

“Knowing What’s Best”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Knowing what is good for someone else is a dangerous thing. Sure, if that person would only listen to us, his life would be better, richer, more moral. But believing you have someone else’s interest at heart can easily shade into force.

Writing of Marxism years ago, Lionel Trilling warned: “Some paradox in our nature leads us, once we have made our fellow men the object of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion.” What begins in thoughtfulness ends in tyranny.

In this sense the beginning of the Bible is corrected by its ending. The tower of Babel is the model of tyranny. Everyone must participate in the great collective endeavor. Long after Babel, at the end of the Bible, the tribes of Israel have finally reached the promised land. Yet two-and-a-half tribes decide not to live in Israel, but across the Jordan. After all the work, the struggle and the miracles, to bring them to Israel, surely they will be forced to live there — it is, after all, ‘best’ for them. But Moses only asks their help to secure the land, then they may live where they wish. Moses, the leader of liberated slaves, teaches the world what it is to treat human beings as free.