

Noah October 20, 2012 Tower of Babel and Hebrew Midwives as a subversive sequel. Bob Karasov

The take home message of Noah seems to be that man is evil; you can't change an evil society, so save yourself. Some stories in the Bible like this make me uncomfortable. The apparent take home message is hard to accept. Judy Klitsner, a senior faculty member at Pardes in Jerusalem recently wrote a very interesting book on this issue, called, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible. How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*. Her view is that later stories in the Bible revisit theological or philosophical questions that remain after studying earlier narratives. Looking through the lens of later narratives we can reexamine earlier ones and imagine alternative possibilities for these earlier narratives. She calls these subversive sequels. The sequel continues and completes the earlier story but does so in a way that often undermines the very assumptions upon which the earlier stories were built as well as the conclusions these stories have reached. That's why they are subversive.

I want to thank Hayim Herring for recommending and lending me the book and I highly recommend it to you. I want to discuss the chapter that dealt with the Tower of Babel and its subversive sequel, the story of the Hebrew midwives in Egypt.

On the surface, the tower of Babel and the Hebrew midwives don't seem to have much in common. But they both deal with building cities, they use the same building materials, there is an emphasis on the presence and disappearance of names and they show the centrality of individual identity in the divine human relationship. So let's analyze the stories.

At first glance, the Tower of Babel has a group of seemingly well meaning people who want to build a city and tower with its top in the heavens so they can make a name for themselves and **avoid being scattered**. For unclear reasons, God gets angry and the punishment is that they get **scattered**.

So what was their crime? As I read the passage, listen for words that occur frequently. (Read Genesis 11; 1-9). Certain words kept repeating themselves: kol haaretz, all the earth safat, language, bana, build Ir, city, pavatz, spread out shem name sham there and finally echad or ahat, one.

The repetition of words is not bad writing, it is emphasizing the human drive for indivisibility. There was oneness in speech and geography. None of these un-named people act alone. They want to make a name for themselves but no one is named. They hope to have a name shem, by staying there, sham. In the city they intend to build. The word **city** actually occurs more often than the word **tower**, despite our usual reference to the Tower of Babel. God obstructs the building of the city, not the Tower. **But still, what was their sin?**

Rashi looks at the opening words, "all the earth was of one language and devarim ahadiim", which he translates as **one counsel** or a single idea. He says that their unity was for the purpose of rebelling against God. That's why the top was in heaven. They wanted to make a name for themselves ,sham in shamayim. After the flood, God told them to spread out all over the earth. They don't want to, so they rebel. The big problem with Rashi's explanation is there is no textual evidence of a rebellion.

A second theory comes from Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the Netziv, a 19th century Lithuanian rabbi. He defines devarim ahadim as **one speech**. He says, “They feared that since not all human thoughts are identical, if some would leave they might adopt different thoughts”. So they decided to kill anyone who did not think as they did. The Netziv agrees with Rashi that they had ideological consensus but he says it is the **consensus itself** that is the sin, rather than a rebellious **focus** of the consensus. They wanted uniformity in the form of an oppressively monolithic society. There would be many cities in the world each promoting the same uniformity. The Tower was built to look out over all the cities to ensure that none would split off into another land. Throughout the book of Genesis, cities are places of alienation from humanity and God. This explains why the passage emphasizes the city more than the Tower. But the Netziv’s explanation doesn’t address the issues in the text that made Rashi think they were rebelling against God or why God was angry. For that we need to look at the creation story.

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God said, “Behold the human has become **like one of us** knowing good and bad.” Ramban finds in this statement evidence of God’s **pride** in humanity’s development. After all, what better compliment can you give someone than to say they are becoming like you? In order to fulfill God’s intention for us, we must each develop as unique individuals. An individual, even a rebellious one, is more Godly than a mindless member of a human herd. And only as a distinct individual can we freely choose to have a relationship with God. So, in a way, both Rashi and the Netziv are correct. The people’s sin of suppressing individuality was also a rebellion against God.

This point is further emphasized by looking at the role of names in the Bible. The importance of names is obvious from the naming of things in the creation story to the long genealogical lists that we could all live without. A list of the descendants of Noah immediately precedes the Babel narrative. Yet **no one** in the Babel story has a name; emphasizing the loss of individual identity. And in case you miss the hint, the next sentence **after** the Babel narrative is another list of names, starting with the name Shem, which means name.

So what is the lesson of Babel? Cities can lead to depersonalization. Tyranny can lead to the loss of individual identity. In these situations, there is not much any individual can really do which leads to a loss of relationship with God who is displeased.

But what if we ask ourselves, not only what happened, but what might have happened if people had behaved differently. For this answer we look to the subversive sequel, the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt. Here too we have a tyrannical society trying to stamp out individual identities. Can individuals combat this? Can the divine human relationship survive?

The book of Exodus also starts with names. Eleh Shemot, these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt. Some of the language that follows is very similar to the Babel language. Words like **Havah**, come, as in come let us build the Tower, and come let us deal shrewdly with the Israelites, and the word **pen**, lest, as in lest we scatter across the earth, and lest the Israelites increase, This combination of Havah and Pen **only occurs** in these two stories, nowhere else in the bible. Both stories involve building cities with **homer and levaynim**, mortar and bricks and this combination of building materials is **also only** found in these two stories. The book of Exodus starts with names, but after listing

the sons of Jacob, names also disappear from this story, replaced with the collective, “children of Israel” hinting at the loss of individual identity. All of Pharaoh’s actions are designed to dehumanize the Israelites in the eyes of the Egyptians and wipe out the Israelites’ sense of individual identity. Working in forced labor gangs they become an anonymous mass.

But here, suddenly, the story takes an unexpected turn. We read, “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew Midwives, one of whose **name** was Shifra and one of whose **name** was Puah”. Suddenly we have two named characters. And to drive home the point, the word **name** appears twice. It could have said their names were Shifra and Puah. Pharaoh tells them to kill the Israelite baby boys but they are conscientious objectors. Through this act, they reclaim their individual identities and salvage the identity of the Israelites.

God has been absent from the story up until now. Just like at Babel, without individual identity, there can be no relationship with God. But now it says, “God dealt well with the midwives”. Individuality paves the way to a relationship with God. The word midwives occurs **7 times** in this story and they have names as opposed to Pharaoh who is unnamed. Interestingly, the letters in Shifrah’s and Puah’s names contain all the letters in the word Pharaoh. All these textual hints are to show that the midwives were equal to or even greater than Pharaoh in determining who would live and die.

In a world without names they are named, in a world without God’s presence they find God and fear God. Babel warns of the dangers of a society that fails to confront itself. The midwives challenge convention and serve as a retort to that failed generation. Shifrah and Puah set off a chain of events that ultimately leads to the defeat of the tyrannical regime.

In today’s society it is easy to relate to the Babel narrative and feel that there is nothing we can really do to change the system. At times, we may feel nameless, faceless or insignificant. The Exodus subversive sequel comes to teach us that it is only through our own unique individuality that we can change the world and connect with God. Living authentically, being who you are as a person, small acts of kindness will connect you with God in a way that no Tower ever can. Shabbat Shalom