

*Understanding the Sins of the Dor Haflagah (Generation of Separation)*

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words (דְּבָרִים אֶחָדִים). (*Sefer Bereishit, Parashat Noach 11:1*, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Our *pasuk* (verse) is the introduction to the famous narrative of the Tower of Babel. It immediately presents us with two exegetical challenges, namely, what do the terms “one language,” and “uniform words” actually mean? Rashi (1040-1105) explains the first expression as “the Holy Tongue [i.e. Hebrew].” This interpretation seems to be nearly universally accepted. The second term, however, proves to be far more elusive. Instead of offering us a gloss composed of a few words, Rashi presents no less than three Midrashically based interpretations:

**and uniform words:** Heb. דְּבָרִים אֶחָדִים. They came with one scheme and said, “He 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 [i.e. G-d] of the world. Another explanation of דְּבָרִים אֶחָדִים. (other editions read: דְּבָרִים קָדִים sharp words): 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.”

In Rashi’s first two explanations, the *Dor Haflagah* (Generation of Separation) sought to challenge the Holy One Blessed be He, and either had planned to literally wage war against Him or had spoken vehemently against Him and His hegemony over the

Universe. In contrast, the third interpretation seems to suggest that the people of the time doubted Hashem's omnipotence, and therefore thought it was necessary for them to support the sky to prevent its collapse. The connective link in all three instances appears to be the generation's inability to recognize G-d's unlimited power and ability.

Perhaps Rashi suggested multiple explanations of our term based upon Rabbi Elazar's statement in *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 38:6: "The matter [concerning the destruction] of the Generation of the Flood is explicitly explained, [in contrast,] the matter concerning [the separation] of the Generation of Separation [i.e. our case] was not explained." Given the inexplicit nature of the narrative of the Tower of Babel, Rashi, driven by his singular intellectual honesty, was well nigh forced to share all three Midrashic interpretations.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893), in his classic work of Torah exegesis, *Ha'amek Davar*, took an entirely different approach to "דְּבָרִים אֶחָדִים" than that of Rashi. His analysis begins in a parallel fashion to Rabbi Elazar's observation:

The text does not clarify the matters [associated with the Generation of Separation] except through insinuation as is explained in the *Midrashim*. The text, however, does not explain **what** these matters were – only that they were "uniform words."

At this juncture, the Netziv shared his own unique thoughts to facilitate our understanding of "the story behind the story" regarding the participants in the construction of the Tower of Babel:

And we may learn that it was not because of the qualitative nature of these matters that the Holy One Blessed be He was bestirred, for if it was solely because they were united, this, in and of itself, would have been of no account, and therefore, it appears that there was no sin in this instance. In fact, the opposite is true, for it is proper and fitting to leave even a group of discontents (*chibur atzavim*) to their own devices. Here [in this specific case], however, [the act of being united] enabled them to think along certain lines that led to the destruction of their civilization ... (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, according to the Netziv, the *Dor Haflagah* thought “along certain lines that led to the destruction of their civilization.” The exact content of their thoughts, however, appears to remain undefined.

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), depicted the nature and being of the Generation of Separation in his interpretation of two verses that appear in our *parasha*. In so doing, he delineated the vague “lines of thought” that led to their ultimate demise and channeled Rashi’s comments into the context of modern tyrannies:

The construction of the tower represented industrialization. The society enslaved the individual, not to other individuals, but to the state, to the collective, to the group... the *dor haflagah*, the generation that built the tower of Babel, were disciplined and well organized. They had a strict political code... They were aggressive in undertaking, bold in design, and arrogant in execution. The ideology of Marxism as interpreted by Lenin and Mao Tse Tung could not have found a better portrayal than in these verses... The *dor haflagah* were a power-hungry band of fanatics who wanted to rule the heavens as well as the earth, scoffing at faith in G-d, human weaknesses, at the very idea of individual human dignity and freedom... (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Bereishit: with Commentary Based Upon the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, verses 11:3-4, pages 66-67*)

In conclusion, the *Dor Haflagah* was an authoritarian “band of fanatics” that outlawed the best in mankind in order to ensure the realization of their arrogant undertaking. Their worldview eschewed freedom and dignity, and “scoffed at G-d.” Little wonder, then, that “... the L-rd scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city.” (*Sefer Bereishit 11:8*) After all, their united existence was antithetical to G-d’s presence in the world.

With Hashem’s help, may we lead lives that repudiate the essence of the *Dor Haflagah*. Moreover, may we become sensitized to the needs of all mankind, so that we can help

build communities and societies that realize the values “of individual human dignity and freedom.” *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com).

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

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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