

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT NOACH

"And Man's Loftiness Will be Bowed:"[1]

The Sin and Punishment of the Tower of Bavel

By Rav Elchanan Samet

On the surface, the brief episode of the Tower of Bavel (Bereishit 11:1-9) appears to be a story of sin and its punishment. However, what is the nature of this sin, and where exactly is it described in the narrative? These are not easy questions. Bereishit Rabba notes (38:10), "The deed of the Generation of the Flood is explicated, but the deed of the Generation of the Dispersal is not." Yet, their story is clearly a seminal event in Bereishit and in the Torah's view of history, shifting the focus from a universal approach to the concept of the Chosen People. How are we to understand this cryptic but momentous passage?

THE VIEW OF THE "PASHTANIM"

A group of early commentators, termed by the Ramban "the pursuers of peshat" (the literal meaning of the text), read our passage in light of God's blessing to Adam (1:28) and Noach (9:1): "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land..." The following is Ibn Ezra's commentary to verse 4 (emphasis mine:)

The verse reveals their desire and their ultimate intent: to build a metropolis to inhabit, and to build a high tower to provide a symbol and fame and acclamation... Their reputation would outlast them, as long as the tower stood; this is what Scripture means when it quotes their objective, "And we shall make for ourselves a name"...

Do not be confused by the expression, "[A tower] with its top in the heavens," as Moshe used a similar expression (Devarim 1:28): "Great cities, fortified to the heavens." These builders attempted to prevent their own dispersal; God did not desire this — **BUT THEY DID NOT KNOW.**

Similarly, in his explanation of verse 7, Ibn Ezra states: "God spread them out, FOR THEIR OWN GOOD, as it says, 'Fill the land'".

Apparently, based on his approach, the story is not one of sin and punishment, but rather a story of human error and its divine repair. The builders' monomania contradicts the divine plan, and therefore God involves Himself — so that His design will be realized, for the ultimate benefit of humanity.

Yet it is difficult to accept that our passage is not one of sin and its punishment. Verse 5 relates, "God descended to observe the city and the tower," reminding us of a similar verse regarding another sinful city, Sodom (18:21): "I will descend and observe if they have done as the cry which has come to Me [indicates]." Both examples describe God's descent to observe, akin to the judge's survey of the scene of the crime before issuing a verdict (see Rashi's commentary to these two verses). It appears that the general ambiance of the story does not agree with Ibn Ezra's analysis.

Consequently, Radak accepts the main thrust of Ibn Ezra's explanation, but sees in the actions of the architects of the city a direct and willful rebellion against the divine plan. He explains (11:5:(

They are called 'Children of Adam' since they follow their heart's inclination, ignoring God's actions; for He wanted the world, from east to west, to be settled, while they wanted to settle only one small location, AND THEY INTENDED BY THIS TO ANNUL GOD'S WILL.

Rashbam's explanation (11:4) runs along the same lines.

Ramban, however, asks a common-sense question of these pursuers of peshat (11:2:(

If they are correct, [the builders of the city] would have to be fools. How could any one city or tower be sufficient to hold the entire world's population? Or did they think that they would not reproduce?

Indeed, it is difficult to see God's blessing to Adam and Noach as the background of our narrative. There is a great conceptual difference between the two instances: there mankind is blessed to "fill the land" through normal population growth, while in our case God spreads the people all over the face of the land not in order to settle it, but to disperse them. An analysis of the root of the Hebrew word for spreading, "hafatza," in Scripture, reveals that, in the vast majority of cases, it describes a negative scattering: usually, the losers in a battle, the shepherdless sheep, and the far-flung exiles are the Scriptural "nefotzim." [2]

THE MIDRASHIC APPROACH OF RASHI

In his commentary, Rashi pursues the path of derash, the non-literal, aggadic approach. In accordance with Bereishit Rabba (38:6), he finds the allusion to sin already present in verse 1: "All of the land was of one language and united ideas" — "one language" refers to a shared tongue, while "united ideas" denotes a universal consensus. (Radak echoes this.) Regarding what was their consensus? Rashi supplies three possibilities:

They came with one counsel and declared: "[God] is not the be-all and end-all, that He should select the upper regions for Himself. Let us ascend to the firmament and wage war on Him".

Alternatively, ["united ideas" ("devarim achadim") means] concerning the Unique One ("Yachid.")

Alternatively, "united ideas" implies that they said: "Once every 1656 years the firmament collapses, as it did in the time of the Flood; let us make supports for it"!

These explanations are derived by way of derash; the pashtanim, as is their wont, deal with Rashi's commentary only to question it. Without mentioning by name Rashi or the midrashim, Ibn Ezra (11:4) states:

These builders of the tower were not such fools as to think they could climb to the heavens. They also were not afraid of the Flood, for Noach and his children, to whom God had sworn [not to bring another deluge], were still alive, and all listened to them, as all humanity was descended from them.

The common point shared by all three of Rashi's explanations, representing the Sages' view of the Dispersal generation, is that they regard this sin as a serious revolt against God.[3] Thus, Rashi's exegetical approach intensifies their sin, to the same degree that the approach of the other commentators lightens it. The sin is severe, in theological terms, creating an expectation of a corresponding punishment. However, in actuality, that generation's punishment is a slap on the wrist: they are simply scattered linguistically and geographically. Rashi (11:9) struggles with this question, once again following Bereishit Rabba:

Which sin was worse, that of the Flood generation or that of the Dispersal generation? The former did not assault the Essential, while the latter did assault the Essential (as if it were

possible to wage war on Him); yet those were drowned, while these were not utterly destroyed! Still, those of the Flood generation were thieves, and they had social strife, so they were destroyed; but these acted with love and fellowship, as it says, "one language and united ideas." We thus see that contention is despicable, while peace is great.

Ironically, the phrase that condemns the Dispersal generation, "one language and united ideas," also proves to be their salvation. Rashi's aim here, following the midrash, is clear: to teach us that human unity, even when used for evil and thus necessitating dissolution, is considered meritorious.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NARRATIVE

One who reads the story of the Garden of Eden in the previous parasha does not ask questions concerning the realia of the story (e.g., Where is Eden located? What species was the Tree of Knowledge? How could the serpent speak? etc.), and rightly so, because that narrative (like many of the early episodes in Bereishit) has a distinctly unreal quality. What about our narrative?

In its opening lines, the narrative describes a known geographic area: "a valley in the land of Shinar," or Mesopotamia, and at its close it names the city of Bavel, one of the oldest and most famous in the ancient Near East, mentioned repeatedly in Scripture, and site of the earliest archeological excavations.

The city of Bavel was already very large in the earliest extant records, and its temple to Marduwas distinguished; its tower as well was the grandest in ancient Babylonia, earning it the appellation, "The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth." The ruins of this tower, which our episode deals with, are visible today (for those who have the opportunity to stroll through rural Iraq), and they were excavated at the turn of the century.

We do not know exactly when the tower and temple of Bavel were built - nor did the ancient inhabitants of the city. But we do know that the ancient inhabitants of the city were quite proud of their edifices, attributing their construction to the gods themselves. The towers, or ziggurats, were meant to serve as a point of encounter between the gods (dwelling in the heavens) and man (dwelling on earth). A stunning set of stairs surrounded the tower, allowing the priests to ascend to its apex. At the tower's top sat a temple, in which the priest would "meet" the gods.

With this background in mind, it appears that the traditional exegetes erred in seeing the expression "with its top in the heavens" as hyperbole. The ziggurat's architects and their followers truly intended for the tower to reach the heavens, the residence of the gods.

Knowledge of these historical and archeological facts compelled Cassuto to explain our narrative as satire, intended to mock the pagan pride of Bavel. The city of Bavel, with its temple and tower, was destroyed many times throughout the long march of history, and there were long periods in which the entire city, and the tower in particular, were heaps of ruins. We cannot point out all the details in the story which Cassuto explains as satirical [4], but let us cite one example.

Verse 5 ties together the two halves of the story, serving as its central axis: "The Lord DESCENDED to observe the city and the tower which the CHILDREN OF ADAM had made." The first difficulty is theological: does God need to descend in order to observe the actions of the humans? Rashi replies by citing the Tanchuma's words: "He did not need to do so, but He came to teach judges not to condemn the accused until they would see and understand [the facts of the case]." Cassuto adds,

There is a satirical allusion here: they thought their tower would reach heaven, but in God's eyes their edifice was not giant, but rather the creation of puny creatures, a thing of earth and not of heaven. If God, the Dweller of the Heavens, wanted to see it up close, He had to come down from heaven to earth.

Similarly, the words "children of Adam" at the verse's end, which are strikingly extraneous, prompt Rashi to ask: "Rather than children of whom? Perhaps children of donkeys or camels?" Cassuto attempts to see here as well satirical allusions: divine beings did not build the tower, as the Babylonian myth claims, but rather children of Adam built the city and its tower.[5]

THE EXEGESIS OF CHAZAL: A REEXAMINATION

This conception of the episode, as a satirical protest aimed at the pagan arrogance of the ancient inhabitants of Bavel, brings us back to Chazal's explanation, cited by Rashi, of the Dispersal generation's sin. Following are Midrash Rabba's original words (38:6:(

Rabbi Yochanan says: 'Devarim achadim' —that they said harsh things (devarim chadim) about 'the Lord our God, the Lord is one (echad)'... They said, 'He is not the be-all and end-

all, that He should select for Himself the upper regions and give us the lower regions! Rather, let us build for ourselves a tower, AND LET US MAKE AN IDOL AT ITS TOP, and we will put a sword in its hand, and it will appear as if IT WAGES WAR ON HIM.

It becomes apparent that the midrash links the Tower of Bavel to the idol at its apex, which dovetails beautifully with our knowledge of the ancient conception of the ziggurat. However, the midrash tells us more: the basis of this paganism lies in typical human arrogance and foolishness. Thanks to their technological know-how, with which they are blessed by their Creator, they suppose that they can invade the divine arena, force themselves on the supernal realm, and walk there as the equals of God. This is nothing but a ludicrous declaration of war by humanity on the divine.

The Sages were closer than the medieval pashtanim to the realia of the Tower of Bavel episode, both chronologically and geographically. They lived either in Israel or in Babylonia itself, at a time when the remains of Bavel's towers, and of the city of Bavel itself, were still recognizable. In Bereishit Rabba (38:8), a number of sages describe their personal observations of the remnants of the Tower. In their era, the pagan myth still had followers, and the link between it and the still-visible ancient ruins of Bavel, as well as the Torah's response, was natural and understood.

THE LITERAL EXEGESIS

According to this view of our episode, shared by both Chazal and contemporary commentators,[6] our story deals with the most serious human sin imaginable: rebellion against God. Man is created to serve God, and if he rebels, his very existence is counterproductive. This revolt, with its basis in human arrogance, with its undermining of the boundary between the human and the divine, finds its fruit in paganism.[7]

Thus, the sin of the Tower's architects lies not in their desire to be united, but rather in their audacious attempt to darken heaven's doorstep and to defy their human bounds. "And we shall make for ourselves a name" is the essence of their pretension. In the dedications of various kings discovered in excavations in Mesopotamia (some of them in bricks sunk into the foundations of ziggurats), we repeatedly find the claim that their towers reach heaven. These dedications claim, many times, that the kings who built (or restored) these towers "made a name" for them and their kingdoms — even to the extent of earning them a place among the gods.[8]

According to this explanation, we might say that the words "lest we be scattered across the face of the whole land" do not indicate the objective of the construction of the city and the

tower per se (as the pashtanim explained) — rather the aim is mentioned prior to this: to reach the heavens at the tower's apex, and thereby "we shall make for ourselves a name." The end of the verse, "lest we be scattered," expresses their anxiety; something might prevent the united community from making its name. Social unity creates the desire for immortality and provides the tools to realize the most grandiose construction project in human history. If this unity is compromised for any reason whatsoever, this initiative cannot be realized, and therefore the construction of the city and the tower must be completed with all due haste.

BAVEL AND EDEN: THE TOWER AND THE TREE

In many ways, our story seems to be the continuation of the story of man's sin in the Garden of Eden. Both narratives explain the reason for basic problems affecting the human species. The story of the expulsion from Eden explains why man must struggle in the two most basic areas of his existence: finding sustenance and begetting children. (In both of these areas, man is at a distinct disadvantage as compared to the animals.) Adam and Eve desired to "be as gods" (3:5), and the perpetual existential struggles that they were punished with serve to humble them.

The Garden of Eden narrative gives a reason for man's weakness as an individual. Our narrative, on the other hand, gives a reason for the basic failing of mankind as a whole, namely its lack of unity. The linguistic, cultural, and geographic divisions weaken mankind and lead to unending strife and warfare between different groups. This is a fitting punishment for humankind, which, when it was united, dedicated its great power to overstepping its bounds and climbing into the divine arena. Thus, two curses peculiar to man — labor for Adam and Chava, war for the Bavel architects — emerge from these twin sins of presumption.

This commonality between the narratives is expressed in their shared syntactic structure. Compare "Behold, the man has been like one of us to know good and evil" (3:22) with "Behold, one nation and one language tthem all, and this is what they begin to do" (11:6). Si, "And now, lest he send his hand and take from the Tree of Life and eat and live forever..." is mirrored by "And now, whatever they plot to do will not be beyond them." Therefore, the result is similar: expulsion from the Garden of Eden and dispersal from the focus of human strength, Bavel, to the face of the entire earth. Man, in his wretchedness, as an individual struggling with the provision of the most basic needs, or as a member of a species sunk in internecine war, cannot reach self-deification. The human race, in this environment, learns to swallow that bitterest of pills, humility.

THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

With the Dispersal, the pride of a humanity united for evil was broken, stripping the species of the ability to execute similar schemes. From that point forward, the nations were divided, separated in their language and their culture, doomed to wage war with their neighbors — but not forever. When humankind once more comes together, not for self-deification, but for the greater glory of God, this unity will be restored in all spheres, as described by the prophets. "Then will I convert the nations to a pure language for all of them to call in the name of God," and to serve Him with one consent," declares Tzefania (3:9), foreseeing a return to a common tongue. The dream of the entire race finding that unity of purpose and place is most elaborately described by Yeshayahu (2:2-4:(

And it will be in the end of days, the mount of the House of God will be set right... and all the peoples will flow to it. Many nations will go and say: 'Let us go and ascend to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Yaakov, and He will teach us of His ways; and we will walk in His paths...' And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and they shall not learn war any more.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

(1 Twice in our passage we find a plan introduced with the term "Hava" ("Come"): in verse 3 and verse 4. The realization of the plan in verse 3 is described at the end of that verse.

A. Prove that the plan in verse 4 is also realized.

B. Why is it not described in that very verse?

C. Why did God not prevent the construction of the city and the tower in the first place? See Tanchuma's answer (Noach para. 18): "Nevertheless, He left them and said to them, in effect, 'Do it,' since if they had not built they would have claimed, 'Had we built it, we would have ascended to heaven and warred against Him.' Therefore, He let them succeed, and they did it. Then He peered down and scattered them".

(2 Explain according to our approach the following: why was the punishment of the builders of the Tower to have their languages confused and to be scattered across the planet?

(3 There are those who question the reason for Bavel's name given in the text, "for there God mixed up ('balal') their language." Babylonian tradition explains the city's name as following the Akkadian "Babi-ili" (God's Gate). Answer this according to Cassuto's

approach, which sees our story as a satire. Is it possible to point out a thematic relationship between the Babylonian exegesis of the name Bavel and the Torah's explanation?

(4 "They said, each man to his fellow: 'Let us make bricks and ignite a fire.' The bricks were their stones, and the clay was their binding agent" (verse 3). Nechama Leibowitz, in her analysis of "Let us make for ourselves a name" (Iyunim Beseifer Bereishit, p. 75), notes the gist of Benno Jacob's commentary to our verse:

In this verse, the Torah shows us how the creative power of technology can free man from the chains of his natural environment, how he can overcome his natural difficulties, and how, by dint of his technical prowess, he can create in the lowland (where stone, the natural building tool, is unavailable) the industrial equivalent — the brick — which is made from materials found in the valley, and via heat transform it into a strong building-stone. A simple anagram, "leveina — la-even; cheimar — lechomer," linguistically symbolizes the technological shift. From this point forward, man can, at a site lacking rocks and stones, raise houses and forts — a city and a tower.

In light of this, explain how verse 3 contributes to the attitude expressed in the following verse.

(5 Twice, the builders use the expression "Hava," as we noted above; similarly, God uses it once, in verse 7. Link, linguistically and thematically, man's action and God's counter-offensive. How does this double parallelism contribute to the satiric impact of the narrative?

(6 The title of our analysis — "And Man's Pride will be Bowed" — as well as the citations at its end come from the second chapter of Yeshayahu. Analyze the chapter fully and find its link to our story, as explained in our analysis, in both its general concept and its details.

NOTES:

[1]Yeshayahu 2:17.

[2]The root appears twice in the preceding chapter: "From these the land spread out" (10:2) and "Afterward, the Canaanite families spread out" (10:18). This does not contradict our argument, since the events of chapter 10 are explicated in chapter 11.

[3]See Sanhedrin 109a; Bereishit Rabba para. 38; Tanchuma, end of Parashat Noach (para. 16-19); and other midrashim.

[4]For the historical background of Bavel, see, e.g., Umberto Cassuto, From Noach to Avraham," Hebrew edition, pp. 155-58, and "Olam Ha-tanakh: Bereishit" (p. 83.)

For the satirical aspects of the Tower story, see Cassuto, esp. pp. 157-58.

[5]As Cassuto notes (p. 155), this also explains why this episode, unlike that of creation, the Flood, etc., has no analogue among pagan sources. A narrative devised as a satire of pagan arrogance would hardly have found a receptive audience among ancient Israel's neighbors.

[6]By "contemporary commentators," I mean Yechezkel Kaufmann in his work "Toldot Ha-emuna Ha-yisraeilit" (vol. 2, pp. 412-14), though he ignores the archeological background of the story, and, more recently, Nachum Sarna, in his work "Understanding Genesis" (New York 1970), pp. 63-80.

Cassuto, it should be noted, does not fully concur with this view. In his introduction to his explanation of our episode (p. 154), he writes that the Torah's intent in this narrative is to endorse two religio-moral principles: "1. THAT PRIDE AND SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT ON THE BASIS OF MATERIAL STRENGTH is a sin in the eyes of God; 2. that 'God's counsel stands forever,' and any plan conceived by Him is necessarily realized, despite all of man's efforts and schemes to defeat it." He means by this the divine command to "fill the land," and here he follows the pashtanim mentioned above, totally disregarding the midrashim.

[7]The Mesopotamian ziggurats appear to be the most ancient of the monumental edifices in human culture dedicated to pagan worship. The earliest known example, excavated at Tel Arakh (approximately 200 kilometers southeast of the city of Bavel), is attributed to the beginning of the Sumerian era at the latest. (By contrast, the Egyptian pyramids come later, and they were not temples but rather royal tombs.) It should not be too surprising that the construction of the Tower of Bavel — the tallest ziggurat ever — is seen by the Torah as the inception of human rebellion against God and the birth of paganism.

[8]So claims Guda, king of Lagash (c. 2000 BCE), in one inscription.

]Translated and adapted by Yoseif Bloch[