

Noah 5773

The Towers We Build

Shabbat Shalom.

I am not really a big risk taker. I cannot say I am a big fan of risking my life for a thrill, although I do enjoy roller coasters in amusement parks.

I have never gone hang-gliding or para-sailing, but I did learn to water-ski a few years ago. What about you?

Show of hands: who has gone hang-gliding? Para-sailing? Sky diving? Bungee-jumping?

On Sunday, Felix Baumgartner set a new world record as he jumped out of a capsule high above the earth.

Standing 128,100 feet above our planet, Baumgartner slid out of his balloon-elevated pod, stood up, saluted and then jumped into the great beyond. He hurtled toward the ground from the edge of space, reaching speeds over 830 mph, the first human being to break the sound barrier without the aid of some kind of mechanical vehicle, though he was in a unique pressurized suit, which may have scientific implications and benefits for the future.

He experienced some difficulties as he began to spin out of control, but he was able to stabilize himself, which allowed him to break the speed record. In addition, the spinning could have sent too much blood to his brain, which would also have had negative consequences.

In the end, he landed on his feet in the New Mexico desert, fell to his knees and pumped his fists.

After Shabbat, you can watch it on YouTube where it was also shown live: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHtvDA0W34I>

As I watched these clips and contemplated this Austrian daredevil standing on the edge of space, I could not help but think of our own *parashah* and the first time in human history that people wanted to reach space, or at least the heavens.

This morning, Max read the section of *Parashat Noah* that relates the story of the Tower of Babel.

It is a simple but elegant narrative. As the Torah states, all of the people of the earth spoke one language. They settled in *Shin'ar* and learned how to make hard bricks.

“They said, ‘Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.

“Adonai came down to look at the city and tower that people had built, and Adonai 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.’” (Gen 11: 4-6)

God then confounds their speech so that they cannot understand each other, bringing to an end the building of the tower, the ziggurat – which was what actually occurred in Babylonia in 1600 BCE when a Hittite raid left that ziggurat lying in ruin.

The Torah explains that this is why the area is Babel (literally meaning: gibberish) and why people speak different languages and are scattered around the world.

But are there other messages embedded in this narrative?

Why do the people want to reach the heavens?

Why does God feel that this is a bad idea?

Our *Etz Hayim Humash* points us to an understanding that this text reflects two different world views of the ancients. One was the “mountain culture,” which revered and adapted to nature; the other was the “tower-culture,” which appreciated human ingenuity that could control, even dominate, nature.

Interestingly, thousands of years later, those two approaches still animate our lives. Some of us prefer being in the woods of New Hampshire hiking up Mount Washington, and some of us would enjoy the view from the Skywalk Observatory on the top of the Prudential Center.

And many of us appreciate both.

We have built incredible towers that soar into the sky, we can fly around the globe, have travelled to the moon, and can jump from the edge of space; however, the towers can be knocked down, our planes can falter, and in reality, space is not so easily conquered. There is still great majesty in the natural mountains, even as we can admire human-engineered feats.

Perhaps the Tower of Babel reflected the tension between an urban culture with its ziggurats and the more agrarian societies of the time.

Yet another perspective presents the tower builders as too focused on themselves, feeling that they could conquer the world, or become like God. Building on this idea, our rabbis claim these tower builders were so self-centered and consumed by their goal that they lost their human values.

As our Midrash teaches, the people did not care if a worker fell off the tower to his death; but if a brick fell, they lamented the delay in their work.

(PRE 24)

We do have tendencies to get so caught up in something or ourselves, that we can lose sight of the more important aspects of life. We can even begin to lose our ability to relate to others. Our egos can run amuck.

You may remember James Cameron's 1998 academy award acceptance speech after winning "best director" for Titanic where he bellowed "I'm the king of the world!" What arrogance! His words remind us of the danger of losing our perspective.

The Torah wants to teach us about our limits, about humility. While we may be able to build towers and travel to space, we should remember – both as individuals and even in a group – that there are boundaries that human beings should not cross.

After his jump Baumgartner said: "When I was standing on the top of the world you become so humble, you do not think about breaking records any more, you do not think about gaining scientific data, the only thing you want is to come back alive."

Elsewhere, in the book of *Devarim*, in Deuteronomy, the Torah makes this clear. As Moshe warns the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land: "*V'amarta bilvavekha kochi v'otzem yadi asa lee et hahayil hazeh* – you may say to yourself: 'My own power and the might of my own hand have this wealth for me.'" (DT 8:17)

Moshe reminds us that it is natural to feel pride when we achieve something, but we can get carried away. First of all, we usually do not achieve something by ourselves. As Max reminded us in his thoughtful *d'var Torah*, there are often people behind the scenes who work hard and do not always get the credit for what they do.

During the presidential campaign this year we heard this theme as well. Over the summer, President Obama said: "If you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own. [...] I'm always struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart

people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else [...]”

This is fairly similar to what Moshe was teaching. Obama continued in his July 13 speech: “If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business – you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.

“The point is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together. There are some things, just like fighting fires, we don't do on our own. I mean, imagine if everybody had their own fire service. That would be a hard way to organize fighting fires.”

This is a variation on Hillary Clinton’s best-selling 1996 book *It Takes A Village*. We do not exist in isolation and while we can achieve great things, it is hubris to think that it is not also because of others who help us.

Hubris can often get people into big trouble, as they think they are invincible or above everyone else. Being a cyclist, I enjoy riding and watching and following the Tour de France. I was inspired by Lance Armstrong. Not only did he overcome cancer, but he won the Tour seven times in a row.

An incredible achievement.

Well, as we learned more definitively this week, it was not really a credible achievement. It has been ascertained that Armstrong engaged in illegal blood doping, which gave him more red blood cells that gave him greater strength and endurance. Not only did he cheat to give himself an unfair advantage, but he also encouraged others to do the same and threatened those who might have reported on him.

This was a classic case of someone who clearly had incredible talent who thought it was all about *kohi v'otzem yadi* – his own power – and that the might of his hand could accomplish anything and that he could push any rule or any one who got in his way.

But like the Tower of Babel, Lance came crashing down.

There are limits to our own abilities, and if you think you can go beyond them, you are inclined to cheat and make your own rules.

And more than that, the Tower of Babel reminds us all that humanity is not the only achievement in this world. God alone stands beyond us all. Even with all our success, we are but a speck in the universe, a glimmer in God's eye. As the tradition reminds us when we feel full of ourselves, *ani afar v'efer* – I am nothing but dust and ashes.

When we accomplish something, we should acknowledge all those who helped us – Felix Baumgartner had numerous scientists and advisors and a huge team to help him in his accomplishment.

And beyond that, Moshe reminds us that our deepest help, our most powerful strength comes from the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, from the Master of the Universe who can never be reached – not by a tower, nor by a helium balloon on the edge of space.

The power God gives us is a subtle strength that is cultivated through learning, prayer and acts of love. It is refined by a life of humility that allows for God's light to shine through a person, illuminating the world.

May we all internalize that message and rise to those heights of understanding.

Shabbat Shalom.