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The Tower of Babel

KAFKA. *The Tower of Babel*. If it had been possible to build the tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted. *The Pit of Babel*. What are you building? • — I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high. • We are digging the pit of Babel. *Couriers*. They were offered the choice between be-

1 And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech 2 And it came to pass, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. 3 And they said one to another: 'Come, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. 4 And they said: 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' 5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. 6 And the LORD said: 'Behold, they are one people,

Agamemnon instead of stripping the branch of its flowers instantly as we do in reading Lear—are we not reading wrongly? losing our sharp sight in the haze of associations? reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack? Does not the whole of Greece heap itself behind every line of its literature? They admit us to a vision of the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted, the maturity, tried but unbroken, of mankind. Every word is reinforced by a vigour which pours out of olive-tree and temple and the bodies of the young...Chief among these sources of glamour and perhaps misunderstanding is the language. We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English. We cannot hear it, now dissonant, now harmonious, tossing sound from line to line across a page. We cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live... • Further, in reckoning the doubts and difficulties there is this important problem: Where are we to laugh in reading Greek? ...To laugh instantly it is almost necessary (though Aristophanes may supply us with an exception) to laugh in English. Humour, after all, is closely bound up with a sense of the body...The French, the Italians, the Ameri-

Iron, Wood, Stones. The elements are made use of in working up this material: fire to melt the iron, wind to blow the fire, water to set wheels in motion, in order to cut the wood, etc. The result is, that the wind, which has helped to build the house, is shut out by the house, so also are the violence of rains and floods, and the destructive powers of fire, so far as the house is made fireproof. The

stones and beams obey the law of gravity — press downward — and so high walls are carried up. Thus the elements are made use of in accordance with their nature, and yet to co-operate for a product, by which their operation is limited. Thus the passions of men are gratified; they develop themselves and their aims in accordance with their natural tendencies, and build up the edifice of human society; thus fortifying a position for Right and Order against themselves. WOOLF. *On Not Knowing Greek*. But again (the question comes back and back). Are we reading Greek as it was written when we say this? When we read these few words cut on a tombstone, a stanza in a chorus, the end or the opening of a dialogue of Plato's, a fragment of Sappho, when we bruise our minds upon some tremendous metaphor in the

Italo Calvino (1925-1985), *Invisible Cities*, 1972.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963.

Virginia Woolf, *On Not Knowing Greek*

Albert Camus (1913-1960), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942.

Genesis 11:1-8

cans, who derive physically from so different a stock, pause, as we pause in reading Homer, to make sure that they are laughing in the right place, and the pause is fatal. Thus humour is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue, and when we turn from Greek to English literature it seems, after a long silence, as if our great age were ushered in by a burst

of laughter. CALVINO. *Invisible Cities*. Kublai asks Marco, 'When you return to the West, will you repeat to your people the same tales you tell me?' • 'I speak and speak,' Marco says, 'but the listener retains only the words he is expecting.' ARENDT. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. All correspondence referring to the matter was subject to rigid "language rules," and, except in the reports from the Einsatzgruppen, it is rare to find documents in which such bald words as "extermination," "liquidation," or "killing" occur. The prescribed code names for killing were "final solution," "evacuation" (Aussiedlung), and "special treatment" (Sonderbehandlung); deportation... received the names of "resettlement" (Umsiedlung) and "labor

in the East" (Arbeitseinsatz im Osten), the point of these latter names being that Jews were indeed often temporarily resettled in ghettos and that a certain percentage of them were temporarily used for labor...Only among themselves could the "bearers of secrets" talk in uncoded language, and it is very unlikely that they did so in the ordinary pursuit of their murderous duties—certainly not in the presence of their stenographers and other office personnel. For whatever other reasons the language rules may have been devised, they proved of enormous help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose cooperation was essential in this matter. Moreover, the very term "language rules" (Sprachregelung) was itself a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie.

CAMUS. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor... • One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly

and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do; and now nothing will be withholden from them, which they purpose to do. 7 Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' 8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off to build the city. 9 Therefore was the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there a confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward the lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to

the plain. • It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock... • All Sisyphus's silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is a thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly

restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is, but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which become his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling. • I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Questions:

Kafka: What limits humankind?

Amichai: What is the connection between language and dispersion?

Pirsig: Does technology have an ultimate purpose?

Feynman (1): Does God require people to understand anything?

Feynman (2): What is the difference between a name and a thing?

Feynman (3): Is there a limit to what should be taught?

Hegel: How can his analogy be applied to our story?

Camus: Is it good for people to build towers?

Franz Kafka (1883-1924), *Parables and Paradoxes*, Schocken, 1961.

Robert M. Pirsig (b. 1928), *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 1974, p. 220

(1) Richard Feynman (1918-1988), quoted in *Superstrings: A Theory of Everything*, ed. Davies and Brown, 1988.

(2) Richard Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, TV documentary, 1981

(3) On Richard Feynman's blackboard at the time of his death, quoted in *The Universe in a Nutshell*, Stephen Hawking, 2001.

G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), *The Philosophy of History*, 1837, p. 27

IBN EZRA. (i) It says *one speech* because, whereas today we find that in every language there are words that not everyone who speaks that languages knows, at that time the vocabularies of the sage and the fool were the same. (3) The people who built the tower weren't fools who thought they could ascend to heaven, and they were not scared of the flood, since Noah and

his sons, to whom God swore, were there, and because everyone deferred to them, being their children. However, the verse reveals their intent and ultimate goal: to build a large city for them to reside in, and to build for themselves a tall tower as a sign and name and recognition, so that those travelling outside, like shepherds of flocks, might know the city's location. They also built it so that their names might live on after them for as long as the tower stood. This is why the verse says "let us make us a name."

(7) *Come, let us go down.* This "us" was God speaking with the angels. Now, there are those who say that they turned their hearts to hate one another, thus causing each one to invent his own language. And there are those who say that the One who renders wisdom to man [i.e. God] caused them to forget the knowledge of their language. What appears to me to be correct, however, is that they were dispersed, after which Nimrod (and subsequently other kings) ruled over Babel. Then, after a long period of time, when the first generation had died out, the first language was forgotten. As well, God dispersed them because it was good for them, as it says, "And fill the world." (Bereishit 1:18) **KELI YEKAR.** (i) *And the whole world was of one language and one speech.* It seems from the verse that all the actions connected to the ultimate dispersion of this generation are connected to the rabbinic maxim, "The concentration of the wicked is bad for them [the wicked themselves] and bad for the world, while the scattering of the wicked is good for them and good for the world, while it is exactly the reverse for the righteous." (TB Sanhedrin 71a) This idea is correct, for the wicked think of wicked ideas when they are concentrated together, and in addition they develop in their interactions words of conflict, fighting, and hatred. Thus, reading between the lines in the story, we can see the theme of evil zealotry, where all of their acts were not for the

בראשית יא:א-ח

אבן עזרא. (א) וטעם דברים אחדים, בעבור שימצא היום בכל לשון דברים שלא יבינום כל אנשי הלשון. ובימים ההם דברי חכם וכסיל היו אחדים, והם רבים מגזרת אחד. (ג) ואלה בוני המגדל לא היו טפשים שיחשבו לעלות אל השמים, גם לא פחדו מהמבול, כי נח ובניו שנשבע להם השם שם היו, וכלם סרים אל

משמעתם, כי בניהם היו. והנה הכתוב גלה חפצם וסוף דעתם לבנות עיר גדולה למושבם, ולבנות מגדל גבוה להיות להם לאות ולשם ולתהלה לדעת מקום העיר לההולכים חוצה כרועי המקנה, גם יעמוד שם אחריהם כל ימי המגדל. וזהו שאמר הכתוב ונעשה לנו שם. ואל תתמה על מלת וראשו בשמים, כי הנה כן דבר משה ערים גדולות ובצורות בשמים (דבר' א, כח). ואלה הבונים ראו בעצתם שלא יפרדו, והשם לא

יעץ כן, והם לא ידעו: (ז) הבה נרדה דבור השם עם המלאכים...וי"א שנהפך לבם לשנוא זה את זה, וכל אחד חידש לשון. ויש אומרים כי המלמד לאדם דעת שכתם דעת לשונם. והנכון בעיני שנפוצו משם, ואחר שנפצו מלך נמרוד על בבל, וקמו מלכים אחרים. וכי מים רבים במות הדור הראשון נשכח הלשון הראשון. והשם הפיצם, והוא טוב להם, וכן אמר ומלאו את הארץ שפה אחת ודברים אחדים: נראין הדברים שכל מעשה הפלגה הוא על דרך שאמרו חז"ל (סנהדרין עא ב) כנוס לרשעים רע להם ורע לעולם פיוזר לרשעים טוב להם וטוב לעולם ובצדיקים הכל בהיפך זה, לפי שהרשעים על ידי כנוסם יחשבו ביניהם עצות רעות על אחרים, נוסף על זה ימשכו ביניהם דברי ריבות ומחלוקות ושנאות, וזאת תורת הקנאות המצויות בין הכתות אשר כל מעשיהם לא לשם שמים כי אם כדי לעשות להם שם בארץ, ועיקר הסיבה לזה שיש לכל אחד מהם תכלית חיצונית חלק לבם זה מזה, כי זה יתאוה לעושר וכבוד, וזה לרוב מאכל, וזה לרוב משגל, וזה יאמר נעשה לנו שם ורוצה להיות גבוה מעל גבוה, ומתוך כך המריבה ממשמשת ובאה הן מן הצד שאין להם תכלית אחד, כי הדרכים רעים הם רבים, והדרך הטוב אינו כי אם אחד...

for the sake of heaven but simply to make for themselves a name on earth, and the core of the reason for this idea was that each one of them had an external goal that divided their hearts from one another, for this one wanted wealth and honour, this one wanted lots of food, this one more sexual intercourse, and this one said, "Let us make for ourselves a name," and wanted to be at the very top of everything. But because of this, controversy came upon them, for they did not have a single path and there are simply so many evil paths, while there is only a single good path...

מגדל בבל

רש"י. (א) שפה אחת: לשון הקודש: ודברים אחדים: באו בעצה אחת ואמרו לא כל הימנו שיבור לו את העליונים, נעלה לרקיע ונעשה עמו מלחמה. דבר אחר על יחידו של עולם. דבר אחר ודברים אחדים, אמרו אחת לאלף ושש מאות חמשים ושש שנים הרקיע מתמוטט כשם שעשה בימי המבול, בואו ונעשה לו סמוכות:

(ג) איש אל רעהו: אומה לאומה, מצרים לכוש [וכוש לפוט] ופוט לכנען: לבנים: שאין אבנים בבבל, שהיא בקעה: (ד) פן נפוצו: שלא יביא עלינו שום מכה להפיצנו מכאן: (ה) וירד ה' לראות: לא הוצרך לכך, אלא בא ללמד לדיינים שלא ירשיעו הנדון עד שיראו ויבינו. (ו) הן עם אחד ושפה אחת: כל טובה זו יש עמון, שעם אחד הם ושפה אחת לכולם, ודבר זה החלו לע-

שות: (ז) הבה: מדה כנגד מדה, הם אמרו הבה נבנה, והוא כנגדם מדד ואמר הבה נרדה: **בראשית רבה.** (ד) ונעשה לנו שם: תני רבי ישמעאל אין שם אלא עבר-דת כוכבים. (ז) הבה נרדה: זה אחד מן הדברים ששינו לתלמי המלך, הבה ארדה ואבלה, ונבלה שם שפתם, א"ר אבא בר כהנא משפתם אעשה נבלה, הוה חד מנהון אמר לחבריה אייתי לי קולב והוא הוה יהיב ליה מגרופי הוה מחי ליה ופצע מוחיה, הה"ד משפתם אעשה נבלה. **רשב"ם.** (ד) הבה נבנה לנו עיר וגו': לפי הפשט מה חטאו דור הפלגה? אם מפני שאמרו וראשו בשמים, הא כת' ערים גדולות ובצורות בשמים? אלא לפי שצום הק' פרו ורבו ומלאו את הארץ, והם בחרו להם מקום לשבת שם ואמרו פן נפוצו, לפי הפיצם משם בגזרתו: **רמב"ן.** ורודפי הפשט (הראב"ע, והרד"ק), אומרים שלא היה דעתם אלא שיהיו יחד מחוברים כי הגיד הכ"תוב דעתם "פן נפוצו", ולא ספר עליהם ענין אחר. ואם כדבריהם יהיו טפשים, כי אין תהיה עיר אחת ומגדל אחד מספיק לכל בני העולם. או שמא היו חושבים שלא יפרו ושלא ירבו, וזרע רשעים יכרת: אבל היודע פירוש שם, יבין כוונתם ממה שאמרו ונעשה לנו שם - וידע כמה השיעור שיוזמו במגדל לעשותו, ויבין כל הענין, כי חשבו מחשבה רעה, והעונש שבא עליהם להפרידם בלשונות ובארצות מדה כנגד מדה, כי היו קוצצים בנטיעות.

RAMBAN. Those who always pursue literal interpretations (like Ibn Ezra and David Kimchi) say that their intent was none other than to be connected to each other because of the verse that says, "Lest we be scattered," and tells us of no other reason for their construction. But if we were to follow this interpretation, the people in question must have been absolutely idiotic, for how can one city and one tower be enough for all the people of the world? (Unless we say that they intended not to be fruitful and multiply, and, thus, [they were punished because] the seed of the wicked is cut off. • However, those who understand the meaning of this passage will understand the builders' intent from their statement, "Let us make us a name," and they will also recognize the size of this tower they intended to build, and they will understand the story completely, for the builders had an evil intention and their subsequent punishment was therefore to have them scattered, through languages and geography. This was a tit-for-tat consequence, as they were "uprooting the shoots."

RASHI. (i) *One language.* The Hebrew language. *And of one speech.* They came with one intention and said, "God may not select the heavens from himself. Let's go up and wage war with God." • Another interpretation is that they spoke the sole language of the world. • Another interpretation is that they said, "It seems that once in 1656 years the heavens collapse, just like they did during the Flood.

Let's make a structure to support the sky." (3) *One to another.* Nation to nation, Egyptian to Ethiopian, Ethiopian to Puttite, Puttite to Canaanite. *Brick.* They used this since there isn't any stone in Babel, since it's a valley. (4) *Lest we be scattered abroad.* In order that no affliction should come upon us to scatter us from here. (5) *And the Lord came down to see.* Obviously, he had no need

to descend, but we learn from his actions that judges should not decide who is guilty until they see and understand [the situation]. (6) *They are one people and they all have one language.* That is to say, they have all this goodness, since they are one nation and have one language, and this is what they begin to do!? (7) *Come, let us.* This was done tit-for-tat: since the people said, "Come, let us build," God, in response, said, "Come, let us descend." **GENESIS RABBAH.** (4) *Let us make us a name.* Rabbi Yishmael taught: There is no "name" other than idol worship. (7) *Come, let us go down.* This is one of the things that was taught to King Talmi: God said, "Come, let me go down and confuse things and mix up their languages." Rabbi Abba bar Cahana said: This means that God said, "We shall mix up their language (or: we shall make it a carcass). One will say to his friend, 'Give me the brick,' and the other will bring tar, and he will then break his skull [out of anger]..." **RASHBAM.** *Let us build us a city.* According to the plain meaning of the verse, in what did the Generation of the Dispersion sin? If it is that they said, "with its top in heaven," are these not similar to the "large cities and towers in heavens" discussed by Moshe? Rather, they sinned because God had commanded them to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the world, and they instead chose a single place to reside, saying, "Lest we be scattered." This explains, then, that

God dispersed them according to his decrees. **RAMBAN.** Those who always pursue literal interpretations (like

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