

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT NOACH

Unity and Individualism

by Rav Ezra Bick

Parashat Noach is about the flood. That fact so obviously dominates the parasha that we do not always have any energy left for the end of the parasha. Of course, the birth of Avraham will get some attention, at least as part of the introduction to Lekh Lekha. But Migdal Bavel (the Tower of Babel) has a tendency to remain mired in our memories of second grade. Today we are going to try and bring the tower up to date.

When reading the short section describing Migdal Bavel (11,1-9), we tend to be completely dominated by the midrashic interpretations cited by Rashi. The people of Bavel were in some sense rebelling against God, and their punishment was dispersion. The tower was a symbol of overweening human pride, a mighty monument aimed at heaven. The dispersion was God's humbling of Man; the tower remains unfinished, a prototype of Ozymandias' pedestal in the empty desert.

If, on the other hand, we read the section with a completely fresh approach, we will immediately perceive that there is no explicit description of a sin, no explicit indication that God is angry, and no clear designation of the dispersion as a punishment at all. Without Rashi, we not only do not understand precisely what is going on, in fact, we do not even understand why the section exists at all. What is the purpose of this story? The more we examine the details, the more perplexing it becomes. Why are they traveling from the East (verse 2)? Why do we need to know that they baked bricks instead of using stone (verse 3)? Why are their plans presented in the form of "and they said, come, let us..." (3,4)? In short, what is going on?

Since I do not propose to ignore the midrashic interpretations, let us first quickly review the different suggestions found there (Bereishit Raba 38). The focus of the midrash is on two phrases: the first in verse 1 - "And the entire land was one language and ONE SPEECH;" the second in verse 4, - "They said: Come let us build for ourselves a city and tower, whose top will be IN THE HEAVENS, and we will MAKE FOR OURSELVES A NAME, lest we be dispersed on the face of all the earth".

(1)R. Eliezer said: "One speech (devarim achadim) - sealed speech (devarim achudim)." The sin of the generation of the flood is explicit, but the sin of the generation of the dispersion is not explicit. "Devarim achadim" - they said sharp (chadim) things about Our God who is one (echad) and about Avraham, who "was one in the land." They said: Avraham is a sterile mule who cannot bear children. And about God they said: Is it right that he has taken the upper worlds for himself and given us the lower worlds? Come let us make a tower and place an idol on top of it, with a sword in its hand, so that it will appear as though it is making war on Him. (Rashi quotes the last line as: "Let us ascend to the heavens and make war on Him.)

(2)Another explanation: One speech - shared speech. What belongs to one belongs to the other, and what belongs to the other belongs to the first. (Note: If you do not believe that the Sages said that the tower was built by communists, please do not rely on me - look it up.)

(3)Another explanation: They said: Once every 1656 years the heavens collapse (the great flood took place in the year 1656 after creation). Come let us build supports, one in the north, one in the south, one in the west, and this one here will be in the east.

The Abrabanel advances a number of arguments - some of which are somewhat contradictory - against understanding these midrashim literally. Either the people of the tower were fools (if they thought they could actually reach the heaven), in which case they deserved no punishment at all, or they were totally corrupt heretics, in which case the punishment was not severe enough. Verse 5 seems to indicate that God thought they could accomplish their goal if left undisturbed ("And now, nothing will prevent them from achieving that which they planned to do"), which is ridiculous if they were trying to build support pillars for the sky. His conclusion therefore is to advance a completely different explanation, but to try and fit it in metaphorically to the midrashim. In this we shall follow the Abrabanel's lead, which is, I think, the proper way to understand the PSHAT of midrashim like these in general.

The powerful images of these midrashim have inspired centuries of "drush." I remember once hearing the Rav, Rav Soloveitchik zt"l, explain the difference between the generation of the flood and that of the dispersion by saying that the first was modern America (moral corruption, pursuit of money and pleasure), while the second was communist Russia. This identification has probably lost much of its meaning in the last fifteen years, but anyone who has seen a Russian propaganda film with one-million volunteer workers joyfully building the world's greatest dam with their bare hands will understand what the Rav meant. The idea of communal man triumphant, knowing no bounds, banishing God and building his own secure future on the power of human construction, based on a faith in technology and engineering, does seem to be the underlying picture of the midrashic interpretation of Migdal Bavel.

What is the problem with these interpretations? I think we often make a mistake when viewing midrashim or other interpretative suggestions of this sort. There is no question that certain kinds of questions can be answered by introducing facts not mentioned explicitly in the parasha. These are questions where not knowing the answer does not render the story incomprehensible. For instance, if you ask why God chose to speak to Avraham in the beginning of next week's parasha, the midrashim about Avraham's early life in Ur Kasdim provide a plausible answer, once we accept that the Torah does not consider it crucial for us to know those stories. In other words, why Avraham is chosen is not an essential part of the Torah's narrative. But it is illegitimate, in my opinion, to use unrelated facts, even if hinted at in the usual midrashic manner, to explain the basic story-line. If you do not understand what is going on without recourse to a midrash, then the story is incomprehensible on a "pshat" level. Midrash can help us to understand pshat, but cannot substitute for it.

In our case, the Netziv expresses this succinctly:

ONE SPEECH: The verse did not explicate what they said except through a hint, as is explained in the midrash. But the verse did not explain them, only mentioning that they were

"one." This teaches us that God was not aroused by the content of their speech, but because it was "one," irrespective of what they said.

In other words, the midrash can answer the question, "what did they say," but not the question, "why did God react as He did." The reason is that the first question is not crucial to the flow of the story (apparently - that is precisely the Netziv's point), whereas the second is. You are meant to understand the point of the story by reading it - very carefully, perhaps, with a great deal of thought, but nonetheless by reading it alone. Once you understand that, the midrashic information can add a great deal of information.

The Netziv follows the school of thought (see Ibn Ezra and Ralbag) that identifies the basic motive of the people of Bavel as being a fear of dispersion. This is explicitly stated in verse 4 - "lest we be dispersed on the face of the earth." This in itself is not a sin, but it is opposed to God's will and purpose in creating man, to whom was given the blessing of "Peru u-revu u-mill'u et ha-aretz" - to conquer and settle the entire earth. Hence God arranged that they be dispersed, not as a punishment, but simply as a device to further the plan of creation. This explanation ignores the midrashim quoted above. The Abrabanel also simply does not understand what is wrong with living together as long as it is economically feasible. To these questions the Netziv gives a single answer. The reason why they wanted to live together, he claims, was because of the "one speech" explicated by the midrash. Their ultimate plans, unimportant in themselves, required unity, and they knew that if people spread out, they would develop independent ideas which would detract from the fulfillment of the grand project. Furthermore, in order to maintain this unity, they would need police and strict totalitarian social control, which is how the Netziv explains "and make for us a name." The "name" means people in charge, supervisors. The outcome would be oppression, as exemplified by the story of Avraham and the furnace of Ur Kasdim. (The Netziv explains that the sentence about making bricks rather than using stone is a hint to this midrash - they needed a great furnace to produce the bricks). The "project" leads to the need for social unity, which leads to social repression. To prevent this, God disperses them.

) The idea of Bavel as a totalitarian state, based on the stories of Nimrod and Avraham, is also quoted by the Abrabanel in the name of the Ran.(

I would like to suggest a variation on this explanation of the Ibn Ezra-Ralbag-Netziv, by reversing the relationship between the "one speech" midrashim and the fear of dispersion as outlined by the Netziv. That which is explicit in the verses - the fear of dispersion - is what is visible in the story. The midrashim, based on hints in the language of the verses, describe that which is hidden in the history of the story as well, beneath the surface. The story is about social unity and pluralism. The people of Bavel are making an attempt to create a unified cohesive society. The tower is, as the Netziv claims, a unifying symbol, a center of gravity, as it were, for all mankind who rally around it. Nothing more (though nothing less either) was the surface intent of the people.

But, the midrashim are clarifying for us the CONSEQUENCES (rather than the causes of) the unitary state. The psychological need for unity, the social pressure involved, the strength and power that result from this unity, all will result in the monolithically totalitarian state, which will result in both civil repression (as in the furnace of Avraham) and spiritual hubris (as in the idolatry reaching up to heaven with a sword). The Torah describes the following progression:

- .1Cultural unity - one language and one speech (verse 1);
- .2Social cohesiveness - living together (verse 2);
- .3Industrial advance - the brick factory (verse 3);
- .4What does one do with one's newfound power - monumental construction (verse 4), leading to centralization, pride and rebellion, and totalitarianism.

The midrashim describe in detail various potential developments of the centralized totalitarian state based on technological man - the expulsion of God, ideological dictatorship, social repression. Organized idolatry, ascribed by the midrash to Nimrod king of Bavel, is a means of ideological control, giving everyone a central figure of authority easily manipulated by the ruling class. Perhaps this is due, as the Ran suggests, to the fact that the moral basis of the society is weak. But I think that the Torah is saying that this is inevitable if everyone must be included in the unitary society. The basis of total unitary society for all mankind will of necessity tend towards physical symbols, a tower, or an idol, and will of necessity be intolerant and compulsive. Because there is no other basis for unitary society other than the shared industrial projects, there will always be a need to invent new projects and force every part of society to take part in order to provide the strength and power inherent in organized mass society. In this context, the midrash (no. 2 above) that adds shared property to the norms of Bavel is unusually prescient. The goal is a unified mass, dedicated to building central institutions which will perpetuate the unity. A logical eventual form of such a society may well be the Stalinist state.

God's solution to this tendency of man is first of all forced cultural diversity - different languages - and secondly, physical dispersion. This will hardly prevent tyranny in the future, but it does ensure that each people and culture will develop individually. It may seem strange that cultural development requires inhibited communication, but the midrashim are spelling out the alternative. Total unification of humanity is not desirable, if humanity is to develop, because diversity and pluralism are necessary components of freedom, and human development requires freedom. In this case, freedom is protected by a counterweight to the human desire for the security of unity - the counterweight is, paradoxically, lack of communication.

This explains why this story is here, in this location in the Torah. We are perched on the verge of the creation of the Jewish people. Avraham will be asked shortly to separate himself from his father's house, his country, his birthplace, and create an individual unit of spiritual perfection. The question is why, why is the truth of the Torah not offered to all of humanity? Is not Judaism and its message a universal one? Why is Judaism a national religion? Why is the Torah given in a way that makes it incomprehensible to most of mankind? The Torah explains to us that even though the universal mass society of Bavel included pious individuals (Shem, Ever, even Noach are still alive), the service of God cannot arise out of such a society. It is too repressive, too dedicated to maintaining its own existence. Man must be dispersed in order to develop individually. There is a real spiritual basis for the need for cultural pluralism, including different and somewhat mutually incomprehensible languages. In this context, one nation can arise slowly, over a long period of education, trial, and redemption, which will carry on God's message for humanity. Within Nimrod's Bavel, Judaism is impossible. Within any world order, world empire, Judaism cannot arise. Mankind is dispersed to develop individual character, cultural diversity. In one corner, without having to worry about the destiny of all mankind, a small family will build the kingdom of God. Cross-cultural dissonance is the price that must be paid for spiritual development. In Avraham's case, that dissonance will be even more extreme. Only through

lonely separation can true spiritual greatness be achieved. The unity of the Jewish people will be achieved through that spiritual development, slowly over many generations, with the Torah and Eretz Yisrael at its center. Having broken up the totalitarian unitary state, the Torah is ready to embark on the adventure of Avraham Ha-Ivri, the man from across the river, a stranger in a strange land.

Further study:

.1Go back and answer the questions raised in the third paragraph of the shiur.

.2The midrash (no. 1 above) has the people of Bavel speaking against God AND Avraham. This is continued by the midrashic identification of Nimrod king of Bavel with Amrofel king of Shin'ar (14:1 - see Rashi ad loc.), and the statement of the midrash that the purpose of the four kings in stating the war with Edom was to kill Avraham. Why is Nimrod and his people so opposed to Avraham?