

Drash – Parsha Noach (10/9/21)
by Laura Callen

Reading this week's parsha, I imagined walking through the land of Shinar. The tower rising on the horizon. The words of one language ricocheting around town. Then Chapter 11 verse 6 stopped me in my tracks.

“...and the Lord 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.”

“...nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach”. This is an extraordinary idea: Humans have the ability to imagine anything and make it real.

The people imagine a tower “with its top in the sky”. God responds with a harsh punishment, letting us know that this is not the best use of our imagination.

The verse is heavy with anger and disappointment. But as I read it over and over again, all I could feel was excitement. If we can propose, *yazmu*, anything, then aren't towers just one possibility? Can't we also propose sanctuary cities and mutual aid networks? I became deeply curious about our imagination and how we might use it to shape a more just future.

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So far in Genesis, God has been very busy creating: the heavens and earth, human beings, a flood followed by a rainbow.

Poet Lucille Clifton said, “You cannot build what you can't imagine.” That makes sense to me. God the Creator must also be God the Dreamer.

Made in God's image, *betzelem elohim*, I believe that we too have this power to dream... to imagine what doesn't yet exist.

In her book, *The Beginning of Desire*, Aviva Zornberg says, “In exercising imagination, man meets God.”...”both God and man have the power of making and breaking reality.” She calls our imagination a kind of “godly play”.

Our imagination is divine. It imitates God. And we use our imagination for so many of our sacred moments. On Shabbat, when we imagine having a double soul. During Passover when we imagine both backwards in time, being slaves in Egypt, and forwards, to a world free of enslavement. When I approach the bimah for an aliyah as a Jew by choice, I imagine myself “bat Abraham v Sarah”.

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If imagination is a divine ability, how can we ever go astray? How can it lead to detention centers rather than community centers?

There are some clues in Bereshit, where the phrase "the imagination of the heart of man" occurs twice, in Genesis 6:5 and 8:21. This imagination is expressed as *yetzer*: an inclination. Inclination itself, *yetzer*, is value neutral, similar to *yazmu* in verse 11:6. It's neither good nor bad. It's source energy, arising unbidden like a heartbeat. It powers our imagination, both the dreams that affirm life – *yetzer ha tov* – and the dreams that diminish life – *yetzer ha ra*.

Aviva Zornberg describes a midrashic debate between rabbi Yehuda and rabbi Meir. R. Yehuda calls imagination a "glory". R. Meir calls it an "alarm". I think they're both right.

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So maybe this parsha isn't about a tower problem. Maybe it's about an imagination problem. God is angry because we are misusing our divine imagination.

Maybe our task, and what the people of Shinar have not yet learned, is to work skillfully with our wild and powerful imaginations. To sift through all the possibilities and choose, with conscious intention, those dreams that are life-giving. To choose what Zornberg calls "the world of the feast, in which there is no need to conquer and suppress one will in order to realize the other".

To understand that imagination is the beginning of justice.

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adrienne maree brown, social justice facilitator, author and healer says of our prisons and colonization and racism, "We are walking around inside of someone else's imagination of how this world could work."

On Monday, Indigenous People's Day, I invite us all to use our divine imagination to inhabit a particular dream of how this world could work -- what the Lisjan Ohlone people call rematriation.

The Lisjan Ohlone are the Indigenous people of the East Bay. They call this land Huchiun. And they have lived here for thousands and thousands of years. They never left or gave up their land, and they live here today.

Rematriation means "restoring sacred relationships between Indigenous people and their ancestral land." Being in sacred relationship with the land is not about owning it, in the sense of private possession that we are taught by capitalism. Indigenous wisdom says that no one owns the land. It can only be stewarded well for the benefit of all. Our Shmita wisdom tells us the same thing. Stewarding land allows the fullness of all life to flourish. Not just the soil, plants and animals...but language, food, ceremony and ancestor memory. Not just some people...but all people.

Can we imagine what repatriation might look like, when the Lisjan Ohlone people are stewards this land once again? We might...

Hear Chochenyo, the Lisjan Ohlone language, in the grocery store, the DMV and right here in shul

See 4th graders visiting an Ohlone learning center at the West Berkeley Shellmound instead of re-enacting the Gold Rush or building models of missions.

Enjoy walks along all the creeks in the East Bay, including the ones that used to be buried.

Introduce ourselves by saying, "I live in Berkeley, in the territory of Huchiun".

Meet with Lisjan Ohlone people in our sanctuary to receive guidance about how to tend 1316 University Ave. in a good way, and how to teach our preschool students about native plants in the garden.

This is the world of the feast.

Non-Indigenous people like me and many of you can choose to be part of this vision. Corrina Gould, the tribal spokesperson for the Lisjan Ohlone people, says that her people want to be good hosts, but they need good guests.

She says, "we invite those who have benefitted from stolen land and settler-colonialism to contribute to our vision of Repatriation, to help us build Indigenous Sovereignty, and support our movement to Repatriate the land."

Sogorea Te' Land Trust, a Lisjan Ohlone organization, has created a Repatriation Guide to offer clear and concrete guidance about how to be a good guest. We can pay the Shuumi land tax, help protect the West Berkeley Shellmound, learn the history of this land and more.

This invitation to be good guests on Lisjan Ohlone land is a profound act of generosity and grace given the unfathomable violence and loss that Indigenous people in California have experienced for over 250 years and continuing today.

More and more people are choosing to be good guests in Huchiun, in support of a repatriation dream. The signs that mark Berkeley boundaries say "Ohlone territory". This summer the city of Alameda started paying Shuumi land tax. And on Monday at 3:30, the Lisjan Ohlone flag will be raised over the Albany City Hall. It's part of a much larger repatriation initiative approved unanimously by the Albany City Council just three weeks ago.

This Indigenous People's Day, may we engage in godly play. May we imagine being good guests on Ohlone land, in support of repatriation – and then take a step towards

making that a reality. We know this is possible because nothing that we may propose to do is out of our reach.

Shabbat shalom.