



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת נח תש"ע 5770

THE BIG IDEA

THE FIRST COMMUNISTS

The building of the Tower of Bavel, as recorded in this week's *parshah*, is a most intriguing event:

“And the whole land spoke the same language... And they said, ‘Let us build a city and a tower, whose top reaches the Heavens... lest we be scattered over the entire earth...’” (*Bereishis 11:1,4*).

The Torah continues to describe Hashem's strong opposition to this project. He intervenes by introducing foreign languages, to the extent that the builders could no longer understand each other. Their plans are thwarted.

At first glance, the entire episode seems somewhat mysterious. The motives of the people for undertaking this project, while not entirely clear, do not appear to be particularly pernicious. Yet Hakadosh Boruch Hu felt that their efforts definitely needed to be stopped. What was it that they wanted, and why, exactly, was it so bad?

That they indeed harbored evil designs is unquestionable; as the Mishnah in Sanhedrin (10:3) unequivocally states:

דור הפלגה אין להם חלק לעולם הבא, שנאמר (בראשית יא) ... ויפץ ה' אתם, בעולם הזה. ומשם הפיצם ה', לעולם הבא.

“The *Dor Haflagah* (generation of the dispersal; i.e., those who worked on the tower) have forfeited their share in the World to Come, as it says... ‘And Hashem scattered them,’ (*Bereishis 11:8*) in this world. ‘And from there Hashem scattered them,’ (*Ibid. v. 9*) in the World to Come.”

To be sure, some contend that – initially, at least – their motives were actually not so malicious.

In fact, according to the great medieval commentator the *Tzror Hamor*, they began with the most altruistic of intentions and utopian visions. They wanted to create a totally harmonious society, free of strife and envy, wherein everything would be equally shared and everyone would belong to one big, happy, family. Apparently, however, something went sour, to the point that Hashem had to disrupt their plans, and they merited only eternal retribution.

PRECURSOR OF NASA

Whereas the Torah itself was deliberately vague in its presentation of this event (see *R' Bechaye, Bereishis 11:4*), Chazal were licensed to provide more details. A more elaborate picture emerges from their words (see *Sanhedrin 109a; Bereishis Rabbah 38:1-9*). For example, Chazal clarify that there were actually divergent groups building the tower, meaning that different people had different motives in participating in the project.

A major factor driving the creation of this structure, Chazal tell us, sprang from fear over the relatively recent *mabul* (flood). Aware that basically the entire population had been wiped out, they wanted to make sure that they too would not fall victims to a deluge. The tower was intended to spare them from just such a calamity.

How exactly the tower was supposed to accomplish this remarkable feat is the subject of much discussion. An extremely fascinating approach is offered by the Gaon R' Yehonasan Eibshutz (*Tiferes Yehonoson, parshas Noach*). The people of that time thought they had hit upon the perfect solution to avoiding another world-wide *mabul*: simply leave the planet. According to R' Yehonason, the real goal of the builders was to reach the moon, which was ostensibly safe from any potential *mabul*. The only

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problem was how to get there. And that's where the tower came in.

(What follows is a presentation of R' Yehonason's approach in summary form. For a more thorough examination of the aerodynamic, atmospheric, gravitational, and other issues that are touched upon, the reader is referred to the original source.)

Apparently, the tower was not the end-game in their endeavor. Rather, it was a means to arrive at their intended lunar destination. The idea was to fashion a craft capable of transporting them to the moon. This vessel came complete with flight sails positioned to catch the rising thermal updrafts, propelling the airship heavenward. What prevented the successful buoyancy of such a contraption until this point were the atmospheric conditions resulting from the density of the surrounding air, which would serve as a drag on the craft, pulling it toward Earth. The plan of the *Dor Haflagah* was to overcome these atmospheric conditions by launching the craft from a height wherein the density of the air was considerably diminished. This was the idea of the tower: to create a structure whose top would reach a point where the air was much thinner and would thus not counteract the effect of the rising updrafts. In other words, according to R' Yehonason, the tower was to serve these aspiring astronauts as a launching pad to the moon.

Now, Chazal characterize the actions of the *Dor Haflagah* as thoroughly wicked. They are called "Rebels against Hashem," and as we have seen, forfeited their share in the World to Come. Yet their intentions, as described above, seem benign enough: to escape a flood. What was so terrible?

THE FIRST EVOLUTIONISTS

In their desire to escape calamity, the *Dor Haflagah* seems to have overlooked – or, more likely, purposely ignored – a more obvious and straightforward strategy. The original flood came about because of the people's flouting of Hashem's Will. To avoid future retribution, all that was necessary was simply to follow in Hashem's Ways!

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Yet instead of choosing the path of righteousness and decency – which most certainly would have prevented the visitation of worldwide destruction – the *Dor Haflagah* adopted a different approach. In fact, they practically bent over backwards to avoid subservience to the Creator, choosing instead to concoct the most far-fetched of stratagems. And so, in order to behave in any way they pleased and *still* avoid perishing at the hands of a Divinely summoned flood, they chose instead to "circumvent" the issue by building the tower. The rest, of course, is history.

As ridiculous as it may sound, there exist even today people who follow in the footsteps of the tower-builders. Aware that submission to Hashem would conflict with the unbridled pursuit of their every whim and desire, they seek to avoid recognition of the Creator of the Universe at all costs, even if it means resorting to the most outlandish schemes and concocting the tallest of tales.

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