

The Radical Idea

This is a sermon about a radical and obvious idea. It is deeply Jewish, evidenced throughout history, and it challenges some of our most foundational modern beliefs. It speaks to the divisiveness of our times, offers hope for our future, and is, I believe, the singularly most important concept for America today. But I'm not ready to share the radical idea just yet.

The first Bible story I remember learning as a child was the Tower of Babel. Here is the story as I learned it: all of humanity lived in one place. With hubris and a desire for conquest, humanity banded together to build a tower tall enough to reach the skies and sought to rule all the heavens and the earth. As punishment, God destroyed the tower, scattered humanity to the ends of the earth to each speak different languages and be unable to work together again. The lesson: we are naturally haughty and power-hungry and need to be made vulnerable to learn the importance of humility.

It's a clear story with a pithy point. And for this fort-building boy who dreamed of seeing what is beyond the clouds, it encouraged keeping my

feet firmly on the ground. The only trouble: it isn't actually the story of Babel. If you go turn to the Torah, and feel free to take any translation you wish, you'll find a very different tale that casts a very different understanding of humanity. We read:

The people said, "Come, let us build us 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 came down to look at the city and tower that humanity had built, and God said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to build, then nothing that they may dream 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." Thus God scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city.

That is, humanity joined together to create shared sanctuary from division and isolation. And in so doing, they held such potency together that God feared they could achieve anything. It is not the story of hubris, but humanity's ideal state: we are meant to be together.

The trouble is, we often tell the wrong story.

In 1954, Nobel Prize-winning British author William Golding published “*Lord of the Flies*.” The book focuses on a group of British boys stranded on an uninhabited island and their disastrous attempt to govern themselves. In showcasing the brutality of the boys when divorced from civilization, it portrayed the thin veil of society that keeps our basest instincts at bay. Early reviews hailed Golding for his “courageous realism,” and for tens of millions of Americans, this novel remains required middle school reading.

The trouble with the book is that Golding had no background in developmental psychology. And for the past 70 years, countless studies have suggested the opposite understanding of human nature.

Preschoolers are naturally cooperative¹ and youth actually tend towards generosity and altruism when given opportunity to be in charge.² Just over a decade after the publication of *Lord of the Flies*, a real world example arose of 8 teenage boys shipwrecked on a remote island for 18 months. When they were finally discovered and rescued, they had naturally formed

¹ Ashley J., Tomasello M. (1998). Cooperative problem-solving and teaching in preschoolers. *Social Development*, 7, 143–163.

² Benenson J.F., Pascoe J., Radmore N. (2007). Children’s altruistic behavior in the dictator game. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 28, 168–175.

a collaborative community together and were described as healthy and thriving.³

Just a few years after my own reading of *Lord of the Flies*, I first encountered the infamous shock experiments of Stanley Milgram. As many may recall, Stanley Milgram was a Jewish psychologist who became an instant celebrity at age 28 as he found that 65% of subjects would be willing to deliver lethal doses of electric shock to strangers simply by being told to do so by a person of authority⁴. The results of Milgram's experiments blanketed headlines around the globe, positing that it takes very little to push people into the depths of depravity.

However, 60 years later, much about these studies has been upended. A decade after the study was published, Milgram noted that only half of the participants actually believed the shocks were real. And one of Milgram's assistants noted that the vast majority of people who actually believed the shocks were real chose to quit the experiment, and therefore were not included in the data⁵. In his personal journal, now available to the public,

³ Bregman, Rutger, *Humankind*, Little, Brown, and Company: New York, NY, 2019, pp.22-38.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/1963/10/26/archives/65-in-test-blindly-obey-order-to-inflict-pain-yale-experiment-shows.html>

⁵ Perry, Gina, Credibility and Incredulity in Milgram's Obedience Experiments: A Reanalysis of an Unpublished Test, *Social Psychology Quarterly* (22 August 2019).

Milgram himself reflected, "Whether all of this ballyhoo points to significant science or merely effective theater is an open question. I am inclined to accept the latter interpretation."⁶

If there's one belief that has been predominant for centuries it is the tacit assumption that humans are selfish, evil, and seeking to rule over everyone else. It's a notion that drives newspaper headlines, TV shows and movies and guides the laws that shape our lives. I posit that, at best, this story of humanity is incomplete; and at worst, this story of humanity is completely and utterly incorrect.

Our Torah paints a very different picture of people. Created in the image of God, our sacred text imagines a world of chaos brought to order by both divinity and humanity. From the cosmic to the personal, we encounter a universe of interconnectedness. The choice of one may turn the fate of all. Our perspective moves through Genesis into the later books by elevating attention from the fate of an individual and into a collective perspective. The nation will rise or sink together. The future is inherently shared. Everything we do, from what we eat to the clothes we

⁶ Milgram, Stanley, Evaluation of Obedience Research: Science or Art? *Stanley Milgram Papers* (Box 46, file 16).

wear, from how we treat a mother bird to how we engage in war, everything ripples with shared significance.

Our biblical tradition moves this assumption of cosmic interconnectedness into an ethic. Justice could not be bought by the rich, nor should the poor remain impoverished. The blessings of one were commanded to be blessings shared by all; systems of perpetual economic injustice were abolished; the marginalized were to be included in all communal consciousness. Addressed as a nation, the Israelites were given a worldview in which each person was tethered to the next; in fate, in behavior, no individual was isolated on an island, nor any choice disconnected from the collective.

At a time when we watch the collapse of civil discourse, the bloom of bifurcation and political tribalism, such a consciousness seems but a distant dream. For many of us, we feel all of this in the most personal of ways. We have lost friendships and even familial connections, we have boycotted news sources and websites. Some of us have felt marginalized and silenced, others emboldened and heard. Whatever landscape of reality once invited us to find shared ground of humanity is diminished.

And for many of us we look across the country, across party lines, across the pew, we find only allies or enemies. A binary battle of belief.

In our divisions, we have largely lost a sense of hope and belief in humanity that may unify us. As Dr. Yuval Noah Harari captured prophetically:

People feel bound by [democracy] only when they share a basic bond with most other voters. If the experience of other voters is alien to me, and if I believe they don't understand my feelings and don't care about my vital interests, then even if I am outvoted by a hundred to one I have absolutely no reason to accept the verdict. Democratic elections usually work only within populations that favor some prior common bond, such as shared religious beliefs or national myths. They are a method to settle disagreements among people who already agree on the basics.

According to Pew Research, the political partisan polarization is wider today than it has been since 1879, the earliest year for which there is data.⁷ Prior to that, facing a nation of division, President Abraham Lincoln addressed the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in 1859:

⁷ <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>

[Even] the [person] of the highest moral cultivation...likes [the person] he does know much better than [the person] he does not know. To correct the evils great and small [that] spring from want of sympathy...among strangers, as nations, or as individuals, is one of the highest functions of civilization. To this end our Agricultural Fairs contribute in no small degree. They make more pleasant, and more strong, and more durable, the bond of social and political union among us.⁸

In the face of division, our greatest antidote is to come together. To create the space for encounter. To imagine the stranger not as our enemy, and the neighbor as one with whom we share an entwined fate. To imagine together a dream towards which we might both orient, one altered and reimagined by living with others. In such relationship we may begin to see rhythms fall into synchrony, and order that emerges organically through an expanded awareness.

This is the hope at the heart of our tradition. Towards the end of the Torah, God raises a vision for the idealized future - *yachad shivtei Yisrael*⁹ -

⁸ ; slightly adapted for oral recitation.

⁹ Deuteronomy 33:5

that all of the tribes of Israel will stand in unity. Our early rabbis try to understand the meaning of this image. Noting the constant conflicts between the tribes, and the Torah continuing to address each tribe as its own identity, what does unity really mean? The rabbis define it as *Aggudah* – as a cluster or collective; not a homogenous group, but a collection of difference into a larger identity. One of our sages illustrated it in this way: A parable: a person brought two ships and stationed them in the middle of the sea. The person then built a palace upon the decks of the two ships. As long as the two ships are tied to each other, the palace stands firm. Once the ships are separated, the palace cannot stand. So it is with the people of Israel.¹⁰

If we are each autonomous vessels, the question needs to be asked of each of us: to what degree will I be bound so a palace will be built? And to what degree do I believe that the only way such a palace can be constructed is by being tethered with others? Do I care enough about communal unity to be tied to you, do you care enough to be tied to me?

Our Torah begins with the understanding that in our origins, we worked together, shaping Babel with such ability that anything was achievable.

¹⁰ Sifrei, Ve-zo't ha-berakhah, sec. 346

The rest of the Torah is about a dispersed and divided people learning to return to this great building project, to stand as an *aguddah*, as a collective, and reclaim being builders of a great palace of possibility.

Which brings me to the radical and obvious idea: we are born to be collaborative, we are wired to work together. And this, this congregation, this space, this is the grand experiment to reclaim this heart of humanity. Community. This is the most potent response to fear, to fragility, to division. In tying together our boats, we see the wisdom that ripples out from every direction. From diversified stock portfolios to the magic of an orchestra, from a stellar soccer team to the most effective government body, the *aguddah*, the collective joined together with shared purpose, is our most powerful and pragmatic way to exist.

The trouble with community, is that it doesn't just happen. It requires of each person to actively tie and tether themselves to others. It is the choice to show up, to give of oneself, and in return be nourished and protected and made more effective. What if we showed up for services, not simply for the purpose of prayer, but to live out the ethic of community? What if we attended a class, not only for the sake of learning, but to knit together new bonds and connections? What if we volunteered at Backpack

Buddies not only to support food insecure children but to shape a practice of shared responsibility? What if we joined a Minyan, a small group, as our most effective response to this time of divisiveness and became a conduit of new connection?

Kindness is catching. Community is contagious. And during these High Holy Days, our liturgy winks at us again and again with this wisdom. Throughout our prayers, we don the collective perspective. We own misdeed as our shared responsibility. We elevate our hopes as shared blessing. We rise and we sit as one. And tonight, we've added an additional experimental layer to this, as we are woven as one large and diverse community into a single space – our Sanctuary. Many of us have experienced disruption tonight – some of us have sat for generations in the same seats in this space, and have brought flexibility to enable others to share these pews. Others may have spent years experiencing the holiest days in other spaces in the building, and now are nimbly trying to feel anchored in this space tonight. Others of us are tuning in from spaces all around the world, trying to feel a gateway between living room and Sanctuary. Just as we will end this High Holy Day season as one congregation out on 83rd Street, we begin these days as a community. As

a collective, each giving towards the grand experiment of how we stand stronger when woven together.

At the conclusion of each book of the Torah and as we prepare to begin the next, Jewish communities rise as one and declare "*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*" - "be strong, be strong, and together we will be strengthened." A communal anthem, it invites us to find shared words and sentiment echoed in myriad timbres and accents. We imagine each person affirming strength to one another, united under a shared fate. Our ritual encounter with Torah then mirrors the very worldview found therein: in a world of division and chaos, ours must be a collective perspective. As we turn once again the pages in our Book of Life, we raise this radical idea to the fore. Woven together, connection brings potency. And like cells at the very heart of our being, it is in relationship that flourishing may flow to every corner. A shared dream. A shared path. Our shared fate.