



YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

# WEEKLY PARSHA

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## *"Behold they have become one people" - Unity or Uniformity?*

“And from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the entire Earth.” (Gen. 11:8). What was the sin of the Tower of Babel, and why was it necessary to scatter them and create many languages? Are not geographical distance and the differences of language and culture the primary bases of misunderstanding and fear of the other? What did this people do to deserve that their unity be shattered and that this terrible curse be brought to the world?

While many explanations have been offered to explain this sin, the simple sense of the verse indicates that their very sin was that of unity, of being one. Immediately upon Noah’s exiting the ark, God had declared: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth.” (Gen 9:1), while those who built the Tower said: “Come...and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” (Gen. 11:4, and see Rashbam there). When God looked at what they had done, God saw not only one language but also that “behold, the people are one.” It was this unity, the fact of having one language, being one people, and wanting to stay that way, which was their sin. After their punishment, the fulfillment of God’s blessing to “fill the Earth,” was realized, and the peoples were “divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.” (Gen 10:5; and see verses 21, 31-32).

We can understand why God wanted the Earth to be populated, but what is wrong with being unified, with sharing one language and one culture? But perhaps there is something wrong with this. It is true that we often speak of achdus, of unity, and assume that it is an unqualified good, but is this actually the case? Are there no dangers in unity? Certainly there is a danger when unity becomes uniformity, when dissenting voices are silenced, and when everyone’s thoughts, words and actions are molded by a groupthink mentality. Those who built the Tower were not only of one tongue, but were also of devarim achadim, which may be best translated as “of one discourse,” or, as Radak translates it “of one consensus.” To only have one discourse, to blindly commit to one ideology, may create a strong, single-minded

following, but it does so at the expense of crushing the individual, of silencing dissent, and of perverting the pursuit of truth.

Unity which is uniformity is not a good, but an evil. Debate, dissension and disagreement, when pursued not for selfish or self-serving goals, but to serve a higher purpose, is not an evil, but a good. It is a machloket liShem Shamayim, a debate for the sake of Heaven. It is, in fact, the very essence of Rabbinic Judaism, where minority opinions are preserved, differences are respected, and debate is valued for its own sake. And in the end, the greater truth emerges: “Through such repeated asking [of the same halakhic question to multiple authorities] the two sides pay scrupulous attention to the matter and when there are times where the first one has made an error, and through this the truth of the matter will come to light.” (Tosafot Niddah 20b, s.v. Agmirei). The greatness of Torah she’b’al Peh is its decentralized nature and the multiplicity of voices which have flourished and continue to flourish as a result.

With the punishment of the generation of the Dispersion, with the introduction of a multiplicity of languages and of cultures, the concept of difference was introduced, and thus new perspectives were able to germinate and to grow, and new ideas could enter the world. Small voices were able to be heard, and one such voice was that of Avraham.

Avraham was a lone voice, introducing the idea of monotheism into a pagan world. When he stayed in his homeland, Nimrod – the leader of the Tower project according to the Rabbis – could not tolerate his heresy and tried to have him killed, according to the famous midrash. The small voice of monotheism was almost silenced before it could be heard. But he then travelled to a different land, one which was welcoming of him as a foreigner and prepared to hear his unconventional views.

He was free to “call out in the name of the Lord,” his voice could be heard and the Abrahamic faith began to take root and to flourish.

We as a nation have been profoundly enriched because of the many cultures and perspectives that are part of who we are as a people. “The Jewish People were only scattered throughout the world so that converts could be brought into them” (Pesachim 87b). The Jewish People have lived in the U.S., in Canada, and in Israel. They have lived in Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. They have lived in England, in France, in Germany, in Holland, in Austria and in Italy. They have lived in Morocco, in North Africa, in Argentina and in Venezuela. We – like the generation of the Dispersion – have been scattered throughout the Earth. We have welcomed in converts from all these lands. We have remained true to the Torah and our commitments, and at the same time have opened ourselves to the cultures, the perspectives, and the intellectual pursuits of the people of these lands. Our different cultures, our different practices and our different ideas have enriched us and have deepened us. Nahar nahar u’pashtei, “Each river goes according to its flow,” (Hullin 18b) and different customs and halakhic differences are part of the beauty of our tradition.

Sadly, there are many today who reject this approach, and who would like to believe that all Jews do or should look alike – white and Ashkenazi – and that all Jews should think and act in exactly the same way. Sometimes this desire expresses itself in a demand for a centralized rabbinic authority, one that would define one standard for all Jews, and reject any differences of practice or opinion. This is happening more and more in recent years with the Israeli Rabbinate, and has had a tragic impact on so many Jews, and also on so many prospective Jews – prospective converts whose very difference could so benefit the Jewish people.

This desire has also expressed itself in an importing of the attitude of “da’as Torah” into the Modern Orthodox community, and in the claim that in communal matters only one standard can be practiced, even if other practices are acceptable halakhically. The argument goes something like this – “In matters of communal policy, which are so important, should we not defer to the opinion of da’as Torah?”. Of course, following one standard is fine, if it happens to be the right one. But if it is the wrong one, we will all fail. Would it not be better if we encouraged multiple practices, and let them play out in the free marketplace of ideas? Perhaps the

best thing for the community is a different practice than the conventional one, or perhaps the best thing is having a multiplicity of practices, so that the differences in our community are respected, and all our different needs are addressed.

A story is told of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk. When the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, a central rabbinic policy making council, was being formed, he chose not to join. He was asked why he had made this decision, and he replied, “Let me tell you why. When they introduced electricity into Brisk, it was amazing. We could do away with the lamps, which were messy and costly, and our entire town is now lit by cheap, clean electricity. There is only one problem. In the past, when one person’s lamp went out, the others remained lit, and there was light throughout Brisk. Now, however, when the generator goes out, the entire town is cast into darkness.”

Let us all unite and work together to promote a committed Jewish society in which difference is valued and treasured. It is through this that we will escape darkness and that the truth will emerge to light.

Shabbat Shalom!

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