

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/19/18

## **Noach 2018**

*There are approximately 6.5 billion people in the world today, and collectively we speak about 6,000 different languages. The Torah portion we read this week, with its tale of the Tower of Babel, tries to explain how the world got this way. Our ancient ancestors wondered both how we came to populate every corner of the world and why we speak in so many diverse tongues. Genesis, Chapter 11, offers one explanation. As the portion says, all the world was gathered together in one place, all speaking the same language. But this ran contrary to Gd's plan for human beings to spread out and repopulate the world that was destroyed in the Noah flood. So Gd caused the people to disperse and to speak different languages in the new lands they would settle.*

*Well, as it turns out, the Torah might have a certain degree of scientific authenticity when it comes to the story of the Tower of Babel that we read here this morning. We human beings, Homo sapiens, have been around a lot longer than 5,779 years, of course, so that part is not accurate. How long? DNA science now tells us that we Homo sapiens have been on earth for about 65,000 years. As a species, we originated in Africa. After about 5000 years the full effect of the Ice Age was felt. All the world that was not tropical was covered in thick ice, including where you are sitting right now. Over time, even the area closest to the equator began to cool rapidly. As a result, the human population of the world plummeted to about 2,000 individuals all living somewhere close to where Tanzania is today. Our species was hanging on by a shoestring!*

*But somewhere in the neighborhood of 60,000 years ago, that Ice Age came to an end and the human population began to grow again. So people travelled. They moved along the grasslands that banded the tropics and in time even went into the colder areas where the ice never melted. Therefore, it is indeed quite likely that there was a time when all of what we today call "humanity" lived close together and probably spoke one language.*

*And yet, as interesting as that might be, this slice of science was not what the Torah intended to teach. That's because, of course, the Torah is not a science book. No, the Torah (the word itself means "Teaching") was designed to teach us about values and ideals. It was given to us to teach morality and to emphasize our shared humanity. That's why we have these opening chapters of Genesis in our sacred and holy Jewish text long before we Jews came on to the scene. (We won't read about Abraham until next week, and it was twenty generations between Adam the first human being, and Abraham, the first Jew.)*

*You know, when many people read (or more likely are told as children) the story of the Tower of Babel, that the main lesson to be learned is that we cannot make a tower high enough to reach Gd because Gd is invisible. And while that is, in a sense, literally true, it's not the main message of this ancient passage, either. After all, the invisible Gd of the Noah story was already well known. No, the central message, at least to me, is that this building project was a way of keeping people together in one place at one time when Gd specifically told them to do the opposite. Gd wanted the world not just repopulated, but also diverse. The purpose of the Tower of Babel story is to teach that while we have many languages, and skin tones, and varying physical forms, we all come from a common ancestry. We were all originally one. DNA*

*now proves that. But the Torah did not have DNA to back it up. All it had was an understanding that by emphasizing our common ancestry we have a much better chance of establishing mutual respect. That, to my mind, is what this portion comes to teach.*

*This timeless message is as true today as it ever was. In recent years societies in Europe and America have become far more divided. The gap between left and right has become deeper. The extremes are growing and the center ground is being abandoned. And so the message the Torah is teaching - that we have a common ancestry, and at one time all spoke the same language - is an important reminder that we should still want to do so. We need a common language. Not English, French or Chinese, but the shared language of caring and love and respect. That's what this story is all about.*

*I worry that the rifts in society today will filter down to our children and that they will have no working models of compromise in their lives. They will have no notion that common ground is indeed sacred ground. The Torah is here to remind us that we are bound together by bonds that go beyond self-interest, bonds that go back to the origins of humanity. Our obligation, as Jews, as human beings, is to celebrate diversity, the flowering of civilization, while remaining aware of our shared roots that go back 60,000 years and are at the very core of the stories we tell ourselves as Jews. 60,000 years ago is just 2,000 generations. We look to our past so that we can be more mindful of the world we are leaving to the next generation...*