



Growing Up Is Hard To Do:

Individuality and Conformity in the Formation of a People

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Opening Questions for Reflection:

1. What makes a team a team? Is it important that everyone is the same and excels at the same things? Is it important that people are different and are good at different things?
2. What unites a team? What brings them together? Is it their similarities or differences? Do these matter?

1. Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

3 They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. 6 The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

א וַיְהִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ, שְׂפָה אֶחָת, וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים. ב וַיְהִי, בְּנוֹסְעִם מִקֵּדָם; וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְקִעָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר, וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם. ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ, הֲבֵה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים, וְנִשְׂרָפָה, לְשִׂרְפָה; וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְּבָנָה, לְאֲבָן, וְהַחֲמֶר, הָיָה לָהֶם לְחֹמֶר. ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲבֵה נִבְנֶה-לָּנוּ עִיר, וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם, וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָּנוּ, שֵׁם: פֶּן-נִפּוּץ, עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ. ה וַיֵּרַד יְהוָה, לָרֹאֵת אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל, אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ, בְּנֵי הָאָדָם. ו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, הֵן עִם אֶחָד וְשִׂפָּה אַחַת לְכֻלָּם, וְזֶה, הַחֲלֹם לַעֲשׂוֹת; וְעַתָּה לֹא-יִבְצָר מֵהֶם, כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת. ז הֲבֵה, נִרְדָּה, וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם, שִׂפְתֵם--אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ, אִישׁ שִׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ. ח וַיִּפֹּץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם, עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ; וַיִּחְדְּלוּ, לִבְנוֹת הָעִיר. ט עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ, בָּבֶל, כִּי-שָׁם בִּלְלַל יְהוָה, שִׂפַת כָּל-הָאָרֶץ; וּמִשָּׁם הִפִּיצָם יְהוָה, עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ.

8 So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Questions for Students:

1. Why was God concerned that all of the people were speaking one language with common speech? Shouldn't this have been a good thing that the people were united?
2. Can you think of a situation where everyone thought the same thing and it was a problem? Why was it a problem? Do you think it's important that there are differences in opinions?

2. R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda, Haamek Dvar, 19th c.

And we will make a name for ourselves - people were set up to watch and be in charge of the thing, and they were army chiefs in charge of punishing those who would cross, since if this is not the case there would be no need for the tower. And all that was due to fear/suspicion.

Lest we be scattered over all the face of the earth - However, we must understand why they feared that someone might leave to another land. And it is understood that this was related to the uniformity that was among them. And since the opinions of people are not identical, they feared that people might abandon this philosophy and adopt another. Therefore they sought to ensure that no one would leave their society. And one who veered from this uniformity among them was judged with burning, just as they did to our forefather Abraham. And the "same words" can also be seen as the fact that they would kill whoever did not think like them.

ונעשה לנו שם. אנשים משגיחים וממונים על הדבר ויהיו שרי צבא להעניש את העובר. דבלא זה אינו מועיל המגדל. כל זאת היה לחשש.

פן נפוץ על פני כל הארץ. אמנם יש להבין מה חששו אם יצאו כמה לארץ אחרת. ומוכן שזה היה שייך לדברים אחדים שהיה ביניהם ובאשר אין דעות בני אדם שוים חששו שלא יצאו בני אדם 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.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What problem or question in the story of the Tower of Babel that this commentary is responding to? How does this answer the problem in the story of The Tower of Babel? Note: depending on level of text background and age of students, I might explicitly say what the problem is (i.e. it seems strange or extreme that God responds to unity in the people by confusing all of their languages so they're unable to communicate with each other) and then ask "How does this commentary respond to this strangeness in this text? Why does God confuse all of their languages?"
2. What do you think this commentary is trying to teach us about similarity and difference? About uniformity and individuality?

3. Talmud Bavli Hullin 127a

<p>You have creatures that grow in the sea, and you have creatures that grow on land. If those in the sea would ascend to the land, they would immediately die. If those that are on land would descend to the sea, they would immediately die.</p> <p>Similarly, you have creatures that grow in the fire, and you have creatures that grow in the air. If those in the fire would ascend to the air, they would immediately die. If those in the air would descend to the fire, they would immediately die. Therefore, 'how great are Your works, O Lord.'</p>	<p>וכשהיה ר"ע מגיע לפסוק זה אומר (תהלים קד, כד) מה רבו מעשיך ה' יש לך בריות גדלות ביים ויש לך בריות גדלות ביבשה שבים אילמלי עולות ביבשה מיד מתות שביבשה אילמלי יורדות לים מיד מתות</p> <p>יש לך בריות גדלות באור ויש לך בריות גדלות באור שבאור אילמלי עולות לאויר מיד מתות שבאור אילמלי יורדות לאור מיד מתות מה רבו מעשיך ה'</p>
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Questions for Reflection:

1. How might we map this text about creatures onto people? Why is it important to let people thrive in the environments that are best for them?
2. Have you ever felt like a creature of fire/water/sea/air made to live like a creature of different kind? Have you ever felt like you were forced to live in an environment that was not the right or natural environment for you? What was that like?

4. Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, 19th c. Mei HaShiluah, Numbers 2

<p><i>"Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral</i></p>	<p>שאו את ראש וכו' תפקדו אתם לצבאתם אתה ואהרן ואתכם יהיו איש איש למטה. ענין נשיאות ראש היה כפי</p>
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houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.” (Numbers 1:2-3)

The matter of taking a census is according to that which is brought in the Talmud: The mind of one person is not similar to that of another. Because the Holy One distributed to each person goodness and life for each one, and one is not similar to the other. And so it says “take a census of each person” in order that you stand each person in the place to which she belongs. And through this, she will be in her place, marked and raised. “With you shall be a person from each tribe,” because the leader knows which person belongs to which place in the tribe, and if even one switches her place, the tribe is not whole. This is like a parable: there is someone who plants in an orchard nicely in order, and if one planting is missing or switch, he sees that the orchard is not whole, and the Israelites are referred as “Planted by God for God’s glory” (Isaiah 61:3).

מה דאיתא בגמ' (ברכות נ"ח.) אין דעתו של זה דומה לשל זה. כי הש"י חלק לכל אחד טובה וחיים בפני עצמו ואין אחד דומה לחבירו. ע"כ נאמר שאו את ראש היינו שתעמדו כל אחד על מקום השייך לו. ועי"ז יהיה במקומו מדוגל ומנושא... ואתכם יהיו איש איש למטה, לפי שהנשיא היה יודע לכל אחד איזה מקום שייך לו בהשבת, כי אם יחליף מקום אחד אין מצב השבת בשלימות, דרך משל מי שנוטע פרדס בסדר נאה ואם יחסיר או יחליף נטיעה אחת ניכר שאין הפרדס בשלימות, וישראל נקראים מטע ה' להתפאר

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why is it important that we each stand in our own places? Why would the tribe not be whole if people stood in the wrong place?
2. What is the metaphor of the orchard teaching us about the importance of each unique person? Note: with younger kids, I would explain the metaphor of the orchard and what it's teaching. And, then ask “do you think that's true?” “Does that feel true for our class? Our school? Our community?”

Question for Educators:

1. What texts or pieces of these texts might you use with your students and how? What other texts, teachings, or ideas would you pair these with?