

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT NOACH

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise  
with prayers for Refuah Shelema for all who require healing,  
comfort and peace –those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly,  
publicly and privately.  
May Hashem mercifully grant us strength,  
courage and compassion.

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In memory of Eitan Palmer z"l and Berachya Suslovich z"l  
Hashem natan veHashem lakach, yehi Shem Hashem mevorach.  
Please pray for a refua sheleima for  
Nachshon Meir ben Hindel Ruth and Almog David ben Segal,  
refuat hanefesh and refuat haguf.

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**“And We Shall Make for Ourselves a Name” – Why Not?¹**

**By Rav Gad Eldad**

The story of the Tower of Bavel is one of the great mysteries of the Torah. The initiative of the human race at the time seems, on the face of it, innocuous enough, and the reader finds it difficult to understand why God viewed it as so evil that He saw fit to thwart their plan:

And the whole earth was of one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shin'ar, and they dwelled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them well.” And they had brick for stone, and slime they had for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the children of men built. **And the Lord said, “Behold, the people is one and they have all one language, and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they have schemed to do.** Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth, and they ceased to build the city. (*Bereishit* 11:1-8)

Generations of commentators have risen to the challenge and proposed different explanations, most of them based on philosophical analysis of the initiative, with less attention to the precise language of the text. However, it must be remembered that in the short history of the world up to this point, the Torah has already recorded God's displeasure with a human initiative and His action to halt its realization:

And the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; **and now, he might put forth his hand and take also from the tree**

**of life and, eating, live forever.”** Therefore, the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So He drove out the man and He placed the *keruvim* at the east of the Garden of Eden, and the bright blade of a revolving sword to guard the way to the tree of life. (*Bereishit* 3:22-24)

Here, too, God takes similar action, driving out the human race from its place. We therefore propose that we address our opening question by returning to the Garden of Eden. This may give us a better understanding of the intentions of the Creator, Who appears to sabotage His creations' plans again and again.

**“And the Man Gave Names”**

During his stay in the garden, Adam managed to fulfill one task that God had set for him:

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and He brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the animals, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field, but for the man there was found no help to match him. (*Bereishit* 2:19-20)

The man gives names to all the animals, and then realizes that he remains alone. To solve this situation, the female is created. Once she exists, the man continues to fulfill his name-giving function, and he gives her a name, too:

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, and He took one of his sides, and closed up the flesh in its place, and of the side, which the Lord God had taken from the man, He made a woman, and brought her to the man. And the man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman (*isha*), because she was taken out of Man (*ish*).” (*Bereishit* 2:21-23)

In bestowing the name *isha*, the man also awards himself the name *ish*. We will not discuss here the full significance of this act.<sup>2</sup> However, we note that it makes only a minor impression. Over the course of the story of the eating from the tree of knowledge, the man is referred to as *ish* only once – and even then not as part of the narrative, but rather as part of the punishment to the woman: “and your desire shall be to your husband (*ishekh*)” (*Bereishit* 3:16).

The episode concludes with the man giving the woman a new name:

And the man called his wife's name Chava, for she was the mother of all living (*chai*). (*Bereishit* 3:20)

This name sits better with the system of creations to which the man related in giving them their names:

... And whatever the man called every living creature (*nefesh chaya*), that was its name. (*Bereishit* 2:19)

<sup>1</sup> Based on chapter 3 of my book, *Ha-Adam - Bein Ha-Yotzer Le-Yetzur* (Tevunot, 5770).

<sup>2</sup> In this context, see chapter 1 of my book (above, n. 1), “*Ha-Reka Le-Chet Etz Ha-Da'at*”.

This move appears to annul the unique and exceptional status that the man had dared to award himself and his mate in choosing the names *ish* and *isha*.

It is at this stage that God expresses His concern over man's eating of the Tree of Knowledge. And here we skip to the story of the Tower of Babel in order to explore the link between the two narratives and the reason that the Creator seeks to thwart both initiatives.

#### “And We Shall Make for Ourselves a Name”

After the remnants of the human race recover from the experience of the Flood, they seek to build a tower that reaches to the heavens. The purpose of the building is stated in the text:

And they said, “Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, and **let us make ourselves a name**, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” (*Bereishit* 11:4)

Keeping in mind the events in the Garden of Eden, as discussed above, the text seems to suggest that the moment that man is left to his own devices, he reverts to the same path that he had adopted previously, seeking to give himself a name. This plan prompts a heavenly response:

And the Lord came down to see **the city and the tower which the children of men built**. And the Lord said, “Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do; and **now nothing will be withheld from them, which they have schemed to do.**” (*Bereishit* 11:5-6)

The tower is already standing. The Creator is not troubled by its construction, but rather by its ramifications for the future. Seemingly, the text gives no indication of what these ramifications might be. However, in truth, they have already been set forth – for the aim of the builders is “to make themselves a name”. This being so, as the city grows, so will their name grow, and it will become great and renowned. Hence, it appears that it is not the construction itself that is the problem, but rather the “name” and fame that it will bring to the builders.

In further support of this analysis, we may say that had the building itself been the problem, the obvious solution would have been for God to destroy it. Instead, He chooses a different way of frustrating the plan:

“Come, let us go down and there **confound their language**, so they will not understand one another's speech.” So the Lord **scattered them abroad** from there upon the face of all the earth, and they ceased to build the city. (*Bereishit* 11:7-8)

In light of the Creator's response, let us try to expose the objective behind His actions. It would seem that the most immediate effect of the confounding of language is that it becomes impossible to call anyone or anything by name; consequently, on the collective level, too, the people will not be able to “make themselves a name”. Once the system of communication is broken and each race has its own names for phenomena and objects, no one can make himself a “name” because his appellation will be different in every place. Thus, the initiative ends with a radical about-turn, and the verse concluding the episode once again lends support to our hypothesis:

Therefore, **the name of it is called Babel**, for there the Lord confounded the language of all the earth, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (*Bereishit* 11:9)

Ultimately, the name of the place will commemorate for all time what God did there, rather than the initiative of the builders, such that the quest of the human race to “make for themselves a name” by building the tower and the city fails entirely.

#### “And the Lord Scattered Them Abroad from There”

Further support for our focus on the “calling/making a name” is to be found in another literary device. Throughout our narrative, the word *shem* (name), or *sham* (there), appears no less than seven times, in different forms:

1. ...They found a plain in the land of Shin'ar, and they dwelled **there (sham)**. (*Bereishit* 11:2)
2. “Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, and let **make ourselves a name (shem)**.” (*Bereishit* 11:4)
3. “Let us go down and **there (sham)** confound their language.” (*Bereishit* 11:7)
4. And the Lord scattered them **from there (mi-sham)**. (*Bereishit* 11:8)
5. Therefore, **the name of it (shemah)** is called Babel. (*Bereishit* 11:9)
6. For **there (sham)** the Lord confounded the language of all the earth.” (*Bereishit* 11:9)
7. And **from there (mi-sham)** the Lord scattered them upon the face of all the earth. (*Bereishit* 11:9)

The same letters – *shin* and *mem* – comprise words with different and, in fact, opposite meanings. Giving a name (*shem*) bestows singularity and uniqueness on an object or phenomenon; it allows that thing to be referred to specifically. The word “there” (*sham*), on the other hand, denotes the ordinary or incidental nature of the object or phenomenon, negating any sort of special or unique quality, and referring to it simply via its location, the place where it happens to be.

Thus, through a brilliant play on words, the text tells us the story of the Tower of Babel, which started with the hope of thereby “making a name” (*shem*), but ultimately ended “there” (*sham*). Through this device, the text once again alludes to the centrality of “making a name” in our narrative.

History does indeed repeat itself, and we encounter the reappearance of a familiar human aspiration. Man seeks to make himself a name, to define his uniqueness and specialness. He failed in this endeavor in the Garden of Eden, but God knew that he might try again to make himself a name through eternal life. God obstructs any further development in this direction, but after some time there is yet another attempt – this time not as an individual, but rather an initiative to which all of humanity is committed.

But if this is a typical human aspiration, then the question arising from God's response is even greater. Why does man's Creator not encourage this aspiration and help to nurture it? Why does He act, again and again, to thwart its realization?

#### “And I Shall Make You a Name Like the Name of the Great Ones who are in the Land”

The Creator is not “jealous” of His creations; He seeks their success and their self-fulfillment. That is their right, and even

their obligation to themselves and to the world in which they live. At the same time, the Creator is aware of the danger lurking on the path of “making a name”. The focus of the human race on exploration of the world will bring benefit, and such efforts will be blessed. Those who are successful in their investigations will make themselves a name and will be crowned with fame. But the moment that “making a name” becomes the purpose of or motivation behind the investigation, rather than a side-effect of its results, mankind is in danger of bringing catastrophe upon itself. If man is driven by the glorification and defense of his own name as an end in itself, the center of gravity of his investigation of the world will ultimately shift away from the quest for scientific truth in the direction of internal squabbles, and the purpose of his creation will be nullified.<sup>3</sup>

A similar message is conveyed by R. Tzadok Ha-Koken of Lublin (*Machshavot Charutz*, 4):

The essence of man’s efforts to achieve sanctity is the desire to resemble God, and it is for this reason that man is called *adam*, as alluded to in the verse, “...*adameh le-elyon*” (“I will be like the Most High” – *Yeshayahu* 14:14). The principal intention behind the creation of man was that he might adopt and imitate God’s traits and thereby “resemble” Him, as it were. This is the desire of the positive inclination. However, man also possesses a negative inclination, which tries to thwart this primal, natural purpose and to lead man to deviate from his original path, such that instead of growing and developing in the direction of imitating God, he is drawn to grow and develop with the aim of aggrandizing himself. This is the meaning of the serpent’s words, “You shall be like gods”. What he meant was not that they would be great and important because they would resemble God, but rather that they would be great and important because they could groom and position themselves to become substitutes for God. And this is precisely the root of idolatry. The whole purpose of the Torah is to address this – i.e., to direct man to an approach whereby all that the negative inclination tries to tempt him with, with the aim of aggrandizing himself, is done purely with the aim of achieving sanctity – in other words, to come to resemble the Creator. Thus, through the same actions, man achieves sanctity and realizes the Divine will underlying his creation.

From the moment of man’s creation, God imbues him with a nature that strives for greatness – hence his name, *Adam*, alluding to his “imitation (*adameh*) of the Most High.” Man’s job is not to sit passively, but rather to work to realize his potential and to exercise his abilities. However, he must exercise caution and not be carried away by the desire for self-aggrandizement. Addiction to this purpose, and the urge to “make for himself a name,” may cause him to focus on himself rather than on the results of his exploration of the world.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>3</sup> Commenting on Moshe’s argument, “Why should the Egyptians say...,” Ramban writes (*Devarim* 32:26): “Omnipotent God could care less about showing His power to the nations, who are regarded as frail and feeble in His sight. Rather, God had created humanity with the hope that man would recognize his Creator and acknowledge Him. He gave man the exclusive ability to choose good or evil. When all of them willfully transgressed and denied Him, only one nation remained associated with His name. Through them, God indicated by signs and wonders that He was indeed the Supreme God and the Ultimate Sovereign, and so He became known to all of the nations. If God then acts to destroy the people of Israel, then the nations will forget His signs and deeds and will never recount them, and any historical success of the Jews will be regarded as passing fortune. Thus, the purpose of creation and of man will be negated, for none will remain to acknowledge their Creator, but only to anger Him! Therefore, it becomes necessary for God to preserve the people of Israel forever, for they are the closest people to Him, who acknowledge Him more than any other nation.” (Translation by Michael Hattin, <http://etzion.org.il/en/eternity-jewish-people> ). The point that Ramban is making is similar to our argument above: the world was created with the aim of allowing man to fulfill his destiny and potential as a human being with free choice. This entails the risk that man might endanger the rest of Creation by nullifying its destiny and purpose. As the Creator, God is committed, as it were, to ensuring that the world can fulfill its destiny, and He takes steps to realize this purpose. The same idea underlies God’s actions in our narratives, too.