



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“With All of Our Voices”

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Midrash and reflections delivered on September 20, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Do not stand idly by when your neighbor's life is in danger. I am God. Leviticus 19:16

I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there's nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Adlai Stevenson (Unitarian)

Diversity may be the hardest thing for a society to live with, and perhaps the most dangerous thing for a society to be without. William Sloane Coffin Jr.

We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color. Maya Angelou

Tower of Babel Midrash and Reflection

(This text is an approximation of what was delivered during the actual service.)

Kids and adults, do any of you speak a language other than English? Please tell us what language and can you say “Good Morning”? *(Several shared greetings in a variety of languages.)* Thank you. I think it is a wonderful gift to be able to speak another language and communicate to different people.

The story I want to tell you this morning comes from the Hebrew or Jewish Bible, It offers an explanation of how the world came to have many different languages. It is a story created long before modern experts began to trace the movement of people and the spread of language around the world.

You might have heard the story before, but is worth telling again because each time we hear it we may receive a new idea or insight. Stories have much to tell us if we but listen.

For this story, I'm going to read it in parts and ask questions of you as I go. By doing this we participate in an ancient Jewish tradition called *midrash*. Midrash means reading between the lines. By seeking meaning in the gaps between words we're a bit like treasure hunters searching for hidden valuables. Jewish scholars believe scripture is alive with meaning and can be interpreted anew for new times and places. This is not re-interpretation, but seeing new meanings that were always there, just hidden between the lines. This approach exists in opposition to Biblical literalists who see only what is in black and deny anything lies in white, between the lines.

Let us be treasure hunters and see what we can find in this story from Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible. To begin, let's put ourselves back in time. Imagine living thousands of years ago before the invention of planes, phones, or air conditioning. Instead of cars—camels and horses help move people and goods. Because of the heat, you wear loose clothing and sandals.

The Bible says: “**Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.**” What does that mean—one language and the same words? (*Members volunteered a variety of explanations—everyone understood each other, emphasis on similarities, shared culture, music, etc.*)

Do you think the world would get along better if we all spoke the same language? (*Yes and no.*) We here all speak the same language. Do we always understand one another? (*No.*)

The black words don't tell us exactly what was meant, but my reading between the lines tells me it implies *uniformity*. The double emphasis on language and words indicates the storyteller wants us to believe that people are alike in most ways.

Let's read on: “**And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.**”

What group is migrating from their homeland today? (*Syrians*) And why are they moving, leaving their homes? (*Escape war, find freedom, have a better life...*)

Biblical scholars tell us that this story was written during a time when the ancient Hebrew people were exiled in Babylonia. They had lost a war and were forced to leave their homes and temple in order to resettle where they were told by the king of Babylonia. Like today's Syrian refugees, the ancient Hebrews migrated, and they probably tried to stay together in this new land. We tend to want to settle with people we know, whose customs we know, and whose language we speak.

Back to the Biblical text, once the people migrated, they had an idea to produce bricks. What do you use bricks and mortar for? (*Building roads, houses, etc*)

Let's see what they wanted to build. **Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens,**

We build cities and towers to the heavens, don't we? For what purpose? (*To be seen from far away, to show off, maybe to reach God*)

Would building a city and a tower be like building a castle or fort to keep you safe? (*Yes*) And might that mean you didn't trust God to keep you safe? Bricks are human-made; stones are God-made. They didn't need or want what God had provided them—Tower over Torah. I doubt God would like being irrelevant to the people. Let's see what God does: **and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'**

The scripture says the people wanted to make a name for themselves. What does that mean? (*The people were boastful, full of themselves*)

Yes, and they wanted to be known for their own accomplishments—not something God gave them. Just like brick-making, they want to show they're capable of great things.

The text adds that they didn't want to be scattered abroad. Why do you suppose that? (*Felt vulnerable on their own, thought they could protect each other, wanted to maintain their traditions and not assimilate into the prevailing culture...*)

How would a tower prevent their scattering? (*The tower would be a focal point to keep people within range, within sight.*) I remember my parents telling me I could play with my friends in the neighborhood, but I couldn't leave site of the house. Were any of you told that? (*Yes*) The

tower could act like a beacon that prevents people from spreading out too far, that way they're close and safe. Does that seem pretty smart? (*Yes*)

Let's see. [YHWH / God] came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And God said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

Do you think God is pleased with the people building a tower? Let's see: *Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.'*

So that sounds like God is not pleased. Why? What will happen if people can't talk to each other? (*They can't accomplish much*)

Why would God not want people to work together? Why does God seem to punish the people for their independence and accomplishments? (*Jealous, angry, dislikes human boasting, doesn't like cities, doesn't like technology ...*) These are some common answers people have given to explain God's actions. If true, doesn't it make you wonder about what kind of God this is? (*A jealous, petty God*)

Let's see if that holds true by the end of the story. The text says: *So God scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there God confused the language of all the earth; and from there scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

Not only does God confuse the people by creating new languages, God forces the people to scatter across the earth, their biggest fear.

But let's look between the lines to see if this is really a punishment. Maybe something else is hiding between the lines.

The people said they feared being scattered, so they built the tower to keep them safe. Their motive is not to boast, but to be safe. They feared being scattered and unprotected. But God said in an earlier chapter that he wanted the people to spread across the earth. Yet here they defied that order. Perhaps God wanted the people to face their fears. Perhaps like a caring parent, God nudged them to leave home. We all know that to stay home and not interact with the world is one way to never grow and develop. Perhaps confusing the languages wasn't a punishment after all.

And even without a command to scatter, it is a myth for our time just as it was in theirs, that we can isolate ourselves from those who are different. We cannot build walls at borders and expect to keep people out. We cannot build walls where language and culture differ if we want to enjoy the benefits of different cultures. Our lives are rich today because of the music, food, dress, and ideas of other peoples. Even ecologists remind us of all creation's need for diversity.

We hinted earlier that even when people speak the same language they don't always get along. In fact, sometimes when we think we should be alike, we discover we're not alike. We speak the same language yet we don't all have the same politics, the same beliefs about God or no God. Some people like to eat spaghetti and others can't stand it. Some people like to wear pink and others can't stand it. I'm partial to purple. And, I think you all should agree with everything I say. But how likely is that?

When we expect everyone to conform, to be alike and speak the same language and words, we can become too rigid and limited. We'd be identical robots, not a rich tapestry of people.

And if we tried to build a tower to the heavens, even if everyone believed it were possible, it might not be practical or wise. And what if no one spoke up from the crowd to say, "Stop?"

We're going to be looking at whether or how to expand our building and parking this year. You were invited to a Town Hall between the services to discuss priorities and next steps. Our planning will be better because you won't all speak with one mind, one word, or one language. We'll move forward better because your differing input will improve the results, even if our differences get messy occasionally. We also enjoy many different ideas, language, and words to think about or describe the divine, life, death, and everything in between.

In other areas of our lives we don't want everyone doing the same thing or having the same ideas, either. We need the rich diversity that exists so that our lives are enriched and we benefit from many ideas contributing to solving life's many challenges.

This story makes me think about modern communication. I wonder if we are better or worse for our technologies and gadgets. Our social media and constant connectivity. If the world wide web is our one language and same words, maybe we need to rethink it, maybe we need to be scattered once again.

In this story, I think God blessed the people by preventing them from being uniform. Conformity has limited value. Walking in lock-step, as the Jews know well, has been disastrous for our world.

Unity of purpose with a diversity of approach is humanity's hidden treasure. Unity of values with a diversity of beliefs is Unitarian Universalism's oft-hidden treasure.

No matter how alike we think we may be, we must work to understand one another. Our diverse languages, appearances, and cultures remind us we can't assume unanimity. Thus, we must work to get to know one another and work to accomplish great things together. Let us celebrate our diversity along with our common humanity.

Tikkun Olam Reflection

FROM: It Happened at the Creation, After Sefer Yetzirah, Aryeh Kaplan, editor

No one really knows how the universe was created. One idea is that before our world was created there was only G-d. G-d's light filled everything. In order to make room for the Creation G-d had to contract, to pull back, some of the Divine light. That light was stored in containers, in vessels.

Somehow, some way, and for some reason, [some say the power of the light was too strong for the jars] the vessels broke. And with that breaking, the pieces of the vessels and the sparks of Divine light that were stored in them were scattered throughout the Creation. Since that time people have been living with the sparks of light and the broken vessels, trying to sort them out.

The Jewish people, so this story goes, have a particular job. That job is to gather the sparks of G-d's light and do the work of tikkun olam, repairing the world.

On the face of it in black type, our first story, The Tower of Babel, appears to be one where God punishes the people and scatters them intentionally. Yet Amber has just shared a story from the Jewish tradition about gathering back up. In her story, divine light has burst the jars containing it, making light and pieces of the jar scatter all over the earth. In order to repair the world, and make it holy once again, we must gather the light up.

Does this sound counter to our first story? Let's look at it more closely.

If we accept that we humans are separate individuals, just as the broken shards of light are

separate pieces, we can understand this story as symbolically speaking to our need to come together as one. Though we value diversity, just as each shape of broken jar is unique, we also value unity and community. Unity and Diversity are yin and yang; they are the paradox that is human existence. We are both separate and together.

We can repair the world, the meaning of *tikkun olam* [tee-KOON o-LAM], every time we bring people together. With every act of compassion, loving kindness, neighborliness, and generosity of spirit, we put pieces of the broken jar back together and it is able to hold a little more light. With every act the world becomes a little more holy, a little more healed. The world does not wait to become holy only after the jar is complete and filled once again. The world becomes holier with every act of love.

Repairing the world is love in action. As it indicates in the Hebrew book, Leviticus, we must not stand idly by when someone is in need. We cannot perfect the world alone. We need each and every one of us doing our part, putting the pieces back together again.

There is much in our society that is broken and in need of repair. We separate ourselves from those whose language, looks, or means may differ from our own. In the history of this country, we put Native Americans on reservations; we put Africans, first in chains, then in ghettos, now in prisons; we put Muslims on terrorist watch lists; we put Mexicans in detention; we put Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgender persons in less-than equal status; and we ignore anyone whose income falls short of the top 1%.

Our environment is broken, its bio-diversity threatened. We act as if homo sapiens are the only life form that matters. Yet ecologists and climatologists warn us we need to come together and re-envision our impact on the planet.

On Sunday morning we are divided by race and class, and often times by age. We have numerous religious denominations because people insist their truth is the only truth. And we are separated from the rest because we insist there is no single truth. There is too much that divides us, when it need not.

So let me ask you, what one thing might you do today before you leave this building to put back one shard of light in the jar? (*Smile. Listen to someone. Help recycle papers. Clean up in the kitchen. Play with someone new...*) I know you have plenty of time, talent, and treasure to offer the world and help repair it.

We gather between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Let Jewish tradition teach us to respect the diversity that difference brings, even as we come together to solve society's problems. Let this Fellowship be a beacon, a tower that draws us back each week to community and to our shared values. But may this Fellowship's beacon light guide us out into the world, spotlighting that which needs to be repaired, that which needs our acts of love and generosity. May this Fellowship build bridges between the world's many divisions.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe when you first realized people were not alike in language, culture, or capacity.
2. What divisions in your life need to be bridged or healed? What first step can you take towards bridging that gap? What prevents you from taking that step?
3. Do social media and ready communication make understanding others easier? Share.