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From: *A CHILD'S BIBLE*

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## *Teacher's Guide*

### 5 A TOWER TO THE SKY

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*Genesis 11:1-9 – Text, pp. 41-47*

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#### **Important Concepts**

- Heaven is beyond human reach
- Idolatry has disastrous results
- Language can bind us together, but sometimes blinds us to others

#### **Background Information**

Once more we are faced with a story best understood through a Hebrew play on words. In Babylonian parlance, the word *Babel* means "gateway to God." In Hebrew, it is closely associated with the root meaning "confusion."

The subject of the story was the actual temple-tower of Babylon. Evidence suggests that this tower was destroyed by the Hittites in 1531 B.C.E. In lines 60-62 of the Akkadian *Enuma Elish* epic we have an account which closely parallels the story: "The first year they molded its bricks. And when the second year arrived they raised the head of Esagila [the temple-tower] toward Apsu [the sweet waters above heaven]." It appears that there was a sacred custom involved in spending an entire year preparing the bricks, and the biblical account picks up on this practice.

A secondary aspect of the story arises from the Mediterranean tradition of viewing particular mountains as the "homes" of gods (Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb, the Temple Mount, Mount Olympus, and so on). In Babylonia the land was flat. And the Babylonians, perhaps in an attempt to compensate for this shortcoming of their landscape, built artificial mountains called "ziggurats." A ziggurat was a stepped, pyramidal-shaped structure, rising many stories above city buildings. Its prominent features included a stairway leading up one side from bottom to top, and a temple structure on the topmost platform or step. This was the classic "stairway to heaven."

In one sense, at least, this story parallels the account of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In that case, too, God was concerned with limiting the powers of human beings. In the garden, "God said, 'Now Adam knows good and evil. He might also eat from the tree of life, and live forever! And, if he did evil afterward, he could do evil forever!'" Here, God hears the people say "Together, we are very great. Together, we can do what only God could do before." In both cases, God closes a "gate." In the first instance, the gate of the Garden is sealed forever. In the second instance, God seals the "gateway to heaven."

## Introducing the Lesson

Choose which of the major themes you plan to develop with the class during your lesson. You may wish to focus on (1) the inequities of "looking down" on other people, (2) how human beings sometimes try to replace God with idols or with worship of other human beings, (3) or the idea that things are never as important as people. Of course, you can combine these ideas into one lesson if you have the time.

(1) Read or tell the story. Ask students to find places in the story that show how some people felt bigger and better than others. Have they ever felt "left out" or "less important" than their friends? What made them feel that way? What did their friends say to them or how did their friends show them that they were considered less important? How could they show their friends that everyone is important? Proceed to the section called *What Does It Teach?* and then to *A Lesson about the Torah*.

(2) Bring a doll to class. Talk for a few minutes about idolatry. If we wanted to worship the doll, how would we make it into an idol? (Have a ritual to make it holy, bring it presents (sacrifices), set it up on a high place (the ziggurat), etc.) Read the story with the class. Proceed to *What Does It Mean?* and then to *A Lesson about the Torah*.

(3) Read or tell the story. Then read the section called *A Lesson about the Torah*. Talk about making bricks. Why did the builders think that bricks were more important than people? (It took many years to bring the bricks up.) Why did God decide to destroy the tower? Why did God decide to make the people speak many languages? How does being different from other people help us to remember that things are not as important as people?

## Teaching Opportunities from the Text

**In those days everyone on earth spoke the same language.** The meaning here should be understood in context. As we have mentioned before, all the early stories use a single individual to represent an entire class of people. Here, the Bible uses the same literary device to point to "all people" as Babylonians.

**"People will then remember us and praise our name."** Meaning, people would praise the name of the Babylonians over the name of God.

**"Together, we are very great. Together, we can do what only God could do before."**

This is the sentence which most fully explains the central conflict in the story. In essence, the Babylonians wanted to replace God entirely so that people would worship them instead. To this end, they wanted to "reach heaven." The Tower of Babel can stand for any human attempt—whether by words, fashion, money, or bricks—to displace God through idolatry. In biblical thought there is a sharp distinction between God and God's creation.

**"When they talk, let them babble ... "** The play on the word babble works almost as well in English as it did in the original, since our language includes the necessary biblical referents. You will want to point out this verse and the next in discussing the pun.

**And, from that time to this, people call that place Babel.** Actually the place was already called Babylon, but this final touch closes the story in a loop and makes it seem to the average reader that the story is included mainly for its etiological purpose (to teach how the name arose). As we have seen, this is a "cover story" for a far deeper purpose.

## Developing the Lesson

*WHAT DOES IT MEAN?* The text draws a startling analogy between "making war with God" and "looking down" on other people. You will have to help the students make this connection. Since God cares about each of us, when we stop caring about one another, we are no longer "walking with God." Then we are "making war with God." After reading the story, do the children feel that we can ever "win" a war with God? Why not?

*WHAT DOES IT TEACH?* The illustrations in the text include a picture of a ziggurat. Ask the students to turn to the picture (page 42). Talk about the steps leading up the side of the ziggurat and the temple at the top. Why did the builders choose to make this "mountain?" (They wanted to reach heaven. They lived in a plain and thought they would build something they could "look up to.")

Why did they think other people would want to be just like them? In what way were they setting themselves up in God's place? Why did God disapprove of their plan? What does God really want us to believe about other human beings?

*A LESSON ABOUT THE TORAH* What made the bricks so important? (See above.) What does this lesson from the midrash teach about how we should treat others? Why did the builders ignore this lesson?

## Teaching the Illustrations

The illustration on page 42 shows a "ziggurat" like those common in Mesopotamia. The photograph on page 43 shows a "ziggurat" like those common to cities today (in this case, the Empire State Building). You will want to introduce your remarks on these structures by reading the special topic "A Tower to the Sky" on page 44. Then talk about skyscrapers and modern-day versions of ziggurats. But, be sure to point out the basic difference. We do not build our skyscrapers and monuments as places of worship.

## Exercises

Assign exercises at appropriate moments during the lesson, as a way of keeping lessons from becoming too verbal. Note: An asterisk (\*) following an exercise indicates that it is a good candidate for a homework assignment. Answers are given in brackets, in italics.

### *MAZE*•

*YOU BE THE TEACHER* After teaching the main portion of the lesson, ask students to work individually or in small groups to complete this activity. Then share some of the student responses with the whole class. Try to leave enough time to share one or two responses for each of the lessons.

### *DO YOU KNOW WHY?*

*WORD SCRAMBLE* [Bricks; babble; tower; build; city; mighty.]

*PICTURE MESSAGE\** [The people decided to build a city so tall it would reach the clouds. They forgot what was really important.]

## Arts & Crafts Idea

Cover shoe boxes with construction paper to look like bricks. Using toy soldiers, ask students to retell the story of the Tower of Babel as they "build" a ziggurat by carrying

one shoe box after another to the top. Ask them to talk about how their toy soldier "feels"-about the people below, about building the tower, about carrying the bricks, etc. And, remember, half the fun is allowing the class to knock the tower over from time to time.

### **Closure**

Ask students to restate, in their own words, the meaning of the Tower of Babel story. If they want to show their love for God, how would they go about it? (Refer back to the sentences in the text about watching a sunset or looking at flowers.) How do these things remind us of what is really important in the world?

Give students a preview of next week's lesson by telling them that we will be talking about other people who walked with God - a man called Abram and a woman named Sarai. From now on, we will be reading the Bible stories that are about Jewish history, not just about world history.

Close the lesson by restating the themes you have chosen to teach.

## A TOWER TO THE SKY

**I**n those days everyone on earth spoke the same language. They called things by the same names. And all together, they wandered as one tribe, living and speaking as one people.

Once they came to a green and rolling valley in the land called Shinar. It was there they decided to stay.

They said, "Come, let us take clay from the ground and use it to make bricks. We will bake the bricks to make them hard."

So they made bricks into stones for building, using tar to hold the stones together.

They decided to build a mighty city and a tower of brick. "We will make the tower so tall it will touch the clouds in the sky," they said. "People will then remember us and praise our name. People will want to live in our city forever."

For many years they built. As time passed, more and more people came to join them. It seemed that all the people of the earth were gathering together in one place. The people thought, "Together, we are very great. Together, we can do what only God could do before."

God saw the bricks becoming a city and a tower. God watched as the hearts of the people became as hard as bricks. The people of the earth stopped loving one another. They forgot how to love God. No more did

they stop to look at the flowers growing on the hillsides. No more did they pause to watch the splendor of a sunset. They cared only about building the tower and the city.

The tower was raised brick by brick. As it grew higher, the workers looked down on the people in the city below. The people below looked as tiny as ants. It made the builders feel mighty and strong. "We can build our tower into heaven itself," they said. "We can make war with God."

So God decided to teach them a lesson. God said, "When they talk, let them babble like the noise of water rushing over bricks. They will not understand each other. Then their building, and their evil, will come to an end."

God made their language into many languages. People wondered why no one could understand them. The making of bricks stopped. People argued and did not know what their arguing was all about. The building stopped.

People gathered together into small tribes that spoke one language. They said, "Let us leave this place and make a home together somewhere beyond these hills."

The city was never finished, and the tower never reached the clouds. People set out for places all around the earth.

So, from that time to this, people call that place Babel, because in Babel God babbled the language of the whole earth.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

**“We can make war  
with God.”**

The builders on the tower looked down and saw everything below getting smaller and smaller. It made them feel stronger and more important than the people below. They began to think that they were as mighty as God.

You do not have to be on top of a tall tower to look down on other people. You can just say or think that a person is someone to “look down on,” someone less important than you.

But, really, God makes each of us special, so every person is important. Every person has something special to offer the world. “Looking down” on people is always a mistake. It’s like “making war with God.”



The Empire State Building: One of the most famous skyscrapers in the world. Can you imagine how the people of the city below looked to the workers who built this modern-day ziggurat?

At the United Nations people speak many languages, but try hard to understand one another so that the nations of the world can live together in peace.

God made each of us special and different. It is up to us to learn how to share one world, making it better for all.



#### WHAT DOES IT TEACH?

### A Tower to the Sky

The tower in the story was a kind of pyramid called a *ziggurat*. Almost always, the reason for building it was to worship a false god at the top. The builders wanted the people below to worship them the way we worship God. They knew no tower could really reach the sky. But the builders wanted their tower to be the highest in the world. Then other people might think the builders were the greatest and mightiest people in the world and want to be just like them. But God does not want us all to be alike. God did not give us one face,

one color of skin, or one way of thinking. God wants each of us to be special. So God divided these people and sent them to all corners of the earth.

It is wrong to think that all humans should be one and the same. In truth, God is One and Unique, while we are many and different.

#### A LESSON ABOUT THE TORAH

### What Is Really Important?

Our teachers say: The Tower of Babel had seven steps from the east and seven steps from the west. On one side they brought up huge bricks. On the other side people went down again. As the tower grew taller, it took many years to bring a brick to the top. So it seemed that the bricks were more important than people.

If a person fell off the tower, people did not even stop working. They paid no attention at all. But if one brick fell down, they would sit and weep. They would cry, "Woe to us! When will another brick be brought up to replace the one that fell?"

God wants us to remember what is really important. Bricks can never be more important than life. Things are never as important as people. That is what the builders forgot, and that is what we must always remember.

[Source: Pirke deRebbe Eliezer]