

HaShem created a perfectly organized world – until Day Six, and with it the painful realization that humankind is unpredictable, stubborn, and tragically prone to repeating past mistakes in seemingly endless variation. Indeed, we have all too often flagrantly misused our position at the top of the earthly food chain. Our sages teach that there are four levels of creation: 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, which sets us apart from the rest of creation, is also the root of most of our problems. As soon as two humans appear, 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, and all too often deceived. Which poses a thorny question: Who gave the serpent the power of speech that propelled Adam and Eve out childhood in Eden into adult responsibility in the wide world? (Maybe we'll explore that the next time we read Parashah Balak.) Along with Balaam's donkey, these are the only talking animals in the TaNaKh, and their stories are related. They both begin with the animal asking a question, and both contain curses. HaShem curses the serpent for persuading Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, and curses Adam and Eve for their disobedience. Balaam, sent by King Balak to curse the Israelites, remains powerless to carry out his mission. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil activated our power of discernment, but sadly, we often let our desires override our better judgement. In Noach's era, *kol basar* – all flesh, including the animals, over whom humans had been given dominion, had become corrupt. There is a wealth of speculation about what exactly moved HaShem to destroy nearly all of earth's creatures and start anew. Chapter 6, verse 11: "The earth was corrupt before God, and the earth became full of robbery. The root **חָשַׁב** means corrupt, damage, destroy, violate, deal corruptly. The root **שָׁדַד** means robbery, oppression, evil-doing, and in Jewish law, violent robbery. How tragically ironic that this word, with its derogatory connotations in Hebrew, is the name of the radical political organization Hamas, which has just carried out the worst pogrom since the Shoah. The name Hamas is an abbreviation for its Arabic name, *Charakat al-Muqāwamah al-'Islāmiyyah* as well as the Arabic word for enthusiasm and heroism. The power of persuasion gone tragically awry! Parashah Bereshit ends with HaShem's decision to destroy the earth's fauna, except for Noach, who had "found favor with Adonai." Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 108a offers several reasons for this radical move, many of them having to do with sexual immorality. "... the people of the generation of the flood mated male domesticated animals with female undomesticated animals, and male undomesticated animals with female domesticated animals, and all male animals with human females, and human males with all female animals." ... Come and see how great is the power of robbery, as the generation of the flood violated every precept, but their sentence to be destroyed was not sealed until they extended their hands in robbery." Why is robbery the final straw? Robbery stems from coveting, which is explicitly prohibited in the 10th Commandment. See it, want it, take it, as parents of toddlers know all too well. Restraint is not an intrinsic human characteristic; it must be learned. Upon eating from that fateful tree, we gained the ability to discern between right and wrong, good and evil, i.e., we became adults. We know that the *jetzer ha tov* (good inclination) and the *jetzer ha ra* (evil inclination) vie within us for supremacy. It is our duty to keep the latter at bay, and this must be diligently taught, by correction and by example. Every generation grapples with this in the context of its own era, but the underlying challenge remains the same: upholding values that ensure justice for all, not just for a select few. These values are grounded in honesty and the ability to accept responsibility for one's own actions rather than blaming others – another human weakness that began back in Eden, and continues to afflict the entire world. When people begin to steal and justify their deeds, society inevitably succumbs to the basest urge to survive at all costs. One of the seven "Noahide Laws" that obligate all of humanity is to not curse HaShem. This goes far beyond the expletives with which some of us pepper our everyday language. Cursing HaShem is action through speech as illustrated in the story of the Tower of Babel. Humans again become arrogant and set out to "make a name" for themselves by building a magnificent structure. Among the many interpretations of this story, one of the timeliest is that of Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (1475-1550), who taught that the builders sought to enforce cultural homogeneity to the detriment of all other forms of worship, lifestyles, and political systems. 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 defame their culture, often through cunning manipulation and outright deception. 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? We Jews believe that HaShem judges all humans by their behavior irrespective of religious or political orientation. We have our own covenant that defines our unique relationship with HaShem, but we all descend from Adam's son Kain through his descendant Noah. It is upon us – *aleinu* – to represent our own culture honorably by observing our *mitzvot*, which obligate us, but do not make us superior to others, to the best of our ability.

Shabbat shalom!