

## Parashat Noach, DC Beit Midrash, October 24, 2011

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From these the Sea Peoples branched out [These are the sons of Japheth,] in their lands, each with his own tongue, according to their clans in their nations....

These are the sons of Ham according to their clans and their tongues, in the lands and their nations. Sons were born, too, to Shem, the father of all the sons of Eber, the older brother of Japheth....

These are the sons of Shem according to their clans and tongues, in their lands and their nations. These are the clans of the sons of Noah according to their lineage in their nations. And from these the nations branched out on the earth after the Flood. (Genesis 10:5, 20-21, 31-32)

And **all the earth** [*kol ha-aretz*] was of **one language** [*safah ehat*] and **one** set of words [*devarim ahadim*].\* And as they journeyed from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled **there** [*sham*]. And they said to one another, “**Come let us make bricks** [*havah nilbena leveinim*] and burn them hard [lit. “burn burnings”], and the brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as **mortar** [*ve-ha-hemar haya lahem la-homer*]. And they said, “**Come let us build a city** [*havah nivneh*—from the root **b,n,h**—lanu *ir*] and a tower, with its top in the heavens, and we will make a name [*shem*] for ourselves, **lest we scatter** over the face of **all the earth** [*pen nafutz al penei khol ha-aretz*]. And the Lord descended to see the **city** [*ir*] and the tower that humanity had **built** [*banu benei ha-adam*]. And the Lord said, “If, as **one nation** [*am ehad*] and **one language** [*ve-safah ehat*] this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they propose to do will be out of their reach. **Come let us descend** [*havah nereda*] and confuse their **language there** [*sham sefatam*] so that they will not understand each other's **language** [*ish sefat re'ehu*]. And the Lord **scattered** [*va-yafetz*] them from there over the face of **all the earth** [*mi-sham al penei khol ha-aretz*] and they ceased **building** [**b,n,h**] the **city** [*ir*]. Therefore, He called its **name** [*shemah*] Babel, because **there** [*sham*] the Lord confused the **language of all the earth** [*sefat kol ha-aretz*] and from **there** [*mi-sham*] the Lord **scattered** them [*hefitzam*] over the face of **all the earth** [*al penei kol ha-aretz*]. (11:1-9)

This is the lineage of Shem: Shem was a hundred years old when he begot Arpachshad two years after the Flood...

And this is the lineage of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot....And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran. (Genesis 11:10, 27-32)

\*“translating this ambiguous phrase in line with Alter.”

“*Devarim* could mean *words, deeds, or things*, and *ahadim* could mean *few, several, or one*. [Also: *joined together* as in Ezek. 37:17]. Rashi [says] the people were possessed by a single idea.” (Klitsner, p.37)

**Come, let us.** As many commentators have noted, the story exhibits an intricate antithetical symmetry that embodies the idea of “man proposes, God disposes.” The builders say, “Come let us back bricks,” God says, “Come, let us go down”; they are concerned “lest we be scattered,” and God responds by scattering them. The story is an extreme example of the stylistic predisposition of biblical narrative to exploit interechoing words and to work with a deliberately restricted vocabulary. The word “language” occurs five times in this brief text as does the phrase “all the earth” (and the “land” of Shinar is the same Hebrew word as that for earth.) The prose turns language itself into a game of mirrors.

**bake bricks and burn them hard.** A literal rendering... would be something like “brick bricks and burn for a burning.” This fusion of words reflects the striking tendency of the story as a whole to make words flow into each other. “Bitumen,” *heimar*, becomes *homer*, “mortar.” The reiterated “there,” *sham*, is the first syllable of *shamayim*, “heavens,” as well as an odd echo of *shem*, “name.” Meaning in language...is made possible through differences between terms in the linguistic system. Here difference is subverted in the very style of the story, with the blurring of lexical boundaries culminating in God's confounding of tongues. The Hebrew *balal*, to “mix” or “confuse,” represented in this translation by “baffle” and “babble,” is a polemic pun on the Akkadian “Babel,” which might actually mean “gate of god.” ...

Central translation, Genesis 11:1-9: Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*. (Jerusalem: Maggid Books/Koren, 2011).

Context, comments: Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. (NY: Norton, 2004).

**Umberto Cassuto**, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*: “The Story of the Generation of Division”

Although the construction of the tower occupies an important place in the narrative, it is not the main subject. The principal theme is the dispersion of mankind over the face of the whole earth, a matter that God purposed and that was ultimately fulfilled in accordance with the Divine will, notwithstanding human attempts to obstruct it. (p.226)

The prophet [Zephaniah] describes the situation in the end of days as the antithesis of the Generation of Division. On account of the pride and arrogance of mankind, the Lord, in ancient days, did away with the *one language* that they had, and confused their tongues....in the future, all the *peoples* will once again have only one tongue, a *pure speech* understood by each one of them (it means, of course, ideas shared by all humanity)... (p. 230-231)

We hear a constantly recurring melody in the passage, a kind of leit-motif, which accompanies the narrative almost from beginning to end, and reaches its climax in the explanation of the name Babel; it is the sound of the letters [*bet, lamed, nun*] which occur repeatedly in close association.

Nay, more. Other interesting contributions to the musical quality of the narrative inhere in other features that are in keeping with the taste and methods of oriental literary style. These are: [alliteration, word play, pun, recurrence of similar words – all highlighted in Klitsner's translation] (p. 232-233)

Most modern expositors consider that the Bible implies that the ambition to win fame in the world is one of the things that God dislikes. But this is not true, for among the blessings bestowed upon Abraham is included also that of renown: and I will make your name great (Gen. 12:2). It is likewise incorrect to suppose that the 'making of a name' is mentioned here as the reason for building the city and the tower – a different motive from that stated thereafter, lest we be scattered abroad etc.... (p.243)

**Nechama Leibowitz**, *New Studies in Breishit*:

Not only in ancient times and in one particular generation has man striven to build a tower with its top in heaven, but in every age whenever technical achievements reach new heights of perfection we witness a repetition of that which is depicted in *Pirkei derabi Eliezer*:

If a man fell down and died, no attention was paid to him, but if one brick fell down, they would sit and weep and say: Woe betide us, when will another one be hauled up in its place?

Til when? Until the day that Isaiah the prophet foretold would come:

For the day of the Lord of hosts

Shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty....

*And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall...*

And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.

And the idols he shall utterly abolish. (Isa 2:2-18; emphasis is Leibowitz's)

Only then when there will be an end of idolatry, that is, man's pride which takes advantage of the wisdom implanted in him by God in order to turn himself into a deity and worship the work of his own hands...only then shall we reach the day when according to the Prophet Zephaniah, in alluding to the story of the Babel of tongues, when no man understood the speech of his neighbor –

For then will I turn to the people a pure language

That they may all call upon the name of the Lord,

To serve him with one consent (Zeph. 3:9) (p.105-6)

**Klitsner**, beginning with a quotation from *Ha-amek Davar*:

We must understand why they [the builders of Babel] feared some people leaving for another land. This was certainly related to the *devarim ahadim*, 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 *devarim ahadim*, the “one speech” that was among them would be sentenced to burning as was done with our forefather, Abraham.\* What emerges [from this text] is...they decided to kill anyone who did not think as they did (*Ha-amek Davar*, Gen. 11:4, s.v. *Pen nafutz al penai kol ha-aretz.*)

\*Netziv refers to a famous midrashic story about Abraham's beginnings in which Abraham shatters his father's idols out of a newly discovered monotheistic world view. In rage at his son's behavior, Abraham's father reports him to the king, who sentences Abraham to death by furnace... (Genesis Rabbah 38:13) (p. 29)

The insistently repetitive rhythms of the text point to a generation's intellectual and ideological homogeneity, in which every element of culture is mandated from language and thought to meter and melody. Through structure and sound, this passage informs us that the sin at Babel is the achievement of consensus at the expense of individuality. (p.43)

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 (p.45)

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“Unto every one of you have we appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.” (Qur'an 5:48)  
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Klitsner, Judy. *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*. Jerusalem: Maggid Books (Koren), 2011.

Klitsner teaches at Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies. A student of Nehama Leibowitz, she is originally from Wilkes-Barre, PA, and travels in the U.S. – a great teacher in person.

The material quoted above is from an essay linking the Babel story with the early verses of Exodus, making the latter the “sequel” that redeems the Babel text.

*Ha-Amek Davar* – Torah commentary by Naftali Zevi Yehuda Berlin (1818-1893, AKA Netziv), first published in Vilna in 1879-1880 and developed through classes at Etz Hayyim yeshiva of Volozhin. where he was dean from 1853-1893. Klitsner says, “He sought to harmonize the talmudic interpretation of the Bible text with its plain meaning and often added psychological layers to his interpretations of the behavior of biblical characters.” (I only know of his commentary second hand.)

Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951) *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part Two: From Noah to Abraham*. Translation by Israel Abrams, 1949. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University. See also Part One and commentary on Exodus.

Italian bible commentator who moved to Palestine in 1939. Professor of Bible at Hebrew University. Considered the “defeater of the documentary hypothesis.” Often quoted by Leibowitz. A terrific resource, if you don't mind wading through a bit of old-fashioned sounding academic language. Cassuto died before finishing his commentary on Genesis, although some notes appear at the end of “Part Two.”

**James Joyce** (1882-1941) comments on Babel. *Finnegans Wake*. NY: Viking Press, 1939.

Bygmester Finnegan, of the Stuttering Hand, freemen's murer, lived in the broadest way immarginable in his rushlit toofarback for messuages before joshuan judges had given us numbers or Helviticus committed deuteronomy (one yeastyday he sternely struxk his tete in a tub for to watsch the future of his fates but ere he swiftly stook it out again, by the might of moses, the very water was eviparated and all the guenneses had met their exodus so that ought to show you want a pentschanjeuchy chap he was!) and during might odd years this man of hod, cement and edifice in Toper's Thorp piled building supra building pon the banks for the livers by the Soangso. (p.4)

What then agentlike brought about that tragoady thundersday this municipal sin business? (p.5)

The babbblers with their thangas vain have been (confusium hold them!) they were and went... (p.15)

A bone, a pebble, a ramskin; chip them, chap them, cut them up allways; leave them to terracook in the muttheringpot: and Gutenmorg with his cromagnom charter, tintingfast and great primer must once for omniboss step rubrickredd out of the wordpress else is there no virtue more in alcoholoran. For that (the rapt one warns is what papyr is meed of, made of, hides and hints and misses in prints. Til ye finally (though not yet endlake) meet with the acquaintance of Mister Typus, Mistress Top and all the little typtopies. Fillstup. So you need hardly spell me how every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings throughout the book of Doublends Jined (may his forehead be darkened with mud who would sunder!) til Daleth, mahomahouma, who oped it closeth thereof the. Dor. (p.20)

...but one who deeper thinks will always bear in the baccbuccus of his mind that this down-right there you are and there it is is only all in his eye. Why?

Because, Soferim Bebel, if it goes to that (and dormer window gossip will cry it from the housetops no surelier than the writing on the wall will hue it to the mod of men that mote in the main street) every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time: the traveling inkhorn (possibly pot), the hare and turtle pen and paper, the continually more and less intermisunderstanding minds of the anticollaborators, the as time went on as it will variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns. No, so holp me Petault, it is not a miseffectual whyacinthinous riot of blots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as damn it; and, sure, we ought really to rest thankful that at this deleteful hour of dungflies dawning we have even a written on with a dried ink scrap of paper at all to show for ourselves, tare it or leaf it, (and we are lufted to ourselves as the soulfisher when he led the cat out of the bout) after all that we lost and plundered of it even to the hidmost coignings of the earth and all it has gone through and by all means, after a good kiss to to Terracussa and for wars luck our lefftoff's flung over our home homoplate, cling to it as with drowning hands, hoping against hope all the while that, by the light of philosophy, (and my she never folsage us!), things will begin to clear up a bit one way or another within the next quarrel of an hour and be hanged to them as ten to one they will too, please the pigs, as they ought to categorically, as, strictly between ourselves, there is a limit to all things so this will never do.

Also of note: Lucia Boldrini, *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Virginia Spatz is a freelance writer and interdenominational/interfaith activist, participating in several local congregations. Her local journalism appears in *East of the River* and *The Hill Rag*. Her midrash and other Jewish writings appear in a variety of forums; more notes on Noach, e.g., at [songeveryday.wordpress.com](http://songeveryday.wordpress.com). See also <http://about.me/VirginiaAvnielSpatz>