

The best-known tale of ambition in the Bible is the account of the Tower of Babel. The people of the world, the Torah tells us, begin to build an enormous tower that they intend to reach up to the very heavens. They seek to create a massive monument: in the words of the Torah, to make a name for themselves. The project, as we know, comes to an abrupt end when God causes the world's peoples to speak different languages, sowing confusion and making further cooperation impossible. Unable to communicate with each other the people abandon the enterprise and are scattered across the earth.

There is much left unexplained in what may be the world's earliest, and most cryptic, story of human hubris. Clearly the people's actions anger God – a response that one of our Bat Mitzvah students several years ago admitted was mystifying to her: “My parents are always telling me to cooperate with my brothers. Here, the people are all cooperating... and God gets angry about it!” She had a point! The relative virtues of cooperation for its own sake notwithstanding, however, the more interesting question to me that the story raises is the one of *ambition*: what does it mean that the people decide to erect this tower in the first place, what does it mean to make a name for yourself, and what's wrong with that anyway?

Ambition is a tricky thing. As the drive to accomplish and achieve, it is tremendously powerful in ways that can be both incredibly constructive and incredibly *destructive*. As I read and thought about ambition, two distinct schools of thought emerged – one that views ambition as fundamentally good but needing to be tempered because it can become bad, and one that thinks it's fundamentally bad (or, at least, suspect) and has to be carefully monitored and checked so it has the possibility of bringing about something good. Our story, I would argue, doesn't give us enough information to get a clear take on the Torah's view of this issue. God, obviously, is angered by the project to the point of undoing it, but is it because the people's ambition was bad in and of itself or because they expressed their legitimate ambitions in a bad way? Given how effective the people are in acting on their ambition, there seems to be a core of ambiguity about the issue at the heart of the story that I think reflects the ambivalence we feel about ambition today.

On the plus side, ambition involves a refusal to accept conventional limitations and boundaries. Ambition can cause us to look at a situation and seek to transform it. Ambition creates new possibilities – new life-saving medications, new useful technologies, new companies, new social movements. Martin Luther King, Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, Theodore Herzl: the great good they engendered was a function of their talent, their passion, their vision and, yes, their *ambition*: the drive to get out in front and make things happen without which all of the rest would be merely clever ideas and noble impulses. In the marketplace ambition is celebrated: the drive to create something new, or make something old work better, or to produce it more efficiently is the engine that drives our economy and innovation, and we are the beneficiaries of the results. The builders of the Tower of Babel didn't just sit around on their *tucheses* in their parents' living rooms and *wish* for a big tower: they were entrepreneurial disruptors who envisioned it and then took the initiative and set out to make it happen! What parents *wouldn't* want their children to be ambitious?

At the same time, we're well aware of the ways and reasons in which ambition can be corrosive and destructive. Ambition often involves trying to put yourself ahead and can be damaging both for you and for anyone who stands between you and your goal. We all know people who are always trying to get ahead, who prize advancement and climbing the ladder above all else, pushing aside coworkers, or engaging in ethically dubious practices, or simply ignoring the needs of their spouses and children in the

quest to work longer and harder hours. We all know parents who push their kids to take seventeen AP classes, make three travel teams, and take test prep after test prep in an attempt to get into the best schools and have the best shot at getting ahead. We turn on the news and are bombarded with the stories of the twenty-two (and counting) men and women who are competing to be their respective parties' presidential nominees next fall – one of whom is taking the Babel story a step further by not only putting his name on several towers, but on casinos and golf courses as well. Many of these candidates are good people who genuinely want to make a positive contribution to this country. But their ambition drives them to stake out positions they don't genuinely believe in, chase after campaign cash from wealthy donors to whom they'll be beholden after the election, and generally embarrass themselves and the office to which they aspire in their quest for attention and momentum in the polls. Turn on the news and look at the jockeying and sniping at debates and on Sunday morning talk shows: this is what raw ambition looks like.

It's no wonder, incidentally, that while Jewish tradition deeply values and acknowledges the importance of leaders and leadership, it is also often suspicious of those who actively seek out leadership positions. As our tradition puts it, "A person should not on his own place a crown on his head, but others may do so for him." (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 11) Our classic model for this, of course, is Moses who resists God's call several times, begging God to send someone else as messenger to Pharaoh and, at various points through the forty years of wandering, asking God to lift the burden of leadership from him. The ideal of the reluctant leader is one way to solve our ambivalence about ambition by reconciling the importance of strong leadership with the lack of seeking glory or personal advancement. In practice, of course, the attributes that propel people into leadership positions are precisely those that can lead them to abuse those positions, that make it hard to exercise authority fairly and make it difficult to relinquish power. So the ideal, sadly, remains the rather rare exception and a survey of history and our own experience often serves both as a caution against ambition and a reinforcement of its seductive dangers.

Take our tower builders, for instance. In the Torah's account they say to one another: "Come, let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens that we may make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth." (Gen. 11:4) So, first it's striking that the initial impulse to take up this project comes not from a place of hope, but of fear: "Let us build up this tower lest we be scattered over all the earth." The endeavor springs directly from the people's anxiety that they are powerless and inconsequential. And this point gives us insight into the phrase, "Let us make ourselves a name." The "name" they seek is connected with the idea of creating something permanent, a bulwark against impotence and oblivion. The "name" is an attempt to transcend the limitations and finitude which are inherent in what it means to be human, which are the lot of flesh and blood. And *this* insight in turn yields another: that their desire to build this tower "with its top in the heavens" is a bid for eternity by supplanting God, a drive to displace God in both a literal and symbolic sense. This view is embraced by the midrash, which imagines the construction of the tower as an act of rebellion and the builders planning to ascend with bows and spears in an assault on heaven. No wonder God such takes stern action in the story.

Obviously the idea of trying to defeat God in armed combat is ridiculous, strikes us as absurd. But the core anxiety at the heart of the story about obliteration, about being reduced to nothingness and being forgotten, and the resulting desperate drive to assert our own power and make a name for

ourselves – this is something that is tragically all too believable. The idea of displacing God because God is a terrifying reminder of our own fragility and mortality, of trying to build up with our own hands faster than we imagine God can tear down – these can be a powerful and dangerous engine for human ambition. It's also an idea that stands in stark opposition to what Rosh ha-Shanah is about, since this day calls us to acknowledge our limitations in the face of God and the unknown future. Rather than ignore or deny this reality by seeking to make a name for ourselves, rather than attempting to wrest control from God over our own names and fates, on this day we humbly ask God to care for us, to inscribe our names in the Book of Life – to entrust our names and fates to God's embrace and acknowledge that we are not the masters of our own destinies.

Two years ago, following our visit by Rabbi Arthur Green as our scholar in residence, I decided to focus a year of Shabbat morning Torah study on early Hasidic commentaries and insights to our weekly portions. One of the passages I discovered, exploring the vessels of the Mishkan, came from the Maggid of Mezritch, the renowned 18th century teacher and disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidut. He points out that the word for "blood" in Hebrew is "*dam*," spelled '*dalet, mem,*' as in "creatures of flesh and blood" – a standard Jewish turn of phrase for people. This word is one letter shy of the Hebrew word for "human," *adam*. What's the difference, the Maggid asks, between being a person, *dam*, and being human, *adam*? It's an *aleph*, the silent first letter of the Hebrew alphabet which in Jewish mystical thought represents God and the ultimate oneness of all existence. It is only by incorporating God's will into our own and joining ourselves to God's transcendent purposes that we can become most fully human.

And this teaching, to me, casts the story of the Tower of Babel and the idea of making a name for ourselves in a whole new light. The people in the story are trying to make a name *for themselves*. They do this from a place of fear, resentment, and despair and they do it by trying to usurp God's place. But they don't understand that they and God are already deeply intertwined as *dam* and *adam*: that you can't usurp the one without doing indescribable damage to the other. The people of Babel refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty and, by extension, refused to acknowledge the Divine image in which all people are created. The midrash tells us that workers routinely plummeted to their deaths in the course of building the Tower and this did not upset the builders at all since there were so many to replace them, but if a brick were to fall this would be treated as a calamity since it would slow the progress of the tower. This, of course, is an extreme example. And yet ambition – at least, the sort of ambition we should be concerned about – has the capacity to treat other people as stepping stones, obstacles to be overcome, resources to be ground up, or 'sacrifices that must be made.' Ambition tends to treat people as means to fulfill your all-consuming goals, rather than as Divinely created ends. We deny the *aleph* of people's ultimate meaning and infinite worth, seeking to make a name for ourselves that is alienated from its Divine source because it denies and distorts it in others.

Ambition is, at its root, *transformative* – an unwillingness to accept the world as we find it and a desire to change or remake it. *How* we do that, I think, is the best indicator of whether our ambitions will be dangerous and damaging, or positive and productive. Ambition that holds firmly on to the idea of all people being in God's image, that is to say, of human value, dignity, and purpose has the capacity to transform in marvelous ways – clearing away slums, creating new medicines, lifting people out of poverty, creating vibrant works of art. But it's not the goals alone that have to be worthy – it's also the means we use to accomplish our ends that have to uphold these efforts if our ambition will extol rather

than distort our humanity. Our ambition should not be for the sake of our own ego or gratification, or flow from a place of fear and desperation. Unlike the builders of Babel we cannot seek merely to build up our own names because these efforts will founder as surely as the crumbling of the Tower. Instead, we have to fully embrace the Divinity and infinite worth in each and every person, adding the *aleph* to our own *dam* and realizing our collective divinely-infused human name.

And so as we enter this New Year I want to urge us all to be profoundly ambitious. I want us to strive, and build, and transform. I want us to pursue our dreams. But I also want us to ask ourselves: What are those things that are truly worth being ambitious about? How do we make sure the goals we are pursuing are ones that promote the good and dignity of all people, and not just our own personal gain? How can we put energy not only into advancing our careers but also into advancing our families? How can we aspire to excel not only in school, in sports, and at work, but also in kindness, patience and gratitude? How can we set and achieve lofty goals for *teshuvah*, the work we hope to do on ourselves in the coming days and in this New Year, pushing ourselves to examine and evaluate the way we live our lives, the priorities we set, the way we live in this world. Let us be ambitious. But let us act from a place of hope and humility, not from a place of fear or arrogance. This year, let us strive to make our lives into towers that reach up to the heavens – towers built tall with compassion, made of bricks of generosity and constructed with humility and awe, all resting on an unwavering foundation of love. And let us make a name for ourselves, a name that exalts the deepest realization of what it means to be created in God's image.