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Multiple Truths and the Towers of Babel: Deconstructionism in Jewish Philosophy

What are the main intersections between Jewish thought and contemporary philosophy? Postmodern critique is often considered to have overturned several aspects of contemporary Jewish life, arguably posing one of the most acute demands of our times. It presents the task of squaring the circle of positing truth amidst a crisis of nihilistic relativism. Many Jewish thinkers present postmodern discourse as essentially a precursor to the breakdown of religious truth. Assumptions of being able to think, express oneself, and make claims in neutral terms, have come under critique by postmodern thought as the pre-eminence of contextuality is adopted. The notorious "metanarrative" has been torn asunder and, whether one agrees or not, multiple truth theory, even in relation to theology, triumphs.

Whilst "postmodernism" is a vast, changing set of ideas, for our purposes, it can be distilled to refer to a critique of the ideas of neutrality, objectivity, and knowledge, all of which have been thought to underlie religious belief.

However, postmodernism is far from a pure philosophical method—it spans various disciplines and is more identifiable as a "mood" of malaise, critique, and *ennui*. In speaking of Jewish thought, therefore, postmodernism also embodies a mood of rejection, opposition, and critique.

According to postmodernism as a theory, and also as a mood, a clear demand which is made of us is to query and dismantle previously held theoretical assumptions. In contemporary Jewish philosophy, this demand does not stop short of applying to religious belief and theology. In responding to this call, I will point to certain important concepts and their need for profound theological reconsiderations and reconfigurations.

Here, I would like to illustrate a response to this demand, bringing postmodernism and Jewish thought into conversation with one another,

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rather than through pure theoretical analysis. In this illustration, I engage in an analysis of the French-Jewish postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida's interpretation of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). His writing offers a typically postmodern elucidation of the enigmatic and mysterious parable narrative of the Tower of Babel, from which an important understanding of the idea of deconstructionism can be gleaned.[1] Moreover, the subject of Babel signifies themes at the crux of this discussion itself: breakage, collapse, and renewal. The major themes of construction and subsequent destruction of the tower allow for a glimpse into Derrida's philosophy of deconstructionism. Through this I will explore the methodology of weaving together discourses of Jewish thought and postmodern discourse.[2]

Babel is often used as a model for understanding the existence of humanity—we witness a will to build and reach the heavens (either to reach God or to destroy God) by a united group of individuals. The tower is destroyed: and the people, once supposedly united in vision, are scattered upon the face of the earth.

The story is one whose relevance is different for each generation, and for diverse religions, mirroring the confusion sensed today with the multitude of truth claims, narratives and meanings. While this thinking is manifested in diverse interpretations of the story of Babel, in this context, it presents an example of one of the more creative elements of postmodern thinking—textual play and language games, with interpretative rules which are contextual and ever-changing. Accordingly, objective ways of understanding texts are destabilized, and thus singular meanings are "deconstructed." This at once connects textual play to Jewish methods of interpretations, which are based on historical, contextual, and theological layers over the generations. Deconstructionism—destroying meaning—does not necessarily result in an absence of meaning, as some critics argue. It is coupled with a deeper aspect of deconstructionism which is the dissemination of new meanings, and this explanation is allegorized and highlighted in Derrida's reading on Babel:

> This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation.[3]

The multiplicity is created through the imminent divine-willed destruction of the Tower. Further, the architectural and actual construction of the structural edifice of Babel represent an order which must be deconstructed, an idea which forms of the focus of the text. The word *bavel*

itself is noted for its signification of confusion, and describes the location of an event founded upon misunderstanding, which is based on miscommunication between different languages. The interplay and puns in the Hebrew letters have long evoked exegetical enquiry. In our generation, R. Jonathan Sacks points to the

> etymology for the word Babel, which literally meant "the gate of God." The Torah relates it to the Hebrew root *b-l-l*, meaning "to confuse." In the story, this refers to the confusion of languages that happens as a result of the hubris of the builders. But *b-l-l* also means "to mix, intermingle"....[4]

In some ways, these themes of confusion and language resemble ideas found in the rich and varied interpretations in Rabbinic literature which offer a multiplicity of ways of understanding the passage. The meaning of the text is offered multiple interpretations—historical, ethical, geographical, theological, and philological. Theologically-speaking, there is a quest to understand the nature of the divine will, and the meaning of human existence.[5] This quest is expressed through the many questions and responses arising in different *midrashim* as to understanding the cause for the construction of the tower. What were the intentions of those building the tower? The prevalent idea of the nature of the builders as evil, engaging in a rebellion or war against God, has midrashic sources.[6] This theme continues in talmudic and later rabbinic literature.[7] There is often leadership said to be at the root of the rebellion—wherein the Babel generation claimed Nimrod as their leader.[8]

These interpretations then lead to philosophical challenges—one midrash describes the intention to build as a metaphysical aspiration, upon which the theme of rebellion rests.[9] Why are these two ideas intertwined? Is it because divine agents descend to the sphere of humanity and announce "let us confound their language" and destroy communication between the builders to the extent of causing death and destruction?[10] Is metaphysical aspiration always doomed to fail? Can the divine realm ever be understood? Is an effort to understand unwelcome by the heavenly spheres? Derrida, too, poses these questions, which I believe shed light on the way midrashic literature is understood, proposing an original approach to Jewish discourse around Babel. Derrida draws on the biblical words of "making a name for themselves" from a deconstructive perspective:

> Does he punish them for having wanted to build as high as the heavens? For having wanted to accede to the highest; up to the Most High? ... Perhaps for that too, no doubt, but incontestably for having wanting thus

> to *make a name for themselves*, to give themselves the name, to construct for and by themselves their own name, to gather themselves there.... For the text of Genesis proceeds immediately, as if it were all a matter of the same design: raising a tower, constructing a city, making a name for oneself in a universal tongue.... Then he disseminates the Sem[itic name] and dissemination here is deconstruction.[11]

Destruction is interwoven with the creation of a multiplicity of languages, and consequently with the difficulty of translation across those of foreign cultures, religions, and nations. The dispersal, or dissemination, is a clear result of the deconstruction of the tower, which resembles a monolithic desire for a "name" in the heavens, which is beyond the capabilities of humankind. This approach is reminiscent of the *midrashim* which explicate some of these themes, notably in *Bereishit Rabba*.[12]

It is possible that the construction itself was considered as sinful activity,[13] however, there were opportunities for repentance throughout this process.[14] For R. Sacks, the finale of the tale is critical in relating the ultimate message of the story:

> In broad outlines, the moral of the story is clear. People gathered together to build a tower that would reach to heaven, but the proper place of man is on earth. They were guilty of hubris and they were punished by nemesis... after Babel the world is split into many languages, and that until the end of days there is no single universal language.[15]

The final destruction was aligned with a divine will, as part of a clear message, though one which receives new meanings in each generation. One such example is exemplified here by R. Sacks which draws on contemporary issues of multiple narrative theories, and philosophy of languages and religions, and wherein one of his main claims, one not dissimilar to an idea of Rav Shagar, is to feel "at home" in one's own language.[16] Teaching students of our generation in a university setting about concepts of chosenness, universalism, and particularity, involves a sincere engagement with the prominent critical theories of the day, such that, with considerable differences, it is fitting to discuss Derrida in relation to and in contrast with R. Sacks and R. Shagar. This is one such example, wherein theories of the existence of a particularized Jewish theology must be harnessed in the critical discourse of the 21st century. Deconstructionism as a method certainly has its shortcomings in Jewish exegesis.[17] Nevertheless it is useful to teach it coupled with the creative element of dissemination with which it is accompanied. Babel is but one example of this, especially in the ways the conclusion of the Babel story can be considered.

The tale ends with the dispersal of peoples to all places in the world, where each now has its own language, and method of communication. Each nation will always experience communicative limitations; notably misunderstandings, and mistranslations. Pursuing the relevance of Babel for our age, one could go further and ask to what extent the challenges of cross-cultural understanding remain acutely relevant today? Or was the multi-national multi-linguistic existence of today the desired state of human relationships around the globe? And if so, what meaning might one ascribe to insurmountable conflict between the nations of the world? Had the ideal for humanity been absolute unity, why the multiplicity of languages and narratives? These questions surrounding the closure of the Babel story are not new, but they are now asked in a new way with a new intonation of urgency. They wrestle with the meaning of multiple truths which exist in the world: how can my religious belief be universally true?

The closure of the story is in fact an opening up of a brave new world. However sinful the Babel generation may have been, it is compared favorably to the generation of the Flood—of which none remained.

This theory can be developed even further from a philosophical perspective. Could an aspiration to engage in a metaphysical quest be recognized in its futile attempts to explain the mysteries of the world? After all, the Babel generation was engaged in an attempt to share the celestial spheres between humanity and God. Many of this generation did survive, and continued on to disparate lands. Further questioning this closure—one asks, what happened to the structural edifice of Babel? The plain meaning of the text does not describe an architectural collapse, but rather, hones in on the fate of humanity. Two *midrashim* teach that one third of the tower was burned, one third was swallowed up, and that one third still stands.[18] The notion that one third still stands would call to question the applicability of a total deconstructionism. A remnant of deconstruction remains. Its very existence is dependent on the scattering of is builders.

This line of thinking is reflected in Derrida's accompanying parallel theory of deconstructionism, known as "dissemination."[19] In dissemination, wherein the model of Babel is used, deconstructionism facilitates the creation and dispersion of messages and meanings. This can be seen in his essay on Babel, wherein the idea of stable unchanging meaning is undermined, due to human misunderstanding, and even due to a failure of humanity to creative models of effective communication.

This idea calls for a recognition of creation and flourishing of new ideas in the wake a destruction. This is one idea of how breakage symbolizes new life. One idea destroyed is another one created through the

existence and proliferation of multiple languages and cultures. In this sense, deconstructionism does not necessarily denote a destruction of truth. Rather, it lends credence to creative aspects of interpretation.

My proposition therefore, of which this study forms an example, is an invitation to be receptive towards deconstructive approaches in contemporary Jewish philosophy. Textual analysis and critique lie at the heart of postmodern discourse, and so scriptural interpretation offers a glimpse into postmodern theories. Through this examination I attempt to draw out one specific theory in postmodern discourse—deconstructionism—and I propose to continue to put forward the suggestion of possibilities for engaging in contemporary Jewish philosophy from perspectives of the 21st century.

[1] Jacques Derrida, "*Des Tours de Babel*" in Joseph F. Graham, ed. and trans., *Difference in Translation* (Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207. The words "*Des Tours*" are left open to translation, as they can be translated in different ways: *des tours*—some turns—or as a single word: detours, deviations, departures, digressions from the past. The word *Des* also leaves open the gender of the Tours which would automatically be signaled in the French (similarly to Hebrew) in gendered nouns. Even in translations of this text, the words *Des Tours* are not translated, which itself illustrates both Derrida's intentions, as well as the confusion of how it could be interpreted. This, in turn, mirrors the confusion created in Babel with the collapse of translatability across cultures. See also Lynne Long, ed., *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?* (Multicultural Matters, 2005).

[2] I have learned from the thinking of several scholars engaged in readings of Jewish philosophy through a deconstructive lens, see Miriam Feldmann Kaye, *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Liverpool University Press, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 26.

[3] Derrida, "*Des Tours de Babel*," 171.

[4] Jonathan Sacks, "Babel, Then and Now," *The Jewish Press* (October 23, 2014).

[5] This is also palpable in interpretations of Babel in other religions, for example in Islamic literature, see Qur'an, Sura 2:96.

[6] See for example *Mekhilta Mishpatim* 20, and *Bereishit Rabba* 38:7.

[7] *Sanhedrin* 109a, also noted in Josephus 1, and *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer* 24.

[8] *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer* 24. Links between Babel and Nimrod also appear in talmudic sources, e.g., *Avoda Zara* 53b, *Hullin* 89a.

[9] *Bereishit Rabba* 38:8.

[10] *Bereishit Rabba* 38:10.

[11] Derrida, "*Des Tours de Babel*," 169–170.

[12] *Bereishit Rabba* 23:7.

[13] *Bereishit Rabba* 38:6.

[14] *Mekhilta* on *Beshalah* 5.

[15] Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future: The Ecology of Hope and the Restoration of Family, Community and Faith* (Mercer University Press, 1997), 79.

[16] See in particular Rav Shagar (Rosenberg), *Be-Tzel ha-Emuna: Derashot u-Ma'amarim le-Hag Sukkot* [Hebrew], (Machon Kitvei Harav Shagar, 2011), 126–127.

[17] I have expanded on Jewish philosophical critique of deconstructionism elsewhere. Here, I have deemed it sufficient to introduce the idea of dissemination as a parallel theory. See also internalized critique, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (Routledge, 2002), 243; and J.H. Olthius, ed., *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (Routledge, 2002), 161.

[18] *Sanhedrin* 109a; *Bereishit Rabba* 38:4.

[19] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (University of Chicago Press, 1983).