

DEBAR TORAH *by* RABBI ROHDE

By the Word Did Ancient Babylon Rise and Fall

One of our Bible's main foci of interest is Mesopotamia, and especially Lower Mesopotamia in the region of Babylon. Nimrod is named, along with the names of other cities in the area, as well as upper Mesopotamia, in a genealogy of their eponymous founders in Gen. 10:8-12. Curiously, Egypt and its adjacent Kush (Nubia/Ethiopia) is also listed alongside. Babylon is also the focus of the famous story of the Tower of Babel, which follows in Chapter 11. Babylon and Mesopotamia loom large in the Bible also as the worldly powers which conquer Israel and Judea, destroy the Temple, and take Israelites and Judeans back to live there as a captive people. Egypt/Kush is like Babylon in having a great civilization based in a well-irrigated large river valley in which structures are built using man-made brick, so perhaps that explains the association. Accounted for between the rivers of Mesopotamia and Kush are three of the four fabled rivers of the Garden of Eden.

The Tower of Babel story clearly is meant to assail the advanced civilizations of large urbanized societies/empires centered in the great river valleys. Although these cities lie in lowland valleys, they aim to build themselves up artificially high to the sky! Further, although they have plentiful and fertile soil, clay, and mud in their valleys, they lack exposed rock, which leads them to fashion durable buildings out of fired clay baked into longer-lasting brick. The worry of these ancient "Babylonians" which leads them to build their tower seems to be "lest they spread out upon the face of all the land;" the continued advance of their civilization to prominence seems to require the concentration of population which urbanization makes possible. For this purpose, they seem to have built upwards, it seems. Also striking is the story's premise that the civilization was united by one language and that God stops them from succeeding in their project by dividing mankind by language. We are told it is this Divine linguistic division that leads to God's physical separation and scattering of post-Noahide Mankind across the face of the earth, spreading them out and hence ending the intense upward-building urbanization project and the need which was its impetus.

It is true that ancient Sumerian and Akkadian and later Babylonian civilizations reached astounding heights, and they built great urban concentrations of populations. They also had managed a good deal of at least written linguistic uniformity. Written Sumerian and Akkadian circulated widely for quite some time in the ancient world, and the end of their use was associated with a steep decline in the level of civilization. The Babylon in which Jerusalem's Exiles lived was respected as the heir to a great ancient and powerful civilization. And yet it had been succeeded by Assyrians and their languages and Babylon struggled to reestablish itself. The ancient Babylonian science, technology and language fell into eclipse became forgotten until rediscovered in modern times.

It's hard to discern the lessons intended in this for the Children of Israel. The energies necessary to concentrate and build up great and impressive civilizations generate powerful centrifugal forces which can easily spin out of control and rip them apart. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Israel must take account of the great powers, but not lose hope, for sudden disunity can disarray the most advanced and established of powers, and this can bring advantage. Great power is often fostered by manufacture and artifice and makes use of unnatural means, which leave it ultimately less stable and liable to upset, cracking and breakage. Perhaps the most enigmatic message in the tale is the role of language in fostering unity as well as in tearing a civilization apart. We know that keeping the Jewish Scriptural traditions fostered Jewish unity during the Babylonian Exile. Similar language, perhaps including similar rhetoric, are seen as key to unity.

Babylon was admired for its power, a power much facilitated by written languages, tablets of which remain today as testament. But centrifugal forces altering the languages and dispersing the population eventually could not be resisted. It was by Language and unified Word that ancient Babylon arose, and it is by God's Confounding Word that Babylon falls.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Noah | Shabbat of Hope October 20-21, 2023 | 6 Marheshvan 5784

SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 26 | Haftarah: p. 1054

Hertz: p. 26 | Haftarah: p. 41

Candle Lighting | 5:51 pm

Friday Evening Services | 6:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

5784 Premiere: *Friday Night Lights* | following services | Main Sanctuary |
"The Handwritten HaTikvah & the American Musician: A New York Story
for our Time" | *5784 Season sponsored by the Julis-Rabinowitz family*

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Special Lecture | Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Judaica & Us: The Story of the Jewish People in Ten Objects

Lecture #1: The Lamp of Life: A Story of Hope and Endurance

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Junior Congregation | 10:30 am | Small Synagogue

Kiddush | following services

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 5:00 pm | Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Evening Services | 5:45 pm

Habdala | 6:38 pm

Weekday Service Times

Sunday Morning: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday Mornings: 7:05 am

Minha & Arbit: **5:45 pm (note new time)**

COMING UP

Meet & Greet With Our Yoetzet Halakha, Ellin Cooper

Shabbat, October 28 | At Kiddush

Come chat with Yoetzet Cooper and see for yourself what a delightful resource she is.

How To Save The World In Six (Not So Easy) Steps:

Bringing Out The Best In Nonprofits

An Informative Book Event with Author David Schizer

Interviewed by Shearith Israel's Beth Goldman

Thursday, November 2 | 6:30 pm

Register to reserve your complimentary copy of the book (courtesy of the Columbia Center for Israeli Legal Studies) at shearithisrael.org/events/schizer.

SAVE THE DATE: Friday Night, November 10

CSI Young Professionals and Shearith Israel present:

Dinner with Guest Speaker Jordan Gorfinkel

author of the Graphic Novel Haggadah & Graphic Novel Megillat Esther

All ages welcome!

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Laurie & Eli Bryk**, upon the birth of a grandson, George David (Yaakov David), born to their children, Diana & Joseph Straus.

Mazal tob to **Noah Lang**, upon his upcoming marriage to Jenna Bergman. Congratulations to his parents, **Leslie Cohen & Jeffrey Lang**, and the entire family.

Mazal Tob to **Jacob & Jannah Neumark**, upon the *berit milah* of their son **Matanel Amichai (Harrison Sidney)**. Congratulations as well to the proud grandparents, **Avery & Susan Neumark**, great-grandfather **Melvin Neumark**, and to the entire family.

Mazal tob to **Alissa & Jacob Oslick**, upon the birth of a baby boy, Jeremiah (יקוחיאל נועם).

Condolences to **Colonel Jonathan de Sola Mendes**, upon the passing of his sister, Ruth (de Sola Mendes) Hurwitz.

In the Press

In the Wall Street Journal, Rabbi Soloveichik wrote about the indomitable Jewish spirit and quest for life. Read it on our press page at shearithisrael.org/resources/press.

SHABBAT OF HOPE

Thank you to our sponsors:

Naomi & Peter Neustadter | The Solomon Family

Anonymous

Dr. James & Debra Herstoff

Leslie Cohen & Jeffrey Lang, *with a mazal tob upon the upcoming marriage of Noah Lang to*

Jenna Bergman

Aviva Miller

Susan & Avery Neumark, *in honor of the berit milah of Harrison Sidney (Matanel*

Amichai) Neumark

Rima Raynes, in honor Zoya and Naftali Friedman

WE STAND WITH ISRAEL

WHAT WE ARE DOING & HOW YOU CAN HELP

Financial Support for Israel

- We have set up a special Israel Emergency Fund through the Rabbis Discretionary Fund - to contribute as a *kehillah*, go to shearithisrael.org/giving/rdf.
 - We've assembled an easily-shareable webpage of a few trusted organizations to which you can give directly - go to shearithisrael.org/giving/stand-with-israel.
-

Send Letters to Active Soldiers in the IDF

1st batch - Drop off deadline: THIS Monday, October 23

Organized by the Sisterhood

Let's send as many letters and cards as we can. Children, teens, and adults: please prepare a letter or card, put it in an envelope, and drop it off in the collection box at the synagogue.

We'll deliver them to our contact in Israel who will ensure they reach IDF bases.

Misheberakh for Our Relatives in the IDF

Members, on Shabbat we will be reciting a Misheberakh for the IDF. It is very powerful to hear the names of our relatives recited aloud at Shabbat services in our Sanctuary.

If you have any relatives who are currently serving, please submit them at

shearithisrael.shulcloud.com/form/misheberakh-IDF

so that we can have them in mind.

We are collecting this information privately for our own internal use.

Members, do you have an Israel initiative you'd like to organize for our community??

Let us know!

עם ישראל חי!