

א ביסל תורה!

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ב' חשוון תשפ"ו · נח

בבל The Tower of

By Mark Druskin '26

The Tower of בבל is a powerful symbol in the West. Anywhere one goes in the Western world will know about the story of G-d scattering the nations and languages, and certainly many Jews know the story of the Tower to the Heavens - a story that, at a grand total of less than ten פסוקים long, might be the shortest complete story in רבה בראשית. It brings a very well-known story of a nation of almost irredeemable sinners who were tangled in immorality and sought to make idols of themselves, who put their pride before even their own flourishing. They believed that the collapse of the heavens was predetermined and cyclical, recurring every one thousand six hundred and fifty-five years, the amount of years between creation and the flood, and so prepared towers to hold up the sky. They scorned אברם for being barren and waged war against G-d in heaven. This is a very influential story.

While this explains some of what happened, a different perspective might explain the rest of the story. Firstly, since the תורה does not ever state when it happens; one can place it much closer to the time of the flood. Here, only a few generations have passed. The number of people on Earth at this time is more than a family but less than a full-fledged nation: it might be well described as a clan; it is composed entirely of these first generations of the descendants of נח. It is a small enough group that they travel together and make decisions together; the clan chief

can speak directly with each family head, and the family heads exercise direct control over their families. They did "דברים אחרים" "singular actions" (בראשית יא:א) because of this level of tight-knit, direct control; they were united with one language because they all spoke נח's language, as they were still so closely related to him.

Now, נח settled in the mountains of אררט. These mountains are located at least to the east, according to the simple reading; if we place these mountains to be the same as those that share their name today, נח would have settled on the very volcanoes of אררט that are located in the easternmost region of Turkey, bordering Armenia. In the next פסוק, the clan begins its journey from the East, and they settle in a valley in the land of שנער. Now, there are not many things that can grow in the mountains. Barley, rye, apples, some berries, and potatoes - which were not found in the Old World prior to their export from South America - are not the most tasteful or nutritious options, and all hard to grow in the mountains without advanced agricultural technology. When the sterile mountainous soil was no longer able to support the clan, they were forced to leave to seek better living conditions; they descended the mountains to the South and, eventually through their wandering, found the fertile soil between the Tigris and the Euphrates.

The clan ceases their wandering and begins to build a permanent city in the place they discovered. In its process, they decide "ומגדל וראשון בשמים" "Let us build.. And

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a tower with its head in the heavens, and we will make a reputation for ourselves, lest we be scattered on the surface of the land" (בראשית יא:ד). This is a very interesting expression, and is what could be the crux of this alternative perspective. In this exclamation, they decide to do two things: they decide to build a city and they decide to create a reputation for themselves; their purpose in doing so is to avoid being "scattered on the surface of the land." The מדרש says that, by this, they meant that G-d would cause the flood to repeat in one thousand six hundred fifty-five years. In the alternative perspective, however, the assumption of the people was that there would be no scattering, rather, everybody would be killed except for a minimum amount to continue the earth.

To prove this, one should look at the words used. It did not say "פן-נחרב" "lest we be destroyed." Rather, they used "פן-נפץ" "lest we scatter" implying a scattering over dry land. Additionally, a tower might have kept them safe from catastrophic flooding, yet the flood destroyed all the buildings on the earth. The descendants of נח knew about the flood and how it had destroyed the domain of man.

They believed that, for some reason, something would come to pass that would cause them to be scattered - but not destroyed - and that the tower, and a name, would help them find their way back together again. In a way, a tower makes sense for this purpose - a monument that was so tall it could be seen from all directions, so that someone lost from the meager clan could find his way back to it. A name could have two purposes: if they ever met someone in the world, they could say they came from בבל, and they would be told

the way to the city; and the name could be a figurative name, a memorial to the people if they ever became scattered. The tower and the city, their ruins themselves, would be the name, and generations in the future would come and gaze on the remains of that civilization and remember their name in perpetuity; or, in a form of rebellion, they thought that if G-d ever did completely wipe out civilization, He would look onto the city and remember them.

In a sense, this is exactly what happened. G-d "went down" to look at the city and the tower within which the people had built. The grammar of the text, and of the next פסוק, implies that the tower was fully built, yet G-d having to go down to see the tower shows that it did not truly reach the heavens where He resides. This language, of G-d going down to the city, is the same as in the later story of סדום and עמורה in פרשת וירא. In fact, דרבי אליעזר described nine times G-d descended and one time He will descend. Out of those ten, these two are unique for G-d descending to "see" the goings-on in the land. It is unique that the תורה makes such a direct comparison between this event and סדום and עמורה, which puts emphasis on the peculiar fact that the people of בבל would not receive the same destruction as did סדום and עמורה. Somehow, they did not merit to be annihilated, which the people of that generation seemed to have known.

In the sixth פסוק we hear G-d's observation on the city. Part of what He declares was already stated, that they shared a language. The second of G-d's observations is an interesting development in the story of this people. In G-d's plan, just before He

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undoes this city, they go from being a meager tribe to a nation. Somewhere along the way, in their creating a permanent dwelling and in making a name for themselves, a nation was born.

G-d's observation continues. Based on these two facts He concluded that this unity has caused them to start to act. "וְעַתָּה לֹא-יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמֹן לַעֲשׂוֹת" "and now, nothing can be withheld from them; they can achieve anything they want to do" (בראשית י"א:ו). Depending on one's reading of this פסוק, it could be contradictory to the very core of Judaism and G-d's omnipotence. How could a nation of humans become so powerful that even G-d cannot stop them? This cannot be the correct interpretation of this phrase. The מדרש does not think so either, which is why they interpret this phrase in three parts: "וְעַתָּה" "and now" is an opportunity G-d grants for repentance. "לֹא" "no" is the refusal of the people of בבל to repent. G-d then goes forward with His punishment and thwarts ("יבצר") their schemes. Regardless of what G-d said earlier, He was able to prevent their action, and it could not have been true according to the reading we discarded.

A slightly different explanation for what G-d means by His conclusion. Is that G-d does not mean He cannot thwart their plans, rather, the natural world cannot thwart their plans - and this is the crux of the sin of the generation of the flood. The people of the flood did not believe that they could become G-d's nation, because they did not believe in G-d, or at least did not believe in his omnipotence. Enough time had passed that they no longer had complete faith in G-d, so they thought that they could overcome whatever natural issues might interfere with the prospering of their city. Be it an earthquake, a flood, or a strange scattering, they would be able to overcome it by combining their effort and preparing for that event. They were wrong in thinking this, and because of this arrogance G-d had to punish them. But it was not a malicious arrogance; they did not hold themselves

above each other, but above the might of G-d. This explains the differences between the conclusion of this story and that of סדום, and the peculiarities that distinguish what happens here.

The people of בבל built their tower to avoid being scattered, and they did this to make a name for themselves. They did not get what they were hoping for. In the end, G-d confused their languages, causing many nations to sprout with their own languages on Earth. G-d stopped their building of their city and scattered them across the face of the whole Earth; they were not successful in overcoming the might of G-d and could not resist being scattered. The final, ironic action G-d does is He gives them a name and preserves it in the most published book in the whole world: the תורה. They did not preserve their nation, but they got a name more famous and permanent than any other. Today, everybody knows the name "בבל."

There might be many reasons why סדום and בבל are so similar, and so different. The people of בבל denied the existence of G-d, whereas the people of סדום hated their fellow man. The people of בבל had two desires, the people of סדום had none that we know of. The people of סדום were destroyed in fire and brimstone, the people of בבל exiled through a "nondescript" miracle. סדום and בבל are both preserved forever in the תורה.

Was צדיק a נח?

By Noah Levy '29

This week's פרשה starts out "אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק" "אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלְךְ-נֹחַ:" "This is the line of נח. נח was a righteous man; he was (simple/perfect)

blameless in his age; נח walked (reflexively) with G-d" (בראשית ו:ט). After reading this line one should think that נח is a צדיק. There is even a song, "נח was a big צדיק." But, there are a few questions after reading this פרשה that someone might have about the level of righteousness that נח had. רש"י quotes the נח that says about this פסוק that if נח was only considered a צדיק because he was in a sinning generation, however, if he lived in אברהם's generation he would not be a צדיק.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says that רש"י is asking "Why does the תורה say that נח was a righteous man (צדיק) in his generation? If he was a צדיק, would he not be so no matter what generation he was born into? Why did it not simply say נח was a righteous, wholehearted man?" Rav Soleveitchik brings up in מסורת הרב, his commentary on the פרשה, that in a story similar to that of the flood, in שמואל after the Golden Calf, Hashem tells משה that he will wipe out the Jewish nation. משה responds and says that if Hashem does so then משה would ask Him to take his name out of the תורה.

This commentary leads to a third story, the story of סדום. In this story Hashem tells אברהם that He is going to wipe out the city of סדום. Then, there is the famous debate between אברהם and Hashem which results in us knowing that there were not even 10 צדיקים in the city.

In all 3 of these stories, Hashem threatens to wipe out an entire nation, city, or world. In the story of סדום and in the story of the Golden Calf the "צדיקים in the story" argue that Hashem should not destroy the

nation that He wants to destroy. In contrast, according to the Rav, נח did not pray on behalf of the people of his time.

This brings us back to the question: was נח a צדיק? The פסוק in his commentary on the קדושת הלוי says that there are two types of צדיקים, both of whom serve Hashem. The first category does so with enthusiasm and profound devotion, but does so only as an individual, not endeavouring to draw other people, sinners, nearer to their Creator. The second category is those who not only serve G-d themselves, but who also are instrumental in leading sinners back to their Creator.

Even though נח had flaws, he is still a צדיק. In a non-religious sense he is very similar to Babe Ruth. Babe Ruth was great in his day but would he still be good even in the modern MLB? The same goes for נח, what would his role have been in the generation of אברהם? In my opinion, just as Babe Ruth is considered a great baseball player, so too נח was a צדיק.



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