



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Noach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 4, 2013

Noach

Babble On



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

If all the billions of people in the world spoke one universal language, would we be more united and better at loving one another?

Maybe yes. But probably no. For we see that even people who speak the same language can find little to agree about. Conversely, two different people, from two different corners of the earth, speaking two different languages, can love each other.

Once upon a time, a mighty empire tried this experiment, and it proved its downfall. But from their colossal mistake we derive a formula for true co-existence and love.

The final verses in this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Noach* – contain the secret to world peace and the antidote to all bigotry, racism and animosity. And, as well, on the personal front – the secret to creating harmonious relationships.

Within this legendary story of languages, skyscrapers and confusion, lies the secret to touching heaven and creating peace on earth, and the real reason for the rise and fall of all empires throughout history.

This sermon also asks: Why did Ludwig Lazarus (Leizer Levi Zamenhof), a Jew from Bialystok, fail in his attempt to unite the world? And it answers: For the same reason that all empires have fallen.

Though the people of these mighty empires may have spoken the same language, they lacked the most important ingredient – true unity. For, sometimes, speaking different languages helps us come to terms with what really binds us together. The personal lesson from this is as astonishing as it is revolutionary.

BABBLE ON:**WHEN PEACE IS WAR AND UNITY IS DIVISIVE**

Take-away message: Diversity – our differences – can bring greater unity than our commonality. Sometimes, when different languages divide us, we can learn to communicate the deepest truths.

1. Multilingual (Joke)

A tourist in Tel Aviv, lost and confused, pauses at an Egged bus stop where two Israelis are waiting, to ask for directions.

“Entschuldigung Sie Bitte, koennen Sie Deutsch sprechen?” he asks.

The two Israelis stare at him.

“Excusey-moi, parlez vous Francais?”

The two continue to stare, only as Israelis can.

“Parlare Italiano?”

No response.

“Hablan ustedes Espanol?”

Still nothing.

“Efsher redt ir Yiddish?”

Blank.

The tourist marches off, extremely disgusted and frustrated. The first Israeli turns to his friend and says, *“Achi ... brother, you know, maybe we should learn a foreign language...”*

“Lama, why?” says his friend, *“that guy spoke five languages and look how far that got him!”*

2. Universal Language (Optional)

Imagine if the entire world spoke one language, if all people were of one tongue. It would be a nice world, no?

In the late 19th century, there was a Jew from Bialystok in the Russian Empire, named Leizer Levi (Ludwig Lazarus) Zamenhof. He was an ophthalmologist and linguist.

This is an excerpt from a letter he wrote (circa 1895) to one Nikolai Borovko:

The place where I was born and spent my childhood gave direction to all my future struggles. In Bialystok the inhabitants were divided into four distinct elements: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews; each of these spoke their own language and looked on all the others as enemies. In such a town a sensitive nature feels more acutely than elsewhere the misery caused by language division and sees at every step that the diversity of languages is the first, or at least the most influential, basis for the separation of the human family into groups of enemies.

I was brought up as an idealist; I was taught that all people were brothers, while outside in the street at every step I felt that there were no people, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews and so on. This was always a great torment to my infant mind, although many people may smile at such an “anguish for the world” in a child. Since at that time I thought that “grown-ups” were omnipotent, so I often said to myself that when I grew up I would certainly destroy this evil.

So, what did Leizer Levi Zamenhof do to destroy this evil? He created a new universal language, a language whose aspirations were to unite the entire world and all its inhabitants under one common tongue.

He called this language, Esperanto, from the Latin word for “hope.”

How many people today speak Esperanto? Estimates range from about 100,000 to 2 million. Not bad for a man-made language, but certainly not universal. This means that close to 7 billion people do not speak Esperanto.

Sadly, the universal language of Esperanto never achieved its founder's goal, of removing all evil and uniting all people. The 20th century, just a few short years after Zamenhof's introduction of Esperanto, brought with it some of the worst devastation and evil the world has ever known.

3. Root of War and Hate (Optional)

This begs the obvious question: If not language or other differences between us, what is the root of war and hate? If we were to communicate in the same tongue, would there be peace on earth?

And, also on a more personal level: What is the cause of all the discord that we human beings face throughout our lives? Does it boil down to a diversity of language?

You know the one about the marriage counselor trying to reconcile serious disagreements between two sparring partners. "Here are the ground rules," began the therapist. "Each of you will present your case without the other one interrupting, and I will weigh in with my opinion." The wife spoke first poignantly articulating her grievances about her husband. After carefully listening, the counselor said. "Your arguments are very convincing. You're certainly right to be upset." Then came the husband. After presenting his complaints, the therapist said: "I see your point and I agree with you."

Both wife and husband cried out: "How can we both be right when we utterly disagree." Said the therapist: "You're both right about that as well!"

Language – linguistics – alone is clearly not enough to unite us. We need something deeper. What is that? What is the secret ingredient beyond common language that unites us?

4. Parshat Noach: Did The World Have Flood Insurance?

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Noach* – relates the story of a mighty empire where everyone spoke one language, but this very trait proved its downfall.

And it is a sad story indeed.

It happened just after the great flood had destroyed the world, and humanity regenerated itself.

Imagine how nice it must have been – all corruption had been washed away ... the world was clean, pure, and fresh. This is how the Torah describes the scene:

And the entire earth was of one language and uniform words ... And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly" ... And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth."¹

How beautiful! How peaceful! How wonderful! More than wonderful – it sounds down-right utopian!

Everyone in the world was speaking the same language (and Rashi says it was Hebrew, the Holy Tongue, the language of creation itself). And they were working together toward a common goal! They were building a unified monument to reach heaven and establish their unity, each person contributing bricks and clay. All this – lest they be scattered upon the face of the earth.

What parents wouldn't want this world for their children? A world that is unified, with all contributing, with all making names for themselves ... it is a dream reality, a fantasy world!

¹Noach 11:1-4.

5. God's Disapproval

Ah, but what did God think of all of this?

And the Lord descended to see the city and the tower that the sons of man had built. And the Lord said, "They are one people, and there's one language for all, and this is what they have commenced to do ... Come, let us descend and confuse their language, so that one will not understand the language of his companion."

And the Lord scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore, He named it Babel, for there the Lord confused the language of the entire earth, and from there the Lord scattered them upon the face of the entire earth.²

What just happened?

From a utopian unity to a dream destroyed! What did these people do wrong and why did God turn a wholesome, communicative world into a confusing babble?

6. Unity and Peace

Unity and peace – *shalom* – is the greatest possible blessing and achievement. As Jews, we are taught from day one, even before we can read, that our task in this world is to strive for unity and peace. We are taught that this will bring about the Final Redemption. Yet, here are a people of one tongue and uniform words, building something together, and what does God do?

He shatters their unity and scatters them throughout the world, separating them by language, race and culture.

²Noach 5-9.

In short: It seems as if the human race was ready to unite as one. And God deliberately upset this unity, and created miscommunication, babbling, and its consequences: bigotry, racism, hate...

Why would God do that?

7. Talmudic Clue

The Kli Yakar³ provides the answer as he beautifully elucidates the entire story of the Tower of Babel – and indeed the inside story of the rise and fall of all empires throughout history.

And to do so, he quotes the Talmud:

The dispersion of the wicked benefits them and benefits the world. But the dispersion of the righteous injures them and injures the world. Gathering of the wicked injures them and injures the world. But for the gathering of the righteous benefits them and benefits the world.⁴

Why? What is the difference between righteous gatherings vs. wicked ones? And between righteous vs. wicked dispersions?

The Kli Yakar says that when wicked people with unholy intentions get together, it is a negative and destructive experience for two reasons: 1) they put their evil minds to work to scheme against others, and 2) they themselves ultimately digress into infighting and hatred.

This is because the intention of the wicked is not to join together as one, but to make a name for themselves. Remember, the Babel builders said: “Let’s make for ourselves a name.”

³ Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550-1619) was a rabbi, poet and Torah commentator.

⁴ Sanhedrin 71b.

This implies that each of them had a personal and selfish agenda. One might have been striving for wealth, another for health, a third one for fame, the fourth for satisfaction, and so on. With the competition getting fiercer and fiercer, each individual would try to top his fellow until ultimately what started as a unified assembly turned into civil war. If the objective was “to make for ourselves a name,” everyone wanted his name on top.

Self-interest, in other words, even when it may begin peacefully, ends up tearing people apart.

The Kli Yakar puts it in these poetic words:

For the paths of wickedness are many, but the path of goodness is but one.⁵

Therefore, when the wicked are assembled, it is harmful for them and the world; but when they are scattered it benefits both them and the world. Their dispersal is not just good for the world so they cannot gather to conspire, but also good for *them*, because that way they can't destroy one another with their conflicting self-interests.

8. Critical Lesson: Three Devastating Words

According to the Kli Yakar, the Tower of Babel narrative presents us with a critical lesson in life and in history, teaching us the very secret to enduring survival.

The people who built it – Noah's descendants – were one people. They all spoke one language and were unified. They were not idiots and they knew that, as their families grew and their children had children, their people would begin to spread out and their unity would be challenged.

⁵ See Talmud Baba Metzia 5b: the presumption is that a man will not commit a sin unless he stands to profit by it himself. This also explains the Mittlerer Rebbe's statement, that when two people meet we have two divine souls against one animal soul. Though they each have an animal soul, one individual animal soul is consumed with its own interests, and not those of another animal soul. The divine soul by contrast is selfless and shares interests in the positive objectives of another divine soul.

Ultimately, they envisioned a fragmented universe of many nations and many lands each one fighting with the other, vying for supremacy and power.

No, idiots they were not. More like prophets. Visionaries seeking world peace.

So what did they do? They said, let us all bring bricks and clay and we shall build one central metropolis, one capital of the world, anchored by a skyscraping tower that would, literally, touch heaven. Let us join as one and build a unifying hub, “lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth.”

Had they sufficed with stating this noble objective, says Kli Yakar, then their generation would have achieved the epitome of peace. But they didn’t stop there. They added three devastating words: *v’naseh lanu shem*, “and let us make a name for ourselves...”

Oh oh. With these three words they revealed that their endeavor was not selfless and righteous at all but rather one driven by self-glorification.

Instead of wishing to bring divine unity into this world, instead of glorifying the name of God on earth, they each wanted to glorify their own name.

9. God’s Response

So God said:

Now that you revealed your true selves, your being of one tongue and assembled in one place is bad for you and for the world. Ironically, you wished to bring peace by elevating your own name. If I allow this dream of yours to reach fruition, the consequences would be devastating.

At first, true, you'd be at peace, working in unison, but since your objective is self-glorification, each man will inevitably try to make a name for himself, as will each woman. And then one will try to top the other, and each person will have his or her own agenda. Ultimately, this will result in a catastrophe, with infighting, neighbor slaughtering neighbor, family members swallowing other family members ... until the earth is desolate and destroyed.

Indeed, this factor – “let us make ourselves a name” – is the single most damaging force that destroyed empire after empire throughout history. Self-interest and self-glorification cannot last. Built into this motivation is its own destruction. When individuals – even best friends – join together with the objective of making for themselves a name, their conflicting interests will cause them to ultimately implode and self-destruct.

Therefore, said God:

In order to preserve and protect you from hurting yourselves and hurting the world, I have no choice but to disperse you, to mix up your tongues, to confuse your languages – and therefore this place will be called Babel, because it is here that I made you babble!

10. Preventive Action

Thus the creation of different languages and the scattering of the nations ironically prevented war and strife.

Indeed, language confusion and the scattering the nations was good for them and for the world not only because it didn't allow them to hurt others and themselves, but because it created an antidote to the egotistic drive (“let us make ourselves a name”) that brings war and strife.⁶

⁶ See Talmud Pesachim 87b: “The Holy One, blessed be He, showed righteousness [mercy] unto Israel by scattering them among the nations.”

Once apart, they were no longer in each other's hair, competing with each other, and their selfishness could not fester. They also could no longer take their superficial camaraderie for granted. They could not assume that just because they spoke the same tongue they were united. The mere fact that they spoke different languages and were scattered across the globe, gave them the ability to reflect on their differences, and they were forced to dig deeper to connect, to find a more intimate unity than a surface one.

11. Fertilizer and Wings

Two apt metaphors for this come to mind. The first is fertilizer, the second, wings.

Fertilizer, when heaped and gathered in one place is wickedly foul, creating an unbearable stench and – shall we say – a negative atmosphere. When, however, fertilizer is spread out over a vast area, it has the power to make the most beautiful gardens flourish and grow.

A bird's wings, when constricted and locked together by its side, are dead weight, pulling the bird down. When, however, the wings are spread apart, they allow the bird to fly!

So is it with narcissism, selfishness and wickedness. When it is gathered in one place, it reeks, weighs you down, and is generally negative. When it is spread out, each individual personality can blossom and be transformed into a positive.

How?

When a room full of people that are selfish and connect to one another only superficially – because they have the same language, or they look the same, or they share the same culture or the same taste of food – then they never really get to know one another.

To really come together they must be forced to look deeper. And for that they have to be spread out, to learn to communicate not only with the same language but to learn to convey the same message – the message of divine unity.

12. Babble, Babble, Babble

To babble is to speak continuously, foolishly, and incomprehensibly. In Hebrew, Babylon (babble on) is called Bavel – a word which shares its root with *bilbul* meaning “confusion” and *nevela* meaning “corpse.”

The punishment for wanting to make a name for themselves was confusion, dispersion and incoherent babbling – a dead language.

God said: “You want to live in unity? Then you have to learn to be selfless.”

The secret to unity is not merely speaking the same language, but not focusing on the self, on making for yourself a name. You want to live in unity? Learn to communicate with one another – not only because you both speak the same language, have the same customs, or like the same restaurants. Nope, you are going to have to get away from all those things, become confused, and then go search and find the deeper parts of life that truly keep you together.

It isn't a question of which language you are speaking; it is a question of what you are saying.

Two people can speak the exact same language and say two very different things. Two people can speak two different languages and say the exact same thing.

(Sections 13-15 are optional. You can easily skip to section 16)

13. Illiterate Genius (Joke) (Optional)

Speaking, reading, and writing only Yiddish, a greenhorn immigrant, fresh off the boat, went looking for a menial job at the local Lower East Side synagogue. He applied to be the *shamash* (sexton) of the synagogue. Following a positive interview,

he was given a contract to sign. Instead of signing his name he placed an X on the dotted line. “No, that will not do,” said the president of the congregation. “We need you to sign the contract with your full name.” “I can’t,” the greenhorn t blurted out, “I don’t know how to write.” “Well, in that case, I am sorry but we cannot hire you. The job requires someone who can write in English.”

Dejected, he left and went off searching for opportunities. Resourceful as he was, with a pinch of desperation, he eked out a livelihood. Over the years, with diligence, ingenuity and persistence he climbed the ladder and ultimately became a very prosperous man. He became known in town for his enormous wealth and was greatly respected by his peers and above all, by the banks that readily issued him the loans he requested.

One day, a new bank manager was going over this fellow’s latest loan application, and noticed that instead of a signature there was an X at the bottom. The manager called him up: “My dear sir, you forgot to sign the application.” “I did sign it, with an X,” he replied. The manager was bewildered. “Why do you sign with an X and not with your name, if I may ask?” “Well,” he sheepishly replied, “I never really learned how to write English...”

The bank manager couldn’t help himself, “Wow, and so successful you became! Just imagine how much more successful you would have been if you had learned to write English and sign your name!”

“Sir,” the gentleman calmly said, “if I knew how to sign my name I would now be the *shamash* in a Lower East Side synagogue...”

14. Language vs. Message (Optional)

Sometimes we can get caught up with the language that we forget the message that we are actually trying to convey.

This is a lesson for every single one of us. Spouses, friends, siblings, parents, children, and colleagues – if you are looking to be united and one, you have to not just speak the same language, but put aside (or at

least minimize) self-interest. Only then can we transcend our cultural, racial, national, or biological differences. But, as long as we are driven by making a name for ourselves, we cannot find true and lasting unity.

To take this a step further: Our diversity is actually a force that allows us to find our true common denominator.

If we were all exactly the same and spoke exactly the same language, then we would have no impetus to really get to know one another on a deeper level, to really communicate on an essential plane. We would talk and understand the words we are saying to one another, but would we really come to know one another?

Not really. And the end result would be much worse. We would self-destruct from within, because we would all be pulling in different directions with different selfish agendas (albeit all in the same language.⁷)

And this is why God said to the Babel builders, “You were looking to bring unity by gathering together; I too am looking to bring unity by spreading you apart. To reach heaven you need to stop trying to get there for your own personal glorification.”

15. Root of Racism (Optional)

Racism, bigotry, anti-Semitism, hate – whatever noun (or verb) you want to put to one human being disliking another – stem not from different languages, or skin colors, or religions, or languages, or genes, or noses.

⁷ But, as we all know, a positive message can be learned from everything. Rashi on the verse states that Generation of the Flood did not follow God’s commands but they did not attempt to undermine or displace God Himself, yet they were all drowned in the flood; here however, the Generation of Division undermined God Himself completely, yet they were allowed to live. This, says Rashi, teaches us the power of unity, that even though they were completely wicked, and denied God Himself, because they spoke one language and were unified in their building the Tower, they did not perish. Unity is a very powerful force.

No, it does not stem from traveling upon different roads, rather it stems from not traveling to the same destination. The Kli Yakar says it so clearly in explaining that passage of the Talmud, which states that gathering of the wicked is harmful but the gathering of the righteous is beneficial.

Why? Because of one fundamental difference.

When wicked people meet and gather, each person has an agenda, his own agenda. When, however, righteous people gather, there is but ONE unified objective – bringing peace into this world.

If we all have the same goal, then it matters not whether we speak English, Hebrew, Yiddish, French, Cantonese, or Sign Language.

And this is true on the global scale as well as on the personal scale.

When spouses, when parents, when children, when friends, when colleagues, when coworkers have the same goal, the same unwavering epitomic destination, then it matters not what their accent might be, what their genes might be, what even their hair-color might be. If they are glorifying God's Name together, they can do so in different languages. But if they are trying to make a name for themselves, then it matters not if everyone speaks the same language, ultimately only a babbling and confusing message will be heard.

16. In Conclusion: Aramaic, Yiddish & Ladino Lessons

This is a reality we Jews have always been in tune with. Perhaps it is one of the factors that has kept us thriving for so long.

We speak every language. We even have developed our own languages. In the European countries it was Yiddish, in the Spanish countries it was Ladino, and in Babylon it was Aramaic.

Yet, no matter where we found ourselves, no matter which language we spoke, we always strove to deliver the same message – the message of divine unity. Yes, we have not always succeeded but it has always been our goal, a part of our purpose, a part of our national soul.

Today, in one synagogue, we can find an English-speaking Jew from the United States, a Hebrew speaking Jew from Israel, a Russian-speaking Jew from Moscow, a French-speaking Jew from Paris, a Yiddish-speaking Jew from Boro Park, even a silent Jew who doesn't speak at all (a rarity indeed) – and all are part of the same thing, all are sharing the same message!

All are singing the same song.

You know the difference between a song and a sentence? Two people speaking at the same time (even if they are speaking the same language) creates confusion. Two people singing at the same time (even if they don't speak the same language) creates harmony.

When we sing a song together, though we may be from different countries and cultures, our souls join as one.

Conversely, a stadium can be filled with a hundred or two hundred or a hundred thousand people all speaking or yelling in the same exact language, even with the same exact regional accent. Yet, they are all saying different things. They are having independent conversations. They have never met one another, have nothing in common, and don't want to have anything in common.

Why? What is the difference? The difference is that the former are united by one goal, one purpose, one soul, while the latter are not.

On this Shabbat, the Shabbat of *Parshat Noach*, may we be flooded, truly flooded, over-flooded, with only joy and blessings. And though we may all speak different languages, may we all strive to say the same divine things.

Let us learn to sing together. And teach our children how to embrace their individuality as they discover their soul's commonality.

Shabbat Shalom!