

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Noach)

Contrary to popular myth, there is no better or worse way to lose someone close to you, but there is definitely a worst way to find out about it.

It had been a long day, and I was finally taking a few moments to relax, sitting in our small living room watching the evening news. There had been a terrible tragedy. An elite unit of the paratroopers, on a mission deep in Lebanon, had gotten a little too spread out, and there was a heavy fog. Somehow, without realizing it, the officer leading the unit was allowing them to gradually curve around until the front of the unit was almost heading back in the direction from whence they had come.

Suddenly, the men on point saw silhouettes in the fog and, assuming them to be the enemy, opened fire. As it turned out, they were actually firing at their own comrades, as the patrol line had gotten split up in the darkness, and the ultimate nightmare: a 'friendly' firefight, ensued.

As I was watching the story on the news, Dvir's picture flashed across the screen, and I felt like the wind had been sucked out of me. I must have cried out a horrible cry, because my wife came running out of the kitchen. There is no more horrible way to discover that someone special has been killed, than to see his picture on the evening news.

D'vir Mor-Chaim had been a real project. Years earlier, I had taken a job on the educational staff of an Israeli High School, and as I was waiting outside the principal's office for what would be the last interview, I struck up a friendly conversation with a boy who was sitting in one of the waiting chairs. He looked like he was waiting for an unpleasant talk with the principal, and I always have a soft spot for the troublemakers, so we started talking. With a tousled mop of blonde hair and green eyes, he had the rugged good looks the girls always swoon over, and you could tell he was a real rebel. But you couldn't help liking the kid, as soon as he flashed his mischievous, winning smile.

He was in tenth grade, and obviously waiting for a serious meeting dressing down. He seemed pained, as though he knew he didn't belong in a chair in an office, but outside somewhere navigating the Judean hills he loved to explore.

A short while later, as I concluded my interview with the principal, I was told I had the job, and that I would be working with the eleventh grade when the next year began. So, I asked whether D'vir, whom I had just met, would be one of my students.

"Oh, don't concern yourself with him; he's a real trouble-maker, and it looks like he's on his way out. We're probably going to expel him from the school; he doesn't really fit in."

I don't know whether I simply wanted to impress the principal, or this kid had touched something, but I offered to take him on as a project.

“Why not give him a couple of months (the current school year was a week away from being over), and I’ll take him on as a project? I think we hit it off....”

And so, when I began the school year, I was reminded that he was my project, and his future was in my hands.... And project he was, but D’vir not only made it through the system, he became one of the leaders of his class. And over the next two years I learned what a difference a little faith in someone can make.

Five years later, I watched as his coffin, draped with an Israeli flag, and surrounded by his fellow paratroopers, was lowered into the ground at Har Herzl, Israel’s national military cemetery.

Of all the things D’vir Mor-Chaim represented to me, what was most powerful was the beauty and value of each individual; everyone has something to bring to the table...

Hidden between the lines of this week’s portion, Noach, there is a powerful idea that gives much to think about regarding this question.

Ask any Jewish kid who ever went to Hebrew School, what the top ten Bible stories are, and he or she has probably heard of the Tower of Babel. But the details of this story often get overlooked, and there may well be, hidden in this story, one of the essential and basic truths of Judaism.

First of all, it is important to note, that despite the fact that this episode is indeed commonly referred to as the story of the Tower of Babel, the tower is, in fact, only half the story. Indeed, the major issue is not the tower, but the city they built first.

“And they said, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower...” (Bereishit (Genesis) 11:4)

And indeed, *“G-d went down to see the city and the tower that they had built.” (11:5)*

However, most telling, is the fact that the result of G-d’s reaction was much more about the city:

“And G-d scattered them from there, across the face of the entire earth, and they ceased to build the city.” (11:8)

Was there something wrong with building a city? The Bible is full of the dream of the city of Jerusalem, so what could be the problem with building a city? In fact, a city is a place where many people can come to live together; seemingly a good thing.

Perhaps a closer look is in order:

*“And the whole land (the earth) was one language and one speech. And it was, when they journeyed from the East, (Mi’Kedem) and they found a valley in the land of Shinar and dwelled there...
... And they said, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower, whose top will be in the heavens, and we will make for ourselves a name, lest we are scattered upon the face of the earth.
And G-d went down to see the city and the tower that the children of man were building.*

*And G-d said: 'Behold, they are one people and one language and this is what they start to do? Behold, nothing will come of all that they plotted to do.
And G-d scattered them from there, across the face of the entire earth, and they ceased to build the city. Therefore was its name called Babel (babble) for there did Hashem mix up (balal) the language of the entire earth, and from there did Hashem scatter across the face of the entire earth.'* (Genesis (Bereishit) 11:1-9)

One would have imagined that there was at least one redeeming factor about this group of people who got themselves into so much trouble: namely, the fact that they were all together. Whatever they may have done, at least they all shared the same goal, and they were all of one mind and one purpose.

Imagine how different the world would be, if we could all speak each other's language. If every Jew spoke perfect Arabic, and every Arab spoke perfect Hebrew, wouldn't there be so much more room for working things out together?

Recall that these are the descendants of Noach after the flood, such that, at least in the context of the Torah, this is the entire world, and they are essentially one family, living in one place. So, the entire world was at peace! And the entire world shared the same goals. Isn't that, in the end, the dream we are still waiting for?

And there we were thousands of years ago and we were already there! We were all together! So why is this the one thing that G-d actually undoes? Why is the consequence of whatever goes wrong here, that the world actually becomes *divided*?

A careful look at the verses tell us that even within the context of their unity, something is seriously wrong.

"Come," the people say:

"...Let us build **us** a city and a tower with its top in the sky... "

"... *Havah nivneh lanu*..." (ibid. 11:3)

The city and the tower are *lanu*—for us. They are involved in the most magnificent building project the world has ever known, but it's all for themselves. Indeed, the verse continues: "Na'aseh *lanu* Shem..."
"... We will make a name for **ourselves** ..."

The new world cannot be built on the foundations of selfishness....

And the Midrash (rabbinic legend) adds a deeper understanding, suggesting that as the building progressed it took an enormous amount of time to get the bricks to the top of the tower. So, the people became so focused on the tower that they lost sight of the people building it. If a brick slipped and fell, the people wept. But when a person fell and was killed, no one took notice. So, bricks became more precious than human beings. Do we sometimes fall into this trap? Do we sometimes get so absorbed in our work that it gets prioritized above family and friends? Do we delude ourselves into thinking that what we leave behind that really matters are the towers we build rather than the children we raise? What are our bricks, and how do they measure up next to the people who surround us?

Do we make sure our families and friends more important than our bricks and mortar?

Sometimes we become so enamored of the whole, we lose sight of the value of the sum or all its parts. If what is important is bricks which are all the same, it is because what is really important is the building. Indeed, the more uniform all the bricks are, the more beautiful and lasting the building. People on the other hand, are all very different.

We live in a world that places equality on a pedestal. All men are created equal, suggested a brilliant group of men some two hundred and fifty years ago, and based on that fact, all people have certain inalienable rights.

Indeed, the equal rights movement in America is one of the most important movements in American history, and has accomplished many great things, though of course, there is still a ways to go. There is no reason a woman should be paid less salary than a man for the same job, and people should be judged, in all things, by the color of their deeds, and not the hue of their skins.

To be sure, equality is a valuable idea. The only problem is, it simply isn't true. Because, thank G-d, we are not all equal, not any of us. Two pennies are equal, because essentially they are exactly the same. They have the same value, serve the same purpose, and most often, cannot be told apart.

But two people are anything but the same. We are all so very different. We have different characters and personalities, different loves and likes, fears and concerns, we even look different. In the entire world, with all of its billions of people, you will not find two people who are or even look, exactly alike. And the fact that we are all different, means that every one of us has what to contribute.

If we were all equal, then we could all be replaced. You can always substitute one apple for another. But people can never be replaced. And the world, without any single one of us, simply would not be the same.

Judaism suggests, that while there is great value in building up the whole, whether the whole community, nation, or even the world, such that no one individual supercedes the next, it is only as great as the value inherent in each individual.

The world today speaks of equality, but Judaism begins by stressing individuality.

This is one of the dangers of an atheistic philosophy; if we are all random, having arrived simply as the evolution of what preceded us, then in the end it is all too easy to arrive at the idea that the whole is the greater good, and that the people, and indeed the world, is a cause worth losing a few individuals over. It is no accident that the societies that left religion and the idea of purposeful creation behind, very soon resulted in so much human misery. More people were killed in our century as a result of Nazism, Communism, and the Khmer Rouge, to name a few, than in all the combined history of the world until now. Because if each human being is just part of the large test tube of life, then in the end, what is one more or less when weighed against the goal of the common good?

But if every human being is created in the image of G-d, then there is a little bit of G-d inside every one of us, and if you can't see a little bit of G-d in the person sitting next to you, you'll never find Him anywhere else.

Five thousand years ago, at the dawn of civilization, an entire world was in touch with that idea, that we all are one and yet other as well.

And then they got stuck, in a valley. And made the first mistake (the first *chet*) of the new world. The issue wasn't the city they built, it was the reason they were building the city.

"Lest we are scattered upon the face of the earth." They so loved the beauty of their oneness; they forgot the secret and the beauty of their otherness. Soon they no longer saw each other as individual worlds in the image of G-d. All they saw were the bricks, which were the vehicle for creating a society where the individual was forgotten in the search for the greater good of the whole.

So right there, at the beginning of the world, Hashem separates us, to teach us that we are all different, and that even when we speak the same language, we all speak different languages, and that's actually okay.

Perhaps this story is in the portion of Noach, because he forgot this simple lesson. In the end, Noach was indeed the most righteous man in the world, but he was righteous on his own. When the rains began to fall, Noach entered the ark alone.

Perhaps he became so focused on the world as it was meant to be, he forgot all the people the world was meant to be for.

And it is interesting, points out the Ohr Sameach (Rav Meir Simchah of D'vinsk) in his *Meshech Chochmah* that the sign G-d gives Noach after the flood, indicating that He will never again rain such destruction down on the entire world, is the rainbow.

Why a rainbow? Why not a lightning bolt? A rainbow you, see, is the opportunity to see all the different colors of the spectrum. But you only get to see all those different beautiful colors, when the light is refracted through the clouds. Only when light comes through the darkest clouds do we get to see the beautiful colors of the rainbow. Perhaps, suggests the Ohr Sameach, this is to remind us that even in the darkest clouds, one can still find the most beautiful colors. You just have to shine a little light in there. And again, when you take the time to shine that light, you see the beauty of all the different and *individual* colors. All the different D'vir Mor-Chaims.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman