

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated

in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

PARASHAT NOACH

"Then Shall I Bring Upon the Nations a Clear Language"

By Rav Yaakov Medan

Introduction

"God said to Avram: 'Go away from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land which I will show you. And I shall make you a great nation, and I shall bless you, and I shall make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I shall bless those who bless you, and those who curse you shall I curse. And all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.' So Avram went as God had spoken to him, and Lot went with him, and Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan." (12:1-4)

The Torah's opening verses about Avraham give no reason for God's revelation to him. We are introduced to him at mid-life; he is already 75 years old. We are left with several questions: what is the beginning of the story? Why does God choose Avraham and send him to walk about in the land? In what way is Avraham different from the twenty preceding generations, all of which angered God? And even if we succeed in unearthing the story of Avraham prior to God's revelation to him, we must still ask: why does the Torah not explain why God chose him?

Teachings of the Sages with their Mysteries

Since the Torah provides no reason as to the selection of Avraham, we must turn to Chazal.

The Midrash recounts two stories (Bereishit Rabba 38, 13) concerning Avraham's life during his first seventy-five years:

a. "'Charan died before Terach, his father' – Rabbi Hiya bar Beriya said in the name of Rav Ada of Yaffo: Terach was an idolater [idol merchant]. Once he went off to a certain place, and he left Avraham as shopkeeper in his stead. A person came who wished to buy [an idol]. [Avraham] said to him: 'How old are you?' The man replied, 'Fifty,' or 'sixty.' Avraham said: 'Woe to this man, who is sixty years old, and he must serve an idol created just yesterday!' [The man] was ashamed, and went away. Another time a woman came, bringing a bowl of meal. She said to him, 'Take this; offer it to the idols.' [Avraham] got up, took a hammer, smashed all the idols and placed the hammer in the hand of the biggest of them. When his father returned, he asked: 'Who did this to them?' [Avraham] answered, 'A woman came and brought them a bowl of meal; she told me to offer it before them. I offered it before them, and one said: 'I shall eat first,' then another said, 'I shall eat first.' The biggest among them got up,

took a hammer, and smashed them.' [His father] said, 'What nonsense are you telling me – do they then have any understanding?' [Avraham] answered, 'Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying'!?

b. "They took him and handed him over to Nimrod [the king]. He said to him, 'Worship the fire!' Avraham answered, 'Shall I then also worship water, which extinguishes fire?' Nimrod said to him: 'Worship the water!' He answered: 'Then should I also worship the cloud, which bears the water?' He said, 'Worship the cloud!' [Avraham] answered, 'Then should I also worship the wind, which disperses clouds?' [Nimrod] said, 'Worship the wind!' He answered, 'Shall I then worship man, who endures the wind?' He said, 'You talk too much; I worship only fire. I am going to throw you into it; let the God whom you worship come and save you from it!' Charan was standing there. He said, 'Either way [I shall be safe] – if Avraham wins, I shall say, 'I am with Avraham.' If Nimrod wins, I shall say, 'I am with Nimrod.' When Avraham entered the fiery furnace and was saved, they said to him: 'On whose side are you?' He told them, 'I am with Avraham!' They took him and cast him into the fire, and so he was burned with no chance of bearing children, and he came out and died before Terach, his father. Therefore it is written, 'Charan died before Terach, his father'".

Before explaining the midrashim, let us first say a few words about our basic attitude towards Chazal's teachings. Chazal are not story-tellers, and obviously anyone who understands Chazal's teachings literally is a simpleton. The purpose behind Chazal's narratives is also not to convey ancient legends, but rather, principally, to interpret the Torah. The source for any narrative by Chazal is usually to be found in some prior biblical incident.

Let us explain: In many instances the Torah is cryptic and fails to recount details of events that represent the reason for things that we read about in the text. So it is in our case: there is no explanation for Terach's sudden departure from Ur Kasdim, nor for God's selection of Avraham. Chazal, as biblical commentators, come to explain that which is opaque. For this reason they create legends which "fill the gaps" in the text.

In our case, as in many others, our question is: upon what do Chazal base their narrative? Why do they choose to recount specifically this story about Avraham, or some other story about Yaakov?

It seems that Chazal followed the well-known principle, "The Torah text elaborates in certain cases and is brief in others." Wherever there are gaps in the biblical narrative, Chazal compare the character or the subject under discussion to a parallel biblical excerpt. This comparison provides the basis for a "filling-in" of the picture, to create a sort of "photomontage" that completes the missing pieces of the puzzle.

If we try to trace Chazal's sources for the stories about Avraham, we arrive at two biblical narratives: the story of Gidon, son of Yoash, smashing idols is the inspiration for the first midrash quoted above, while the episode of Chanania, Mishael and Azaria in the fiery furnace represents the inspiration for the story of Avraham's own trial of fire.

What causes Chazal to connect these stories to the life of Avraham? It is this question that we shall investigate in this shiur.

Gidon and the smashing of the idols

"It happened on that night that God said to him: 'Take your father's ox and another ox seven years old, and destroy your father's altar to Ba'al, and cut down the ashera that is upon it. And build an altar to the Lord your God at the top of this strong point, where it is level. Take the second ox and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the ashera which you will cut down.' So Gidon took ten men of his servants and did as God had commanded him. And because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night. When the men of the city awoke in the morning, behold – the altar to Ba'al was broken and the ashera that was upon it was cut down, and the second ox had been offered as a burnt offering upon the built-up altar. They said to each other, 'Who has done this?' They investigated and sought out, and it was said, 'Gidon, the son of Yoash, did this thing.' Then the men of the city said to Yoash, 'Bring out your son that he may die, for he has broken the altar to Ba'al, and because he cut down the ashera that was upon it.' And Yoash said to all those who stood against him, 'Shall you then fight for Ba'al, shall you save him? Let anyone who pleads on his behalf be put to death by morning! If he is a god – let him fight for himself, for his altar is broken.' And on that day they called him Yeruba'al, saying, 'Let Ba'al fight against him for he has broken his altar.'" (Shoftim 6:25-32)

This story is remarkably similar to the legend about Avraham: Gidon breaks his father's altar, used for idolatry – corresponding to Avraham's destruction of the idols belonging to Terach, his father. The question is why Chazal "pair up" Gidon and Avraham, carrying over the story from one to the other. What is the basis for this comparison?

It seems that the parallel between Avraham and Gidon is based upon the story of the war of the four kings, since in many respects that war fought by Avraham is similar to Gidon's war against Midian:

.1The number of fighters:

In parashat Lekh-lekha we find an astounding military scenario: how could Avraham take only three hundred and eighteen men to fight against a mighty alliance of four kings, with a vast number of soldiers? A similar question arises concerning Gidon's fighters: they number a bare three hundred, against a massive army of a hundred and fifty thousand (see Shoftim 7:12 and 8:10.)

.2Course of the war:

Avraham's battle tactic is, "he divided himself and his servants against them, by night" (14:15). This was calculated to confuse the enemy forces and to exploit the element of surprise to create panic in their camp. This tactic is especially effective when implemented against an alliance of different kings, where the allied armies are unfamiliar with one another. The classic example of such a battle is to be found in the story of Gidon, who comes upon the enemy forces with three groups of soldiers in the middle of the night, exploiting to the full the ensuing panic in the camp comprised of soldiers from Amalek, Midian and Bnei Kedem. Based on this parallel we may assume that Avraham too, like Gidon, used the element of surprise in the middle of the night to startle the enemy. Since their camp, too, was comprised of forces representing different kings, this created chaos: in the dark the soldiers mistook identities and fought each other, eventually fleeing in all directions.

.3Purpose of the war:

At the conclusion of Gidon's pursuit of the kings of Midian, we discover the reason for it: "He said to Zevah and to Tzalmuna: Where are the men whom you killed at Tavor?" They said, "Like you – so were they, with the appearance of the sons of a king" (Shoftim 8:18). In other words, Gidon was trying to establish what had become of his brethren who were killed at Tavor – apparently on their way to call the men of Ephraim to war. Similarly, Avraham pursued the kings in order to find out what had happened to Lot, his nephew.

.4Avraham and Eliezer vs. Gidon and Pura

Rashi quotes the Gemara (Nedarim 32a), asserting that Avraham and Eliezer alone prevailed over the four kings:

"'Eighteen...' – Our Sages taught: There was only Eliezer. The "three hundred and eighteen" refers to the numerical value of his name".

This Midrash is most surprising: Is it not impressive enough that Avraham destroyed the camp of four kings with the help of only three hundred and eighteen men? For what reason do they reduce this number to Eliezer alone?

"The meaning of the text never contradicts the literal reading": we cannot deny the explicit verses teaching that Avraham wages war against the kings with the help of his servants. Therefore what Chazal are trying to teach seems to be that although three hundred and eighteen men came with Avraham, Avraham and Eliezer alone would have sufficed to win. This type of message is certainly reminiscent of the story of Gidon and Pura, his attendant:

"It happened that night that God said to him, "Arise, go down to the camp, for I have given it into your hands. If you are afraid to go down – go with Pura, your attendant, towards the camp [1]. Listen to what they say, and then you will be strengthened to go down into the camp." So he and Pura, his attendant, went down to the outskirts of the armed men of the camp... and Gidon came, and behold – a man was telling his neighbor about his dream, and he said: "Behold, I dreamed a dream: a slice of barley bread was rolling about in the camp of Midian, and it came up to the tent and struck it so it fell and was overturned, so the tent collapsed." His neighbor replied, "This can mean nothing else but the sword of Gidon, the son of Yoash, a man of Israel. God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand." When Gidon heard the teller of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down, and returned to the camp of Israel, and said: "Arise, for God has given the camp of Midian into your hands."" (Shoftim 7:9-15)

The story of Gidon and Pura reminds us of the battle of Mikhmash, in which Yehonatan, son of Shaul, and his servant succeed in dispersing an entire camp. Since Chazal draw a parallel between Gidon's battle and that of Avraham, we may conclude that Avraham went down to the camp like Gidon, or Yehonatan later on, and therefore they teach that Avraham descended with Eliezer alone.

These similar elements are the basis for Chazal's parallel between Gidon and Avraham, in light of which they raise another point of similarity: just as Gidon started his rebellion by smashing his father's altar, overcoming any fear of standing against the entire nation and placing God's altar as an alternative to that of Ba'al, so Avraham shattered his father's idols and introduced the alternative: worship of God.

The fiery furnace

As mentioned above, the story of Avraham's trial in the fiery furnace is inspired by the story of Chanania, Mishael and Azaria, recounted in the Book of Daniel, chapter 3:

"King Nevukhadnetzar made an idol of gold, sixty amot high and six amot wide, and erected it in the valley of Dura in the province of Bavel. Then Nevukhadnetzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces to an inauguration of the idol which King Nevukhadnetzar had set up, and they stood before the image that Nevukhadnetzar had set up. Then the herald cried out: "To you it is commanded, o nations, peoples and tongues – at the time when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and all kinds of music – all the nations, peoples and tongues shall fall and bow down to the idol of gold which Nevukhadnetzar has set up. And whoever will not fall and bow down shall immediately be thrown into the midst of the burning furnace".

At the time when all the nations heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and all kinds of music, all the nations, peoples and tongues fell and bowed down to the idol of gold which Nevukhadnetzar had set up. At that time some people of Kasdim came near and accused the Jews... Nevukhadnetzar replied and said to them: "Is it true – Shadrakh, Meshakh and Eved-Nego – that you do not worship my god, nor bow down to the idol of gold that I set up? Now, if – when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and all kinds of music – you shall fall and bow down to the idol that I have made – well and good; if you do not bow down – at that moment you shall be cast into the burning furnace, and who is the god that can save you from my hands"?

Shadrakh, Meshakh and Eved-Nego answered and said to the king: "Nevukhadnetzar, we have no need to answer you in this regard. If He so wishes, our God Whom we worship can save us from the burning furnace and from your hands, o king; and if not, let it be known to you, o king, that we do not worship your god, nor do we bow down to the idol of gold that you have set up." Then Nevukhadnetzar was filled with fury, and the appearance of his face changed towards Shadrakh, Meishakh and Eved-Nego, and he answered and commanded that the furnace be heated seven times more that it was usually heated. And he commanded the most valiant men of his army to bind Shadrakh, Meishakh and Eved-Nego and to cast them into the burning furnace... And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw these men, over whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was the hair of their heads singed, nor were their garments damaged, nor had the smell of fire passed over them"....

The story of Chanania, Mishael and Azaria represents convincing evidence that Chazal's stories are sometimes borrowed from biblical narratives, since it is almost certain that the source for the second midrash is biblical. [2]

The story of Canania, Mishael and Azaria opens with a giant golden idol, sixty amot - about twelve stories - high. This was no "tower reaching to the heavens," but rather a huge image of Nevukhadnetzar himself. Such an idol would be an object of great admiration; the king's subjects would gaze at it with their heads bent backwards and their hearts raised towards their "father in heaven." Not to mention them in the same breath, the sight would be reminiscent of Moshe lifting his staff at the top of the mountain, with Bnei Yisrael gazing at the upraised staff and subjugating their hearts to God.

At the site of the idol a concert is performed: AT A SINGLE MOMENT all the musicians begin to play, and at that same moment all the nations, peoples and tongues bow and prostrate themselves. This image cannot but remind us of the story that we read in this week's parasha: "It was that the whole world was of one language and of the same speech" (11:1). However, there is a clear difference between the two stories: the episode of the Tower of Babel starts off with a single language that ultimately splits into many languages, many nations and many peoples, while Nevukhadnetzar's idol aims to unite the diverse nations, peoples and tongues into a single entity.

Nevukhadnetzar's status is something new to the world: no-one before him ever attained such a position – absolute power over the entire world. A world that is ruled by a king such as Nevukhadnetzar raises a most difficult question of faith: who is the king of the world? Perhaps God has truly chosen Nevukhadnetzar?

In the story in the Book of Daniel, Nevukhadnetzar's aim is explicit: he wants to nullify God's rule. In the preceding chapter, Nevukhadnetzar dreams of a great idol, its head fashioned from gold, its neck and chest from silver, its abdomen from copper and the lower part of its body from brass. At the end of the dream, God's Kingship comes and replaces the idol made from these perishable substances. In response, in the next chapter Nevukhadnetzar has an idol fashioned altogether from pure gold, so as to show that it is not God's Kingship that will replace the idol described in his dream, but rather his own kingship that will last forever.

What we see is a sort of dialogue between the idol that Nevukhadnetzar sees in his dream, and the idol that he creates. The significance of the dialogue is a battle between God and Nevukhadnetzar. God appears in his dream as the King of all the world, but even then – in the dream – Nevukhadnetzar declares that God may be King in the dream, but he – Nevukhadnetzar – is king in reality. Instead of an idol that has only a head made of gold, Nevukhadnetzar makes an idol that is fashioned altogether from gold so that people will bow before it and rebel against God.

Indeed, were it not for Chanania, Mishael and Azaria, he would have succeeded. God's agents – representatives of the Jewish nation – stood firm and spoiled Nevukhadnetzar's vision, until ultimately the king himself is forced to acknowledge the truth. At this point God's clear victory over the kingship of Nevukhadnetzar finds expression. (In fact, Chazal teach that when he saw how he had been defeated by God, Nevukhadnetzar praised and extolled Him to such a degree that the ministering angels wanted to silence him, because no-one in the world had ever praised God as Nevukhadnetzar was doing now!)

Having reviewed the background to the Midrash – the story of Nevukhadnetzar – let us now re-examine the story of the Tower of Babel and reconstruct Chazal's process of "photomontage" in the story of Avraham.

What's wrong with unity?

The sin of the generation that built the Tower of Babel is not stated explicitly in the text. The Torah only describes their initiative:

"They said: Let us build for ourselves a city, with a tower reaching up to the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name lest we be scattered over all the earth." (11:4)

The verses convey the impression that the main problem concerned the city that they wanted to build (the city is mentioned in the story more often than the tower, and at the end we read, "So God scattered them... and they ceased the build the city"), while Chazal indicate that the fundamental sin of the generation lay in the construction of the tower. Either way, when God sees the city and the tower, "God said: Behold, they are a single nation and they all have the same language, and this is what they have begun to do. Now nothing will be withheld from them of all that they have planned to do." (11:6). But what is it about the unity of the generation that is so bad? Isn't unity – under any circumstances – usually a good sign?

War against God?

While the "literal" commentators (Rashbam, Radak, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni and others) explain that the sin lay in the desire to build a tall tower, in the spirit of, "Great and fortified cities to the sky," Rashi - based on Chazal in the Midrash (Noah Tanchuma 18) - understands the sin as concerning the construction of a tower whose "top reached up to the heavens." To his view, the people of that generation actually wanted to reach the heavens: "They said: He can't just decide to take the upper worlds for Himself and give us the lower! We shall go up to the heavens and strike Him with axes!"

Perhaps Chazal base their interpretation on the connotations of the word "tower" (midgal) in Tanakh: it usually indicates a battle fortress and observation point (see especially Divrei ha-Yamim II, chapters 26-27). And if the top of this tower would be in the heavens, then it would be meant for the purposes of waging war against Him Who dwells there. But it is more likely that Chazal's view is based on the linguistic connection between the story of the Tower of Babel and the preceding story of Nimrod:

"Kush bore Nimrod, and he began to be a mighty person in the world. He was a mighty hunter [3] before God; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod – a mighty hunter before God." The beginning of his kingdom was Bavel and Erekh and Akad and Kalneh, in the land of Shin'ar. Out of that land came Ashur; he built Ninveh and the city of Rechovot and Kelah." (10:8-11)

It appears that the kingdom of Bavel lasted only a short time; this was the beginning of Nimrod's kingdom before he left there (following the episode of the Tower of Babel). This being the case, we should seek the sin of the kingdom of Babel – the generation of the Tower of Babel – in the person of the ruler of that kingdom: Nimrod.

"Which the sons of men have built"

"Which the sons of men have built' – R. Berakhia said: ----- (Bereishit Rabba 38,9)

In this midrash, Chazal teach us that the people of the Tower of Babel were wicked descendants of a wicked ancestor: they were the children of Adam, who himself sinned against God. Taking his lead from this midrash, Ramban interprets the sin of that generation was that of heresy (hinted at in the words, "And make for ourselves a name:("

"But one who understands the meaning of "name" will understand their intention, as expressed in their words, "And make for ourselves a name," and know the extent of what they tried to achieve by means of the tower, and understand the entire issue. For they thought up an evil plan, and their punishment – that they were divided into different tongues and

dispersed to different lands – was "measure for measure," for they were spreading heresy. Their sin was similar to that of their ancestor. Is it for this reason that [the Rabbis] interpret, "which the sons of men have built" – Rabbi Berakhia said---

The corruption of the land and the dispersion came because of their heresy; they were punished by God's great Name. And this is the meaning of [God's] expression "to go down," as it was in [the episode of] Sedom. One who is wise will understand this." (Ramban on 11:2)

The Ramban fails to explain in what way this generation was heretical, but the style of God's claim against the builders of the tower would seem to lend weight to what the Midrash and Ramban are saying. Following the sin of Adam, we read:

"The Lord God said: BEHOLD, man has become LIKE ONE of us, knowing good and bad; NOW, he might put forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life, and eat from it and live forever. So the Lord God SENT HIM AWAY from Gan Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken." (3:22-23)

Following the sin of the Tower of Bavel, we read:

"God said: BEHOLD, they are a single nation with ONE language for all, and this is what they have begun to do. NOW nothing will be withheld from them in all that they planned to do... so God DISPERSED them from there over the entire world, and they ceased to build the city." (11:6-8)

Why is God concerned about man's power once he knows good and bad? Rashi on 3:22) explains:

"'Now perhaps he will put forth his hand' – since he will be immortal, he will likely mislead the world and claim that he, too, is a god".

It is precisely the same danger that existed concerning the generation of the Tower of Bavel, whose project was meant to reach to the heavens. Their king – Nimrod – would sit at the top of the tower, and from his elevated throne in the sky he would rule all of humanity, which was "all one nation and of one tongue," and he would tell them all that he, too, was a god.

"Its top reaching to the heaven" – how?

According to what we have said above, based on Chazal's interpretation, the expression "a tower reaching to the heavens" is no exaggeration: the people of that generation wanted literally to reach the sky. We must then ask, were they idiots? How could they think that they could actually build so high?

But the sky is not a blue curtain hanging somewhere in infinity. Throughout Tanakh, "shamayim" (the heavens) refers to the cloud level, the line representing the border between the "upper world" and the "lower world." At the beginning of the story we read of how man discovered bricks and mortar; this enabled them to build taller and better buildings. [4]

Constructing a tower that reaches cloud level is not an impossible task. We may assume that at the top of the tower there was supposed to be a balcony where Nimrod would sit and look out over his kingdom. All would look upwards to him, while he would gaze upon them from

amidst the cloud (together with the rays of the sun that would radiate from around it). The significance of such a position is altogether GODLY. Nimrod's subjects would look up towards the cloud of his glory, passing before him like a flock of sheep.

Indeed, descriptions such as this exist in historical records. Various kings ruled over the entire world and attempted – at certain stages – to eternalize their names and become eternal kings (admittedly not through constructing towers, but through other technological means). This was the purpose of the mausoleum in Moscow, which turned Lenin and Stalin into immortal beings; the same phenomenon occurred during the period of Mao-Tse-Tung in Communist China, and Saddam Hussein had the same ambition. All of these are hinted to in Rashi's words, "Since he will be immortal, he will likely mislead the world and claim that he, too, is a god!"

One nation and a single tongue

From the story of the Tower of Babel we learn something of the nature of the unity that existed in that generation: all had the same aim. This was not ONE NATION ('am ehad'), but rather – as in Stalinist Russia – "A NATION OF ONE" ('am shel ehad'). They were not "of A SINGLE TONGUE" ('safa ahat'), but rather "of the tongue of one [person]" ('safa shel ahat'). The builders were not "OF ONE AIM" ('eitza ahat') but rather "of THE AIM OF ONE" ('etza shel ahat') – of Nimrod, the mighty hunter who ruled over them. The collective conscience, the collective initiative and the collective thinking reflected not a unity and harmony of opinion, but rather the brutal and tyrannical coercion of a single individual, who thought and planned on behalf of everyone. This ruler – like other such rulers throughout history – was bloodthirsty; he brought about the unity of thought and belief in a single idea by means of a terrifying furnace into which anyone who dared to think differently would be mercilessly thrown.

If this is the type of unity that is proposed, then dispersion and division are preferable. Therefore God's response is, "God dispersed them from there." It is better for all of humanity not to be subjected to the all-encompassing power of a single autocrat; rather, every person and every nation should choose his own ideals.

"They left to go to the land of Kena'an"

We are left with one more question: in the story from the Book of Daniel we see how Chanania, Mishael and Azaria spoiled Nevukhadnetzar's plan. Having drawn a parallel between this narrative and that of the Tower of Babel, we are left looking for someone to spoil Nimrod's plan. And who is our candidate?

To answer this question, let us examine the end of the story:

"Terach lived seventy years and he bore Avram and Nahor and Haran. And these are the generations of Terach: Terach bore Avram and Nahor and Charan, and Charan bore Lot. Charan died before Terach, his father, in the land of his birthplace, in Ur Kasdim. Avram and Nahor took wives; the name of Avram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milka, daughter of Haran, the father of Milka and the father of Yiska. Sara was barren; she had no child. Terach took Avram, his son, and Lot the son of Charan, the son of his son, and Sarai – his daughter-in-law, wife of Avram his son, and departed with them from Ur Kasdim

to go to the land of Kena'an; they went as far as Charan and sojourned there. Terach lived two hundred and five years, and Terach died in Charan." (11:26-32)

It is clear to us from the end of parashat Noah that the birth of Avram represents a turning point in relation to the ten preceding generations. After the list of ten generations, the Torah suddenly begins to detail a new genealogy: "Terach was seventy years old and he bore Avram and Nahor and Charan. And these are the generations of Terach: Terach bore Avram and Nahor and Charan, and Charan bore Lot".

The Torah leaves many questions unanswered: why did Terach behave as he did? Why would a person whose life was based in Ur Kasdim get up and leave his country and birthplace, and head for the land of Kena'an?

Several hypotheses exist to explain this issue. Rav Yoel Ben-Nun writes in his article, "The Hebrews and the Land of the Hebrews" [5], that Terach's family was a family of merchants, therefore they wandered from place to place. He maintains that Avram's journey to the land of Kena'an was actually a combination of two journeys: it was a continuation of the journey started by Terach, his father, and at the same time a journey at God's request ("Go forth..."

Rav Mordechai Breuer, in his book "Pirkei Bereishit," writes that the Torah gives no explanation for Terach's journey to the land of Kena'an because in truth it lacked any reason. It was an initiative in the direction of Eretz Yisrael, inspired by the Divine ideal that extended to those generations.

We reject these explanations, and propose that the juxtaposition of the journey to Kena'an with the episode of the Tower of Bavel lends support to our claim:

"God SCATTERED them from there over all the land, and they ceased to build the city. Therefore its name was called BAVEL, for there God mixed up ('balal') the tongue of all the land, AND FROM THERE GOD SCATTERED THEM OVER ALL THE LAND." (11:8-9)

The impression that arises from these verses is that some event took place in the land of Bavel, as a result of which everyone was scattered and they wandered to many different places. Indeed, this is told to us explicitly in the story of Nimrod: "The beginning of his kingdom was Bavel... FROM THAT LAND ASHUR EMERGED"! For some reason Ashur was forced to leave Bavel. The reason, apparently, is the story of the Tower. Just as all the other nations emerged from Bavel and wandered to other places, Terach also left Ur Kasdim and set off for Charan.

Let us now try to investigate further the matter of this "scattering." The Torah itself presents the scattering as a punishment for the having built the Tower, but in parashat Ha'azinu we are given a different reason:

"When the Supreme God gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He placed the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the children of Israel" (Devarim 32:8)

This verse reveals another explanation for the dispersion: it was all intended so that Avraham would reach the land of Kena'an: "He placed the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the children of Israel!!!"

If we try to combine these two contradictory reasons, we discover that the Torah is describing the two poles of the same idea. At one end we find Nimrod, who wants to rebel against God, and at the other end we find Avraham, who calls in God's Name. For Nimrod, the dispersion was a punishment: "God scattered them from there," while for Avraham this was an instance of Divine Guidance: "He placed the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the children of Israel".

Avraham, then, is the opposite pole, and it is he who overturns Nimrod's plans. Avraham the Hebrew ('ha-ivri') is on one side ('ever ehad'), while all the rest of the world – i.e., Nimrod – is on the other side, busy commanding everyone to bow and prostrate themselves to an idol! It is a short step, then, to complete the comparison between the story of Nimrod and that of Nevukhadnetzar, by placing Avraham in the role of Chanania, Mishael and Azaria.

"A clear language"

Another king built a city with a tower reaching to the heavens:

"I shall sing now to my beloved a song of my beloved concerning his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard in a fruitful hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted a good vine, and built a tower in its midst..." (Yishayahu 5:1-2)

The "beloved" is the same beloved that we find in Shir ha-Shirim: it is Shelomo, builder of Jerusalem and the Temple. Shelomo did not build with the intention, heaven forefend, of using it as a base to wage war against God; on the contrary, he built a house so that God would dwell in it. Its stones did not reach the heavens, but its essence and purpose certainly ascended there:

"You shall hear the prayer of Your servant and of Your nation, Israel, who will pray towards this place, You will hear all the way to the place of Your dwelling, to the heavens; You will hear and You will forgive." (Melakhim I 8:30)

Like Nimrod, Shelomo also wanted to forge all of humanity into a single nation with a single tongue. But unlike Nimrod, he tried to do this not by means of a fiery furnace, by sowing fear and terror, but rather through love:

"It is written, 'King Shelomo loved foreign women.' R. Shimon ben Yohai said: 'He loved them' – literally, i.e., for prostitution. Chanania, the son of R. Yehoshua's brother, said: 'For it is written, "You shall not intermarry with them." R. Yossi said, 'For --- for the words of Torah and for a sacrifice under the wings of the Shekhina.' (Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 2, 6)

Through the covenant of marriage, Shelomo sought to bring the entire world to the "Tower" – the Temple; to bring them to belief in God. Even this unity is not proper in God's eyes – even though it came not from fear but rather from love, and Shelomo himself was punished with dispersion: the division of the kingdom, with "Each man to your tents, O Israel".

This unity was not successful because boundaries and levels became blurred owing to the urge towards immorality. But that hoped-for unity will come about – not out of immorality nor out of murderous intentions, out of a reign of terror. This unity – when it happens – will

be in accordance with the vision of the prophet Tzefania, who witnessed Nevukhadnetzar's rise to power and who presented a faith-based alternative:

"Then I shall make all the nations into a clear tongue, to call out – all of them – in God's Name, to serve him together." (Tzefania 3:9)

Indeed, the world is destined to speak a single language and to be of the same words, with all the nations and tongues gathered around a single Tower, all coming to Jerusalem to bow before the King, God of Hosts. Then "God will be King over all the world; on that day God will be One and His Name – One" (Zekharia 14:9)

Notes:

[1]The text hints here at a misdeed on Gidon's part: since he did not go down to the camp alone, he did not merit to have the miracle performed through himself alone.

[2]An interesting addendum concerning the name Shmiramit: certain sources identify this personality as the wife of Nevukhadnetzar, while Tzemach David, and other scholars, assert that she was the wife of Nimrod.

[3]A "mighty hunter" does not mean a person who brings the greater part of his booty home. It is an expression familiar to us from Esav, who was "a hunting man, a man of the field": it refers to a man who went about at the head of a band of four hundred men, and who – according to Chazal – would capture women from their husbands, rape them, and transgress five grave transgressions on a single day.

[4]Stone buildings are of lesser quality, since stone is heavier and the bonding substance makes it impossible to build several floors. A discussion in Bava Batra 3a concerns building materials and how their quality influences the height of buildings.

[5]Published in "Megadim" 15, 5752.

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