

In the summer of 2006, I lived at Elat Chayyim, a Jewish Renewal retreat center in Accord, NY. I imagine a few of you have spent time there. That summer, the retreat center was going bankrupt, an attempt at starting a long-term intentional community there had fizzled, and it turned out that my summer there was the last summer it was in operation. It wound up closing, and merging its programs with the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Connecticut, which today still runs much of Elat Chayyim's original programming.

I recall a conversation I had that summer with one of the residents of the Neshama intentional community who had been living on site for two years. As she considered why the idea of the intentional community didn't work out, she mused, "We were all in agreement that we wanted to build a spiritual structure to hold us together. But we never really clarified what that meant. So it was as if one person was working to build a medieval monastery, while another person worked to build a sweat lodge, and another, a revival tent."

It was such an apt metaphor, and I think about it often. I particularly thought about it this week, as I contemplated both this Torah portion, and the escalating terror attacks in Israel. At the end of this week's Torah portion, Noach, we have an episode commonly known as "the Tower of Babel." We read at the beginning of Chapter 11 of Genesis how everyone had the same language. The people say to each other, "Come, let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." God, for reasons undisclosed in the text, responds with alarm, and decides to "confound their speech," so that they will not be able to understand each other.

In ancient times, this story serves as an etiology for why human beings speak different languages, and how the land of Babylon, Babel in Hebrew, got its name - because there, says Genesis 11:9, God *balal* - confounded - human speech.

Of course, the midrashic tradition asks bigger questions, like, "Why was the building of the tower deserving of punishment?" Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, a collection of midrash attributed to the mishnaic sage, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, states that while the tower was being built, "If a man fell down and died, no heed was given to him. But when a brick fell down, they stopped work and wept, "Woe unto us! When will another be brought up in its place?" According to the midrash, this prioritization of the edifice over human life is what made the work of the tower so sinful that it required drastic divine intervention.

Given the terrorist violence mounting in Israel this week, I actually want to speak about the intellectual edifices that we build, and the precious humanity that gets shoved aside in that building.

I know this is a diverse congregation, in terms of its viewpoints around Israel. There is good reason for that.

Many of us have been raised with stories of the historical vulnerability of the Jewish people, and of the moral triumph of the founding of the state of Israel after 2000 years of diaspora and persecution. We see Israel as a tiny, embattled island of democracy, surrounded by hostile enemies, threatened internally by terrorists bent on its destruction, and held to a gross double standard on the world political stage. With that understanding, it is difficult to have patience for those who cry for every Palestinian death but have no sympathy for Israelis.

And then, many of us has been raised up with liberal values to examine the dynamics of oppression and liberation. When we apply those values to Israel, it can feel unbearable to defend Israeli policies in the West Bank and treatment of Palestinians. It can feel difficult in the face of what feels like large scale injustice to find patience for those who condemn isolated acts of terrorism but refuse to engage in conversation about the larger imbalance of power between Israelis and Palestinians.

And yet we must find that patience in our own community. We who come from the right need to be able, if not to feel compassion for the plight of the Palestinian people, to listen openly to those in our community who do. We who come from the left need to try to feel compassion for the fear our fellow Jews feel in Israel, and if we can't get that far, to at least listen openly to our fellow community members who do. I say "we" in both cases, because I personally, deeply relate to both challenges. It is so tempting to build our moral argument, figure out exactly who is right and who is wrong, stake our claim there and refuse to engage. Our humanity depends on our ability, not only to speak up for what we believe is right, but to listen to each other and try to understand the perspective of others in our community, even when they say things that we believe to be wrong.

If this feels too threatening, consider how much higher the stakes are for those actually living in Israel. Or go back to the Torah portion. Another commentary, Genesis Rabbah, Chapter 38, offers this explanation of what it meant for God to "confound" the language of the people: When one said to another, "Bring me water," he brought him earth. Whereupon one cracked the other's skull. When

one said to another, "Bring me an ax," he brought him a spade. Whereupon one cracked open the other's skull.

This midrash takes the consequences of an inability to communicate to its extreme. When we get more attached to edifices than to human life, violence escalates. When we can't understand each other, in the most extreme cases, that leads to murder.

In this community, thank God, we are not there. However, if we are to pray for peace and harmony in the world, we can only start by doing the difficult work of building it right here, with the conversations that feel difficult to have.

I hope you will join us for the Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace solidarity vigil with Hillel next Friday, at 4 pm - especially if that is something out of your comfort zone. Even if you think that the Occupation is wrong, see if you can find some solidarity in your hearts for the Israeli victims of stabbing and other terror attacks.

I hope you will also join us for the Havdalah and conversation program, next Saturday evening. Even if you are fed up with talk and listening, let us remember that peace begins with the opening of channels of communication.

Perhaps Babel cannot be reversed. We are scattered - linguistically and intellectually. But we can stop building separate edifices, speaking different languages. That way only leads to violence. Let us learn from the story of Babel, to put humanity first. Let us refuse to be strangers to each other.