

INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT NOACH

GREATNESS – AMONG US OR ABOVE US

By Rabbi Yaakov Beasley

Like the diluvian waters themselves, the memory of the events that led up to the Great Flood slowly receded from mankind's memory. Instead, the descendants of Noach began the slow process of repopulating their devastated world, as chapter 10 informs us:

1 Now these are the generations of the sons of Noach: Shem, Cham, and Yaphet; and unto them sons were born after the flood. **2** The sons of Yaphet: Gomer, and Magog, and Madai, and Yavan, and Tuval, and Meshech, and Tiras. **3** And the sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, and Riphath, and Togarmah. **4** And the sons of Yavan: Elishah, and Tarshish, Kittim, and Dodanim. **5** Of these were the isles of the nations divided in their lands, every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations. **6** And the sons of Cham: Cush, and Mitzrayim, and Put, and Canaan. **7** And the sons of Cush: Seba, and Chavilah, and Sabtah, and Ra'amah, and Sabteca; and the sons of Ra'amah: Sheba and Dedan. (*Bereishit* 10:1-7)

Rather unobtrusively, the Torah continues with the mention of one significant individual before continuing with the genealogies:

Cush fathered Nimrod. He began to be the first man of might on earth. He was a mighty hunter **before Hashem**; hence the saying, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter **before Hashem**." And the beginning of his kingdom was Bavel, Erekh, Akkad and Khalneh in the land of Shinar. From that land emerged Ashur, who built Nineveh and Rechovot-Ir and Kalach. Resen was between Nineveh and Kalach - this was the great city. (*Bereishit* 10:8-12)

What does the phrase "**before Hashem**" mean? Ibn Ezra, the early Spanish commentator, translates this phrase as meaning "in the presence of God:"

Do not pay too much attention to a name [the Hebrew root of the word Nimrod is *mered* – rebellion] if its meaning is not expressly pointed out in the biblical text. Nimrod was the first to show mankind's might over the animals for he was a "mighty hunter." The phrase "before *Hashem*" tells us that Nimrod would build altars to God and sacrifice the animals that he caught to God. This is the straightforward reading of the text (*derekh ha-peshat*); however, the *midrash* chooses a different reading.

We sense that the Ibn Ezra is wrestling with a pre-existing interpretation prevalent among the people, as he explicitly addresses his commentary to those who would understand the Torah's text through the prism of the rabbinic tradition, overriding the text's simple meaning in the process. Who is the midrashic Nimrod that the Ibn Ezra rails against? He is one of the most frightening characters in history – a true epitome of evil. According to the midrashic tradition, Nimrod organized the Tower of Bavel with the explicit aim of confronting and overthrowing Hashem's dominion. The king who attempted to silence humanity's first self-made believer, Avraham, by throwing him into the heat of an enormous furnace was, once again, Nimrod. Only the appearance of a later, greater, even more dangerous foe will silence Nimrod's arrogant rule - the other "hunter" in the Torah - Esav (25:28). According to the *midrash*, Esav stalked and killed Nimrod on the day of Avraham's death, and in the process acquired from him his magical hunting camouflage – the same cloak that he wore to honor his father.[1]

Accordingly, the *midrash* portrays Nimrod as a violent man. Unlike the Ibn Ezra, the *midrash* interprets Nimrod's name, although an explanation is not explicit in the text. The name Nimrod – from the

Hebrew *M.R.D. (mered)*, rebellion - personifies his life's mission. Since Nimrod was an all-powerful tyrant, the only one he could rebel against was Hashem. Nimrod the rebel rebels against the only power that can possibly oppose him; he wages a war against Hashem, making Hashem his enemy. This is how Rashi understands our verses:

A MIGHTY HUNTER - He would snare people's minds with his powerful rhetoric, influencing them to rebel against God.

BEFORE HASHEM - lit., in the face of God - He wanted to anger God in a direct confrontation. From here we derive the saying "LIKE NIMROD A MIGHTY HUNTER BEFORE HASHEM" - whenever we see an evil arrogant person who knows of God but freely and brazenly chooses to reject His authority, we describe him as Nimrod-like - a mighty inciter in direct confrontation with Hashem.

Based on this interpretation, Rashi states that the episode described in the next chapter (chapter 11) - the Tower of Bavel - was Nimrod's magnum opus and the culmination of his life's efforts. When we read the story, we are struck by the vague manner in which the Torah describes the events that occurred, revealing almost no details. A strongly unified society decides to harness their advanced technology to build a colossal tower, under the battle cry of "Let us make for ourselves a name" (11:4). Was this a sinful act? The commentators are divided. Many suggest that the very idea of building a tower "with its top in the heavens" is not a primitive desire to reach God, but reflects instead a deliberate expression of mankind's supremacy. The person who sits at the tower's apex looks down at the ant-like people scurrying at its base. Those lowly individuals on the ground view him among the clouds, as if he were in the heavens.

Whatever humanity's motivations in building the tower, however, *Hashem* once again chose to intervene in world events, this time dividing human society itself before a potentially greater evil could occur.

What led Rashi to connect the story of the Tower of Bavel with Nimrod? One of the few and vital details that the Torah reveals in this episode is its geographical location. The story occurs in Shinar (11:2), **the very Shinar where Nimrod began his rule**. At the story's conclusion, the place is also called Bavel (11:9) - once again, the place of Nimrod's beginnings. Therefore, suggests Rashi, if Nimrod is indeed behind this enterprise, then it is Nimrod who is attempting to place himself at the tower's peak – replacing *Hashem*.

When we examine the Ramban, we note that he rejects both of the approaches presented by Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Because of the Ramban's more conservative outlook regarding the midrashic tradition, he rejects the Ibn Ezra outright. "How can he be correct!? He has transformed the *rasha* into a *tzaddik*! Our sages know from the earliest tradition that Nimrod was evil." However, the Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretation as well. It could not be that Nimrod's sin was his opposition to *Hashem*. The Torah's text indicates that Nimrod began something new - "he began" – yet people had opposed God previously, to the extent that *Hashem* was compelled to wipe out humanity in a devastating flood. Instead, the Ramban makes another suggestion, one followed by later commentators:

In my opinion, he was the first to begin ruling over others through sheer might and brute force. He was the first tyrant. Up until this point, there had been no wars and no king ruled, until Nimrod used his strength to become king over Bavel. He then set out on a conquest of Ashur and expanded his empire, building fortified cities in his might and power.

This idea is echoed in the Radak's commentary:

He began to show his might, to conquer one or more nations, becoming king over them. For until he rose, no man aspired to rule over a people. This is the force of the words 'in the land' (v.8). The text records the boundaries of his kingdom and the cities he conquered because there was no king until he rose; each nation simply had its own judges and leaders.

In that case, Nimrod's sin, his failing, was his desire to become humanity's first conqueror. For the first time, a human being aspired to achieve dominion and control over others. Every group of people had their leaders; without them, anarchy would ensue. However, no one sought leadership for the purpose of dominance, of achieving supremacy over others, until this point.

The democratic impulse behind this interpretation finds full expression in the comments of the Abarbanel:

What the Torah wishes to convey in this section is that at this time, all people were considered equivalent in stature, indeed, equal members of humanity. This Nimrod appeared suddenly and began to overcome and conquer others of his generation, as it states, "He began to be the first man of might on earth." Similarly, it writes that, "He was a mighty hunter before *Hashem*." The rabbinic interpretation is well-known... I wish to suggest that Nimrod hunted people, not animals [and that was his "greatness"]. He accomplished this in two ways: First, by demonstrating his mastery over the animals, people who had previously feared the bears and lions began to fear his prowess and strength... Second, through the building of great and powerful cities and fortresses, all the better with which to conquer and subjugate others ...

In other places in his commentary, the Abarbanel decries the tendency of people to aspire to create hierarchical systems of government that deny and suppress the fundamental equality of all humanity (see his commentary in *Devarim 17* on the appointment of a king). It is therefore appropriate that he sees here the first fundamental betrayal of the Torah's message.

Why does the Torah choose to interrupt the listing of the genealogies with this character of Nimrod? In his book *From Noah to Abraham*, Professor Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951; Italian Bible scholar who taught at Hebrew University) argues that the purpose of chapter 10 is not simply to teach us genealogy. What moral purpose would that serve? Instead, suggests Cassuto, the chapter wishes to contrast Nimrod's behavior with the rest of humanity after the great upheaval:

The new race of mankind that emerged after the Flood was a unity... It sprang wholly from one couple and all the peoples were brothers to each other. This outlook serves as the foundation for the prophetic latter day messages that "no nation shall lift up sword against nation and neither learn the arts of war any more."

Chapter 10 described a world of seventy nations - "These are the groupings of Noach's descendants, according to their origins, by their nations; and from these the nations branched out over the entire earth after the Flood" (10:32) – living in harmony and growing in all its diversity of language and geographical location. Nimrod's regime, wherein one man raises himself above others to establish an ever-expanding kingdom, is the antithesis of such a world. Nimrod may cloak himself as promoting peace and harmony among the people, but this is deception, belied by his use of force to subjugate cities, peoples, and nations. Against the backdrop of an ancient world that lived by a strict feudal caste system that divided people by birth,^[2] the Torah proudly and defiantly declares that all man were created in the Divine image, and therefore were equal to each other. Nimrod tried to become a ruler of men, and in doing so, attempted to replace *Hashem*. Men are not supposed to live in servitude to a man, but rather to serve God alone (see *Vayikra 25:55* and Rashi there). No human being may view himself as worthy enough to lord over others. This is our section's fundamental message.

[1] There are several sources for these *midrashim*. Nimrod and the Tower of Babel: *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*#24. Nimrod and Avraham: *Bereishit Rabba* ch. 38. Esav killing Nimrod: *Bereishit Rabba* 65:16; see also another version of the *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba* 63:32. A fuller listing is provided in *Ishei Ha-Tanakh* – entry: Nimrod.

[2] Ancient Sumerian society recognized three kinds of people - the *amelu* at the top rung, consisting of government officials, professional soldiers, and priests; the *mushkinu*, the middle class of Sumerian society, comprised of shopkeepers, farmers, merchants, and laborers; and the slaves at the bottom.