

## In Defense of Babel

By David Kraemer

On a recent afternoon—bright, clear, and deceptively cheerful—I got out of the subway at 28th Street in Manhattan and headed east. The throngs that populate the sidewalk along those blocks are international in the extreme, though Spanish-speaking and Arabic-speaking people seem to dominate. As I listened to the sounds of Arabic conversation surrounding me, my attention was drawn upward by a commercial jetliner, flying extremely low over midtown. My imagination suddenly got the best of me. What if the plane was headed toward the Empire State Building, just a few blocks away? What if, at the hands of Muslim hijackers, it was all happening again?

The plane quickly passed, and the Empire State Building continued to stand tall. But my imagination continued on its course. What if there was another such attack? What sorts of steps to assure security would I be prepared to support? Forbidding all Arabs to fly in the United States? Expelling all non-citizen Arabs from the country? I was not proud of my thoughts, but I couldn't help thinking them as I continued to walk east. If the security of my home were at risk, wouldn't I have to support extreme measures?

I was on my way to the office, though as it happens, my immediate destination was a Pakistani grocery on Lexington Avenue. I wanted to stop in there for some tri-color couscous, an ingredient in a recipe I'd spotted that morning in *The New York Times* and wanted to try. As I walked into the grocery, I was greeted by the colors and smells of foods and spices from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other near-Asian countries. It was hard not to love the richness of it all. The store transformed my mood. I walked out feeling happy.

As I looked along that small block of Lexington Avenue, with its signs in Indian, Arabic, and other languages I could not recognize, I thanked God for the variety of peoples and cultures that is New York City. Here, the traditions and collected wisdoms of all of the world's nations gather. They thrive in peace and, mostly, in respectful mutual recognition, knowing that no one of them can claim general hegemony. Each contributes to the swirl of competing ideas that is contemporary America, and together they make this city a place of unparalleled richness. How lucky we are, I thought, that we can enjoy the fruits of this variety. How much poorer would we be without the babel of languages that meets us, challenges us, and welcomes us every day.

As my joy dispelled the bigoted anxiety I had experienced earlier, I was ashamed of the path along which my imagination had led me. The greatness of this society in which we live and thrive is in the tolerance and openness that makes it so complex. There has never been a society where so many different kinds of peoples can live and thrive side by side, as neighbors if not always as friends or

lovers. And the richness of our lives is unparalleled precisely because of the openness we have been able to create. As we have recently been reminded, there will always be those who are threatened by our openness and hate our tolerance. They will be suspicious of a society where there is no single right and wrong. They will resent a society that, by virtue of its freedoms, achieves a standard of living that is without peer. Indeed, they will hate us for not hating those they hate. And, because of the very openness we have created, they will always have an opportunity to strike at us without our expecting it. That is the price we pay.

We must remember that we are vulnerable because of our strengths, strengths we would never want to give up. Were we to become too strong where we are vulnerable, shutting tight our open doors, then we would be much weaker where we are strong, and our society as a whole would suffer. So if we err in one direction, it must always be in the direction of tolerance and openness. Such an “error” is the only assurance we have that America will remain America, great precisely because it refuses to erect strong boundaries.

I have no doubt that the risk is worth it. This is clearest to me when I imagine walking through this city that is so familiar and important to me, with all its different neighborhoods. It is true that when I think of Ground Zero, still smoldering, I get angry. I imagine the buildings that used to be there, and I think I’d like to shut down our borders, keep out everyone if only it would keep out those who want to commit such crimes. But then I imagine walking up to Chinatown, and then through Little Italy; through the Asian communities along Lexington in the 20s, and back west through Korea town. When I imagine traversing these neighborhoods, or the hundreds more both like and not like them, I do not feel the need to protect myself from foreigners. Instead, I want to praise God for the variety of humanity and its creations. The city and its wealth of neighborhoods and inhabitants make me want to recite the ancient rabbinic blessing: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, who made variety in those who were created.” Because diversity *is* a blessing. It is our most powerful assurance that we will see beyond ourselves. Hence, it is a provocation for imagination. And from imagination comes wisdom. It is to wisdom that we ultimately strive.