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## PARASHAT NOACH

The Tower of Bavel  
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Sefer Bereishit deals with two periods: the beginning of the Sefer (chapters 1-11) describes the period of Creation (Bereishit – literally, "In the beginning"). The remainder of the Sefer covers the period of the forefathers.

The Bereishit narratives share a special characteristic, distinct in relation to the other books of the Torah. These are universal narratives that deal with all of humanity, as opposed to the other stories of the Torah, which focus on specific individuals and on the children of Israel.

The story of Creation describes the creation of the entire world: Adam is the father of all of humanity, and the story of his sin affects all of humanity for all generations. The story of the Flood describes the corruption of all of humankind, leading to the eradication of all existence and its new beginning, with Noach as the new father of humanity. The story of the Tower of Bavel is similarly a universal story. It makes no mention of any individual names; in fact, quite the opposite: the story begins with the verse, "All the earth was of one language...." This introduction tells us that the narrative deals with "all the earth" – all the people of the world. These universal stories teach us fundamental lessons about humanity. The Bereishit narratives describe the confrontation between the ideal world and the human, natural reality. Through these stories it becomes clear that the material world cannot be ideal. The Bereishit narratives present us with the gradual fall from the ideal world to a world on a lower level, allowing human existence.

The story of the Tower of Bavel is one of the Bereishit narratives - more precisely, the last of them. What does this story teach us about humanity? Why is it specifically this story that concludes the period of Bereishit, while afterwards we move on to the period of the forefathers?

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Let us review the story of the Tower of Bavel (Bereishit 11:(

" (1All of the earth was of one language and of one speech.

(2And it was, when they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelled there.

(3And they said to one another, Come, let us make bricks and burn them with fire. Then they had bricks for stone, and slime for mortar.

(4And they said: Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower"...

The story begins with a description of the deeds of the people: all of the people spoke the same language. There was unity in the world. They began to roam about, and found themselves a permanent place to settle. They learned to bake bricks, and began to build a city in which to live.

The description is altogether neutral; there seems no hint of any trouble. It is for this reason that we are surprised at the way in which events take a sudden turn: God is not happy about what the people are doing; He takes care to break up the unity among them, to scatter them, and to bring their building to a halt. We are astonished: what was so bad about what they were doing? Can the construction of a city and a tower be that problematic? Isn't unity a positive phenomenon?

From God's reaction we learn that the story is not as innocent as it seemed. And indeed, if we go back and try to understand the story more deeply, we discover that from the very start there are signs that what is going on is not as simple and innocent as our superficial reading would suggest.

"All of the earth was of one language and of one speech" – what is the meaning of the expression, "One speech" (devarim achadim)? Is it synonymous with "one language," or does it mean something else? If it has the same meaning, what need is there for a second expression? And if it means something different, then what does it mean? The commentators offer several different possibilities: some maintain that this expression refers to a uniform language, while others suggest that the text refers to a unity of thought. Chazal attach some content to whatever this consensus was, and teach that people shared the thought of rebelling against God.

The fact that so many different explanations are offered for the expression "devarim achadim" tells us that its meaning is ambiguous.

" And it was, when they journeyed from the east (mi-kedem)" – what is this telling us? Are we to understand that the journey started out from a place called Kedem (East), or that they journeyed from the east (i.e. westward)? Perhaps the intention is not to describe the direction of the journey, but rather its time: the journey took place at in ancient (kadum) times. Or, as Chazal interpret it, perhaps the journey was away "from the Ancient One (mi-Kadmon) of the world" – a distancing from God?

The midrashim and the commentators raise all of the above possibilities, each supported by some aspect of the language of the text, but each explanation also presents certain difficulties, such that we are once again left with an expression whose meaning is not entirely clear.

From the very outset, then, this story - which appeared at first to be clear and simple – turns out to be opaque; in fact, we do not really understand what happened at all. And this lack of clarity is maintained throughout the story. Why is this so? It is certainly no accident that the text is written in this way. The Torah appears to formulate this narrative in deliberately equivocal and obscure language. What is the purpose of this? What message does it teach us?

Verse 3 describes the invention of bricks.

This would appear to be an insignificant detail in the story, and the Torah could have mentioned it in more condensed form: "They baked bricks and they said, Let us build a city

and a tower." Instead, the text elaborates for an entire verse on this technological innovation. Clearly, this is no trifling detail, but rather an important stage in the story. What is its significance?

Verse 4 describes the deed itself:

"(4)They said: Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower whose head is in the heavens, and we shall make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over all of the earth".

The beginning of the verse continues the neutral description of the people's actions: they want to build a permanent city, not to roam any more.

The tower with its head in the heavens could also be an innocuous suggestion, as the Radak interprets it:

"'A city' – in order to dwell [in it], 'And a tower' – to observe from there to a distance, to see how their flocks and cattle were doing; it would also be a sign for the shepherds... so they would know [how] to return to the city. 'With its head in the heavens' – meaning that the tower would be tall".

The second part of verse 4 explains the reason for building the city and the tower. What was the purpose of this construction?

- a. "We shall make ourselves a name"
- b. "Lest we be scattered throughout the earth"

Let us examine the first reason: "We shall make ourselves a name." Once again, the meaning here is not clear; it requires some explanation. The expression "to make a name" appears several times in Tanakh, signifying publicity or honor. [1] Accordingly, we understand that the people were building a tower – a tall, impressive building – with the aim of bringing themselves glory.

However, there is a great difference between the "making a name" that is described in other sources in Tanakh and the "making a name" in the context of the Tower of Bavel. The other sources speak either of making a Name for God, glorifying the Name of God (not a person), or a name being made for a person as a result of some great deed, where this is not the primary aim of the deed.

Against this backdrop the arrogance of the builders of the Tower is especially striking: the whole purpose of this monumental construction is self-glorification, self-aggrandizement. The people did not build the tower for any practical purpose, nor to give honor and glory to God. The purpose was simply to "make themselves a name." The text emphasizes this through the word "lanu – for ourselves": "We shall make [for] ourselves a name." This word expresses their focus on themselves, on the glorification of the name of man.

This being the case, the verse "We shall make ourselves a name" is central to our understanding of the verse.

The centrality of the "name" (shem) is emphasized through two literary devices:

- a. The story of the tower is located in between two dynasties of the descendants of Shem. This serves to focus our attention on the name, or word, "shem".

b. The alliteration "shem," "shamayim" is repeated throughout the story, drawing our attention to "the name" and "Hashem" (God; literally – the Name). The words "A tower with its head in the heavens" are juxtaposed with "We shall make ourselves a name," hinting at the connection between "making a name" and "its head in the heavens": the people want to make themselves a name by ascending to the heavens – i.e., penetrating the realm of the Divine. They want to be like God. Here we sense that the expression "A tower with its head in the heavens" is not innocuous; rather, it suggests ascending to the heavens in order to rebel against God.

The word "shem" (name) appears several times in Tanakh as an honorific title for God. In light of the above, we may add this dimension to our understanding of the situation: the people want to make themselves "a name" – they want to be considered as gods.

Human arrogance, the aspiration to "make themselves a name," the desire to glorify the name of mankind – all of these represent rebellion against God and His Kingdom in the world.

Thus, the tower with its initially innocent-seeming intentions is a building that expresses human arrogance leading to rebellion against God.

This conclusion is further reinforced when we compare the story of the Tower of Babel to the story of Avraham, [2] which follows immediately afterwards. Avraham journeys in the wake of God's command, and during the course of his journey he calls God's Name: "He built an altar there to God, and called in God's Name." Avraham does not attempt to aggrandize his own name, but rather to glorify the Name of God in the world.

The result of this huge endeavor, undertaken by people who sought to "make themselves a name," is that they lose their name completely. Nobody knows who the builders of the tower were. Their names are not mentioned. In contrast, Avraham calls in God's Name, and God promises, "I shall make your name great".

Thus, we come back to the words "We shall make ourselves a name" as the key to understanding the entire story. This expression reveals the fundamental problem: the pride of the people who wanted to reach the heavens, to blur the boundaries between man and God.

Chazal explain the rebellious nature of this aim as follows:

"They said: We shall not allow Him to choose the upper worlds for Himself and to give us the lower world. Rather, let us make ourselves a tower, and we shall place an idol at the top of it, and we shall put a sword in its hand, such that it will appear to be waging war against Him" (Bereishit Rabba, 38,1.)

"They said: We shall not allow Him to choose the upper worlds for Himself and to give us the lower world! Let us ascend to the firmament, and we shall strike Him with hatchets. There were three groups among them. One said: We shall ascend and dwell there. Another said: We shall wage war against Him. The third said: We shall ascend and worship the stars and constellations there." (Tanchuma Noach 18)

The Midrash in Bereishit Rabba describes a tall tower with an idol at the top, waging war, as it were, with God. Midrash Tanchuma describes a common desire to "strike God with

hatchets," and then presents three possible scenarios, all of which boil down to an ascent to the heavens to rebel against God.

Thus, Chazal view the words "Its head in the heavens" as a metaphor for the people's desire to rebel against God. This idea, expressed in pictorial language in the midrashim, is the same idea that arises from the literal text.

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The second aim in building the tower was, "Lest we be scattered throughout the earth".

It seems that the people had some inkling as to the nature of the world, and they tried to deal with something that they knew was going to happen. They knew that as the human race multiplied, they would spread over the whole world, and they tried to prevent this. Why? What would be so bad about spreading out? People understand that unity is an important value; that with unity much can be achieved, and they feared a dispersion that would weaken them – perhaps even leading to divisiveness and alienation between different groups, to the point of waging war against each other. Instead of using all their strength for progress, they would be busy fighting; this would weaken them and bring destruction.

The fear of divisiveness is logical. The desire to live in unity appears positive.

Close inspection of the narrative reveals that there are two motifs that repeat themselves throughout the story (each appearing five times):

- a. "All the earth"
- b. "Language"

These two motifs represent two elements of human unity at the beginning of the story, and in both spheres the unity is dissolved. At first, all people ("all the earth") are unified by a single language and seek to live together in the same place, so as not to be dispersed all over the world. At the end of the story God destroys their unity of language, and causes them to be spread all over the world. [3]

From this we understand that God was opposed to the idea of all people living in the same place; He wanted them to spread out over the world. Those commentators who address the literal level of the text (Rashbam, Ribash, Radak, Ibn Ezra) note that the fear "lest we be dispersed" was a problem: having everyone living in the same place was problematic because God wanted things otherwise. God's will was that human beings would fill all the earth, in accordance with His command to Adam: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Bereishit 1:28). The people were trying to oppose God's will; they wanted to dwell all together in the same place, rather than spreading.

The people perceived the nature of the world, as God had created it, and they sought to oppose it: they did not want to be dispersed, as God willed them to be; they did not want to die. They did not want to be subject to God's mercy and to the events that occur in the natural world in accordance with the natural laws that God imbued in it. They wanted to be rulers, they wanted a name for themselves. They wanted to be able to determine their own fate.

They tried to channel all of their talents and abilities (for this purpose the unity was important to them) to develop a technology that would allow them to stand up to all that was destined to happen.

The preparation of bricks represented the development of technological ability that would help man to deal with nature, do things that were not "natural." This ability was given to man by God, with a view to allowing man to develop the world. God wants man to move the world forward; after all, He placed man in the Garden of Eden in order "to till it and to keep it." But the root of this opportunity holds an identical measure of danger. Man can use his abilities to develop the world, but he can also use them against God's will. He may come to rebel against God.

The story of the Tower of Babel opens with a neutral description of human unity and technological progress. The Torah does not present man's actions as fundamentally negative. [4] On the contrary – these actions could be positive and desirable.

However, in verse 4 it becomes clear that mankind has used its abilities in a negative way: technology and unity have allowed people to think that they are able to oppose God's will.

Chazal interpret the obscure verses at the beginning of the story as expressing rebellion against God. However, the Torah chooses to adopt opaque expressions and a neutral presentation of man's actions, rather than an unequivocal depiction of a negative situation. Why?

The message that arises from the obscure style is that unity and technological development are not inherently negative. They can be positive, and even extremely desirable.

However, after the fact, it turns out that people made sinister and sinful use of the positive abilities that God bestowed on them. The preparation of bricks and the construction take place here as a rebellion against God's Kingship in the world. It is a declaration that God will not be the One to determine what happens in the world. There is another force, other than God, who can determine what happens in the world. That force can prevail over God's power. And who has this power? Mankind.

This is idolatry. While it places no foreign god at the center of existence, it places man in that spot, and then worships man and his power.

This is the connection between "We shall make ourselves a name" and "Lest we be dispersed": we, humans, shall have a name for ourselves, we shall have the power in the world, such that we will be able to oppose the order of nature and the decisions of the Creator.

This idea is expressed in the Midrash, in Bereishit Rabba 38,1, once again in vivid language, and is quoted by Rashi on verse 1: [5]

"They said: Once in every 1656 years, the firmament collapses – as it did in the days of the Flood. Let us make it supports"....

In other words, people thought that it was in their power to prevent God from bringing another Flood. They believed that they had the power to prevent natural disasters, and to prevent God from bringing such disasters upon them.

The midrashei Chazal describing the Tower of Bavel as a sin of idolatry or as an attempt to rebel against God appear, at first, to be disconnected from the literal level of the narrative. Where in the story are we told that the tower involved idolatry? Where does it say that they planned to wage war against God? Where is there any indication that they wanted to create supports for the firmament?

When we examine the story in greater depth, we find that the construction of the tower was indeed an expression of rebellion against God. The midrashim give graphic expression to the idea that the root of the problem was a rebellion against God. How does the Midrash describe it? By depicting an idol fighting against God, as it were. By describing the human attempt to strike at the heavens. And by describing the construction of supports for the firmament, so as to prevent a possible collapse.

The literal level of the Midrash, with all of its vivid details, does not fit in with the literal level of the biblical text. But the idea that arises from the Midrash is identical to the idea presented in the text. The details in the Midrash are a device for expressing an idea, and this idea is not disconnected from the text at all. It speaks to a profound understanding of the text, and expresses the inner meaning of the biblical narrative.

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The second part of the story describes God's reaction to man's activity:

" God came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built.

And God said: Behold, they are a single people, with a single language for all, and this is what they have started to do; now, they will not be prevented from anything that they have plotted to do.

Let us go down and confound their speech, so that one will not understand each other's language.

Then God scattered them from there over all of the earth, and they ceased to build the city.

Therefore its name is called Bavel, for there God mixed up the language of all the earth, and from there God scattered them over all of the earth".

God descends to see what the people are doing. The significance of this "descent" may be scorn for these mortals, who aspired to reach the heavens, while the text describes God as having to "descend" in order to reach them.

However, in light of a comparison with other sources in Tanakh, it seem possible that the Torah speaks of God's "descent" in the sense of God coming to intervene in what is going on in the world. [6] Thus far mankind has acted without any connection to God. Now God becomes involved in what is happening. God's descent and revelation in the world is generally accompanied by a significant change in the nature of the world. This case is no exception.

In addition, the descent can also be interpreted as an act of examining the people's actions, an expression of pointing to the crux of the problem. [7]

Indeed, the next verse points to the problem:

"Behold, they are a single people with a single language for all of them." God declares that the root of the problem lies in the absolute unity amongst the people. Attention should be paid to some significant points:

- a. God's words contain no explicit denunciation of any specific act, but rather a description of the situation: "They are a single people, with a single language for all, and this is what they have begun to do".
- b. God's words express concern for the future: "Now they shall not be prevented from anything that they have plotted to do." What is this concern? How can God be worried about the actions of human beings?
- c. God's words contain no explicit reference to the city or to the tower. They are not the essence of the problem.
- d. Once again, the language becomes obscure: What is the meaning of the words, "This is what they have begun to do"? What is it "that they have plotted to do"?

Thus, according to God's words in this verse, the purpose of the dispersion and the confounding of the languages is not as a punishment for past misdeeds, but rather as a preventative measure for the future. God performs an act that will prevent mankind from reaching an undesirable situation.

God states that the root of the problem is the unity. What has happened because of this unity? "This is what they have started to do." We may interpret this unit in two different ways:

- a. "This" – the construction of the city and the tower – "they have begun to do" – i.e., they have begun to build the city and the tower, but have not yet completed their work.
- b. "This" – the construction of the city and the tower – "is what they have begun to do" – the city and the tower are just the beginning. They are likely to go on to other things. (This is the interpretation offered by Y. Kiel in Da'at Mikra).

"Now they will not be prevented from anything that they have plotted to do" – this phrase expresses the essential concern, in the wake of which comes God's response.

The concern is that if the people go on using the power of unity in the same manner, they will succeed in doing something that is not in accordance with God's will. What is it that God does not want them to do?

The Torah gives no explicit answer to this question.

Perhaps the text is hinting to the possibility that they will actually finish the construction of the city and the tower, thereby succeeding in making themselves a name and preventing their dispersion all over the world.

Perhaps the concern is broader in scope: that the people will succeed in realizing other negative initiatives.



The beginning of the verse indicates that the unity is the problem. But what is wrong with unity?

The problem exists on two levels. Firstly – through unity, people can accumulate excessive power, leading them to feel that they rule the world – to the extent that they believe themselves capable of opposing the will of God; they believe that they have "made themselves a name," like God.

But beyond this, absolute unity creates a sense of being like God, since God is One.

The concern, then, is that people will continue on the path of ever-increasing unity, preventing their dispersion, and making a name for themselves. This process is ultimately aimed at removing God from the picture – at rebellion against God's Kingship in the world. God gave mankind the power of unity and the power of creativity, and He wants mankind to use these abilities – but within the framework of His control, not out of rebellion against Him. People must know that they are not able to do anything and everything; their power is limited; there will always be things that lie outside of man's control – and it is in this sphere that God's Kingship finds expression. The problem starts where people think that "they will not be prevented from all that they have plotted to do." This thought is a misconception.

Thus, the story of the Tower of Babel describes a significant change in mankind. The original state was one of unity among all people. This unity was a positive, ideal situation. It was unity of language and, apparently, unity of all people in the service of God. God wanted the unity to be maintained, but that the people would be dispersed so as to fill up the entire world. The people understood the great power embodied in their unity, and therefore tried to maintain and intensify it, by opposing their dispersion all over of world. Such absolute unity would offer them enormous power, and would make them similar to God and even capable of rebelling against Him.

God wanted to prevent this from happening. The world cannot exist when it is entirely directed towards rebellion against God. God therefore needed to break the unity among people – even though unity is the ideal state. The breaking of their unity would prevent the united rebellion of all of mankind against God, facilitating the continued existence of mankind and the whole world.

How does God break the unity between people?

Verse 7 tells us that God planned to mix up the languages. Verse 8 goes on to describe God's action: He disperses the people all over of the world.

How does the change come about? Does God mix up the languages and, as a result, the people scatter over all the earth (as Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, Abarbanel and Malbim would have it)? Or does God cause their dispersion, and as a result several different languages develop (as the Ibn Ezra maintains)?

The text offers no clear description of how the change came about, but what matters is the result: their unity is altogether broken, and the new situation is that mankind is no longer unified in language, and that people are scattered all over the world.

However, it seems that we can also understand the situation differently. The initial unity was supposed to be just a unity of language. God wanted people to be dispersed all over the world and not to dwell all together in one place. Remaining together in one place was part of man's degeneration. In the wake of this degeneration, God intervened and brought about a fundamental change in human nature – a change that would break the natural unity that existed among them. What was this fundamental change? The change was that people would no longer share "a single language." Thus the initial unity that had existed among them was broken. This change resulted in a correction of man's degeneration: in the wake of the separation of languages, people naturally began to spread all over the world, for this had been God's initial plan.

In summary: the story of the Tower of Babel is one of the "Bereishit" narratives. It is a universal story, addressing a fundamental aspect of humanity and describing a fall from an ideal state of unity to a state of divisiveness – which is not ideal, but allows for the continued existence of the world.

The Torah presents the initiative to build the tower in equivocal language, such that our initial impression is that the people's action is not negative. God's reaction, correspondingly, is not presented as punishment for a grave sin.

It seems that the Torah deliberately adopts a positive tone and equivocal language, rather than clearly judgmental language, in order to convey an important message: the original state of humanity was ideal, and their actions could have been positive and desirable. The power of unity and the power of creativity are extremely positive forces; God intentionally imbued mankind with these abilities.

However, mankind began to use these positive powers in a negative direction. They used their unity and their ability to create and develop in order to oppose God's will, to oppose the natural laws that God set down for the world. They wanted to rebel against God and His Kingship, turning themselves into the rulers of the world, with power and "a name".

In the wake of this degeneration, the world could not continue in that ideal state, and therefore there was a need for fundamental change: a dissolution of the unity among people so that they would not rebel against God, such that the world could continue to exist.

The story of the Tower of Babel concludes the "Bereishit" period. Following the division between nations, there is no longer any hope for the ideal of mankind unified in God's service and under God's direct leadership (see the Abarbanel's commentary on Bereishit 11). Now there were many different nations, and there was a need for one nation that would be the nation of God and that would call upon God's Name in the world. Immediately after the story of the division and dispersion of the nations begins the story of Avraham - a descendant of Shem ("name"), apparently no coincidence – the person who is chosen by God to establish the nation of God that calls in God's Name.

#### FOOTNOTES:

" [1]I shall make you a great name, like the name of the great ones in the land" (II Shemuel 7:9); "And David made [himself] a name" (II Shemuel 8:13); "You shall make yourself a

name" (Yirmiyahu 32:20); "You have made Yourself a name this day" (Daniyel 9:15; Nechemya 9:10); etc.

[2]See also Y. Zakowitz, *Mikraot Be-eretz Ha-marot*, chapter 4, pp. 54-55.

[3]Concerning the difference and separation between the two motifs, see below.

[4]In contrast to the story of the Flood and the story of Sedom, in which the Torah emphasizes from the very beginning that there was corruption: "God saw that man's evil in the land was great... the world was corrupted before God, and the world was full of violence" (Bereishit 6); "And God said: The cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great, and their sin, for it is exceedingly grave..." (Ibid. 18:20). Against the backdrop of these two comparisons, the initial image of this narrative is striking in its innocuousness.

[5]Rashi adds the words, "As it did in the days of the Flood". The Midrash itself describes only the fear of the firmament collapsing – a fear of natural disasters, seemingly independent of any Divine action.

[6]As in the Exodus from Egypt (Shemot 3:8), in God's revelation at the giving of the Torah (Shemot 19:11-20), the bestowing of some of Moshe's spirit upon the elders (Bamidbar 11:17-25), the punishment of Miriam with leprosy (Bamidbar 12:5), and several prophecies calling upon God to descend and to reveal Himself in the world (Yishayahu 31 and 63; Mikha 1; Tehillim 18), etc.

[7]As in the story of Sedom: "I shall go down and see whether they have done altogether according to its cry..." (Bereishit 18:21.)

Translated by Kaeren Fish