

THE TOWER OF BABEL: AN ARTISTIC OVERVIEW

The 14th century Flemish painter Jan Beerbohm (born in Germany, Beerbohm emigrated to Flanders to study under Rubens) considered "The Tower of Babel" his masterpiece. In that work, the partially built tower, which looks like a blade aimed at the heavens, is surrounded by scenes of pastoral calm and interpersonal beauty. Two lovers carry bricks together through a field of flowers; children play cooperative games, some of them helping to mix mortar; a son helps an aged father push a wheelbarrow. The Edenic perfection of the scene, however, is marred by a thick streak of gray paint down the right side of the painting.

Some critics argue that the streak is an accidental error and should be scraped off, restoring the picture to the aesthetic perfection Beerbohm intended. Others, however, point out that Beerbohm was deeply religious, while the painting allots such beauty to the Babel culture that G-d Himself seems petulant to have disrupted it. The gray streak, they claim, was a deliberate effort to show that the portrait was superficial, that the culture must have been flawed in some presently unrecognized way. Some more pious critics concede the implausibility of this thesis, but argue instead that after the streak occurred accidentally, Beerbohm recognized it as a Divine message and left it intact. Finally, some moderns have suggested that the gray represents conformity, that the flaw of the Babel culture was that all its creativity was directed toward a communal project which left no room for individuality. They point out that the characters are seen only from the back, and that all of them wear identical clothing.

In 1952, Eric Bar Ilan transformed Beerbohm's work by reimagining the Tower as a windmill. Here the tower itself is unremarkable, but the blades of the unassembled rotor are planted vertically so that they stab both into the ground and toward the heavens.

Most interpreters understand the mill as representing industry, like "the brick that replaced rock" in the Tower's construction. Perhaps this is a Cold War image, and G-d intervenes lest humanity develop the technological capacity to destroy itself. In that case He seems not to have succeeded in the long run.

To my mind, however, Bar Ilan's work actually refers to the windmill in Orwell's Animal Farm that the dictatorial pig Napoleon has the animals continually build, but stealthily pulls down whenever it nears completion. Napoleon's windmill represents a strategy of the totalitarian state, which is to justify current suffering and cruelty by subordinating the present to a messianic future. Bar Ilan creatively argues that the architects never intended the Tower to reach the heavens; rather, they deliberately set their population an infinite task. G-d in this vision is a liberator. Bar Ilan's work tracks the Rabbinic reading of Babel as the birthplace of Nimrod's empire, with Avraham Avinu as the persecuted dissenter.

A more esoteric literary reference is at the heart of a recent installation piece by the punk kabbalist Hava N. N. builds her Tower out of piles of paper. On each paper is written either “brick” or “mortar”, in a pattern roughly parallel to standard bricklaying. Another pile, off to the side, is composed of papers labeled “rock”, and next to it is a sort of puddle of “tar”s. Finally there is a single scrap on its own labeled “Ragle Gumm”.

Ragle Gumm is the protagonist of Phillip K. Dick’s “Time Out of Joint”, which memorably notes that “Ragle Gumm was going sane”. Gumm’s developing sanity involved recognizing that the world he experienced as physical actually consisted of pieces of paper with words written on them. He had been conditioned to see the reality described by those words whenever he read them.

What is N.’s piece saying? Perhaps, as Nachman Levine argued in Nachalah, that the Tower itself is a metaphor for language, the ultimate human construction. G-d creates through speech, and asserts control by naming; it is only through the language of power and the power of language that human beings might even imagine challenging Him. Words are more real than things.

But I think that doesn’t go far enough. N’s deeper point is that the post-Babel world is insane in that it sees language as arbitrary. If language is arbitrary, why does G-d name things? Why does He care what names Adam gave the animals? To go sane is to resonate to the language of Creation.

For a Jewish mystic, this is not wholly a good thing. The truly sane understand that only the undifferentiated G-d exists, and that all distinction is illusion. But G-d has given us that illusion, and we do not necessarily gain by losing the capacity to see it, as if we had only x-ray vision.

For Maimonides, human beings Fell when Eve exchanged truth for beauty. But perhaps we can suggest a more generous reading. Eve Fell by mistaking beauty for truth, but there is value in recognizing beauty while acknowledging that it is illusory. Genesis 2:9 writes that G-d brought forth in the Garden “all trees *nechmad l’mar’eh*” (visually attractive), after all, whereas Eve saw the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as “*nechmad lehaskil*” (intellectually attractive).

N.B. All visual and plastic artists and artworks cited in the above dvar Torah are fictional.