

Parashat Noach 5774, 2013:

The Tower of Babel versus the Earth is the L-rd's

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

In some ways, Parashat Noach reminds me of the refrain of a popular folk song of the 1960's: "When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?" Why? In broad terms, our *parasha* begins with the story of Noach and the destruction of the *dor hamabul* (the Generation of the Flood). It is followed by Noach's exit from the Ark and Hashem's promise to never destroy the world again through the medium of water. This covenant is sealed forevermore by the appearance of the first rainbow. The narrative continues and teaches us that the earth's population began to rapidly expand to the four corners of the globe. In relatively short order, cities were built and civilization flourished once again.

Logic and reason seemingly would dictate that mankind should have demonstrated overwhelming *hakaret hatov* (manifest gratitude) to the Almighty for His kindness and mercy in allowing them to thrive anew. Instead, we are presented with the following disturbing narrative:

Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words. And it came to pass when they traveled from the east, that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly;" so the bricks were to them for stones, and the clay was to them for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth." (*Sefer Bereishit* 11:1-4, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) has a fascinating Midrashically based three-part comment on the phrase, “and uniform words” (“*ud’varim achadim*”):

They came with one scheme and said, “He [G-d] had no right to select for Himself the upper regions. Let us ascend to the sky and wage war with Him.”

Another explanation: [they spoke] against the Sole One of the world.

Another explanation: They said, “Once every 1,656 years, the sky totters, as it did in the time of the Flood. Come and let us make supports for it.” - [*Bereishit Rabbah* 28:6, *Tanchuma* Buber, Noach 24]

In Rashi’s and the Midrash’s view, our predecessors engaged in premeditated rebellion against G-d Himself! They denied His hegemony over the universe and sought to uproot Him from His divine dominion. Moreover, in Rashi’s final explanation, they actually believed they could change the course of the Laws of Nature and be its rulers! This unbelievable *chutzpah* (temerity) and *mardut* (rebellion) rightfully resulted in the end of the period “when the entire earth was of one language”:

And the L-rd said, “Lo! [they are] one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they have commenced to do. Now, will it not be withheld from them, all that they have planned to do? Come, let us descend and confuse their language, so that one will not understand the language of his companion.” And the L-rd scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore, He named it Babel, for there the L-rd confused the language of the entire earth, and from there the L-rd scattered them upon the face of the entire earth. (*Sefer Bereishit* 11:6-9)

What is the antidote for the unmitigated and poisonous *kafui tovah* (rejection of the good) of the generation of the Tower of Babel? I believe it is development of sensitivity to the mastery, omnipotence, and omnipresence of Hashem. *David Hamelech* (King David) memorably formulated this notion in his celebrated 24th Psalm:

Of David, a song. The land and the fullness thereof are the L-rd’s; the world and those who dwell therein. For He founded it upon seas and established it upon rivers... Who is this King of Glory? The L-rd, Who is strong and mighty, the L-rd Who is a mighty warrior. (1-2,8)

With Hashem's help, may we ever be counted among those who embrace *David Hamelech's* stirring words and reject the mindset that led mankind to build their Tower of Babel to wage war with the Almighty. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

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