

The first eleven chapters of our Torah take us on a whirlwind journey from the formation of the universe through the evolution of humanity and deposit us at the beginning of our unique relationship with HaShem. Strikingly similar stories that progress from creation through corruption and deluge to a new beginning can be found all over the earth. Variations on the Tower of Babel story also exist in cultures on every continent, with the common theme of the gods creating different languages to make communication more difficult in order to keep humanity in its place. Mythology the world over is full of stories about humans challenging divine authority and daring to compete with the gods. Predictably, and logically, humans are usually punished for their presumptuousness. Challenging authority and pushing against boundaries is basic human nature. The fruit of that forbidden tree might have given us the knowledge of good and evil, but it did not give us the discernment or the willpower to always make good choices. The builders of the tower live in a world where everyone has “one language and some common words/things.” (11:1) Migrating from the east, they find a valley and settle there. They make bricks, and then they grow ambitious: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach the sky. Let us make ourselves a name, so that we will not be scattered all over the face of the earth.” (11:4) Of course HaShem must intervene. Why? While some commentators, including Josephus, thought that they built the tower out of fear of another flood (in some versions, to hold up the sky to prevent torrential rain), not out of a desire to rule the world, others agree that although the tower is a reaction to the flood, it is primarily an attempt to wrest control of the “upper waters” from HaShem. Indeed, the name *Babel* likely stems from the Babylonian word *bāb-ilim* – gate of the god, the Aramaic word for gate is *bava*, and in Hebrew enter/come is *ba*. Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 109a speaks of three motivations for building the tower: “They divided into three factions ... Regarding the faction that said: Let us ascend and dwell there, God dispersed them. And that faction that said: Let us ascend and wage war, became apes, and spirits, and demons, and female demons. And that faction that said: Let us ascend and engage in idol worship, it is written, ‘Because there the Lord confounded the language of all the earth.’ ... All intended to build the tower for the sake of idol worship. ... The connotation of *name* is idol worship.” According to Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (1475-1550) they built the tower “at the advice of their leaders, who wanted to enthrone Nimrod as king over the entire human race. ... ‘Let us make a name ...’ is a metaphor for ‘let us make a supreme idol.’ This idol was to be placed on top of the tower. They hoped that the visibility of the tower and its symbol on top would ensure that they would be most highly esteemed among people all over the world, regardless of whether they had become part of their city-state. Anyone ruling their city would automatically be recognized as the ruler of mankind.” By scattering the people and “confusing their language” HaShem makes it more difficult to set up a monolithic system, but tragically, there have always been people who will stop at nothing to subjugate others to gain the power and prestige they crave. And there have always been those who willingly allow themselves to be subjugated in return for whatever benefit they hope to derive. A major motivation is an empowering sense of identity, i.e., a “name” which justifies their resentments and gives them permission to say and do things for which they would never otherwise have had the courage. It is a sad commentary on human nature that there are still so many power-hungry autocrats. And it is even sadder that there is no lack of willing followers who are prepared to do whatever they are told is necessary to help create what they naively believe to be the best of all possible worlds. Whether political or religious, throughout history forced conformity has resulted in untold tragedy, with no end in sight. In the USA, President Biden has just issued a formal apology to the Native Americans for over a century of boarding schools’ brutal attempts to “civilize” and “Americanize” them, while religious and political actors all over the world strive to establish their own brands of conformity. Since diversity permeates all of HaShem’s creation and every human is created *bezelem Adonai* (in the image of HaShem), attempting to enforce uniformity is essentially *chillul haShem* – desecrating HaShem. Who are we to decide which race, culture, religion, or language is good, and which are expendable? As we know, one of our euphemisms for the ineffable name of our Creator is *HaShem*: The Name, from the Hebrew word *shem* - name. It is noteworthy that Noach’s son Shem was the father of Eber, (literally, of all who crossed over, from עבר – to cross over, also the origin of *ivri* – Israelite). And Shem was the ancestor of Abraham, who heeded the call of HaShem and became the first to “invoke the name of HaShem,” as we will read next week. The story of the Tower of Babel is not an injunction against building towers, cities, nations, or religious communities. The desire to build is a healthy human trait if it is based on ethical principles. But building solely to “make a name” is idol worship. After all, it was that fateful tower that introduced idol worship into HaShem’s world. The progeny of Cham (grandfather of Nimrod) and Japheth became idol worshippers, while the descendants of Shem still follow HaShem. As Midrash Tanchuma Vayakhel 1 teaches, “A man is known by three names: the name by which his father and mother call him, the name by which other men call him, and the one he earns for himself; the most important name is the one he earns for himself.” *Nomen est omen!*