

For those of us who are anxious about the state of the world - whether at Standing Rock, the election, or in our own homes, consider this: The world was created last week. And this week, only the second parasha in of the Torah, the world gets destroyed, and God decides to start over with new humans. The final chapter of last week's parashah, described how humanity descended so quickly into violence that God decides to send a flood, sparing only Noach and his family. Which is to say: messiness of the human condition is a recent phenomenon.

We have heard the story of the flood, lasting forty days and forty nights, the rainbow signifying the covenant that God would no more destroy the world. But what about humanity after the flood? Were Humans 2.0 a better model? The first story after the flood, in Chapter 11 of Genesis, takes place when there are still few humans. They live in one place for the most part, and all speak the same language. But they begin to spread, and as they migrate to the Valley of Shinar, they build a city, out of bricks and mortar, saying, in Chapter 11, verse 4: "Come, let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered all over the world."

Many of us are familiar, with this story of the tower of Babel. Note the reasons for building this tower. As commentator Nechama Leibowitz points out, the people do not say, "Let us build for ourselves a house as a refuge from the rain" or, "let us build for ourselves cities for our little ones and fold for our flocks." On the contrary, she says, "the achievements of human skill are transformed from being a means, to an end in themselves."

She continues, “The purpose of these awe-inspiring monuments erected by the technical skill of man is to make humans forget their insignificance and transience, delude them with their greatness and “immortality,” in short: make for themselves a name.” She attributes this to an arrogance born of technical prowess.

I am not sure this is about arrogance. I see the line, “let us make a name for ourselves,” but I also see the next line, filled with anxiety: “Lest we become scattered over all the world.” This is not about overconfidence. This looks to me like desire - a desire I am sure we have all experienced - to control an unpredictable future. As Leibowitz points out, the people have learned to build houses - they know how to protect themselves, in the present, from the rain. Now they have turned their attentions to an anxiety about the future. They worry about being scattered. And to prevent being scattered, they decide to build a tower- an endeavor that God eventually punished by confounding their language and scattering them - the very future that these people feared, and sought to prevent. While the generation before the flood was seduced by violence, Humanity 2.0 is seduced by the illusion of control - and not destroyed by it, but seriously harmed.

How does this come to be? Well, one midrash, from *pirkei d'Rebbi Eliezer*, states: “The tower had seven steps up from the east, and seven from the west. The bricks were hauled up from one side, the descent was on the other. 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?”

Not only is this upsetting, the prioritizing of bricks over human life, but it also indicates that as soon as the project was underway, its inherent goal - maintaining unity, preventing scattering, had failed. The strategy, of the tower itself, became more important than the goal of maintaining a community. People were approaching the tower from different angles, and ignoring each other's deaths. I can't help but think of this ridiculous election, which has sapped so much of our attention and energy, in light of the cautionary fable of the Tower of Babel. I have heard so many of us talk about how we can't wait until after Nov. 8th, when this ordeal will be over. But the ordeal will not be over. On November 8th, some people will feel that they have "won," and other folks, probably the majority of the country (when you count those who didn't vote in the first place), will feel outraged or at least demoralized.

And then all of us will still have to do the work of being citizens in this country. The issues that made this election season so mean and angry won't have disappeared. To imagine that "getting through the election" is the goal, is in essence to build another tower, to miss the point of what it means to be humans trying to live in community together. We cannot secure our future through the outcome of this election, any more than the ancients could prevent dispersion by building a tower.

But we can distract ourselves from life and death issues, as did the ancients with their bricks. In our contemporary context, I find it very telling that the Water Protectors at Standing Rock in North Dakota have gotten almost no attention from either presidential candidate.

So, it is up to us, to the citizens, to bring the energy to this movement, with our money, with our voices, and if necessary with our bodies. SURJ organized a protest today, here in Eugene, in support of the Standing Rock Water Protectors. Dozens of Rabbis and other clergy are convened in solidarity in North Dakota right now - and they are probably freezing - they are there because this work is so important. If we ignore the indigenous folks and their allies being attacked by police while throwing all our energy into winning the election," it's as if we are mourning the bricks and forgetting the humans.

There is *so much work to be done*. I don't say this from a place of pessimism. I am also looking forward to getting through the election, but not because then the ordeal will be over, but because then more of us can turn our energy to the rest of the work - not just the work of electing the most competent leaders, but the work of making sure those leaders answer and are accountable to the citizens of this country. To be sure, that will have more or less frightening implications depending upon whom we elect, but it will be a prodigious task, nonetheless.

The good news is that despite the dispersion, despite all of the confusions of language, humanity has survived. Sometimes we rise to the task, no matter how prodigious. Sometimes our better selves prevail, and we build homes and not towers, living waters and not oil pipelines.

May we merit to show up to the work.