

Imagining John Lennon's "Imagine" --- and the Tower of Babel

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
October 24, 2009

I have often been perplexed by the story we read in today's torah portion, the Tower of Babel. The people are united as one. They speak one language. They say the same words. They undertake a project, in which they want to build a tower which has the seemingly noble goal of reaching the heavens. What about this undertaking could possibly be displeasing to God? It is clear from the outcome of the story that God does not want them to succeed. He proceeds to confound the inhabitants and to disperse them so that they will not understand one another and destroys the Tower of Babel.

Something just doesn't seem right here. It seems that they are doing exactly what later prophets envision as an ideal and goal of mankind, working together. What is their sin? What have they done that is so terrible? To say the least, it is confusing, which incidentally is the meaning of the word "babel."

Our commentators have been equally puzzled and perplexed and have offered numerous suggestions to explain and justify of the source of God's wrath. The most frequently cited midrash is that the people had become so consumed with pursuing the goal of building a tower to reach the heavens that they lost sight of their values and of what should have been important. A brick was deemed more valuable than a human life, and they were sad whenever a brick would fall, but barely noticed if a human life was lost while they were constructing this edifice. As a result, some see in the story the suggestion of a metaphor of what can happen when the pursuit of technology blinds people to life's true goals. Although this is the primary line of thinking offered by the midrash, the truth is, nothing in the *peshat* (literal straight-forward understanding) of the text suggests this line of speculation. I would like to suggest a different response that I think is far more plausible.

To truly understand the problem of what the people did wrong, we have to look at a popular song, a song by John Lennon to shed light on the problem.

It pains me to take issue with something written and sung by John Lennon, because ever since that Sunday night in January when I joined the rest of my family to crowd around our black and white Motorola TV to see the Ed Sullivan show I have been a confirmed Beatles fan. I remember the tremendous sense of loss and sorrow and how sad I was I first learned that John Lennon had been shot and killed.

A song which he wrote, and which many revere as an anthem, as a vision of a utopian world expresses a notion I, as a committed Jew and rabbi cannot accept, especially in light of today's torah reading.

The words to the famous song "Imagine" go like this.

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world

You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

So, just as I ask about the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel: what could be wrong with this vision, a “brotherhood of man... sharing all the world, living life in peace?”

As Natan Sharansky points out in his book, Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy while on the surface the song describes an idyllic world, that goal comes at a price. It entails losing one's individuality, for it implies that the source of the world's problems is the differences between people. The song envisions a time when the world is not just united, but calls for a world in which all is one, and uniqueness does not exist.

I believe the diagnosis is wrong. The source of our problems is not our differences, but our inability to tolerate those differences. What truly afflicts us is our lack of understanding and appreciation for diversity and ability to respect others who are different and not like us. The answer is not to become all as one, but rather to embrace, to celebrate and to respect the differences we each have.

The goal shouldn't be to become so united that there is only one language. In other words, John Lennon's vision is of a world where everyone is the same, where there are no differences, of a world where there are no religions, very similar to the world at the time of the building of the Tower of Babel, when the people had only one language. Our story comes to tell us that this is the wrong goal, and that this ultimately is what disturbed God about the project.

Don't misunderstand what I am saying. Judaism shares the vision of a world at peace. We practically invented the concept, for the Hebrew prophets were the first to introduce a messianic vision to the world.

The prophet Isaiah dreamed and imagined a noble vision which is as inspiring today as when it was first proclaimed:

"In the days to come,
The Mountain of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills. All the nations shall gaze upon it with joy.
And the many peoples shall go and say: 'Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; That He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in all His paths.'
For out of Zion shall come forth Torah (instruction),
The word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
Thus He will arbitrate for the many peoples,
And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall take up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

He called for a world in which all the nations of the world will allow each other to live in peace and harmony --- not that they should all give up their unique identity.

The difference between Isaiah's vision and John Lennon's vision is that people do not need to sacrifice who and what they are in the Biblical version of the messianic era. Lennon's vision comes at a price. What he is basically saying is to imagine a world in which there are no differences, no individuality, no diversity. This is the world of the Tower of Babel.

I remember a joke told by comedian David Steinberg many years ago. He said that one day he observed children playing on a playground. He noticed that a black child, an Italian child and a Hispanic kid were all beating up another child. He irreverently asked, "If these kids can all learn to play together, why can't the rest of us?"

Our purpose should not just be to be united, because we can work together and be united, but that doesn't mean the purpose or outcome of our actions are noble or desirable.

Lennon dreams, "Imagine all the people living for today." Again, on the surface, it sounds fine. But herein lies another problem. We are taught by our sages not just to live for today, but to have a sense of responsibility to others, to plan for tomorrow, to work for that better world we all dream of.

Prior to the building of the Tower of Babel, God commands Noah and his descendants to spread out and to populate the world. The people decide instead to settle in one area. They remain in the Valley of Shinar, in defiance of God's command. The profound and difficult lesson the Torah is trying to teach us is that conformity, unity and singularity is not the goal or purpose of human existence.

One last aspect of the story confirms my interpretation. Before and after our story, there are multiple, detailed genealogical lists of names. Interestingly, in the story of the Tower of Babel no names are given. The text says that the people specifically built their tower, "to make a name for ourselves." How ironic, then, that not a single name is given in the whole account, especially since there so many names before and after the story. We do not know who the engineer, architect or project manager was. No names are given precisely because they are all anonymous. And this is because there is no individuality or differentiation, thus reinforcing my sense that this was the problem.

Our ideal of the utopia we should strive to create comes from the vision articulated in this same Torah portion, but not the story of the Tower of Babel.

After the Flood God promised never again to destroy an entire world, and said that the sign of that promise would be a rainbow. A rainbow is a full range of colors, not just one color. May we appreciate the beauty that stems from multifaceted shades and dimensions of the rainbow created by the diversity found in God's palette of human life.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
October 24, 2009*

If this sermon was forwarded to you and you would like to be added to Rabbi Wienblatt's sermon list, please contact bperlmutter@bnaitzedek.org.