

HaShem created a perfectly organized world – until the fateful sixth day, when humans were added, and unpredictability entered the mix. The stories in the Book of Genesis offer a multitude of insight into human nature in all its complexity, and the first painful realization is that we humans are slow, stubborn learners, prone to making the same mistakes over and over again. Indeed, it seems that despite – or perhaps because of our position at the top of the earthly food chain, we are congenital troublemakers. In Jewish tradition, creation is comprised of 4 realms: Inanimate objects are called *domem* (silent ones); plants are *tsomeyach* (sprouting ones); animals are *chai* (*living ones*), and humans are *m'daber* (talking ones). The attribute of speech is precisely that which not only sets us apart from the rest of creation but also is the root of most of our troubles. As soon as there are 2 humans on the earth, verbal communication begins to throw the beautiful balance of HaShem's creation into disarray. The power of speech includes the power of persuasion, and we humans are very easily persuaded. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil activated our instinct for discernment, but sadly, we often let our desires override our better judgement. In Noach's era, *kol basar* – all flesh had become corrupt. Yes, even the animals, over whom humans had been given dominion. So, putting it in modern terms, HaShem saves a few files and then engages the Divine Reset Button, only to realize that this action is futile. The system we call creation contains a bug that is capable of disabling the power of discernment when freedom of choice encounters the power of persuasion, and because humanity has freedom of choice, there is no bugfix. The only mitigating updates are our mitzvot, but at this juncture in our reading most of them are still far in the future.

Also included in the power of speech is the ability to curse. A curse is a verbal incantation containing immense destructive energy, employed both by humans like Balak and by HaShem as a last resort to deal with our obstinance. Appeased by the “pleasant aroma” of the sacrifice Noach offered upon disembarking onto dry land, HaShem vows to no longer curse the earth because of humankind. Creation will continue unabated despite humanity's inclination for evil, because after all, we also have the inclination for good – if only we would use it more often. But alas, we tend to misuse all our powers, and cursing is one of the ways we misuse the power of speech. Noach, who has hitherto been silent, speaks at last – to curse Canaan, the progeny of his youngest son Ham. Only after he has pronounced this curse, does he bless HaShem, and wish good upon the progeny of both Shem and Japheth. Why does he curse Canaan? Not merely because Ham saw his father naked, but more importantly, because he told his brothers about it. *Lashon hara* (evil tongue – i.e. derogatory speech), even though it may be factual, is always wrong because it lowers the subject in the estimation of others and can touch off a series of irreparable calamities. It is no coincidence that 11 of the 43 sins enumerated in the *al chet* confession on Yom Kippur have to do with speech. Because the harm done by speech is unpredictable and once released irreversible, some sources rule that there is no forgiveness for *lashon hara*.

According to the Talmud, one of the 7 “Noahide Laws” that obligate all of humanity is not to curse HaShem. This goes much further than the expletives with which some of us pepper our everyday language. Cursing HaShem is action galvanized by speech as exemplified in the story of the Tower of Babel. Once again, humans have become arrogant, this time aspiring to “make a name” for themselves by building a magnificent structure. Among the many interpretations of this story, one of the most timely is that of Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (1475-1550), who taught that the builders were seeking to enforce cultural homogeneity to the detriment of all other forms of worship, lifestyles, and political systems. The wording used here is strikingly parallel to the wording used by the new Pharaoh in Parashah Shemot: *come, let us ... lest ...* Both endeavors arise from a perceived necessity to preserve the status quo at all costs, which of course, is based on fear of losing supremacy. By scattering the people and “confusing their language” HaShem makes it more difficult to act on this urge, but tragically, we never fail to find new ways to marginalize other humans and debase their culture. Since diversity permeates all of HaShem's creation and every human is created *bezelem Adonai* (in the image of HaShem), any attempt to enforce cultural homogeneity is a particularly nefarious form of cursing HaShem. Who are we to decide which culture, which religion, which language is good, and which are expendable?

The technology that makes it increasingly easier to communicate holds tremendous potential for good, but also for evil. Let us pray that we humans may finally overcome our basest instincts and learn at last to use our prodigious abilities to collaborate with each other for the good of all creation.

Shabbat shalom!