

Noach

(Genesis 6:9-11:32)

(Robert Stone, Kol Nefesh Masorti, 9 October 2021)

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ הִבָּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבִנְיָם וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרָפָה ...

And they said to each other, “Come, let us bake bricks and burn them hard ...

Parashat Noach opens with the account of the Flood, but it also includes the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Only nine verses long, this story has haunted the imagination of people of all faiths and cultures to an extraordinary degree. A Google search for Babel and tower produces about 44 million results, compared with only about 15 million for Noah and flood.^a

So, what happened, and what does it mean for us? Well, it’s only nine verses long, so let me read it, based on Robert Alter’s translation – I’ve timed it and it takes less than one minute to read!

¹And all the Earth was one language, one set of words, ²And it happened as they journeyed from the east, that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to each another, “Come, let us bake bricks and burn them hard.” And the brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. ⁴And they said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, that we may make us a name, lest we be scattered all over all the earth.” ⁵And the Eternal came down to see the city and the tower that the human creatures had built, ⁶and the Eternal said, “As one people with one language for all, if this is what they have begun to do, now nothing that they may plot to do will be out of their reach. ⁷Come, let us go down and baffle their language there so that they will not understand each other’s language.” ⁸And the Eternal scattered them from there over all the earth; and they let off building the city. ⁹Therefore it is called Babel, for there the Eternal made the language of all the earth babble. And from there the Eternal scattered them over all the earth.

The human race at Babel was scattered all over the earth, and their single language was baffled, so that they would not understand each other’s language. What were the people doing that God so disapproved of? There are many explanations by Rabbis throughout the ages, from the tower as an attempt to build somewhere to escape the next flood, to a form of idol worship, to pure arrogance and defiance of God.

The midrash that appeals to me most is summarised by Robert Alter in the notes to his translation of Genesis. Noting that they built both city and a tower, he says, “The polemic thrust of the story is against urbanism and the overweening confidence of humanity in the

^a Accessed 7 October 2021

feats of technology.”^b Perhaps we’ll leave urbanism for another time: for now, I want to focus on overweening confidence in the feats of technology.

The Hebrew language of the Babel story is very dense – words constantly echo each other and flow into each other. In this story of the confusion of language, as Robert Alter puts it, “The prose turns language itself into a game of mirrors.”^c

For example, the clause translated here as ““Come, let us bake bricks and burn them hard” is, in Hebrew:

הָבֵה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרָפָה

which literally means “Come, let us brick bricks and burn for a burning.” According to Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, completed about 1,000 years ago, Rabbi Phineas said.

There were no stones there with which to build the city and the tower. What did they do? They baked bricks and burnt them like a builder would do, until they built it seven miles high, and it had ascents on its east and descents on the west. (The labourers) who took up the bricks went up on the eastern side, and those who descended went down on the western side. If a man fell and died they paid no heed to him, but if a brick fell they sat down and wept, and said: Woe is us ! when will another one come in its stead? (24:6)

“If a man fell and died they paid no heed to him, but if a brick fell they sat down and wept.” People valued the technological achievement of building a tower where there were no stones more than they valued human life.

The “overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology” led them to undervalue human life. Does that sound familiar? This week Facebook has suffered a double blow: firstly, Facebook and WhatsApp, which Facebook owns, was out of action for several hours on Monday, because their technology failed. But secondly, Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, testified this week before the Consumer Protection Committee of the US Congress. To quote the *Financial Times*, she

accused her former employers of pushing to maximise social interaction on its platforms at all costs, even when those interactions exacerbated addiction, bullying and eating disorders.

Haugen said Facebook had decided on multiple occasions not to implement changes that would reduce the visibility of inflammatory content.

^b Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses, Torah: a translation with commentary* (W. W.Norton & Co, 2019), p. 38.

^c *Ibid.*

She also detailed how the company covered up research it had conducted on how its services affect children in particular, exposing them to round-the-clock bullying and content that negatively affected users' mental health.^d

That is as much an issue of the pursuit of profit as the determination to push technology to its limits. The same applies to the recent research submitted to the UK Information Commissioner by 5Rights, a children's digital rights charity, which found that dozens of the companies, including TikTok, Snap, Twitter and Instagram.^e

But there are also cases that more closely resemble Babel in terms of overweening confidence in the value of technology. These cases are relatively new. When Bill Gates made his billions twenty years ago, he and his wife Melinda established the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, devoted to poverty reduction and global health. Among other things, they established the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, which became GAVI The Vaccine Alliance, and which has vaccinated 888 million children since 2000,

The current generation of billionaires, however, have very different priorities, and a different view of the uses of technology. Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, for example, who have built their fortunes on retail technology and vehicle technology, are now engaged in space travel. They don't need a tower to reach heaven and make a name for themselves. Instead, they are launching rockets into the heavens at \$60 million a shot to carry millionaires into space, at a time when COVEX is desperately struggling for money, only 2% of Africans have been vaccinated against Covid, and 800 million people in the world still live in extreme poverty

“But what about language?” I hear you cry. Well as in the case of Babel, language and technology are related. As we entered the 21st Century, it appeared as if “all the Earth was one language” – or at least one *lingua franca*. English has become the universal language of travel, commerce, entertainment and many other fields. When I was in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast in 1970 I would have been completely lost if I had not had fluent French. Five years ago I could have got by very well speaking only English.

But a single language can be a mixed blessing. You might have read of the Babel fish in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: if you stick this tiny creature in your ear, you can understand what anyone says in any language. This meant, according to the *Hitchhiker's Guide*, that “the poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to

^d Financial Times, 6 October 2021

^e *Financial Times*, 8 October 2021

communication between different races and cultures, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation.”

It appears now, however, that the uses of technology are contributing yet another dimension, a new manifestation of the process that God envisaged for the people of Babel, to “baffle their language there so that they will not understand each other’s language.” The same words may be used, but the words mean different things to different people. And I’m not just referring to issues with words like “man” and “woman” and “gender” and “sex” and “safe space” and “freedom of speech”. There are broader areas in which the use of the English language of some groups is incomprehensible or meaningless to other groups. If you look at the social media posts of conspiracy theorists such as QAnon or anti-vaxxers, you will find their language incomprehensible or alienating, or at least I hope you will. At another level, language of populists like Donald Trump and Boris Jonson can often be vacuous or self-contradictory. On Wednesday the Adam Smith Institute, a right wing think tank, said of the speech of the Prime Minister to the Tory Party Conference, “Boris’ rhetoric [that is to say, his language] was bombastic but vacuous and economically illiterate.”^f

In chapter 10 of Genesis, before the story of Babel, we are told of the generations of Noah after the flood. Following the story of Babel, we are told of the generations of Shem until we get to Abraham, through whom God’s connection with humanity is restored. Abraham welcomed strangers, he made peace with Lot, and he risked his life to argue and argue and argue again with God to beg him to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. He prepared the way for the Torah, the most important commandment of which, according to Rabbi Akiva, is “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).^g In other words, love your neighbour even more than you value a brick!

Millions of good, compassionate people live by that standard. We can only hope that it is they, the compassionate ones, who can determine the future, who can create a world in which technology serves humanity and not the other way round.

כּן יְהִי רָצוֹן

^f Adam Smith Institute [website](#), 6 October 2021

^g Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30b