

Genesis Rabbah Translation- Chapter 38:6

“Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words (Genesis 11:1).” Rabbi Lazer said—“the same words” [seems to be a redundancy] and therefore [refers to the fact that] the actions of the Generation of the Flood (the generation of Noah) are expounded [in Torah], while the actions of the Generation of the Dispersion (the generation of the tower of Babel) are not expounded [in Torah].

“The same words”—the rabbis identify that the word “one” is pluralized and thus comment on two individuals that are referred to as “one” in the Bible: “Abraham was one person in the land (Ezekiel 33:24)” and on “God is our God, and God is one.” Some would say that Abraham is like a barren mule in that that he could not beget [a child] and regarding “God is our God and God is one,” [they said to each other]--it is not at all for God to choose for Himself the celestial [realm] and give to us the terrestrial, but rather [they said], come and let us make ourselves a tower and let us partake in idolatry [and build a statue] at its top and we shall place a sword in its hand and it will appear as if it will make war.

Another interpretation of “the same words” is “unified words.” What is at hand for one is at hand for all [regarding the three generations prior to Abraham]. The rabbis say regarding “a single language” that it can be compared to one who was in a storeroom [opening caskets of] wine. He opened the first barrel and found vinegar; in the second, he also found vinegar; in the third he also found vinegar. He said, “Ha! All of the wine is ruined.”¹

Rabbi Lazer said—Which [of the Generation of the Flood and the Generation of the Dispersion] was worst: the one who says to a king, “[Either] you or I will be in the palace” or one who says [to a king] “Neither you nor I will be in the palace?” [The question is answered]: the one who says “Either you or I will be in the palace.” Thus the [Generation] of the Flood said, “What is god that we should serve him (Job 21:15)?” The Generation of the Dispersion said--it is not at all for God to choose for Himself the celestial [realm] and give to us the terrestrial, but rather [they said], come and let us make ourselves a tower and let us partake in idolatry [and build a statue] at its top and we shall place a sword in its hand and it will appear as if it will make war. From [the Generation of the Flood] none were left behind as a remnant, and from them, [the Generation of the Dispersion], a remainder was left behind. [This dichotomy is explained thus]: Rather the Generation of the Flood [was condemned] by the hand that was immersed in thievery. “People remove boundary-stones, they steal flocks and pasture them (Job 24:2).” Thus none were left as a remnant. But [regarding the Generation of the Dispersion], on account of the love for one another [as evidenced by the statement] “all the world had one language, thus there remains of them a remnant.

R’ says—[So] Great is peace that even if Israel were to engage in idolatrous practices, but there is peace amongst them, the Holy Blessed One would have to say, “I cannot destroy them” as it

¹ The highlighted text represents a pun in the Hebrew, playing off the word שפה

is said, "Ephraim is addicted to images, let him be (Hosea 4:17)." But if they are oppositional, what is written? "Now that his heart is broken, he shall be guilty (Hosea 10:2)."

Genesis Rabbah Teaching Transcript, 38:6

One of the great concerns for the rabbis who composed the midrash Genesis Rabbah is how a Jewish community can function, both in contrast to contemporaneous communities of thought of their day and with a diverse array of Jewish practices and beliefs. In working through Genesis Rabbah, it is clear that the rabbis felt that they were beset on all sides by oppositional ideologies and systems of belief, even internal to their own Jewish community. The rabbis needed to justify their own system of thought. Genesis Rabbah 38:6 is contextualized by the story of the Tower of Babel, found in Genesis 11. The rabbis use this story, and this midrash, to create community, even in the face of disunity.

The passage opens by identifying an apparent inconsistency in the Torah text. Genesis 11:1 reads, "Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words." Attributed to Rabbi Lazer, the midrash asks why the Torah would separately identify "the same language" and "the same words" when those two concepts are seemingly the same. The phrase "the same words" must refer to something other than language. The rabbis know that Genesis 10 and 11 records the lineage of Noah, referred to as the "Generation of the Flood", but there is no mention of a lineage related to the generation of those who constructed the tower of Babel, known as the "Generation of the Dispersion." This contrast is expressed in the identification that the "Generation of the Flood are expounded in the Torah while the actions of the Generation of the Dispersion are not expounded." The rabbis take this contrast as an opening for their own activity of crafting a narrative about a group of people, the Generation of the Dispersion, that is not recounted in the Torah. Moreover, the rabbis will use this opening as the

basis for casting judgement on the three generations of humanity portrayed in the Torah prior to Abraham (the generation of Adam, the generation of Noah, and the generation of the Dispersion) and, by extension, their own Jewish community.

The rabbis continue by identifying another apparent textual oddity in the usage of the phrase “the same words.” The Hebrew expression uses the word *echadim*, from *achad*, meaning “one.” The word for “one” has been pluralized. How can there be many “ones?” Drawing on their vast understanding of linguistic connections in the Bible, they find two “ones” identified in other books. First is Abraham, who is identified as “one person in the land” in Ezekiel. The second is God, who is identified as “one” in Deuteronomy (the cited passage is familiar, it appears in daily liturgy as the *shm’a*). The rabbis then imagine a pagan plot to confront God. In the Torah, the peoples of the earth unite in Genesis 11 to build a tower that reaches the heavens. In the rabbi’s portrayal, prior to building the tower, the pagans question why Abraham, and by extension all of the people of Israel, should be considered the chosen one of God. In the rabbi’s imagination, the pagans complain that Abraham is not even able to beget a child, so why should he merit the inheritance of the “celestial realm” and be esteemed by God to the detriment of other peoples? The pagans therefore will build a statue at the top of their tower, “place a sword in its hand” and go to war against God in order that they too might dwell in the “celestial realm.”

This imagined complaint against God by the pagans contains a subtle polemic against Christianity. The rabbis demonstrate knowledge of Christian biblical interpretation in understanding that Christian Old Testament characters often “pre-figure” Jesus Christ. That is to say that the characters found in the Torah are reinterpreted by Christians to show the

inevitability of Christ as savior. This method of interpretation allows Christian thinkers to show how the New Testament would supersede what is said in the Old Testament, particularly the five books of Moses.

The rabbis construct this potential argument against Jewish theology as a straw-man argument, in order, ultimately, to undermine the Christian worldview. Abraham is like Jesus in that he cannot, according to this episode, leave children behind. In a Christian worldview, a childless Jesus is evidence that all peoples of the earth can inherit heaven, rather than a specified “chosen” people like the Jews. In addition, the passage hinges on the idea of multiple languages existing in the world. The outcome of the Tower of Babel episode is that the peoples of the Earth speak different languages. Judaism has one unified language, Hebrew, while Christian practitioners have many languages. The polemic here is that Christians falsely believe that they have a claim on the divine realm and that their “kingdom of heaven” was taken by force, upsetting what the rabbis understand as the divine order of the world.

The midrash shifts focus from the Christian polemic to further deal with the issue of the multiple languages of the world. The rabbis suggest that the word *achadim*, “ones” could be reinterpreted to mean *ichudim*, “unified,” implying that the people who spoke one language were also unified as one people. A *mashal*, a lesson by way of analogy, is presented depicting someone inspecting three casks of wine, but finding each one ruined. The rabbis engage in some linguistic wordplay between the word *sapha*, “language,” and *mishpo*, a made-up word that connotes pleasantness, representing the wine in the analogy. Though the rabbis do not explain their analogy, the implication seems to be that just as all three casks of wine were spoiled, so too were all three generations of humanity prior to Abraham. The wordplay makes

this meaning clear: prior to the Tower of Babel, the world had one language, *sapha*. However, when analyzing each generation of humanity, like looking at the casks of wine, the expected pleasantness, *mishpo*, is in fact ruined. Those that spoke that common language, all of humanity prior to Abraham, should be, for the rabbis, considered corrupt. The *mashal* also helps explain the phrase “What is at hand for one is at hand for all.” In understanding the analogy, it is clear that this phrase is idiomatic and means something closer to: “what applies to one generation applies to all three.”

With the earliest generations of humanity established as problematic, the midrash asks which of the Generation of the Flood or the Generation of the Dispersion were the worse generation. These two generations are characterized by an analogous conversation, where they each ask impetuous questions of a king. The Generation of the Flood is represented in the question “Either you or I will be in the palace” showing that the Generation of the Flood did not recognize the authority of the king, God. This is further supported by the inclusion of a text from Job, placing the question “What is God that we should serve him?” in the mouths of the Generation of the Flood. The Generation of the Flood apparently knows of the existence of God, but actively chooses to ignore the divine power. By contrast, the Generation of the Dispersion is represented in the question “Neither you nor I will be in the palace.” The justification for this passage is a recapitulation of the apparent desire of the Generation of the Dispersion to go to war against God that they might choose who dwells in the celestial realm. Rather than ignoring God, this generation establishes that *neither* God nor humanity has the authority of the divine realm.

The rabbis make their judgement of these two generations clear: the Generation of the Flood is worse than the Generation of the Dispersion. They note that no remnant remains of the Generation of the Flood: God destroys the world leaving only Noah and his family to survive. They were immoral and presented, in this midrash as thieves, supported by another text from Job. The Generation of the Dispersion, however, has some remnant despite their opposition to the divine order. The people of the Dispersion are not fully destroyed in the Torah, but rather, are scattered throughout the Earth and made to speak multiple languages. These languages continue to exist, revealing the legacy of the Dispersion. This generation is allowed to remain “on account of the love for one another.” They were a unified people, rather than a group of self-interested and uncaring thieves.

With the legacy of the Generation of the Dispersion established, the rabbis reach a striking conclusion. “So great is peace that even if Israel were to engage in idolatrous practices, but there is peace amongst them, the Holy Blessed One would have to say, ‘I cannot destroy them...’” The power of unification and peace among the people of Israel is enough to prevent God from destroying Israel, even if they stray from a divinely mandated way of life. Rather than condemning the Generation of the Dispersion, the rabbis take a lesson from them and apply it to their own group. Peace is a greater value than practice. Of course, this peace is precarious because Israel is “guilty” according to the Hosea quote, when “his heart is broken.”

The rabbis begin this midrash by laying out a framework for how they can discuss the Generation of the Dispersion by noting that this generation is “not expounded” in the Torah. The midrash continues with a subtle anti-Christian polemic that helps to establish a mythology of a Jewish divine order, where Jews are the chosen people of God, while Christianity makes

war against that divine order. This polemic feels out of place within the context of the rest of the midrash but is leveraged to emphasize the final conclusion. The rest of the midrash establishes the depravity of the three generations of humanity that precede Abraham but show that the Generation of the Dispersion should be regarded as “better” than the Generation of the Flood due to the unity of humanity represented in the single language they shared prior to the Tower of Babel. Even Christianity, whose mode of thought and belief is identified in the Talmud as idolatrous, expresses a sense of unity in their idolatrous practices. Therefore, the rabbis reach the conclusion that unity and peace within a community supersede expected practice. The Generation of the Flood was wicked and individualistic and therefore destroyed, but the Generation of the Dispersion, while idolatrous, was a unified community, and therefore a remnant remained.

What an amazing conclusion! We should be inspired by this midrash. Progressive, liberal, Jews often have reason to be skeptical of rabbinic authority. The world in which these rabbis lived feels so foreign to our own time that many of their practices and expectations seem like they should not apply. This very midrash contains a strong anti-Christian polemic that expresses a degree of Jewish exceptionalism that might make modern readers uncomfortable. Yet, for all our skepticism, the rabbis conclude that peace within community is the greatest value. What would it mean for modern Jewish communities to find peace amongst themselves? What are the ways in which modern readers can be advocates for peace in the Jewish world? This text encourages us to hold up a mirror. Is our community one of peace? Is our community unified? The midrash concludes with a text from Hosea: “Now that his heart is broken, he shall be guilty.” Is our heart broken? How can we heal?