**NOACH**

(Third portion in triennial cycle)

*Bereshit* 11:1 to 11:32

Hertz:\*\*\*; Plaut: 80; Eitz Hayim: 58

Our Parashah this morning consists of the Chapter 11 of *Bereshit* (*Genesis*), with 32 verses, which can be divided into three sections: The first nine verses focus on the Tower of Babel; the next 11 verses are a series of simple sentences about who seemed to be the leader at that time and whom he begot; the final 12 verses introduce us to Terah, the idol maker, who begot the man called Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, the ultimate ancestor of all humanity, or at least all Jews. Given that those final verses really belong with any discussion about Abraham, and that the middle verses are boring in the extreme, it was not difficult for me to decide to focus today’s d’var on that famous, or maybe I should say infamous, tower.

* We can start with the name Babel, which in Hebrew means Babylon, and which, as suggested in Rabbi Plaut’s note on verse 11:9 in his Chumash, is a convenient play on words: “Babylon is only confusion.” More importantly, to the extent that there is any history in these early verses, it appears that the post-flood people were determined to build the world’s first city. G/d was not pleased with the human desire to live urban lives. Verses 5 and 6 suggest that G/d recognizes the potential of urban living to be produc-tive and creative, whereas His aim for humanity seems to be simple and rural, which implies an agricultural lifestyle. Most commentators derive this assertion from G/d’s earlier instructions to populate the world with both children and farm animals. However, the immigrants coming into “a valley in the land of Shinar” region seem to be a rather sophisticated group. For one thing the region is well known as southern Mesopotamia and later simply as Babylon. For another, the immigrants already know how to make bricks from sand with bitumen as mortar rather than just stone and mud, which would have been sufficient for shelter. Finally, it is reasonable to infer that they knew about, or possibly learned quickly about, tziggurat, which was a distinctive seven-storied feature of all Babylonian temple complexes. If one is going to build up more than a storey or two, one needs hardened bricks at the base, and that is exactly what is mentioned in verse 11:3 and what archaeologists have found in the remains of Babylon. Before going on, I want to digress for a moment to remark on the seven levels to the tziggurat. The number seven has already played a role in the Hebrew Bible, as with the Seven days of Creation and the seven pairs of every clean animal loaded onto the ark by Noah (Genesis 7:2), but so far as I can determine, this is the first time it has been applied to a human structure.

We all know the following steps. Somehow G/d converts the one language of that early generation into a variety of different languages, which precluded the collective activity essential to building not just the tower but also the city. And then G/d “scattered them over the face of the earth.” In a word, G/d created diversity. According to Rabbi Plaut (Chumash 83), “The chapter is a transition from universal prehistory to a story of more limited scope—that of Abraham and his people.” Moreover, it is a transition from G/d coming down to earth to observe and correct things to using human beings as a way to guide people toward correct behavior. That is of course the specific role that he entrusts to Abraham and his descendants. In short, we Jews were a chosen people almost from the start, and certainly before any covenant between us and God.

Those first nine verses in Chapter 11 are all that we are going to learn in the Tanakh abut the Tower of Babel. As usual, the Hebrew Bible tells us what happened, but not why, and the world is open for interpretation by scholars from a variety of schools, not all of them Jewish. Happily, a lot of the scholars agree sufficiently to have fun with, as Plaut puts it (Chumash 83), “obvious overtones of sarcasm, repeated word plays, and an explanation of Babel as a place of confusion.” I would add that this comes with Jewish disgust at the very notion of a pagan city. Further, there is broad agreement among scholars regardless of background that the punishment is intended to make two complementary points:

1. At the ultimate level, it says that heaven is one thing; earth is another thing; and don’t even think about making a bridge between them. Of course, from time to time G/d will make a bridge, as with Jacob’s ladder, but it is forbidden to humans.
2. At the human level, it says to be careful about trying to aim above and beyond. There will always be penalties, especially when elements of arrogance—*hubris—*are involved. True just as at the divine level, from time to time, human beings do have to reach above and beyond—think of bringing half a dozen different vaccines against COVID-19, something expected to take five years, into use within one year.

Clearly there is more to be said about decisions at the human level, and it seems evident that the city and the tower are connected. Indeed, the phrase "Tower of Babel" does not appear in the [Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible); it is always "the city and the tower" (אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל‎) or just "the city" (הָעִיר‎). However, before exploring that thought, but I will again digress for a few moments of pure amazement that you won’t find in any chumash, but appears in Wikipedia’s article on the Tower of Babel. To start, no one should think that we Jews are unique; Wikipedia identifies at least seven regions or nations that have a more or less similar story in their origin, including a couple in North America both of which seem to have incorporated Western and likely Christian thought. Thus, the Cherokee origin story says that their country was subject to great floods so they decided to build a storehouse reaching to heaven. When it was towering into one of the highest heavens, great powers destroyed the apex, cutting it down to about half of its height, and when Cherokee elders determined to repair the damage, they found that the language of the tribe was confused.

WIkipedia also puts the various semi-historical hints together and suggests that the Ziggurat in question in the Hebrew Bible was probably under construction between 3,500 and 3,000 BCE. And it finds a range in Jewish commentary about the story that starts, at one end, from Flavius Josephus’ conclusion in the 1st century CE that G/d acted in response to human defiance against God ordered by the tyrant Nimrod, to a radically different contemporary view that sees God’s “actions not as punishment for pride but as an explanation for cultural differences,” which is to suggest that Babylon was the cradle of civilization.

One can have a lot of fun imagining what did or did not happen with the Tower of Babel, but I doubt that it will be time well spent. It is likely better to start with Rabbi Plaut’s final comment that these nine verses see the city (chumash 84), “as the center of the account and all else as secondary:”

This understanding reflects most clearly a pervasive biblical motif. The city is the ultimate expression of man’s presumption. Babel was the city, and, to the anti-urban tradition of the Bible, its downfall appeared as a proper divine judgement. Babel referred of course to Babylon, but it also symbolized all empire building, corruption, arrogance, craving to erect monuments, desire for fame. . . . !t is no accident that that the Bible next turns to Abraham, a semi-nomad as the source of all future blessings.

But that cannot be a final conclusion. We do not live as semi-nomads nor are we scattered about the countryside; to the contrary, most of us live in cities or one size or another. Moreover, we Jews do not look only to the Hebrew Bible as our only source of future blessings. We also look for direction in both practical and moral senses from later writings, most obviously the many volumes of Talmud. My final conclusion is that there is no cookie cutter way to get answers as to when our human desires, even our human arrogance, is within bounds. Nor can there be any such tool. Instead, we just have to think about ourselves at this time in this situation, perhaps confer with those whom we trust, and ultimately ask ourselves whether what we are doing or what we propose to do is acceptable, or perhaps how it can be tweeked, or perhaps get a thorough revision, before it is within bounds. Good luck with your self-reviews; that is one aspect of the life well lived.

Shabbat shalom,