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Parshat Noach: Harmony, Not Conformity

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In a world with so much disagreement, what would it look like for everyone to just agree? Conformity was the seemingly idyllic world after the flood. Chapter 11 opens:

וְהָיָה כָּל-הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים
“The whole world was of one language and of one common purpose”

What a wonderful image of unity and togetherness. The story of the Tower of Babel continues:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ הֲבֵה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרָפָה וְנִתְּהִי לָנוּ הַלִּבְנָה לְאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֵר הִיָּה לָנוּ לְחֵמֶר:
“Let US make bricks. Let US build a city and a tower with its tops in heaven, and let US make a name for ourselves (11:3).”

At first glance, the Torah seems to be describing a utopian community where everyone is united around a common purpose. Emphasizing the plurality- the “Us”-- creates an image of a society that seamlessly moves together, in one large mass, with one voice.

And yet, God severely punishes the people of Babel. In one fell swoop, God destroys their unity and scatters them all over the earth. וַיִּפֹּץ יְיָ אֶתֶם מִשָּׁם עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ.

God lashes out against conformity. But why is sameness so bad? Doesn't the prophet Zaphania (3:9), alluding to the story of Babel, pray and hope for a time “when God will return to the people a pure language, that they may call upon the name of the Lord to serve him with one consent?”

כִּי-אֵז אֶהְפֹּךְ אֶל-עַמִּים שְׂפָה בְרוּרָה לְקֹרֵא כָּלֵם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה לְעַבְדּוֹ שְׂכֵם אֶחָד

The problem with Babel, is that the people didn't actually care about unity, oneness, and togetherness. They used their unity to build walls, not relationships.

The Pirkei Derabi Eliezer, 24: (an aggadic-midrashic work on Genesis, ascribed to R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the ninth century) describes how the people loved their tower more than people. “It had seven steps from the east and seven steps from the west. Bricks were hauled up from one side, and the descent would be from the other. If one man fell down and died, no attention was paid to him, but if one brick fell down, they would sit and weep...” This was not a society that cared about one another. A united society that is built on prioritizing material wealth- bricks and mortar-- is not a sustainable community.

Perhaps then, God's so called punishment, the demand for diversity was not meant to reprimand the people, but it was meant to teach them to rebuild their world placing **harmony, not conformity, at the center of their world**. Our rabbis teach that when God created the world, God had intended for people to occupy most of the earth; the ultimate divine plan was not to gather in one section of the world, but to be fruitful and multiply throughout the land.

And thus, God spreads the people throughout the world to develop our sense of harmony. Harmony is an ethic that can live between those who are the same as well as those who are different. Now that the world was made up of people with diverse languages and cultures, everyone needed to work that much harder to bring down their personal walls, and learn to live with and love one another.

And God models how to exist in a world of diversity. In verse 7, when God goes down to mete out their punishment, God says: “Come let US go down”

הִבָּה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁמַיִם

Rashi, addressing the question of who God is talking to, suggests that God “took counsel with the Angels, with his judicial court.” Surely God knows how to mete out judgment and punishment, as he has already done unilaterally in the Torah without discussing it with the Angels? Perhaps, God turns to them to assess their thoughts on the sin of the people, to hear their opinion, to debate the pros and cons of scattering the people all over the world. By addressing the Angels, God models how to collaborate with others. Diverse ideas, when debated in a respectful manner, can lead to growth, greater productivity, and ultimately harmony.

Conformity “being of one language with one common purpose” at first seems compelling. But the Tower of Bavel shows us that conformity leads to selfishness. So God introduced us to diversity. The challenge with diversity is to reject the tendency towards segregating, and running away from conflict. For out of conflict, when we are willing to confront one another with healthy debate, tolerance is born. Conformity based on selfishness is not an ideal, but neither is diversity, unless coupled with respect and tolerance.

Let us strive not for conformity, but for harmony.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha’s three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week’s 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek’s 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.