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## **Edah Happenings:**

**Regional Conference in Montreal- Nov. 11th -12th**

**Regional Conference in Boston- Nov. 18th -19th**

**Edah at the JCC in Manhattan w/ Dr. Amnon Shapira Nov 9, 16, 30, Dec 7, 14, 21, 7:30 pm**

**Edah @ the JCC in Manhattan w/ Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller Nov. 21 7:30 pm**

## **The Tower of Babel**

By Dr. Steven Bayme

Shortly after the catastrophe of the Great Flood, yet another crisis confronts early humanity. Genesis records that a group of people, speaking a single language, believed themselves to be the sole survivors of the Flood. The group huddled together in the valley of Shinar (modern-day Iraq) and decided to build a city with a tower reaching unto the heavens. In turn, God, angry at this presumption, multiplies their languages and scatters them over the earth. The tower and city remain standing, presumably in unfinished form, and the city is named "Babylon" for the confusion of languages of God engendered there (Genesis 11:1-9).

On one level this is clearly an etiological tale – an attempt to explain the origins of a phenomenon – in this case, the beginnings of a great city and the evidently widespread linguistic diversity. The bias of the Bible against Babylon as a city is well known and ascribes the city's reputation for evil to its origins in rebellion and arrogance. More generally, Genesis appears to associate urban life with sin and iniquity – for example, the Bible's portrayal of Sodom – while preferring agricultural and nomadic life. Specifically, in this narrative Genesis targets Babylon as the leading city, perhaps housing some of the wonders of the ancient world, yet deficient by moral standards.

Yet interpreting this brief narrative as strictly a story of origins remains unsatisfying. The fear of being overwhelmed by the elements is clearly understandable, given the magnitude of the recent Flood – hence the drive for the protection city walls offered. Attributing linguistic diversity to God's punishment for the tower appears somewhat contrived and artificial. God himself appears petty and reduced in stature, worrying that human greatness might eclipse the Divine reign. Therefore, rather than limit ourselves to an etiological interpretation, we ought to probe the moral message of the narrative.

Central to this story is the unity of mankind and the reasons for its dissolution. A common language symbolizes that unity. In principle, unity is a force for good. Conversely, however, unity of purpose can often drive us to single-minded and nefarious ends. The harmful effects of unity are expressed in rebellion. The people refuse to populate the earth. They fear being scattered. Their desire to remain in the plain of Shinar constitutes a direct violation of the Noachide covenant to rebuild the planet after the Flood. In effect, they shunned the Divine imperative to "be fruitful and multiply" and build a good society. Rather than harness nature to serve human ends,

they remain immobilized, and frightened by nature's forces. Notwithstanding the covenantal promise that never again will nature overwhelm humanity, the tower builders hoped to retreat to a closed and more protective society – to the detriment of future humanity and civilization. Thus the Jewish historian Josephus argued that the tower was built by the hunter-warrior Nimrod as protection against flood but whose name literally means "we shall rebel." In a similar vein, the Church Father Eusebius in the third century wrote that the tower was built by a race of giants, survivors of the Flood, who were in turn scattered over the earth.

What, then are the implications of this ancient narrative – designed to explain the unique phenomena of a great city and linguistic diversity – but told in a moral context of rebellion and refusal to fulfill conventional imperatives? First, the story is telling us that a core value – though a positive force, may be flawed and misdirected toward evil purposes. For example, the banner of unity should not become a vehicle for tyranny of the majority. Linguistic diversity in effect serves as a corrective to the excesses of unity by underscoring the power of speech to challenge prevailing opinion and the need to protect rather than punish dissenting expression.

Second, the tower builders appear to have been guilty of placing their personal needs and aspirations over their responsibilities to society. They state, "Let us make a name for ourselves lest we become scattered over the face of the earth." After the Flood, the collective needs of humanity lay in repopulating earth. The tower builders asked only what was their personal good – not the collective needs of humanity.

Last, the Torah here clearly articulates its validation of this-worldliness and building of society. To paraphrase rabbinic tradition, God created the world so that it be inhabited rather than desolate. This affirmation of constructive human activity runs sharply counter to alternative spiritual traditions that emphasize other-worldliness and elevation of self.

To be sure, the Jewish world of today hardly suffers from an excess of unity. The Genesis narrative reminds us that with unity we may accomplish heroic ends. Yet, let us never be so self-confident to presume that we possess a monopoly on truth and therefore can afford to ignore dissenting alternative expression.

*Steven Bayme serves as National Director, Contemporary Jewish Life for the American Jewish Committee and is a member of the Edah Advisory Board*

# Thank You Rosa Parks

by Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld

At the Memorial Service for Rosa Parks held in Washington, DC one of the first speakers invoked the liturgy of the Jewish people. He recited a prayer in Hebrew and commented that Rosa Parks did for her people what the Exodus from Egypt did for the Jews. She led her people from slavery to freedom.

This eulogy was delivered immediately following the recitation of Psalm 27. Psalm 27 should be especially familiar during this time of the year, as we recited it from the New Moon of Elul all the way through Shemini Atzeret. Ironically, Rosa Parks passed away on the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, the very day that we stopped reciting Psalm 27.

Why did the Memorial organizers choose to recite Psalm 27? Perhaps because it contains the following verse: "I had but one request of God, which I seek, to sit in the House of God for all the days of my life."

Like the Psalmist, Sister Rosa too, desired to sit. But it is big mistake to think that all she wanted to do was to sit on a Montgomery, Alabama bus on December 1st, 1955. What she really wanted to do was to sit in equality in all walks of life. What she really wanted was for everyone of us to be able to sit in the House of God. Rosa Parks showed the world that the House of God is anywhere that human beings behave with dignity, courage, and recognition of the Divine Image in each other

Those of us who were born after the civil rights movement achieved its greatest successes have a difficult time understanding what Rosa Parks accomplished. Growing up in New York City, the racism that I personally saw was not overt. Racism surely existed all around us, but it was removed from the institutional life of cities across America. This was due to Rosa Parks. In this respect, her revolution was so powerful that many of us have a hard time understanding its greatness.

Her greatness became even clearer to me as I watched the reactions of people most lifted by her bravery. Standing on 15th and M street with the crowd as we waited for speakers to eulogize Rosa Parks, the elderly black women next to me were joyous. They were delighted that Rosa Parks was being given the honor she deserved. "She brought us freedom," one of the women said.

"I had but one request of God,  
which I seek, to sit in the  
House of God for all the days of my life."  
Psalm 27

"We are not completely there. But we are almost there."  
The rabbis teach us, "Adam koneh olam ha-bah be-shah achat, a person can acquire the world to come in one moment." Rosa Parks exemplifies this teaching. We should be aware that even single actions of dignity can change the world.

One great aspect of her action was that its application was universal. We all have the right to sit in the House of the Lord. More than that, she taught us that we are all able to actualize God's teaching. This was perhaps the greatest aspect of her action. It was inspirational. We all, no matter how insignificant we think we are, can change the world. A seamstress in Alabama can change the world, and so can you, and so can I.

In teaching us this, she changed the face of America forever. Her actions transcended the civil rights movement. Through her passive resistance, she taught us all that real power lies not with armies and guns, but with integrity and God. Even the most entrenched ruling power in the world can not defeat the heart of a committed human being. Human dignity and equality will triumph. Through her actions, she gave courage to so many others-in both the private and public sphere-who were able to stand up for their beliefs.

How fitting that she became the first woman to lie in the Rotunda! Inspired by her actions, I went to see her in the Rotunda on Monday morning, with thousands of others. As I walked past her coffin, I recited a silent prayer of gratitude for her teaching. All around DC are monuments to generals and freedom fighters, but Rosa Parks' teachings are the mightiest of all.

I now understand why the Memorial organizers placed a Jewish prayer at the very beginning of the service. By not getting up on that bus, Sister Rosa taught us that we all have a seat in the House of the Lord-Jew, Muslim, and Christian. May we truly listen to her message!

*Rabbi Shmuel Hertzfeld is Rabbi of Ohev Sholom Talmud Torah--The National Synagogue, the oldest Orthodox synagogue in Washington, DC. He is National Vice-President of Amcha, and co-founder of Lishmah..*

Edah

45 West 36th Street  
10th Floor  
New York, NY 10018

[www.edah.org](http://www.edah.org)

1-212-244-7501