

*Lessons from Babel and Ground Zero*  
Graduation, Cincinnati, June 3, 2004  
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Rabbi Ellenson, Dean Ehrlich, distinguished faculty – many of you, my teachers – honored guests, and especially, friends and family of our graduates. It seems trite to say how honored I am to be here tonight. Those words are not adequate to express what I feel. My years at HUC, in my late twenties, were formational, and they seem to increase with influence as I get older and as my career objectives evolve. I will always be grateful for the education I received here, and since learning affects us so profoundly at so many different levels, the value of those experiences increases with the years.

I am also realistic about what you graduates will remember of my address in these few moments. I'm aware of the statistics; you will apparently forget what I say as soon as you take off your academic robes (or hang-up your new diploma). So, let's assume there is value in focusing our thoughts together briefly on what I will propose are the most important topics of life. Of course, I could never make such a bold claim – “the most important topics of life” – unless I draw these thoughts from a text more profound than I could ever hope to be. And so, I turn to the opening chapters of the Bible. These first eleven chapters of Genesis presuppose that all humankind constitutes one great family traceable to a common ancestry.

Here, in Genesis 1 and 2, the Bible creates a worldview for Israel that was in many respects unique in the ancient world. Even as readers in today's context, we have to be impressed by the way Gen 1-2 produce an appreciation for the goodness of God's creation and the special role of humankind in it. However, after only two chapters, the Primeval History moves quickly to the origins and history of human sin, and its consequences for that wonderfully created order. As Genesis moves breathlessly through individual rebellion, fratricide, and corporate revolt, we as readers are gripped with the unnerving conviction that the world is out of our control – indeed it seems, out of God's control. There seems to be no way out. The answer, if there even is an answer to this world's dilemma, is beyond us.

We then stumble upon the Tower of Babel pericope in 11:1-9. What a curious way to climax the Primeval History! With one language and a common list of vocabulary words, “they” (our ancestors) settled in the valley of Shinar (Babylonia to us) [vv. 1-2]. Without any further explanation or description, the text says simply (vv. 3-4): (3) And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. (4) Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

Our ancestors resolved to put to use an innovation in building techniques, bricks hardened by firing, until they were almost like stones: “let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” These early humans, wanted to make their building materials permanent, lasting, durable. This technology would make it possible to build as never before. They had resources and a new technology! And they were resolved! The familiar “come, let us make bricks & burn them” is a singular imperative followed by 2 plural cohortatives (with a tip of the hat to HUC). With these exhortation cohortatives (let us make bricks & burn them), the verb of motion in the imperative serves as an intensifying auxiliary.<sup>1</sup> The effect is forceful: it reveals their resolve to encourage each other into action. They were determined. Their plans were premeditated; they were communally and collectively hell-bent on success. There would be no stopping them now.

The same grammatical intensity is repeated in the next verse: “come let us build.” The Babylonian ziggurats were enormous stepped pyramids that served, in most cases, as the base for temples. Cities throughout southern Mesopotamia, from the third millennium to the first, housed their most important deities in temples at the bottom of these ziggurats, so that in general, religion served the political ends of the state.<sup>2</sup>

Our ancestors combined their resources with the latest technology, in order to use religious power in building greater political power. And the text is clear about their motivation in yet another cohortative (v.4): “let us make a name for ourselves.” To be left without name, of course, in the ancient world, was the worst of fates, to cease to exist through ones progeny.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of the name is further explained (v.4) by the alternative for having a name; that is, being scattered across the face of the earth. To have a

name is to be substantive, to have importance, a place where we are accepted and revered. To be scattered is to have nothing.

And so, near the end of the Primeval History, we have this portrait of our ancestors, breathlessly provoking each other, and grasping for power. They grasped for significance; for meaning in life. This text serves a climactic role in the shameful narrative of human rebellion. As we watch in horror, God's perfect creation moves inexorably from taking forbidden fruit to murder; from the near ruin of the faithful line of Seth to a catastrophic flood. The Primeval History, with only occasional bits of God's grace, convinces us that the world is hopelessly lost in its own lust for power and significance. And perhaps this is why we have now reached the climax of that history, because now humans have turned to religion itself – in the building of a tower to heaven – as a means of control and power.

It is easy for us this evening to condemn the abuse of religion as a means of seizing power. Perhaps we would start with the Taliban's use and abuse of women, or the use of religion to work adherents into an anti-American frenzy. But perhaps it will be harder for us to consider the possibility of the abuse of religion in power mongering among North American religious professionals. After all, this text, like the rest of the Primeval History, is the story of everyman and everywoman. It graphically establishes also our story, putting us precisely in the place we all know too well, by narrating the actions of our ancestors.

We are religious professionals. You proud HUC graduates are leaving either the rabbinical school or the graduate school, and going out as religious professionals. As such, our task is more than that of serving as social workers, as noble and as necessary a profession as that is in our culture. But in addition to helping people with their problems, we strive to move them into faith, so that in a simplistic way, our task may be defined as an effort to get people to understand the distinctions between opinion, belief, and faith. I myself have been helped to understand these distinctions by my teacher, Rabbi Chanan Brichto, who drew a sharp distinction between the three, opinion, belief, and faith.<sup>4</sup> He began with Plato's assertion that opinion is the opposite of knowledge – namely, ignorance. We know what we know, but our opinions are clearly what we do not know – although they are what we believe. Belief then is opinion; and if opinion is ignorance then belief is ignorance. The difference between the two – opinion and belief – is one of degree: opinion implies an honest confession of ignorance, while belief is an

assertion of greater confidence. Belief asserts partial or imperfect knowledge. However, faith is an expression which is as much stronger and more confident than belief, as belief is than opinion. Faith, indeed, expresses more than conviction. Faith is a claim to knowledge of a higher order of reality. My opinion is a matter of tertiary concern to me: You can reject it without bruising my ego. Belief touches me more closely – it assures me that, for example, “honesty is the best policy” – most of the time. But faith – faith is the touchstone of our lives. Faith is that certainty – or near certainty – to which we refer the issues of life and death, as touching ourselves and others. We would sooner take our chance with the law of gravity than contravene the norms we hold by faith.

But faith – unlike the other kind of knowledge – is not a constant. It is a light which blazes like a thousand suns – at some times; at others, it flickers dimly, casting shadows of changing shapes. But even when it is weak we struggle to brighten the flame – for it is the most precious of commodities. [Humankind] knows no blackness to match the darkness when that light has gone out. And no [one] who has ever seen it will rest happy until it is rekindled. And when it burns bright, all other lamps are feeble.

Graduates, whether you are leaving this venerable institution to take a congregation, to teach, or to take up some other role of service, this is your task – to “brighten the flame”, to use Rabbi Brichto’s terms – to strengthen the faith that enlightens humanity.

The warning from the Tower of Babel narrative is that you and I are still dangerously gifted tower-builders. My experiences as a seminary professor have confirmed in my mind that we religionists are the best tower-builders in the world. Any time (or perhaps every time) we use our positions of influence and authority to build a tower, a monument, to our own cleverness; we are one step farther away from Eden, one step closer to Babel. Every time we rely on our own intellect, our own resources and latest technology, to grasp for significance and meaning, we are no better than these ancestors standing before their great tower at Babel. We manipulate colleagues, or publishers, or students – graduates, please make your own application here, if ever tempted to manipulate congregants, or fellow rabbis, or colleagues – and when we do so we thereby forsake the very reasons we are in service to God and God’s people. Whenever we triangulate relationships among our

colleagues in order to protect our turf, when we neglect our families in order to write one more paragraph, we take another step toward Babel – a step away from Eden – and we begin to look more and more like tower-builders rather than kingdom-builders for God.

But this is not the final word. This text has many more words (vv. 5-8), and two more of them are cohortatives. After the mortals finished the city & the tower, the Lord came down to see their handiwork (v.5). God marveled at what they accomplished, not because it did make them significant or provided them with an impressive permanence. But because their unity in effort and communication made for a remarkable, if pathetic, ability to build and build and build, and to produce more and more meaningless and insignificant monuments (v.6). Their tower was a monument to the very insignificance they feared, their city a monument to that very emptiness and hollowness they sought to avoid. And they would obviously never stop. God remarks: “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them!”

And then we encounter the remaining exhortation cohortatives: (7) Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there.” Not only do we learn in this text what we are like, about our very nature as tower-builders, but we also learn about God. This time the cohortatives are not part of arrogant human speech, but of divine speech. God is as resolved as our ancestors were to take action. And the specific action he took is surprising. (8) So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. The very thing our ancestors were striving to avoid – i.e., scattering; the very transience and ephemeral existence just there “over the face of all the earth” – that was their punishment. Not only did they lose their name, the enduring substance they sought, they also lost their settlement in Shinar and their unity of language. What has been lost is irretrievable; gone forever.

Things haven't changed much since those days long ago in Babylonia. And God hasn't changed much either, I dare say. Speaking personally, I dilute myself by over-emphasizing the eternal value of the books I write and even the students I teach. My writing, my teaching, and preaching are only permanent, or lasting to the degree that they contribute to building God's kingdom, to building a monument to God's greatness, and to God's enduring covenant and love. Everything else we do will someday stand – like Babylon's ancient ziggurats stand today, strewn across the barren landscape of Iraq – as monuments to our own futility and vainness.

All of us can see it more clearly now. Today, sadly, we all have a vivid image in our minds of towers suddenly crashing to earth; of tall buildings, proud towers, with their tops glistening in the heavens one hour, yet crumbling into a lethal pile of debris and rubble the next hour. Perhaps in our post-911 world, we all understand better exactly how ephemeral and temporary all of this really is. And just so, someday our personal towers of pride and professional ambition may – no will – crumble suddenly into worthless debris and, like ancient Babel, be left abandoned to decay in the heat of the desert sun.

As tragic as recent events in our country have been, we need to come away clearly focused on our tasks as servants of God's people in the world. Graduates, God has gifted you to learn, to proclaim, to instruct, to write. Any work that fails to contribute to the enduring covenant, to that everlasting relationship God has established with God's people, will not last on the day God comes down to see. Because just as God came down to see the city & the tower at Babel, so God continues to come down, because God is a coming-down God. And when God comes, he comes in order to see (v.5). The tasks God has placed in our hands – those of us privileged to earn our bread handling the sacred text – these tasks are the most important any of us could request or expect to receive. We are all about building God's city and God's tower. And we can be grateful this evening, that whatever we manage to contribute to God's city and tower is eternal without end.

And so graduates, be grateful for the talents, gifts and graces God has lavished upon you. Remember it is an honor to enter into a career of service, based on your readings of ancient texts and exhortation. Learn to recognize and eschew those moments when you incline to vain tower-building; when you tend to the old and worn-out habits of humanity, of grasping for name, recognition, and power. Find significance, find enduring permanence, in God and in service to God, while enjoying the work God places in your hands.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 66, paragraph c.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Coogan, “In the Beginning: The Earliest History,” in The Oxford History of the Biblical World (ed. M. D. Coogan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 17. Initially, Mesopotamian shrines were built on the ground, but they gradually evolved through stages using elevated platforms, and eventually to the familiar stepped, rectangular pyramids with the temple on top, raised above the rest of the city; see Elizabeth C. Stone, “Ziggurat,” in The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East (ed., Eric M. Meyers; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5:390.

<sup>3</sup> Name giving at birth is an act of dominion, normally reserved for the parents. At times, such birth names seem to contribute to the shaping of destiny for the newborn. It has been suggested the ancient world had a “doctrine of the name,” or the concept that nothing exists unless it has a name. So the Enuma Elish begins, “When above the heavens were not named, below, the earth was not called a name” which means that primordial time before heaven and earth existed (EE I:1-2). Similarly in Gen, God’s creative activity included naming the light “day” and the darkness “night (day 1), the firmament “heaven” (day 2), and dry ground “land” and the collected waters “sea” (day 3). Adam named each creature as God brought it into existence. Indeed, to have one’s name cut off was to cease to exist. So after Achan’s rapacious act at Jericho and Israel’s losses at Ai, Joshua in prayer before the Lord, is fearful that the Canaanites will hear of it, and surrounding the Israelites, they will cut off their name from the earth (Josh 7:9). The Lord threatens to cut off Babylon’s name, as well as remnant, offspring, and posterity (Isa 14:22, and see 48:19). Having sons and daughters is tantamount to a monument and a name (Isa 56:5, and see Zeph 1:4). And so, one of the driving needs in the little book of

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Ruth is to avoid having a dead man's name cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place (Ruth 4:10).

<sup>4</sup> For what follows, see Rabbi Chanan Brichto, "How Does God Speak in the World?" (paper presented at a conference called by the Commission on Faith and Order of the Ohio Council of Churches, 1970).