LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Noah

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This month's Lehrhaus Over Shabbat is dedicated in loving memory of Mrs. Livia Turkel, Chaya Sara bas Eliyahu, on the occasion of her sixth yahrzeit. A woman who cherished tefillah and Torah learning, she dedicated her life to Jewish education. Sponsored by Brenda and Elihu Turkel and family.

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The Seventh Day: Sabbath and Surrender in Somatic Group Work

Ben Notis studies medieval Hebrew literature of Islamic Spain.

Summer in Jerusalem, 2022

a night darker than a pupil
deeper than a drop of ink
that lapses into a page
craves a life

in this July
the dire jasmine
sips the stone
and dissolves into the crescent

peace o aloes
your limbs entwine like lovers
who touch blessedly

please o night
take me to your cave
and drown me in your pitch

Fragments of an Uncle

Hey nieces and nephews,
you're building rockets out of blocks,
and towers out of magna-tiles,
(with safe rooms for the turtles and chickens),
and pretending to be soldiers.

Siren.
Shelter.
Let's tuck you in—

bullets, get down
don't shudder like the ground now
better to be…

Dad's bringing the neighbors back, and
Mom's keeping you safe inside, and

you're waiting so patiently
with tigers and bears and stickers of planets.

Siren.
Shelter.
Let's tuck you in—

it's all bombed out again
can't put you to rest right now
but maybe tomorrow…

Siren. Shelter.
Let's tuck you in—

Beautiful, beloved nieces and nephews,
I hope we've sheltered you enough,
but I know you shelter us.
Ah, you another story? Sure.

a bough breaks again
it's hard to imagine, i know, but
to me, it seems to be another limb…

A Kaddish

Yitgaddal ve-yitkaddash,
What have we done?
Amen
In the worlds we ended, as we willed,
we overthrew Your dominion—
we ended their lives,
and ended our lives,
all the lives in the House of Israel—
and the puddle of blood
continues to seethe,
and the ash on the altar
continues to burn.
Now, let us say,
Amen.

A Jewish Business Lawyer Reads Magnifica Humanitas in the Wilderness of New Hampshire

Seth C. Oranburg is Professor of Law and Co-Director of the Law and Entrepreneurship Program at the Columbus School of Law, The Catholic University of America.

The bird was banging on my window again. I think he is an oriole, but I am not much of an ornithologist, so I named him Bangy Bird. Bangy Bird visits me most evenings when I work late in the basement. He bangs on the glass for a while and leaves when it is fully dark.

Tonight, it took me some time to notice the dark, because my computer screen was stacked with unanswered emails, a motion for judicial dissolution of an uneconomic trust, and *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV's new encyclical on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence. I also had ChatGPT open for proofreading and Westlaw's AI tool running a deep search for recent cases on social-media liabilities for fraud. I was, in other words, building a small Babel of my own while reading the warning against it, and I did not notice the irony any more than I noticed that the bird had stopped. The encyclical was about what I do.

When I did notice that the basement was dark, I got up to get away from the glare. I sat in my armchair and continued reading the week's Torah portion. It was *Bamidbar* (במדבר), which means "in the wilderness," the opening of the Book of Numbers. The Israelites are encamped at Sinai, arranged by tribe around the Tent of Meeting. The book begins with a census. God tells Moses to count the men encamped in the wasteland.

My mind drifted back to the encyclical, because *Magnifica Humanitas* is about the opposite of a wasteland. It is about cities, two cities. Leo sets them against each other in the opening paragraph and builds the whole encyclical on their contrast.

> Humanity, created by God in all its grandeur, is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together. (MH ¶ 1)

Babel is the city built without God: one language, one technology, one direction, a tower meant to reach heaven and to make its builders a name (Genesis 11:1-9). Jerusalem, rebuilt under Nehemiah, is the city raised from ruin by ordinary people, each family assigned its own section of the wall (Nehemiah 3). Leo frames the choice this way:

> The primary choice is not between a "yes" or "no" to technology, but rather between constructing Babel or rebuilding Jerusalem. (MH ¶ 9)

Maybe it is strange that a desert made me think of cities. But the census was boring me, so I put Numbers down and turned back to Genesis 11, to the Tower of Babel itself.

As an aside, I do not read Hebrew quickly. I know the *aleph bet*. I get through the pointed text slowly with a finger on the line.

Yet I know these letters are not only sounds. They are the material God used to speak the world into being.

The name Babel (ב ב ל) is explained inside the story that names it. God scatters its builders "because there the Lord confused" their speech (Genesis 11:9). The Hebrew for confused is *balal* (ב ל ל). The city's own name is the confusion it produced. And it's more than a pun.

Babel in Hebrew is three letters: *bet* (ב), *bet* (ב), *lamed* (ל). *Hevel* (ה ב ל) is also three letters: *hei* (ה), *bet*, *lamed*. The two words share their last two letters and differ only at the front. *Hevel* means breath, or vapor, the same word Ecclesiastes uses for "vanity of vanities" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Like

chemistry, substitute the breath with a second built wall and you have Babel.

Built wall is the right word, because *bet* is the house. It is the first letter of the Torah, the letter creation begins with, and its shape is a little enclosure open on one side. A house is defined by its opening; that is what makes it a house and not a box. Babel doubles the *bet*, so the word runs house, house, and the first house opens only onto the second one, which is to say, it is not open at all. At the end stands the *lamed*, the one letter that rises above the line of the script.

Hevel begins with the open letter. The Talmud compares the *hei* to a portico, open on one side so that anyone who wants to leave can leave, with its left leg hanging short so that anyone who repents can be brought back in (*Menahot* 29b). Babel puts a wall where that opening was. What still rises at the end of the word is the *lamed*, and Rashi, glossing a phrase in *Sanhedrin*, calls the stroke above the *lamed* the tower—*migdal* (מגדל), the term from Genesis 11—that flies in the air.[1]

בבל. The first house has a door, and the door opens onto the back wall of the second house, which is to say it does not open.

This analysis of the letters is my own reading, but this is what I take Leo to be afraid of. AI becomes Babel when it learns only from what it has already produced, so that each thing it makes opens only onto the next thing it made. What Babel walled off was *hevel*, the breath. AI keeps Babel's wall.

Leo does not stop at warning. He asks a question. Looking at the great "construction sites" of the age, he asks plainly, "What are we building" (MH ¶ 90)? He recommends the other city. And Hebrew has something to say about that city too.

[1] Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 106b, s.v. "https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Sanhedrin.106b.11.3?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en."

Jerusalem first shows up in the Torah as *Shalem* (ש ל ם), which means whole, or at peace (Genesis 14:18).

When God answers Job out of the storm, He describes creation as a building project and gives the specifications: foundations, a measuring line, sunken bases, a cornerstone (Job 38:4–6). Then He asks where Job was when the morning stars sang together. Malbim reads the two as one event: kings laying a cornerstone station singers and musicians to sound a great blast, and that is what the stars were doing. Babel is the only building in any of these texts that goes up in silence.

Leo, echoing the Psalms (118:22), says the city's cornerstone will be "the 'rejected stones' — the poor, the sick, the migrants and the least among us" (MH ¶ 16). The stone the builders threw away is the one the city is founded on. It is, as Leo keeps insisting, an undertaking that "rebuilds relationships before rebuilding with stones" (MH ¶ 8), and it is never finished, because bringing people together is not the kind of thing that finishes.

I kept glancing at the census in *Bamidbar*, which is also a list of names lifted up, each one counted before any city gets built.

Something banged at the window and I looked up, thinking it was Bangy Bird back. It was the wind. The woods around the house do that when the air temperature drops in the evening, and past the glass there was nothing visible, just the New Hampshire dark going on as far as it goes. The room got quiet again.

Leo answers his question, "what are we building," with a tool. He calls AI a valuable tool that asks for "a measured and vigilant approach" (MH ¶ 100), and he denies that any technical instrument is morally neutral (MH ¶ 104). The question is not whether to use the tool but what kind of dwelling we are building with it, and for whom.

There is a Hebrew word more specific than tool for the kind of thing I had in mind, though: *Golem* (גולם). The word in the Bible means unformed substance, what God saw of the writer in Psalm 139:16 before any of his days existed. It is not a man at all in its Tanakh sense.[2] In the much later popular legend it became the clay figure with a name written on parchment under its tongue, animated and powerful and unable to answer for what it does. The legend attached itself to the Maharal of Prague, though nothing he wrote tells it, and the version everyone knows was published in 1909 by Yudl Rosenberg, who presented his own composition as a manuscript he had found.[3] A *golem*, in either sense, is a thing made but not finished, with the power to act and no way to be held to account.

I looked up the modern Hebrew for artificial intelligence. It is *binah melakhutit* (בינה מלאכותית), two words. The first, *binah*, is

[2] "Golem" is applied to a person in Mishnaic Hebrew, in the sense of someone crude and unfinished. See Avot 5:7, contrasting the golem with the wise man; and Jastrow, s.v. גולם.

[3] See Shnayer Z. Leiman, "The Adventure of the Maharal of Prague in London: R. Yudl Rosenberg and the Golem of Prague," *Tradition* 36.1 (2002), 26-58.

understanding. The second is the adjective form of *melakhah* (מלאכה), which means work, or craft. Artificial intelligence, in Hebrew, is the intelligence of craft, the understanding that is made rather than born.

What I noticed, looking at the second word, is that its root is the root of another word I do know: *malakh* (מלאך), the Hebrew for messenger, which the Greek Septuagint renders *angelos*, later Latinized into *angelus*, whence the English "angel." What I noticed, looking at the second word, is that its root is the root of another word I do know: *malakh* (מלאך), the Hebrew for messenger, which the Greek Septuagint renders *angelos*, later Latinized into *angelus*, whence the English “angel.” Samson Raphael Hirsch put the relation plainly, glossing the Sabbath verse in Genesis: while a *malakh* is as a person, a *melakhah* is as a thing, the bearer of an intention that came from somewhere else.[4] Rashi likewise holds that angels are mere instrumentalities with no power of their own (Rashi on Genesis 19:22).

In Hebrew, man-made intelligence and the angel share their letters, because both are sent. Both have a job. Neither chooses.

In the tradition an angel has no evil inclination (*Shabbat* 89a, where Moses argues the point to the angels themselves), which sounds like a virtue until you notice it also has no good inclination. It cannot disobey, cannot repent, cannot love, cannot enter a covenant, because to enter a covenant you have to be free to break it. An angel performs the mission of whoever sent it, exactly, and never two missions at once (*Bereishit Rabbah* 50:2), and the only question that has ever mattered about an angel is who did the sending.

Leo runs through what the machine cannot do. It does "not undergo experiences," does "not feel joy or pain," does not "have a moral conscience" (MH ¶ 99). The full list in the encyclical is longer than mine. A thing that executes a mission without a conscience is a thing the tradition already has a name for. The name is the angel.

And I know what a lawyer does. The lawyer writes the instructions the messenger carries. The contracts I draft tell the algorithm what to do and when. *Shall* is a different country from *may*. The clause governs the machine, and the machine does not pause to ask whether the clause is wise. I had not put that together before.

I looked at the window. Bangy Bird had not come back.

The encyclical names two cities. Babel and Jerusalem, the tower and the wall, the sealed house and the open one. Both are building projects; he calls them that himself. But the book on my desk that night was about neither. It was about the place between them, and the place between two cities is not a third city. It is the wilderness.

The most important thing that ever happened to my people happened there, in the *midbar* (מדבר), on no one's land. The rabbis ask why the Torah was

[4] Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary on Genesis 2:2, in *The Pentateuch*, trans. Isaac Levy (Judaica Press, 1989).

given in the desert and not in a city or a field that belonged to somebody, and the answer they give is that the desert is ownerless (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:7, commenting on the very verse that opens the book). It belongs to no tribe and no king and no company, and so anyone willing to make himself ownerless like the wilderness can receive what is given there (*Nedarim* 55a).

I had heard that before. I had not connected it to the census I was bored by, which is the first thing the Torah does in that ownerless place: it counts the people one at a time, by name, by family, lifting each head. Not bricks, which is what Babel counts and mourns when one falls. Not a wall, which is what Jerusalem will eventually need. Before the people build anything at all, in the place no one owns, they are counted by name.

What the people had in the wilderness was a *mishkan* (משכן), a portable tent carried at the center of the camp. The Torah closes the instructions for that tent with the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-17) and opens the actual building with the Sabbath again (Exodus 35:1-3), and Rashi says the order is deliberate: the tent does not push the Sabbath aside.[5] R. Hanina bar Hama identified the thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on Shabbat as the kinds of work that were involved in the work of building that tent (*Shabbat* 49b), so the day and the tent are made of the same labor. Heschel called the seventh day "a palace in time which we build",[6] and we build it by stopping the physical work that built the tent. The wall came a thousand years later, when there was no camp left. Nehemiah's wall, which the encyclical uses as its image, is what you build after the tent.

I looked, later, at the word *midbar*, wilderness, and the word *davar* (דבר), which means word or speech, because they looked alike on the page. The lexicons separate them, giving "wilderness" a root that means driving a flock, but the tradition has long heard the two together. The opening verse of the Book of Numbers, the verse that gives the book its Hebrew name *Bamidbar*, says "*va-yedaber Adonai el Moshe be-midbar Sinai*" the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. The Sefat Emet hears speech and leading at once in the word *midbar* (Sefat Emet, Bamidbar, 5633). The verb for spoke and the noun for wilderness carry the same three letters, with a *mem* set in front of the one that means wilderness.

The first sentence of the book, read that way, says the word was spoken in the place of speech.

The choice is made in the place the encyclical does not name, the wilderness between the two cities, where you are counted by name before you are set into a wall.

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[5] Rashi to Exodus 35:2, s.v. "https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.35.2?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en."

[6] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005), ch. 1.

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