

The Divinity of Difference
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We have all developed out of the same universal processes into a cosmological sea of complexity and motion. -- Julia Morley

Today we tremble at the edge of creation. The shofar's ancient cry carries us back to the beginning, the earth is birthed anew. Science, too, sings of that beginning — its own liturgy for life, a poetry written in cells. Cells create by one dividing into two — energy arcs across the split, and something astonishing happens: complexity stirs, possibility awakens. Out of division comes life.

Life itself begins in the moment of division.

And it's not only science that makes this claim. Across centuries, our rabbis were tracing the same pattern in their own medium — not in a lab under a microscope, but in the beit midrash within Torah herself.

In an attempt to understand humanity's origins, our sages asked: Why does Torah not start with the letter Aleph, the first letter? Aleph, tradition teaches, is the numerical equivalent of one. It is the silent breath of *Anokhi* at Sinai — the unvoiced, undivided ground of existence from which all creation flows. Wouldn't it make sense for Torah to begin there — in the unity of oneness beneath all things? Yet, our sacred story opens *Beresheit bara Elohim*. Torah begins not with *Aleph* -- one, but with *Beresheit*, *Bet*, the numerical equivalent of two.

"When you multiply anything by one it remains what it was before" teaches the Be-er Mamorim¹ "While Bet, which is equivalent to the number two, is the first number to represent multiplicity and expansion." From the very first *beresheit* moment, *Bet* is both a divider and a multiplier: light is pulled from the darkness, earth is separated from heaven, the seas are rolled aside so that land can emerge. Aleph underlies all of existence, but creation begins with Bet. Bet which is division, which is difference, which is the ever-unfolding multiplicity of life.

This core truth runs throughout Jewish tradition. Every tractate of the Talmud — what is perhaps the most ingenious creative enterprise of the Jewish people — begins not on page one, but on page two — *daf bet*. While perhaps a printer's decision way back when, we can imagine this beginning with *bet* as a way of kindling that *beresheit*, creation energy within Talmud, a way of encoding it as a kavanah. For without the *bet* energy there is no Talmud, no dialogue, discussion or debate without that initial division that *bet* initiates.

While we may celebrate this in the Talmud, enjoying the twists and turns that the discourse takes, in the actual experience of our lives, division and difference tend to unsettle us. Think about a time when you heard a close friend express a view different from yours, different from what you might have expected them to say. Questions might swirl (what did they mean by that?

¹ commentary on Tanhuma

Did I really hear them right?), discomfort might arise (with the person, with the thought of engaging in a potentially tense moment of confrontation/conflict, imagining we might lose this friendship or even our place in community), we may become tight, protective, unsure how to proceed from this place of separation. In these moments it can feel like uniformity or acquiescence is the safest way to avoid a potential rupture.

Yet, Torah shows us the problem with uniformity. Soon after that opening *bet* of *Beresheit* -- the unfolding of the multiplicity of life -- the story of the Tower of Babel can be read as a rejection of the plurality of creation. The story begins powerfully, poignantly describing what had become of life on earth: *vayehi kol ha aretz sefat echat u'd'varim achadim*. And so it was that the entire world was of one language — *sefat echat* — and of the same words — *u'd'varim achadim*. We might pass over this line quickly, not feeling anything is amiss, or, on the other hand, might read this as something praiseworthy, the people coming together in unity, all able to speak with one voice — yet our commentators insist something here is deeply wrong.

What is it that was so troublesome about this situation? If there was an issue, we might assume that it is *what* the people were saying, that the content of their words was cruel or incorrect. But the text in fact never explains what the words themselves are -- there are no specific statements to parse. Noticing this omission, HaaEmek HaDavar suggests: it wasn't because of the content of the words that the Holy One was distressed... it was that they all *thought* the same thing..." The tower is destroyed by God and the people are scattered to disrupt the uniformity of thought and speech and create a world of difference.

We can feel the echoes of Babel reverberating in our world today -- both the longing for unity and the consequences of enforced conformity. In these heartbreaking and polarizing times, with so much on the line, we tend to double down on our desire for the safety and power that we imagine lies in uniformity. Yet, the enforcement of *sefat echat u'd'varim achadim* attempts to create a pure, simple and unified world without difference and disagreement that denies reality in all of its dynamic, diverse, divergent pieces -- denies the reality of both the outside world, and equally denies each of our complex inner worlds.

Judaism is a tradition that places immense value on words, yet when we attempt to enforce sameness of speech -- slogans, hashtags, rallying cries, tropes -- we do words a disservice. Used in this way the words themselves become inert, deadened, wishful thinking or weaponlike. Like the bricks of the builders of Babel, they become our attempt to be like God, shaping the world in our image and likeness, reaching towards heaven only to become ever more disconnected from the actuality of life here on earth.

But the consequences extend further, deeper. *Sefat achat* creates a world of enforced sameness, obscuring what is uncomfortable or inconvenient, erasing the fullness of human expression, and reducing God's image to a single, diminished reflection. Out of fear of giving offense, we echo back what we think is wanted, swallowing the words, the questions, the longings that don't align. But what we swallow does not disappear — unless it has some way to be expressed and explored, it hardens inside us, blocking authenticity, draining the very energy that might have opened us to one another, to God, to the very differences we long to bridge. The walls may rise higher, but the life within is stifled, and all it was meant to shelter begins to wither.

Bayo Akomolafe, contemporary philosopher and writer whose work I have turned to often in these times, writes, “When a crack appears in the mighty wall, the only thing more worrisome than allowing it to breathe, is sealing it up — for the crack call[s] into question...the nobilities we cherish, the stories we assume to be true. The crack...is a reminder that it is often the fixity of the postures we take on that prove more dangerous than the threats we presume to withstand.”

I know this not only in theory, but in the marrow of my own life, as I know many of us do. This summer I fell out of step with some beloved friends and respected colleagues, part of a larger feeling that those I once felt in sync with were marching to a single drumbeat and I could not bring myself to move in time. There were words they wanted me to say, and ways they wanted me to say them, but I could not. To have spoken their words would have been to silence something true inside me. The weight of that difference was heavy — the pressure to align, to smooth things over, to get on board. And it was painful, and lonely, to wonder if my voice, in its dissonance, still had a place. I needed wisdom that could help me stay with that tension without collapsing into despair, or defensiveness, or disingenuous deference. And that is why the story of Babel speaks to me so piercingly now.

As I read the line *sefat echad u'devarim achadim*, of one language and one speech, the cadence of the words evokes for me the final line from *Aleinu* — words we will soon pray as a central part of the musaf Amidah — *Adonai echad u'shmo echad* — “God is one and God’s name is one”. The parallel is striking: the phrases have the same insistent beat, but with entirely different thrust.

In *Aleinu*, God is one and God’s name is one -- this is the realm of the Aleph. The domain of oneness is God’s domain. In Babel *sefat echad u'devarim achadim* — the language is one, the words are one -- this is meant to be the realm of Bet, the realm of humans, serving God, not trying to play God (or be God), in which plurality and difference are essential. The attempt to do away with division and enforce sameness of speech is us playing at being God, is us misunderstanding how to know God, is us forgetting that it is through allowing and tolerating differences in beliefs and positions among us that we understand that God’s oneness that we wish for is, in fact, full of infinite multiplicity, infinite possibility, in ways as humans we cannot fully grasp. What is true is that *we don’t know* and we cannot prescribe oneness based on our human, incomplete knowing.

Consciously or unconsciously, we all long for oneness — with God, with each other, with the whole of creation, within our own selves. Yet, like our forebears of Babel, our attempts at feeling and finding this oneness become distortions, driving us further from this goal. We build towers of our own — imagining we can control or change other people, or convincing ourselves that if only everyone shared our view, unity could be secured. Yet Babel teaches that this is a distortion of the gift God gave us. Our realm here on Earth is not the silent stillness of Aleph, but the messy, chaotic, creative unfolding of Bet: alive with dissonance and difference.

The Tikkunei Zohar teaches that today, Rosh Hashanah, coincides with the second day of creation - the first time there is division, when the lower waters are split from the upper waters. Rosh Hashanah, then, is both the day that marks the first separation and it is the day that celebrates the creation of the world. It is no coincidence that in our sacred mythology these two

facets of existence go hand in hand. Just as the splitting of a cell creates our very selves, the opening Bet of Torah creates the world and all that unfolds from there. Division, dissonance and difference among us is hard and painful, it can break our hearts and can break us apart. And yet, it is in tolerating the cracking of ideas, stories and relationships on which we have relied that breakage can reveal a birthplace for new beginnings.

The world is pulsing with the fierce possibility of this moment. Today, the shofar pierces our defenses, the prayers stir our memories, the liturgy brings us face to face with our deepest longings for the future and the deepest part of ourselves. The world is waiting for you to bring forth what only you can; for each of us to make space for what only others can bring.

Hayom Harat Olam. Today the world is created anew.

Ken yehi ratzon.