

1

NOACH

וַיְהִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אַחַת וּדְבָרִים אַחָדִים: וַיְהִי בְנֹסְעֵם מִקֵּדִם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְּקֶעֶה בְּאֶרֶץ שׁוּעַר וַיָּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה גִלְבָּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרְפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וְהָיִי לָהֶם הַלְבָנָה לְאֹכֵל וְהַחֹמֶר הַזֶּה לָהֶם לְחֹמֶר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה | וּבְנֵה-לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן-נִפְּוֹץ עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ: וַיֵּרָד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשִׂפָּה אַחַת לְכָלֶם וְהֵן הַחֲלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא יִבְצֵר מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: הִבֵּה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שִׁפְתֵם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שִׁפְת רֵעֵהוּ: וַיִּפֹּץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: עַל-פֶּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בְּבֵל כִּי-שֵׁם בְּלַל יְהוָה שִׁפְת כָּל-הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְּיִצָם יְהוָה עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ:

11 The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. 2 And it came to pass, when they migrated from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire." And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them as mortar. 4 And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth." 5 HASHEM descended to look at the city and tower which the sons of man built; 6 and HASHEM said, "Behold, they are one people with one language for all, and this they begin to do! And now, should it not be withheld from them all they propose to do? 7 Come, let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another's language." 8 And HASHEM dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel, because it was there that HASHEM confused the language of the whole earth, and from there HASHEM scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

בנו יעקב בפירושו (בגרמנית) על ספר בראשית מעיר, כי כאן בפסוק זה מראה לנו התורה, כיצד בכוח ההמצאה הטכנית משתחרר האדם מכבלי סביבתו הטבעית, כיצד מתגבר הוא על קשיים טבעיים, ובכוח חוכמתו הטכנית ממציא הוא גם בשפלה, במקום שאין אמצעי הבניה הטבעי — האבן — בנמצא, את האמצעי המלאכותי, הלבנה, אשר נעשתה מחמר רך המצוי בבקעה והופכה על ידי השרפה לאבן בניין קשה. בשינוי קל של המלה (לבנה — לאבן; חמר — לחומר) מסמלת השפה את השינוי הטכני. והנה מעתה יוכל האדם גם במקום חוסר אבנים וסלעים להקים בתים, מבצרים, עיר, חומה ומגדל. ומיד מתחילה ההדרדרות. היכולת הטכנית מולידה את הגאווה, את הרהב; האם נאמר שם נבנה לנו בית ויהי למחסה ממטר? או: נבנה לנו ערים לטפנו וגדרות לצאננו? — לא כך. הטכניקה הופכת מאמצעי למטרה, לתכלית בפני עצמה. האדם היכול יכולת טכנית — נראה בעיניו ככל יכול. מה כתוב שם?

NECHAMA L.

2

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9-10-18
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וַיִּבְנֵה-לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָנוּ שֵׁם!

בנייני ענק, פירמידות, מצבות שיש, ככרות פאר, האין הם מאז ומתמיד אמצעי ביד האדם המתימר להיות שליט עולמים, הרוצה לעלות על במותי עד, להידמות לעליון, להנציח את שמו עלי אדמות, להתגבר על ידם על הרגשת חולשתו, על ידיעתו אשר ממנה אין מנוס ואין מפלט, כי "אך אל שאל תורד, אל ירکت בור" (ישעיה יד, טו)? אותם בנייני ענק, אשר אך כנמלה נראה האדם על ידם ואשר בכל זאת בכוח האדם וחכמתו הטכנית הוקמו, תפקידם להשכיח את קטנותו, את היותו חולף, להשלותו בגדולתם, "בנצחיותם" — לעשות לו שם. תכלית המעשה הטכני אינו איפוא בית עלי אדמות אלא מגדל אשר ראשו בשמים, היכולת הטכנית הופכת מאמצעי לתכלית, מכלי שרת ביד אדם לתכלית אשר האדם משרתה. יפה הובלט מצב זה בדברי המדרש, פרקי דר' אליעזר כד:

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NECHAMA L.

The belief that either the individual or the collective, through the development of defensive technology, can fully protect and make itself impervious to any threat is parallel to pathological narcissism. The psychiatric diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder in an individual is defined as a pattern of overvaluing one's worth and power, together with the inextricable failure to assess one's weaknesses. The outgrowth of this combination is the hallmark of narcissism – a marked impairment of empathy and connection to others. A group lacking the fundamental awareness of vulnerability leads to a communal narcissistic personality disorder with the ultimate end product being a Tower of Babel scenario – featuring a complete breakdown of language and communication. The psyche that denies its vulnerability and the reality of imminent dangers closes itself off from the possibility of any genuine interaction with the Other. Our inherent imperfection and fragility is what allows us to value and relate to others. Thus, what naturally develops from the denial of weakness is a narcissistic attitude that denies the possibility of something being outside of its control. In this narcissistic state, the one who can no longer live with the possibility of weakness organizes his life around its denial. This is the ultimate tragedy of the narcissistic personality; it causes its victim to become mute and disconnected from the organic reality of the world of others, and remains a stagnant shell of its calcified idealization. It is this disconnect and lack of empathy that enveloped the world “so that they would not hear the language of their fellow” (*Bereishit* 11:7). The loss of language and genuine communication is the natural evolution of the narcissism of the age of Babel. While the people started with a unified purpose (*ibid.*, 1, 3-4) the outcome was a collective narcissism that denied the individuals and their experiences and ultimately marked the end of the cooperation of their project – “and they ceased from building the city” (*ibid.*, 8).

The obsession of this generation with its own power and mission, and subsequent distortion in the interpersonal realm so endemic

to the narcissist, is vividly brought to bear in the midrashic account mentioned above (*Pirkei de-Rebbi Eli'ezer*, Ch. 24). “If a person fell [off the tower], and died they wouldn't even pay any attention to him, but if one brick fell they would sit and cry and say 'woe is to us, when will another brick be brought up in its place?'”⁵ Individual people, and even their deaths, had no meaning or impact, whereas a minor inconvenience to their pride was a loss to grieve. The height of the tower, i.e. the extent of their collective imperviousness, was inversely correlated with their removal from the experience of loss in human experience. Conversely, God emerges as a character in the story with humility and in a relational context. While God is always *yachid*, alone, here we find God mirroring the rallying cry of the people in the text – “*havah*” – (*ibid.*, 3-4) in his Heavenly court – “*havah nerdah ve-navlah sham sefatam*” – “Come, let Us come down and confound their language” (*ibid.*, 7). As the *Midrash*, quoted by Rashi, says: “He consulted with His Heavenly court due to His abundant humility” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 8:8). Furthermore, God goes down, “*va-yered Hashem lir'ot*” (*ibid.*, 5). As Rashi says, quoting the *Midrash Tanchuma*, “to teach judges that they cannot convict those being judged until they go down and understand” (Rashi, *ad loc.*). God emerges with humility, descending as He does with His Heavenly court to more fully understand the convicted.

DR. YITZEHOK SCHECHTER

(4)

PSYCHOLOGICAL
APPROACH

heights than hitherto. From this grew the ziggurat, a stepped building of many storeys, which came to have profound religious significance.

Essentially these towers – of which the remains of at least thirty have been discovered – were man-made “holy mountains,” the mountain being the place where heaven and earth most visibly meet. Inscriptions on several of these buildings, decoded by archaeologists, refer, as does the Torah, to the idea that their top “reaches heaven”: “And they said: ‘Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven,’” (11:4). The largest – the great ziggurat of Babylon to which the Torah refers – was a structure of seven stories, three hundred feet high, on a base of roughly the same dimensions.¹

Not only is the story of Babel historically precise, it is also shot through with literary devices: inversions, word plays, ironies and puns. One of the most masterly is that the two key words, *l-v-n*, “brick,” and *n-v-l*, “confuse,” are precise inversions of one another. As so often in the Torah, literary technique is closely related to the moral or spiritual message being conveyed. In this case the word play draws attention to the phenomenon of inversion itself. The results of human behaviour are often the opposite of what was intended. The builders wanted to concentrate humanity in one place: “Let us build a city... and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (11:4). The result was that they were dispersed: “from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (11:8). They wanted to “make a name” (11:4) for themselves, and they did, but the name they made – Babel – became an eternal symbol of confusion.

Their pride lay in their newfound technological ability to construct buildings of unprecedented grandeur. They did not realise that the greatest creative power is language – a message signalled in the opening verses of the Torah with the grand simplicity of the repeated formula “And God said... and there was.” What is holy for the Torah is not power, but the use to which we put it, and this is intrinsically linked to language – the medium in which we frame our ideals, construct imaginative possibilities, and call others to join us in realising them. The word is prior

to the work. With great poetic justice, it was not a technical problem that caused the builders to abandon the project, but rather the loss of the ability to communicate.

What, though, was the builders’ sin? The narrative signals this by a series of verbal cues. The first is the phrase with which the episode both begins and ends, *kol ha-aretz*, “the whole earth.” It opens, “And the whole earth was of one language” (11:1) and closes, “from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (11:9). A framing device of this kind is highly significant. Indeed, the phrase *kol ha-aretz* appears five times in the nine verses – and all three-, five- and especially seven-fold repetitions in a biblical passage signal the presence of a key theme.

The second cue is the repeating phoneme (a basic unit of sound) *sh-m*, either as *sham*, “there,” or *shem*, “name.” This appears seven times in the passage. It is clearly linked to the word *shamayim*, “heaven” – the place the builders were attempting to reach in building the tower. The thematic elements of the narrative are thus clear. This is a story about heaven and earth – returning us to the opening scene of Genesis and its description of the creation of *shamayim* and *aretz*.

RABBI JONATHAN SAKS

5

That was the sin of the builders of the tower. Their aspiration to "reach heaven" (11:4) was laughable, and indeed the Torah makes a joke of it. They think that their construction - three hundred feet high - has reached heaven, whereas God has to "come down" to look at it (in general, the one thing that makes God laugh in the Torah is the pretensions of human beings when they think themselves divine).

However, it was worse than laughable. The Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 1817-1893), writing in Czarist Russia and prophetically foreseeing the worst excesses of communism, sees Babel as the world's first totalitarianism, in which to preserve the masses as a single entity, all freedom of expression is suppressed (that, for him, is the meaning of "the whole world had one language and a unified speech"). Intoxicated by their technological prowess, the builders of Babel believed they had become like gods and could now construct their own cosmopolis, their man-made miniature universe.⁴ Not content with earth, they wanted to build an abode in heaven. It is a mistake many civilizations have made, and the result is catastrophe.

YESHAYAHU
6

בֵּית יַעֲקֹב לְכוּ וְנִלְכֶה בְּאוֹר יְהוָה: כִּי
נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עִמָּךְ בֵּית יַעֲקֹב כִּי מָלְאוּ מִקְדָּם וְעֹנִיִּים כִּפְּלִשְׁתִּים וּבְגִלְרֵי
וְנִכְרִים יִשְׁפִּיקוּ: וְתַמְלֵא אֶרֶצוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְאֵין קֶצֶה לְאַצְרֹתָיו וְתַמְלֵא
ח אֶרֶצוֹ סוּסִים וְאֵין קֶצֶה לְמִרְכָּבֹתָיו: וְתַמְלֵא אֶרֶצוֹ אֱלִילִים לְמַעֲשֵׂה
ט יָדָיו יִשְׁתַּחֲוּ לְאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֶצְבְּעֹתָיו: וַיִּשְׁחָ אָדָם וַיִּשְׁפַּל אִישׁ
י וְאֵל־תִּשָּׂא לָהֶם: בּוֹא בַצּוֹר וְהִטְמֵן בְּעֶפְרַי מִפְּנֵי פֶסַח יְהוָה וּמִהַדָּר
יא גִּאֲוֹ: עֵינֵי גְבוּהוֹת אָדָם שִׁפְלֵי וְשִׁחַ רֹוֹם אֲנָשִׁים וְנִשְׁגָּב יְהוָה לְבָדּוֹ בַּיּוֹם
יב הַהוּא: כִּי יִוֹם לַיהוָה צְבָאוֹת עַל כָּל־גֹּאֲה וְרָם וְעַל כָּל־גִּישָׁא
יג וְשִׁפְלֵ: וְעַל כָּל־אֶרְצוֹ הַלְּבָנוֹן הַרְמִים וְהַנְּשֹׂאִים וְעַל כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי הַבָּשָׂן:
יד וְעַל כָּל־הַהָרִים הַרְמִים וְעַל כָּל־הַגְּבוּעוֹת הַנְּשֹׂאוֹת: וְעַל כָּל־מִגְדַל גְּבוּהָ
טו וְעַל כָּל־חוֹמָה בְּצוּרָה: וְעַל כָּל־אֲנִיּוֹת תַּרְשִׁישׁ וְעַל כָּל־שִׁבְיּוֹת
יז הַחֲמֻדָּה: וְשִׁחַ גְּבוּהוֹת הָאָדָם וְשִׁפְלֵ רֹוֹם אֲנָשִׁים וְנִשְׁגָּב יְהוָה לְבָדּוֹ בַּיּוֹם
יח הַהוּא: וְהָאֱלִילִים כְּלִיל יִחְלָף: וּבָאוּ בַּמַּעֲרוֹת צָרִים וּבַמְחֻלוֹת עֶפְרַי

⁴ O House of Jacob: * Come, let us walk by the light of HASHEM!

⁶ For You* have abandoned Your people, the House of Jacob, because they were filled with [sorceries] of the East and divinations, like the Philistines; and they content themselves with the children of foreigners.⁷ Its land became full of silver and gold, with no end to its treasures; its land became full of horses, with no end to its chariots.⁸ Then its land became full of false gods; each one of them bows to his own handiwork, to what his fingers have made.

⁹ Humankind will have bowed and man will have humbled himself; yet You will not forgive them.*

The Day of Judgment ¹⁰ Enter the rock* and be hidden in the ground, because of the fear of HASHEM, and from the glory of His greatness. ¹¹ Humankind's haughty eyes will be brought low and men's arrogance will be humbled; and HASHEM alone will be exalted on that day. ¹² For HASHEM, Master of Legions, has a day [for retribution] against every proud and arrogant person and against every exalted person - and he will be brought low; ¹³ and against all the lofty and exalted cedars of Lebanon and against all the oaks of the Bashan; ¹⁴ and against all the lofty mountains, and against all the exalted hills; ¹⁵ and against every tall tower and against every fortified wall; ¹⁶ and against all the ships of Tarshish and against all the splendid palaces. ¹⁷ Humankind's haughtiness will be humbled and men's arrogance will be brought down; and HASHEM alone will be exalted on that day. ¹⁸ And the false gods will perish completely.