

God Prefers Diversity

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In preparation for my first visit to Andalusia, the part of Spain where Jews enjoyed a “golden age” under Muslim rule, I’m reading *The Ornament of the World*, by Maria Rosa Menocal.ⁱ The Yale historian describes a far more complex scene than I have ever previously known or taught. Yes, her subtitle is, “How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance and Medieval Spain.” Still, the history that Menocal describes isn’t so simple. Muslims were not uniformly tolerant, and Christians were not always the oppressors who initiated the Inquisition after uniting Spain under Catholic rule.

Menocal particularly focuses on the development of languages and ideas. We learn that Arabic was dominant, not only among Muslims, but also for Christians and Jews. Still, Hebrew enjoyed a resurgence there, with poets like Yehuda Halevy and philosophers like Ibn Ezra and Maimonides bringing innovation to our sacred tongue. Most Andalusian Christians spoke Arabic until 1492, but the romance language that would later become Spanish was evolving as Latin was dying.

I also came to understand that Halevy, whose poetry I’ve long known, was an ideological opponent of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides. The poet expressed contempt for the philosophers’ efforts to reconcile philosophy and religion. Halevy may be compared to religious fundamentalists today who reject scientific theories which seem to them to contradict the Bible. Reform Jews, on the other hand, may embrace Ibn Ezra and Maimonides as our ideological ancestors, finding truth in both Torah and philosophy as we do in Torah and science.

Our Torah portion this evening purports to describe how the multiplicity of languages began in ancient history. After reading about Noah’s flood over the course of several chapters, we encounter the Tower of Babel in a few terse verses. The descendants of the floods’ survivors have built a city and have set about constructing a tower. For reasons that are not obvious in the Torah itself, God is displeased. The people are punished and dispersed, now with many tongues.

My teacher, Judy Klitsner, points to an apparent redundancy in the story’s first verse, “All the earth had the same language and the same words.” We moderns are tempted to view “the same language” and “the same words” as two phrases that mean the same thing, a harmless repetition, emphasizing the point. Biblical interpreters, though, insist on finding independent meanings for words and

phrases that seem to be redundant. Klitsner casts doubt on the standard translation of “The Hebrew term, ‘*devarim ahadim*,’” as, “the same words.” The phrase, she writes, “is teeming with ambiguity. *Devarim* could mean *words, deeds, or things*, and *ahadim* could mean *few, several, or one*.”ⁱⁱ

Klitsner is on firm ground. She cites Rashi, the most important of all biblical commentators: “In his view, *devarim ahadim* means that the people were possessed by a single idea.”ⁱⁱⁱ The tower-builders did not just have one language; they all shared one point of view and were united behind a nefarious goal. According to Rashi, “They came with one counsel and said, ‘Not all depends on [God]...Let us ascend to the firmament and make war with [God].’”^{iv}

The people’s lack of diversity—in opinion, not only language—is symbolized by the fact that none of the tower-builders is named. The Bible is replete with lists of names. Immediately before and after the eleven verses of this story, we read lengthy genealogies, the part of the Torah that many of us find most boring. Only in this story is no of human character named. They lack individual identities.^v

Klitsner also asks us to look at the way the action in the story unfolds. The very first instruction is, “Come, let us make bricks and fire them hard.”^{vi} In fact, the people seem to make the bricks and prepare the mortar before they announce the plan to build the tower to avoid being “scattered over all the earth!”^{vii} “In this way,” Klitsner writes, “individuals are kept at a distance from their goals, from each other, and from any personal satisfaction they might derive from their efforts. Slaves to the whim of the city-building enterprise, human beings lose their stamp of humanity.”^{viii}

We may be reminded of George Orwell’s *1984* or of Soviet communism. Individual will and autonomy are entirely subjugated to the collective endeavor. Unique goals and views are unwelcome.

To bolster this point, Klitsner shares the interpretation of a 19th-century Lithuanian commentator known as the Netziv. He understands enforced unanimity to be the central sin:

“We must understand why [the builders of Babel] feared some people leaving for another land. This was certainly related to the *devarim ahadim*, the ‘one speech’ among them. They feared that since not all human thoughts are identical, if some would leave they might adopt different thoughts. And so they saw to it that no one left their enclave.”^{ix} Klitsner’s description of the tower’s purpose reminds us of the Berlin wall: “The great Tower of Babel was nothing more than a

watchtower that was meant to keep foreign ideas from flowing in and people from flowing out.”^x

When Robert, Daniel, and I travel to Spain in December, we will need our passports. However, unlike every other country I have ever visited, the United States does not check the passports of its citizens upon departure. Most recently, though, the free flow of ideas into this country has been restricted. Previously, foreign students have brought fresh perspectives to American colleges and universities in large numbers. Just this week, though, the *Democrat-Gazette* reported: “Most of the newly admitted international students at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service were unable to attend classes this fall after being denied visas...Eleven students applied for visas, and nine were rejected.”^{xi} The Clinton School and countless other institutions of higher learning are diminished, as is the education of young American adults, when a tower or a wall, even an invisible one constructed by executive order, prohibits diversity of people and ideas.

I was not surprised, though I learned something new, as I read about diverse languages in Muslim Spain and competing ideas among noted Jewish thinkers who were writing at roughly the same time and in the same place. God has created each human being to be unique. We may be frustrated when people disagree with us. In a few weeks’ time, more than a few Thanksgiving tables will be as laden with political discord as with food. While those moments may be uncomfortable, they are also cause for giving thanks. Embracing diverse individuals and divergent views is God’s plan and the dream of America’s founders.

Amen.

ⁱ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*, Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2011, p. 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Rashi to Genesis 11:1, cited by Klitsner, p. 37.

^v Klitsner, p. 47.

^{vi} Genesis 11:3.

^{vii} Genesis 11:4.

^{viii} Klitsner, p. 41.

^{ix} Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, a/k/a *Netziv*, *Ha-emek Davar*, Genesis 11:4, cited in Klitsner, p. 39.

^x Klitsner, p. 40.

^{xi} Frank E. Lockwood, “Schools, students note visa struggles; Little Rock site sees most rejected by U.S.,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, October 28, 2019.