



Dignity of Difference, Strength of Solidarity

Shiur by Rabbi Steven Gotlib

Learn-a-thon in Memory of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, ZT”L

1. Genesis 11:1-9

וַיְהִי כִלְהֵאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים: וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְּקֵעָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אֶחָיו הִנֵּה נִלְכְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרְפָה וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְּבָנָה לְאִבּוֹ וַתְּחַמְרַח הִנֵּה לָהֶם לְחֵמָר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבָּה | נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עֵיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נָפוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: וַיֵּרֶד ה' לִרְאֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּגִי הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אֶחָת לְכָלָם וְזֶה חַחֲלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבְצָר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: הִבָּה גִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ: וַיִּפֹּץ ה' אֶתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחֲדְלוּ לְבִנְתַּת הָעִיר: עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלְלָה שְׂפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְּיָצָם ה' עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

The whole world spoke the same language, the same words. And as the people migrated from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let us make bricks, let us bake them thoroughly.” They used bricks for stone and tar for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches the heavens, and make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered across the face of the earth. But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower being built by the children of men. The Lord said, “If, as one people with one language, they have begun to do this, nothing they plan will be impossible for them. Let us go down and confuse their language so that one will not understand the speech of another.” From there the Lord scattered them all over the earth, and they abandoned the building of the city. That is why it was called Babel, because it was there that the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them across the face of the earth. [English from the Koren Tanakh, translated by Rabbi Sacks, ZT”L].

2. R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893). Haamek Davar on Genesis 11:4

פן נפוץ על פני כל הארץ. אמנם יש להבין מה חששו אם יצאו כמה לארץ אחרת. ומובן שזה היה שייך לדברים אחדים שהיה ביניהם ובאשר אין דעות ב"א שוים חששו שלא יצאו ב"א מדעה זו ויהיו במחשבה אחרת ע"כ היו משגיחים שלא יצא איש מישוב שלהם. ומי שסר מדברים אחדים שביניהם היה משפטו לשריפה כאשר עשו לא"א. נמצא היו דברים אחדים שביניהם לרועץ שהחליטו להרוג את מי שלא יחשוב כדעתם.

Since the views of human beings are not the same, [the builders of Babel] were concerned that no one should have a contrary opinion. They therefore took care that no one be allowed to leave their city, and those who expressed contrary views were condemned by fire, as they sought to do to Abraham. Their ‘shared words’ became a stumbling-block because they resolved to kill anyone who did not think as they did [Translation by R. Sacks in *Not in G-d’s Name*].

3. The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations

The men on the plain at Shinar make a technological discovery. They learn how to make bricks by drying clay. As after so many other technological advances, they immediately conclude that they now have the power of gods. They are no longer subject to nature. They have become its masters. They will storm the heavens. Their man-made environment - the city with its ziggurat or artificial mountain - will replicate the structure of the cosmos, but here they will rule, not G-d...

Babel - the first global project - is the turning point in the biblical narrative. It ends with the division of mankind into a multiplicity of language, cultures, nations, and civilizations. G-d's covenant with humanity as a whole has not ceased. But from here on He will focus on one family, and eventually one people, to be His witnesses and bearers of His covenant - a people in whose history His presence will be peculiarly transparent. He will ask of them that they will be willing to give up home, birthplace and land, all of the familiar certainties, and undertake a journey with G-d as their only protection. Theirs will be a singular and exemplary fate. They will be a people who are different... The question is, why?

...

To this I suggest a radical answer. G-d, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different, *teaching humanity to make space for difference. G-d may at times be found in the human other, the one not like us.* Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one G-d and therefore one gateway to His presence. To the contrary, it is the idea that *the unity of G-d is to be found in the diversity of creation (52-53).*

...

The radical transcendence of G-d in the Hebrew Bible means that the Infinite lies beyond our finite understanding. G-d communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the divine that must forever elude us. As Jews, we believe that G-d has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures and faiths finding their own relationship with G-d within the shared frame of the Noahide laws. These laws constitute, as it were, the depth grammar of the human experience of the divine: of what it is to see the world as G-d's work, and humanity as G-d's image. *G-d is G-d of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity.* Such a narrative would lead us to respect the search for G-d in people of other faiths and reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition (55).

...

Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see G-d, or good, or human dignity in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is of a different colour, whose faith is not my faith and whose truth is not my truth. There are, surely, many ways of arriving at this generosity of spirit, and each faith must find its own. The way I have discovered, having listened to Judaism's sacred texts in the context of the tragedies of the twentieth century and the insecurities of the twenty-first, is that the truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that G-d transcends the particularities of culture and the limits of human understanding. He is my G-d but also the G-d of all mankind, even of those whose customs and way of life are unlike mine... a G-d of your side as well as mine must be a G-d of justice who stands above us both, teaching us to make space for one another, to hear each other's claims and to resolve them equitably. Only such a G-d would be truly transcendent - greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe capable of being comprehended in any human language, from any single point of view. Only such a G-d could teach mankind to make peace other than by conquest and conversion, and as something nobler than practical necessity (65).

4. One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity

The problem that threatens to render all contemporary Jewish thought systematically divisive is not the absence, but paradoxically the presence, of a shared language. Jews use the same words but mean profoundly different things by them... Jews are, to use Bernard Shaw's phrase, divided by a common language. Our condition is an ironic inversion of Babel. 'Behold, here is one people speaking the same language.' Yet despite this, 'they cannot understand one another's speech' (3-6).

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[Orthodox Judaism] Recognizes pluralism along many axes. It recognizes at least some other faiths as valid religious options for non-Jews. It recognizes, within Judaism itself, different halakhic traditions: Ashkenazi and Sephardi, for example, of Hasidic and Mitnagdic. Beyond halakhah, it legitimates a vast variety of religious approaches: rationalist and mystical, intellectual and emotional, nationalist and universalist, pietist and pragmatic. But it does not recognize the legitimacy of interpretations of Judaism that abandon fundamental beliefs of halakhic authority. It does not validate, in the modern sense, a plurality of denominations. It does not see itself as one version of Judaism among others... Non-Orthodox Jews often expect, and feel frustrated by the lack of, Orthodox legitimation. For if Orthodoxy is perceived as a denomination then it must be neither wholly inclusive or wholly exclusive. A denomination is, by definition, a religious group that accepts the coexistence and legitimacy of alternatives. But Orthodoxy involves, among other things, the denial that denominations exist within Judaism. It is exclusive of other Judaisms and inclusive of all Jews. the expectation that it should recognize other movements as valid interpretations of Judaism is one that in principle cannot be met. For Jewish Orthodoxy to be pluralist in the requisite sense, it would have to accept a degree of tacit secularization incompatible with its most basic beliefs. It would cease, in short, to be Orthodoxy (31-32).

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What, then, would an inclusivist advocate in the present? Firstly, a deep sensitivity to the language in which we speak to other Jews... Secondly, the inclusivist would not seek to use coercive means to bring Jews back to tradition... Thirdly, the inclusivist understands the supreme importance Judaism attaches to education... [Fourthly,] the inclusivist seeks to apply halakhah to its widest possible constituency... Fifthly, the inclusivist seeks a nuanced understanding of secular and liberal Jews... Sixthly, believing as he does in divine providence, the inclusivist strives to recognize the positive consequences of Jewish liberalism and secularism even as he refuses to recognize their truth or ultimate viability... Seventhly, the inclusivist, because he sees the shadings, not just the black and white, in contemporary Jewish life, calls on liberal and secular Jewish leaders to act responsibly in the context of the totality of Judaism and the Jewish people... Eighthly, the inclusivist makes a parallel plea for understanding to exclusivist Orthodoxy... Ninthly, the inclusivist calls on all Jews to respect the sanctity of the Jewish people, collectively and individually... Lastly, the inclusivist calls on Jews to hear the divine call in history (217-226).

5. Not in G-d's Name: Confronting Religious Violence

There is nothing accidental about the spread of radical politicized religion in our time. It came about because of a series of decisions a half-century ago that led to the creation of an entire educational network of schools and seminaries dedicated to the proposition that loving G-d means hating the enemies of G-d. The end result has been a flood of chaos, violence and destruction that is drowning the innocent and guilty alike we now have, with equal seriousness, to educate for peace, forgiveness and love. Until our global institutions take a stand against the teaching and preaching of hate, all their efforts of diplomacy and military intervention will fail. Ultimately the responsibility is ours. Tomorrow's world is born in what we teach our children today (26).

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There is no single, simple system that will honour both our commonalities and our differences. Tribalism - identity without universality - leads to violence. Imperialism - universality without identity - leads to the loss of freedom and the suppression of the very diversity that makes us human. That is why the Bible sets out two covenants, not one: one that honours our common humanity, the other that sanctifies diversity and the particularity of love. And the universal comes first. You cannot love G-d without first honouring the universal dignity of humanity as the image and likeness of the universal G-d (200).

...

That is what the dual structure of Hebrew spirituality does. It accepts the inevitability of identity in the here-and-now. We are not all the same. There is an Us and Them. But G-d is universal as well as particular, which means that He can be found among Them as well as among Us. G-d transcends our particularities. That is why he often appears where we least expect him. Sometimes he speaks in the voice of a stranger, the man who wrestled with Jacob at night, or the one who found Joseph wandering in a field, or even the pagan prophet Balaam... For though G-d is our G-d, He is also the G-d of all, accessible to all: the G-d who blesses Ishmael, who tells the children of Jacob not to hate the descendants of Esau, who listens to the prayers of strangers and who's messengers appear as strangers. Only a faith that recognises both types of covenant - the universal and the particular - is capable of understanding that G-d's image may be present in the one whose faith is not mine and whose relationship with G-d is different than mine (205).

6. One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity

To believe, in particular, that Jewish unity is a simple idea in an age of unprecedented fragmentation is to have yielded to myth. Contrary to conventional wisdom of a secular age, I do not believe that Jewish faith is the acceptance of myth. It is the constant battle *against* myth in the name of religiously conceived possibility. Faith does not ask us to see the world other than as it is. It does, however, ask us to imagine a world that *could be*, and to work, without illusions, for its realization. Intellectual honesty is a precondition for the religious life (vii).