

## Noah 5778

There are many times in life when we might be excused for wondering “What was God thinking?” When things go wrong, or when we see something that seems utterly out of place in the world, it is natural to try to come up with some reasonable explanation for why things are the way they are. “Why have hurricanes become so destructive?” “How did the dinosaurs go extinct?” “Why are the Kardashians famous?” Some things cannot be explained even by God.

In this week’s parsha we don’t have to guess at God’s thought process; the Torah records them for us. Speaking of *migdal bavel*, the tower of Babel, it reports that “The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built and the Lord said ‘If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another’s speech.’”

Wow! This verse is not only the Torah’s explanation for why there are so many languages in the world, despite our having come from a common pair of ancestors. It also gives us a rare glimpse into the mind of God, if that can be imagined. Usually, God’s words are recorded as part of a dialogue with a human being. We know what God said to someone because they heard it; we can assume a transmission of those words down through the ages. Here, though, we have a direct quotation of what God was thinking, and the content of that thought links it to another instance of God’s interior thought earlier in the story of Noah.

At the end of last week’s parshah the Torah describes God’s reaction to the wickedness in the world before the flood: “The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He

had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created, men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.’” Before the flood, God saw the evil in the world, regretted having set that evil in motion by creating mankind, and was saddened. No one is reported as hearing the words of doom that God utters there, just as no one is said to hear God’s words about the tower of Babel in our parshah today. Using similar language, they both report God’s regret and then how God intervened in human history to move us to the next stage in that history.

How is it that we know God’s thoughts in these two places, without the aid of a conversation with a human being? A traditional answer would be that since Moses wrote down the words of the Torah, God must have later repeated the story of Noah to Moses, who included it in the final text. A modern, non-traditional explanation would be that the Torah is written from the point of view of an unnamed narrator, one who is totally unconcerned with making a claim of Mosaic authorship. The Torah, in that view, is instead an anthology of Jewish history, a collection of the stories that make us who we are. Its importance resides not in the divinity of a text transmitted by Moses but rather in the sanctity of a text kept alive by the Jewish people for thousands of years. We know what God thinks at the time of the flood and the time of the tower because of the stories that our tradition has given us.

A traditional reader of the text might ask: Why would I invest authority in the Torah if it is not a tradition that goes back to Moses and, ultimately, to God? Why should an ancient collection of stories move me to be part of the Jewish people and to act in particular ways? I would remind us all that we invest deep emotions into things that we feel are a part of us, regardless of their origins. It is not only possible for the people of the greater New York

metropolitan area, say, or Los Angeles, to rejoice, cheer and even cry when their teams get to the World Series, including even those residents who are not originally from those cities, and even though practically none of the players are from there. The feeling of ownership of those championships is quite real to those people. If an entire city and its suburbs can share a near religious connection, devoting a good deal of money and emotional investment to sporting events, I think it is entirely possible to give ourselves over to a tradition that reaches back thousands of years and which has provided answers to questions of ultimate significance ever since, even without the binding authority that divine authorship of the Torah provides. It is not only possible for a modernist to feel deep religious attachment to an ancient text; it is a common reality in which we engage every day.

So I don't get hung up on the question of how we know what God was thinking. I celebrate a tradition that has the hutzpah to even make such a claim. By providing us God's thoughts, the text teaches us values, in this case the value of humility, of not reaching beyond what is proper for human beings to do. The sin of Bavel was not striving together for greatness; it was attempting to breach God's realm. In a time when we are rapidly mastering the ability to edit genes, create new organisms, and even resurrect diseases like smallpox, the lesson of Bavel should not be lost to us. We should never cease asking ourselves "What does God think about how we are behaving" so that we can continue to build and repair God's world, while pulling up short of encroaching on God's realm.

Shabbat shalom.