

The Trump Tower of Babel

by Shalom Auslander

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language...

and now nothing will be restrained from them.

- Genesis 11:6

1.

Once upon a time in Babel, people got together.

“Hey,” they said, “let’s build a tower!”

Everyone thought that was a grand idea, except for a fellow named God, who controlled the world and was an addict. The drug God was addicted to was Power, with an occasional hit of Control, and though he had more power and control than anyone else, he had very small hands, which made him insecure, and so he didn’t like the idea of people coming together, for he was afraid that if they did, he would soon lose his beloved Power.

The tower grew and grew, and it was a magnificent tower, not just because of the wonderful lobby, indoor pool and rooftop restaurant, but because it had been built by the collective effort of mankind, working as one. It was a brick and mortar testament to what mankind can do when it puts aside its differences. But the more magnificent the tower became, the more threatened God felt. And so, one day, God waved his magic wand, and caused the people to begin speaking different languages. Unable to understand one another, the people soon began to fight, and behold, the magnificent building collapsed, and the people were scattered around the world forever more, and God felt like a very big man, indeed.

The End.

Or was it the beginning?

2.

I read an article by a Jewish-American recently - we’re all about the hyphenates these days - that made me wish the Tower of Babel had collapsed upon her, and only her, and behold, her bones had been scattered around the world forever more.

I should state before I begin that I am a happily fallen Jew, an excommunicated apostate with strict Orthodox roots I severed when I was eighteen years old and have not missed for a minute; the absence of those roots has only made this tree stronger and happier, as the toxic soil they had been buried in was causing a slow and painful death. Okay, I think I've stretched that metaphor far enough. The point is, despite my rabbis and despite my passport, I don't consider myself Jewish and I don't consider myself American; what I am is a human being, born against my will, cursed with a frontal lobe, aware of my own mortality, serving out a life sentence for some past-life crime I don't remember committing. That, frankly, is enough of an identity for me.

But more of that later.

The article in question centered around the secular Jewish author's regret, in the face of President Trump, for not being more Jewish. She catalogs the story points of her assimilated life – the non-religious parents, the liberal arts college, the social activism for African-American causes, female causes, but never Jewish causes. In fact, she writes, she never really had to think about her identity as a Jew.

“That is,” she wrote, skipping a line for emphasis like I just did, “until Donald Trump.”

She was shocked – at his victory, his callousness, his racism, his association with anti-Semites and his courting of White Nationals (a scumbag courting scumbags in order to become Head Scumbag of a frequently scumbag nation should not have been the surprise it seems to have been, but there you have it). It was such a surprise, in fact, that she was reborn.

“I might not have wanted to think about my Jewishness,” she wrote, “but now I had to.”

Troubled, the author spoke with a similarly-reborn Jewish-American friend, and they both agreed that the Holocaust was bad, and that Jews aren't all rich, and that the “new cycle” of anti-Semitism was pretty scary. And you know what else they realized? That there were some really great parts about being Jewish, gosh darn it: they loved bagels, and they loved latkes and they loved Anne Frank.

That last one seems like a strange thing to love.

But more of that later.

She concludes the article with a Jewish-American fist in the air: “For the first time, I see my Jewishness as part of who I fundamentally am.”

Given a thousand years, which is twice as long as fundamentalist Jews believe the world has existed, I could not think of a worse reaction to President Donald Trump.

3.

I was raised with a yarmulke on my head, and a target on my back.

Goyim (non-Jews) were out to get me. My parents and teachers made this very clear, and the *goyim*, they explained, were a formidable foe. They're violent, they told me, uneducated, rude and boorish. They have no regard for intelligence, which is why they hate us. They drink – beer mostly, while watching football - and when they're drunk they become violent, usually against Jews. *Goyim* hate Jews, and spend the bulk of their time figuring out new ways to kill them. Anytime you see *goyim* sitting around a table, they're probably talking about Jews, and discussing the latest methods of genocide.

Paranoia existed among Jews long before the Holocaust, but the Holocaust, having occurred just thirty years prior to my birth, seems to have amplified them, justified them, normalized them.

“The only good German,” my parents used to say, “is a dead German.”

Everyone agreed.

The worst type of *goyim*, of course, are the black ones, who are even more violent than the white ones, and dumber, too. But the Irish ones are pretty bad also, because they drink the most, and so are the Hispanic ones, who aren't as bad as the black ones but carry switchblades and mug old ladies. No *goy*, though, is as bad as the Arab, who lives only to murder Jewish children.

“The only good Arab,” my parents used to say, “is a dead Arab.”

Everyone agreed.

And so the hated become the haters.

And those who are hated by the haters who used to be hated become haters of the first haters.

Etcetera.

4.

When I was a child, I wanted to be white. And why not? The white people drove cars on Saturdays – Camaros and Mustangs, not Nissan fucking Sentras – while I was stuck in synagogue, and they ate at McDonald's and Red Lobster, and they got tattoos and the boys could

grow their hair long and the girls wore bikinis at the mall. Best of all, nobody hated them – nobody said they were in league with Satan, or were controlling America, or were evil shapeshifters.

Fortunately, my skin was white so passing would be no problem.

So I spoke like them, I grew my hair like them, I wore “AC/DC” t-shirts and ripped jeans like them.

No luck.

“Fucking Jew,” they said when they heard my name.

Nowadays I don’t want to be white. Who would? White people are bad. White people are slave traders. White people are plunderers. White people are sexual harassers of women. White people are the privileged despoilers of the world.

Fortunately, I’m Jewish.

“Bullshit,” they say when they look at my skin. “Fucking white boy.”

So much for shapeshifting.

5.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author of the best-selling “Between Me and the World,” wrote an article recently chastising Kanye West, the Trump-supporting R&B star, for wanting to be white. Kanye wants a “white” freedom, Coates wrote. White freedom as defined by Coates is “freedom without consequence, freedom without criticism, freedom to be proud and ignorant; freedom to profit off a people in one moment and abandon them in the next; a Stand Your Ground freedom, freedom without responsibility, without hard memory.”

Black freedom, on Ta-Nehisi’s other hand, is philanthropic. Black freedom is giving. Black freedom is self-sacrificing.

Divisions thus solidified, Coates finishes by exhorting Kanye to come back to his race – “back to the bone and drum, back to Chicago, back to Home.”

Here’s what I’ve been thinking lately: if I *could* shapeshift, I sure as hell wouldn’t turn myself into a human.

A dog, maybe.

A tree.

A rock even.

But not a fucking human.

6.

Ever since I was a child, I hear anti-Semitism. Even when it doesn't exist.

Bob Marley:

*Old Pirates, yes, those rabbis,
sold us to the merchant ships.*

Ray Charles:

*Everyone was Jewish,
you can bet your soul,
they did the boogie-woogie
with a study roll.*

Biggie Smalls:

*Now, who's hot, who's not?
Tell me who rock, who sell out in stores?
Tell me who flopped, who copped the blue drop,
Whose Jews got rocks?*

Marley, that son of a bitch, was promoting the old canard that Jews ran the African slave trade; Ray Charles was suggesting that only Jews can afford to go to nightclubs where they dance with "study rolls," by which he obviously means Torahs; Biggie was suggesting that his Jewish talent agents own a lot of diamonds because they steal from him.*

Divisions between peoples, once formed, are difficult to mend. Worse, they are passed down, generation to generation, like gonorrhoea. The German language still gives me the willies. The alt-rock band Tool has a song called, "Die Eier Von Satan." The lyrics are in German, sung as if over a loudspeaker to a massive cheering crowd. It sounds like Nuremberg, with repeated calls for "Und kleine eier!" It is chilling and frightening and a joke: the lyrics are nothing more than the recipe for Devil's Food Cake.

"Und kleine eier!" is German for "and no eggs."

Once upon a time, I began receiving dozens of unsolicited menus shoved beneath my office door. It is a fact of urban life, I suppose, but it annoyed me and so I had a metal sign made,

which I hung on the door, featuring a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson about the importance of peace.

Written in Arabic.

I never received another menu.

* The real Marley lyrics, by the way, are “Old pirates, yes, they *rob I*,” not mentioning Jews at all. Ray Charles was actually saying “Everyone was *juiced*, you can bet your soul, they did the boogie-woogie with a *steady* roll,” which makes much more sense than a nightclub filled with Jews carrying Torahs, and Biggie was simply boasting, saying that his “*jewels* got rocks” -- an ugly materialism, to be sure, but not exactly Mein Kampf.

7.

The future, in case you haven't heard, is female.

Women are marching.

Women are “woke.”

Everyone is woke.

There are Gay Pride marches and Black Pride marches. There is the Salute to Israel Parade, and the Puerto Rican Day Parade. New York City, in fact, is a hyphenates dream. January brings Uduh Fitr, when thousands of Muslim-Americans gather in Prospect Park to celebrate the end of Ramadan. February brings parades for Asian-Americans celebrating Chinese New Year. With March comes spring, and the massive Phagwah Procession for Caribbean-Indo-Guyanese-Americans, followed by the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the “glue of the Irish-American community,” followed a week later by the Greek Independence Day Parade for Greek-Americans. April is a slow month, hyphenate-wise, but May leaves no hyphenate unturned: there is the Buddha Parade for Buddhist-Americans, the Cuban Day Parade for Cuban-Americans, Ukrainian Easter Festival for Ukrainian-Americans, the Norwegian-American Parade for Norwegian-Americans, Martin Luther King Day Parade (which is predominately African-American, though many other hyphenates join in the celebration of the Reverend's call for unity, which is actually anti-hyphenate), the Turkish-American Parade for Turkish-Americans, the Salute to Israel Parade for Jewish-Americans and the Czech and Slovak Festival for Czecho-Slovakian-Americans. And it's not even summer yet! In June the city holds the Puerto Rican Day

Parade, the Tribute to the Ancestors of the Middle Passage, the Caribbean Culture Festival and the LGBTQ Pride March. As June turns to July, you'll find the African Arts Festival over in Brooklyn and the Colombian Independence Day Parade in Queens. August ushers in the dog days of summer, along with the Ecuadorian Parade, the Dominican Day Parade, the India Day Parade for Indian-Americans, the Russian Festival and the Pakistan Day Parade. September means back to work, but save some time for the African-American Day Parade, the German-American Parade, the Muslim Day Parade, the Korean Festival and the Tibetan Festival. The temps cool down in October, but not enough to slow the Hispanic Day Parade in Manhattan and the India Parade at the South Street Seaport.

Identity is all the rage.

Pride is everywhere.

Everyone is woke.

And yet we hate one another more than ever.

Maybe Jesus was right when he said pride was a sin.

What Parade Would Jesus Attend?

In Scrabble, any word with a hyphenate cannot be played.

Jesus or Scrabble, take your pick.

I moved homes recently; my movers were Russian. They were extremely friendly and helpful; my young sons thought Dmitri a "cool guy."

"Did they steal anything?" a progressive Jewish-American friend joked.

"Did they plant cameras?" asked an African-American friend.

"Right now," admitted a LGBTQ+-American, "I would find a bunch of Russians in my house a bit creepy."

And why not? It's a digital World War Three, they inform me. It's a New Cold War. There's a Red under your bed. They hate our freedom. They're trying to take over the world. They're shapeshifters.

Oh, wait.

That's me.

8.

In the wake of Trump, say the polls, the Jews are fracturing. Jewish-Americans who hate Trump can't understand the Jewish-Americans who love him. Jewish-Americans who love him think Jewish-Americans who hate him are selling out Israel. Israeli-Jews love Trump and think American Jews don't care about them. Right-wing Jews are angry at Left-wing Jews for putting Liberalism before Judaism, left-wing Jews are angry at right-wing Jews for not understanding that equal rights for all is good for Jews, too, elderly Jews think young Jews don't understand why they support Israel and young Jews don't approve of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians.

There's one thing everyone agrees on, though: in the face of President Trump, we need to return to our people.

Another article by another Jewish-American – and not just a Jewish-American, but an Ashkenazi-Jewish-American, married to a Ghanian-Jewish-American.

Jewish, interracial and female.

Identity politics wise, that's a Triple Word Score. That's untouchable. That's checkmate.

She's seen an uptick in anti-Semitism, she writes, not just among White Nationalists, but among the progressive movements to which she belongs. When she saw a tweet from Black Lives Matter calling Israeli Jews white colonialists and depicting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle between White Supremacists (Israelis) and an oppressed, dark-skinned minority (Palestinians), she was forced to respond.

“The Israeli Palestinian conflict is complicated, and much more nuanced than this portrayal,” she tweeted.

But the people concerned with black lives, she discovered, were decidedly unconcerned with anyone they deemed white (Israelis, incidentally, are as dark as any Arab).

They told her to shut the fuck up.

They told her she was a “genocidal cunt.”

Her response to their predictable response?

You guessed it: to embrace her Judaism.

“I owe any children we have,” she wrote, “the chance to stand on two feet, firmly rooted in their heritage.” And she vows to continue fighting for progressive causes, “As a Jew, with a full, vocal Jewish identity. I am woke.”

Everyone's so woke, I want to go the fuck to sleep.

Let's talk buildings.

9.

Given that the Old Testament describes the Tower of Babel as being “built with mortar and slime (*Genesis, 11:3*),” I’m surprised nobody has made the connection to Donald Trump, whose properties, family and career have been built of the same materials.

I am, unfortunately, a writer. This means I drink too much alcohol, spend most of what little I earn on psychotherapy, and see narratives wherever I look. All is story: beginnings, middle, ends, major goals, obstacles, acts, scenes; of fictional characters, of my own life, of the lives of friends and family members.

It's very annoying.

And as the world around me gets ever more woke, and ever more fractured, I see a greater parallel to the Tower of Babel story than just the brick and slime.

The rabbis who taught me when I was young said the Babel story is about man's arrogance in challenging God. Bible Scholars, meanwhile, say the story was simply ancient people's attempt to explain the phenomenon of our having different languages.

In my view, they're both wrong.

It's not about God.

It's not about language.

It's about the story of mankind - our beginning, middle and possible end. We have been scattered, broken apart. That, in storytelling-speak, was the Inciting Incident, that plot point of the Beginning that sets the Quest in motion.

Our Quest is to come back together. To return to One.

We are a puzzle slowly reforming, a shattered window, the shards sharp and strewn about the globe.

And so these are the antagonists of the story: Race, Religion, Nationality.

Each conspires to keep the pieces from rejoining.

“You're special,” they whisper in our ears. “You're the most important. You're the most aggrieved. You're the most destined to rule.”

Which brings me back to the journalist I was imagining getting crushed to death beneath the Tower of Babel earlier. And to Donald Trump. And to Jewish-Americans and to African-

Americans and to every other hyphenate in every other country, responding to this nothing-new Trumpian hatred in precisely the wrong manner: with tribalism. With separation. With retreat, wrapped in pride – retreat into the shtetl, the ghetto, the ‘hood.

Giving the Gods, in the process, exactly what they want.

Don’t tell me the answer to hatred is sewing the yellow Star of David on your own damned shirtsleeve. Don’t tell me you’re woke when you exhort your brothers to return to the “bone and drum.” You want to move past the Gods, Trump or otherwise, who incite racism and division? Then fuck who you are, and fuck where you come from. Fuck your hyphen, and fuck your pride, fuck your homeland and fuck anyone who tells you you’re Chosen.

Anne Frank couldn’t stomach the religious Jews in her class, because they were isolationists. It’s one of the many painful ironies of her too-short life: she wanted no labels, and was murdered by people who saw nothing but. So don’t tell me you love Anne Frank, and then pat yourself on the back for sinking into the pit of Identity.

There are no Jews. There are no Africans, no Americans, no Russians.

There are only humans.

We all bleed, we all laugh, we all feel hunger, we all die.

The stakes of this story are high. If we succeed, we might just build something magnificent. If we don’t – if we continue to traffic in divisions and identities and jingoistic flag-waving - we’ll fight, and die, the way the Gods and Trumps want us to.

Racists, nationalists and isolationists all hate different things, but there’s one thing they love, without fail: their blood. They love their blood, and they love keeping it pure, and what they really hate, more than anything, is the “mingling” of their blood with other races.

So let’s mingle.

Let’s become the One they fear.

Let’s fuck, let’s marry, let’s live without past. Let’s get rid of races and religions, nations and nationalities. No more black and white, no more Jew and Gentile. No more Russian and no more American. The only nation is Earth. The only flag is the human flag.

The American President builds with slime.

All leaders do.

All dividers do.

In response, let’s build something magnificent.