They say that one of the indicators of becoming fluent in a language is that you start dreaming in that language. I can personally attest that there is some truth to that. However, my own experience has also taught me that the mind during sleep is much more sophisticated than simply shifting from one language to the other. Our mind is capable of seamlessly mingling languages into a single dream, connecting the language of the dream not just to the place where one is sleeping but actually to the people who appear in our dreams. Practically that means that I regularly dream in English and German all at the same time with the occasional smattering of Hebrew being thrown in the mix. Sounds confusing?

Well, the Biblical authors of this week’s Torah portion clearly thought so. We just listened to the story of the Tower of Babel where we read (Gen 11:5-7):

The Eternal One came down to look at the city and tower that humans had built, and the Eternal One said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."

We are left to wonder what the sin of the people building the Tower of Babel actually was but the punishment for it seems quite clear: a people of common language is divided by the introduction of multiple languages. The theological message of the story of the Tower of Babel seems to be that the existence of multiple languages is a punishment or curse. In fact, the name Babel itself, which can be translated to mean muddle, points to this theological conclusion.

The Christian theologian Joel Green points out that the description of a people as being of ‘one language,’ as the people are described at the beginning of our story, was a popular metaphor in the ancient Near East for the subjugation and assimilation of conquered peoples by a dominant nation. The Jewish view, as first manifest in the story of Babel, is rather contrary as we learn from the story of Exodus. One of the reasons listed in our Haggadah for why the Israelites deserved to be liberated by God is that they kept their own language. Not speaking the language of the oppressors was considered the sign of refusing to assimilate in society – exactly the opposite of the use of the metaphor in the ancient Near East.
We see this ideology manifest until today in the ultra-orthodox community, who insist on speaking to each other in Yiddish irrespective of where they live including those charedim who live in Israel.

Sticking to just one language allows us to understand one another but also separates us from the other. Being a people of one language is the ultimate signal of particularism, of separation from other peoples around us.

Standing in stark contrast to this negative biblical theology of linguistic diversity, is the message of the Christian story of Pentecost – the Festival, which marks the founding of the Church and the revelation of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2 of the Christian Bible we read:

1 When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. ....

And so, the day when the Church celebrates its founding linguistic event—Pentecost—is hailed by many Christian theologians as the definitive reversal of Babel. Whereas at Babel, God confused languages, at Pentecost, God brought people of all languages together and united them. At Babel tongues were confused. At Pentecost, tongues were understood.

As Christianity hails universalism over particularism, whereas Judaism through the millennia tended to prioritise particularism over universalism, this contrast is maybe not so surprising. But do we, as a Jewish people, really consider linguistic diversity to be a punishment?

I would say the contrary is true. The experience of being a people in Exile has meant that the Jewish people embraced linguistic diversity not just in everyday life but even for our prayers as we can see by the inclusion of the Kaddish in Aramaic, the English of early antiquity.

So if we don’t want to negate the experience of the Jewish people as a multilingual people, can we re-read the story of Babel to derive a positive theology of language diversity as the Christian Bible provides with the story of Pentecost?

Judy Klitsner of the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies comments on our Torah portion:

One aspect of the people’s rebellion against God lies in their attempts at effacing the individual. Their attempts constitute a negation of God's plan for humanity to be unique as God is unique. But there is another facet to their mutiny.

By quashing freedom of thought, the tower builders preclude any human-divine engagement...While religious behavior may be coerced or feigned, such acts by definition are meaningless. Religious worship has meaning only when the individual
freely and sincerely chooses to submit to God’s authority. By eroding the individual, the builders at Babel render impossible any hope of a human-divine covenant.

Read from this perspective, we might consider the multiplicity of language as a gift to provide space for the individual to establish their own relationship to God – a relationship that is shaped but not submerged by the people around us.

Maybe this then is the better message for us to take from Babel: each of us is challenged to find a way to connect to God, be that in one or many languages or maybe in a language that reaches beyond words.

Shabbat Shalom