If one takes a look at the list of nations that today makes up the United Nations, and compares this with the list of nations that the Torah list as developing from Noah – one will find very little similarity at all. Maybe one or two are recognisable names – China, Greece and a nation known as Ashkenaz, the name later given by Jewish sources to the German lands. But not many more are recognisable. The only similarity maybe this – the very existence of the concept of a nation.

We take the idea of a nation for granted. It is a given facet of existence that people are part of a nation. The nation that one belongs to may not be represented by a state, but a nation may not need a state to still express a separate identity. The Kurds for instance do not really have a separate state, although we talk about the Kurdish nation. We, the Jewish people consider ourselves a nation although we only recently gained statehood – and there are many Jews who have issues with the nature of present day Jewish statehood. Academics have argued much about whether a nation is something primordial (that is given and always part of life) or whether it is something created or invented. A group of thinkers in the 1960’s started challenging the sense that nations are imprinted in existence and developed theories that the national concept was invented or created. One such thinker, Benedict Anderson, developed the idea that a nation was an ‘imagined community’ in the sense that one member of the nation would never meet most of those who are part of the same nation. Therefore he felt, imagination was required to be part of a national group. He also felt that European nations after the French revolution, copied movements for self determination in south America thus showing the tendency for national movements to copy and model on others.

But our portion seems clear that the idea of a nation is a clear part of the blueprint of existence. In fact most of Chapter 10 deals with the nations that came from the three sons of Noach who were Cham, Shem and Yefet. From them we are told, came seventy different national groupings that all split according to language and according to the land in which they lived.

And this is a most appropriate context for the famous story of the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11. We all know this story. The building of a Tower by man, the divine anger at this act and the consequent mixing up of languages. We often put this act of Tower building down to hubris or arrogance. They wanted to replace God, and He put them back in their place. But what then would be the relevance of punishing through mixing up languages? How does that connect with the act of building the Tower?

I was reading this week an explanation of Babel this week, by Daniel Gordis, who works at the Shalem Centre in Jerusalem. He rejects the hubris explanation and shows the connection between the chapter on Babel and the one before it. In fact the first verse of the Tower of Babel story gives the game away:

‘All the word was of one tongue and together of thought’

Now that is interesting – as we were just told that nations were being formed with different languages and places of habitation. It therefore seems that the people of Babel were working against the Divine plan to create nations. Rather than allow people to spread out into nations, let us build a Tower that will stop people spreading. This will mean that we can all live together, thinks the same way and speak the same language. In fact the leader of Babel, Nimrod, is considered by Daniel Gordis as the first Imperial leader. Babel would be an Empire, and the plan of diverse nationhood would be foiled. And so God’s reaction is to come down and ensure that languages are mixed up and that people do in fact spread over the world. In Gordis’s words – the reaction of God was to ‘get humanity back on track’.

And so the idea of a nation, of a different, diverse national identity is in some ways primordial. But that does not mean that present day nations are themselves primordial. They may well be spurred on by the idea of nationhood as many were after the Enlightenment, but few nations can say that they always were from the beginning of time. On the other hand, national identity will develop ad evolve. It will develop in Ethno-history as social theorist Anthony Smith describes. In other words, past ethnic and religious symbols will become the definition of present day nationalism. Zionist thinkers of the late 19th century felt that Zionism was an evolution of Jewish Diaspora thought that now looked at self determination as a critical step in Jewish history. Is Zionism identical to Jewish nationalism? I don’t think so. But it was born out of a collection of Jewish ideas married up to a socialist point of view. It is therefore one expression of Jewish nationalism.

Where nationalism has fallen in the past is on the relationship between a majority and a minority within a state. In other words rarely today do we find a state only populated by one nation. There may be a majority nation which the state represents. But this does not ideally preclude minorities playing a part in that specific nation. What Daniel Gordis does with his analysis of the Tower story, is to connect it linguistically with the story of the desire of the Children of Israel to exit Egypt and move to the land of Canaan, the land that had been allotted to them already from the time of Abraham. This for Gordis shows the efficacy of the idea that national and geographical separation is something that the Torah is clearly advocating.

I would agree here that national identity cannot be avoided. But the idea that a geographical location should be populated by one national group is surely a dangerous concept. In fact what I feel is needed today is the education of a concept I saw in an article by Professor Yael Tamir, a previous Education Minister of Israel – a ‘self conscious nationalism’. In other words nationalism required cheques and balances and limitations on the hubris that can set in with separate existence. As I mentioned last week with gender identity – we may well be anchored in one national identity, but we must learn about and be curious about the identity of other national cultures.

The beginning of conflict resolution surely is based on this willingness to engage with other nations; and to not see other nations as a threat to my own national existence.