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### *D'var Torah*

## NOACH

The story of the Tower of Babel has come to symbolize human vanity -- people thinking they can physically reach God and the heavens -- as well as rebelliousness against God's wish that human beings should be spread over the earth.

After the flood, the descendants of Noah decided to all stay in one place and ignore God's commandment to scatter over the globe. The people of Babel thought they had power in numbers. They believed that if they combined all of their strength they could "quote" "make a name for themselves" by building a tower high enough to reach God.

So this week's Torah portion, which started out telling about the selfishness of individuals during Noah's time, has switched gears to teach us something about the sins that can be committed by "the group". But this time around, we don't see the vengeful God of the flood but rather a more merciful God. God could have just toppled the building and killed everyone, but instead God's solution was to spread the people of Babel across the planet -- making them speak different languages, see new horizons and experience new things.

God's decision to "punish" the people by scattering them over the earth and babbling their languages has advantages and disadvantages for society. The many differences between people in this world make life interesting. Living in New York City, I enjoy seeing all kinds of people in different kinds of native dress, with distinct customs and foods, and hearing many different languages. To me, this is one of the things that makes New York a great place to live. These differences force us to learn from each other, appreciate diverse perspectives, and hopefully avoid the kind of arrogance displayed by the people of Babel.

On the other hand, communicating is one of the most vital things in this world. Having different languages and ways of life can make it hard for people to communicate which, unfortunately, can result in misunderstanding, discord and even violence between people. While it is meaningful to remember our common ancestry and the basic unity of all mankind, we must also allow for and tolerate the many differences between us.

Lack of respect for diversity and the individual were some of the biggest transgressions of the people of Babel. They weren't committing selfish sins such as robbery and personal immorality as their ancestors did before the flood. In fact, the people of Babel came together as a community to build the ill-fated tower. Their sins had to do with ego and the thirst for power. Because the people of Babel were so focused on being united and powerful, they didn't care about each individual human being. If a person fell off the tower while building and died, the others would just keep on building because their common goal was the most important thing to them.

This Torah portion, combining the stories of Noah and the Tower of Babel, teaches us that we have to find a balance between the needs of the community as a whole, and the needs and differences of the individuals who make up the community. We can't be so focused on our larger goals that we forget to respect each other as human beings. But we also must be careful not to become too self-centered and neglect our responsibilities to our neighbors and God.

When the people of Babel were focusing so intently on building the tower that they forgot about each other, they also forgot about God. They did not realize that they would never be able to reach God. No matter how many people were building a tower, no matter how tall a structure they built, God cannot be physically reached. God is beyond the physical grasp of humans. The people of Babel did not understand that God resides in each person, not in the sky at the top of a tower.

As Jews, we try to reach God by building spiritual towers. We connect with an invisible God not by our material achievements, but by praying to God, talking to God in our hearts, and performing mitzvot. There are even times when it seems like God is NOT invisible; for instance, when we experience a beautiful or awe-inspiring natural phenomenon or an especially moving work of art.

Before the story of the Tower of Babel, the bible told the story of creation and the story of all of humankind. All the people in the world came from the same ancestors and spoke the same language. After the Babel story, and the establishment of different world cultures, ethnicities and beliefs, the Torah begins the epic tale of the creation of the Jewish people with Abraham and his covenant with God. God chose Abraham and his descendants, from all the people across the earth, to follow the mitzvot and be an example to the other nations.

The story of Babel changed the focus of the whole Torah; perhaps these events even allowed for the creation of the Jewish people. As Jews, we have the enormous responsibility of being an "example" to the rest of the world. We must learn from the mistakes of the people of Babel. We must come together and learn to communicate so that we can find God, not in the sky, not at the top of a tower, but in each other.