115:16)

It is more than legitimate to attempt to understand reality, to fly high and enjoy a bird's-eye view. Reality always seems clearer from a distance. But we shouldn't take the insights we gain too seriously. A bird's-eye view is "for the birds". It is detached from the essence of life, and in that sense it is somewhat false.

I very much enjoy philosophy and human thought, but Parashat Noah invites us to remember that all of our thoughts and insights are castles in the air. Counter to our cultural instincts, we will not find the answers we are in search of in our self made intellectual or physical towers

So, where should we look, you may ask?

The only thing that I have come to know as real, close, and very much alive is our physical body, made of the molecules of the earth, from which it came, and to which it shall return. You would be surprised by the depth of wisdom that is hidden in the most delicate sensations of our bodies.

We build skyscrapers and fly to the moon, but know so little about our bodies and about ourselves. I am not referring here to medical knowledge, although I am grateful to every doctor that graduated medical school!

No! I am pointing towards something much deeper, much closer and a lot more intimate. Closer even than our very own flesh and blood: the minutest sensations within it.

Indeed, the most interesting answers lay “right under our very own noses” - where, since Adam, Eve, Noach and Shem, no one bothered to look.

The Tower of Babel is pointing us in a whole new direction. Will we dare look there?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha

P.S. Reminder: This week we begin our Monday morning classes in English. This year's topic is “Oh, God!”, A journey in the footsteps of God, from Genesis to Heschel, and from the Big Bang to Ben Gurion. All of the details were sent in the weekly email.