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**Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA**  
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**Ruach Chayim - Parshat Noach**  
**“Go jump in the lake”**

It sounds like the start of a bad joke:

What did 1) the lesbian Ashkenazi Reform rabbi, 2) the Black Israelite modern Orthodox Rabbi, 3) the leader of the Abayudaya Jewish community of Uganda, and 4) the white straight male Conservative rabbi say to the 3-year old black girl and her white Jewish mother?

They said: “Go jump in the lake.”

And what did the four of us shout after they followed our instructions? “Mazel tov!!”

Last weekend I was one of those four rabbis (I’ll let you figure out which one), and we really did that. On a beautiful afternoon in northern California we escorted a white father and white mother and their two daughters (one black, one white) to a lovely lake, and watched as one smiling daughter immersed in the lake and came up, sadly a little teary-eyed, but now officially a Jew.

It was the same family I told you about last year, the two sisters one black, one white, about whom their seven year old friend explained, “You can tell they’re sisters because they both have dimples!” But even though the fact that the two girls are sisters and that they and their parents are a Jewish family was obvious to a seven year old and to the 4 rabbis I just mentioned, it was apparently not so obvious to a few other – maybe more isolated? -- rabbis this family had encountered in the 3 years since they brought their adopted daughter home. In fact, several rabbis had delayed or declined a mikvah for her, offering one excuse or another.

And that’s one reason *Bechol Lashon* was invented. *Bechol Lashon* (“In Every Tongue”) is the initiative on ethnic and racial diversity in the Jewish Community that BCC’s immediate past president Davi Cheng has been involved with for several years. Last weekend Davi, Bracha and I returned to *Bechol Lashon*’s annual family retreat. This year we took BCC member Lydia Katz with us to be one of the counselors. As a Jew of color who grew up a secure, loved and active member of more than one synagogue, including BCC, Lydia had no idea how moved he would be when he entered the dining hall that first night and saw more Jews of color in one place than he had ever seen before.

The family retreat offered by *Bechol Lashon* provides a weekend of learning and play in a Jewish atmosphere offering more than welcome – offering embrace and delight, an opportunity for Jews with varying ethnicities, skin colors, and nationalities to look around at Jewish faces who look different from stereotypes, Jewish faces who look as different as their own. These Jewish families belong to different synagogues or none at all, and so they often find themselves in (or feeling excluded from) American Jewish communities where they or their children stand out from others in skin color or in accent, in background or in appearance. At *Bechol Lashon* events, stereotypes of what it means to look Jewish disappear within moments of one’s arrival, and instead, people see what really matters – sympathetic hearts and minds, the blessing of diversity, love of Torah and a desire for Jewish community.

In this week’s Torah portion, Noach, after we read about Noah and the flood, we read about the Tower of Babel. It’s a fabulous and confusing story. The earthlings, newly restored after the flood, “have one language and one set of words,” says the introductory verse – *ud’varim akhadim* [11:1], and they seem quite delighted to discover the powers and abilities they have. They begin to build that infamous tower up toward heaven. God gets distressed -- the text is not too clear about why -- and soon God says, “If, as one

people with one language for all of them, this is what they have begun to do, now there will be no barrier for them in all that they scheme to do. Let us, then go down and baffle their language there, so that they shall not understand one another's language." [Gen. 11:1, 6-7]

No one for sure knows what the term *ud'varim akhadim* means. It's usually translated as "the same words" or the "same set of words" as in "they had the same language and the same words." The midrash suggests that maybe we should read not *ud'varim akhadim* but *ud'varim khadim* meaning "sharp words."<sup>1</sup> In which case we might conclude that even though they had the same language, they spoke only sharp words to one another and this is what distressed God so much that God preferred to make them unintelligible to one another than leave them to exchange only harsh words with each other.

Other commentators<sup>2</sup> say the phrase *ud'varim akhadim* can also be understood as "few words": "All the earth spoke one language and few words," thus perhaps suggesting that God was distraught because even though they had a language in common, they barely spoke to one another, did not communicate well, had different visions for how to build their tower and why, and perhaps even whether they should build it. So anxious was God about their inability to discuss and make plans together, that God went ahead and tumbled their tower and their plans for them figuring it would be better to disperse them than leave them to battle it out themselves.

Yet another explanation based on more ambiguity in the Hebrew. This time it's when God says [I will] "go down and baffle their language there, so that they shall not understand one another's language." [11:7] What we translate as "they shall not understand" or "no one will understand the language of their neighbor" reads in Hebrew *lo yishma'u* which can also be translated as, "they shall not [or will not] hear," or "they shall not [or will not] listen to" one another. Some even say they spoke the same words at the same time – meaning no one could hear one another.

Perhaps it was their inability to listen to each other that cost them their community, their mutual dreams, their inspiration.

Another thought about those builders of Babel and why God scattered them: They didn't just speak the same language, they said the same things, they thought alike, there was no *diversity*. And God, having not long ago created a world filled with diversity, and having rescued – before the flood -- *all* the DIFFERENT animals and having afterwards set them all back upon the earth, God was NOT about to let all human creatures be all alike, to think all alike, to all want the same thing, to see the world in the same way. God put color and variety in the world that humans might thrive on them. And by toppling the tower, increasing the languages, and scattering the humans to the 4 corners of the earth, God was insuring the color, the variety, the infinite diversity of humankind.

Davi sees in the tower of Babel God's instruction to vary opinion, to avoid group think, to make sure that we won't all head in the wrong direction just because some of us might do so. Davi, involved with *Bechol Lashon* almost from its beginning, suggests that by "working to understand differences, we come to understand ourselves. And by understanding ourselves, we are then able to create loving relationships, and foster deeper and mutual appreciation for one another."<sup>3</sup>

The 2002 Jewish population study tells us that 20% (1.2 million) of the Jewish population of the United States is "diverse," including converts to Judaism, children adopted into Jewish families and raised as Jews, multiracial children of partnerships between Ashkenazi Jews and people of color, and those who are themselves the generational descendants of Jews of color and those of Sephardic and Middle Eastern [Mizrahi] heritage.<sup>4</sup> And that number is growing -- now more than ever, as corners of the world come together, we are being offered the opportunity not to blend in, but to embrace the diversity of God's creations, right here, in our own city, in our Jewish community, in our own congregation.

As it turns out, being dunked in the lake by your mom isn't as much fun as it promised to be, especially when four strangers start shouting mazel tov and smiling at you while you're crying. To tell you the truth, it took about 10 minutes out of the lake for our three-year old friend to smile again and show us once more

her beautiful dimples. But given that her first words after the tears stopped were an excited and smiling, "I went in the water!" and given the laughter and the running and the games on the way back to the ranch for dinner, I'm betting that the story she comes to tell of her jump in the lake will be as positive a one as it is for the four rabbis who barely knew each other before then, but who now feel bonded in common purpose – to encourage diversity and mutual appreciation, to acknowledge, accept, and love all the wide variety of people who choose a Jewish path to celebrate all the many blessings of our lives.

Those dimples, that smile, that whole scene has stayed in my mind all this week as I returned to LA and studied Torah and looked around at the variety of people in this amazing city. And as I look around this sanctuary tonight, I understand now why the story of the Tower of Babel follows immediately after the story of Noah's ark and the creation of the rainbow, for it's quite clear to me now that what appeared to be a punishment from God – the toppled tower, the scattered people, the confusion of languages – turns out instead to be a great blessing, a great gift from the Holy One, who continually creates a rainbow world filled with endless variety, and dazzling diversity -- all of it awaiting our embrace. Blessed are you, Holy One, who makes the colors of light shine forth, a vision of Your glory.

Shabbat shalom

1. According to Genesis Rabbah 38:6 (end of it, p.306) though the above is my interpretation of what to do with the reading: "All the earth was one language of sharp words."
2. Ibn Ezra and Malbim, in Plaut first gleaning on p.85. Again, what's here is my interpretation of what to do with that translation.
3. BCC drash Noach 10/15/04, <http://www.bcc-la.org/drashot/drash101504.html>
4. See In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People by Diane Tobin, Gary Tobin & Scott Rubin, 2005, p.22-23, or [www.jewishresearch.org/socialchange.htm](http://www.jewishresearch.org/socialchange.htm)