



## **SERMON NO'ACH: THE MISSING INSTRUCTION**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 21 October 2017  
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 “And this is how you shall make it.”<sup>2</sup> With these words, God begins to dictate the instructions for the first recorded instance of flat-pack construction. Not so much tekiah g’dolah as IKEA g’dolah. What were the instructions? “The length of the ark shall be 300 cubits, its width 50 cubits and its height 30 cubits. Make an opening for daylight, near the top, and an entrance hatch; and make the whole ark three stories deep.”<sup>3</sup>
- 2 Stop and have a think: there’s something missing. Seriously, think back to the last time you bought something flat-packed from IKEA or Argos; try to remember what came with it.
- 3 The thing that’s missing is a diagram. (Actually two things are missing if we count the Allen key.) IKEA always, without fail, includes a diagram so that we can visualise what we’re supposed to build before building it. Even then, it’s probably possible to make the furniture without looking at the pictures, if the words are clear enough; but God’s instructions aren’t actually very clear at all. They’re not even instructions, strictly speaking; just dimensions. ‘The ark should be so high and so wide; it needs a door (well duh) and a skylight.’ There are any number of ways Noah could have complied with those specifications – and, indeed, if you search Google for ‘Noah’s Ark diagram’, you’ll see just how many ways artists have envisaged it.
- 4 That wasn’t carelessness on God’s part. God had a vision for what the ark should be like – its general size and shape – but left it up to Noah to decide the rest.



- 5 Hold that thought, because I'm going to skip ahead to the other major story in this week's parasha, the Tower of Babel.<sup>4</sup>
- 6 Economists like to divide things into rival and non-rival goods. A rival good is one where there's a limit on how many people can benefit from it.<sup>5</sup> So a golf course is rival, because, while plenty of people can use it at the same time, the more who do, the more congested and less fun the experience becomes for everyone. Non-rival goods don't cause any of that. A beautiful view is non-rival, because it remains just as beautiful no matter how many people are standing and looking at it.
- 7 Some economists think there's a further category: anti-rival goods. These are things that actually get better the more people use them.<sup>6</sup> The classic example of this is language. Each additional person who learns English not only doesn't interfere with my use of the language, they actively enhance it because now, with no extra work on my part, there are even more people with whom I can communicate.
- 8 God is clearly an economist who believes in the power of anti-rival goods, because, looking down on the Tower of Babel, God decided to take away the most powerful good humanity has ever had – a single, global language – in what seems almost like fear: “If, as one people with one tongue for all, this is how they have begun to act, then there will be no limits to what they can do.”<sup>7</sup>
- 9 But what do these two stories, lumped together in one bumper parasha, tell us? I think they're both about the same thing, and that thing is the need for humans to grow and co-operate of our own initiative. It's a coming-of-age story for humankind.
- 10 God could have told Noah exactly how to build the ark, but didn't, and instead gave Noah the tools he needed to figure out how to do it for himself. And God could have sat back as humanity lazily became more united not out of a sense



of unity or purpose but complacently and by default because they all happened to be born with the gift of a universal language: instead, God ‘balal’,<sup>8</sup> God confused, God shook things up a bit.

- 11 In doing so, God set humankind a challenge – which we still haven’t achieved – to come together as one people, to build a tower under our own steam, in harmony and co-operation, not just out of boredom and for want of anything else to struggle for, coasting on superhuman linguistic abilities ‘just because we can’, but as the fruit of an era of true human co-operation that we instigate ourselves.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 21.10.17**

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 6:13-16

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:15

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 6:15-16

<sup>4</sup> The congregation explored this episode through the lens of Stephen Millhauser’s excellent short story ‘The Tower’, abridged, from *Dangerous Laughter* (Alfred A Knopf, 2009): 145-58.

<sup>5</sup> John Wright, *The Ethics of Economic Rationalism* (University of New South Wales Press, 2002): 7.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Weber, *The Success of Open Source* (Harvard University Press, 2004): 153-54.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 11:6

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 11:7