

רב שלום בניך
Rav Shalom Banayikh

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The Language of Babel

At the Tower with Rashi, Ramban, Netsiv, and Orwell

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Humanistic insight, like the acquisition of wisdom in everyday life, is often marked by serendipity. We are surprised by insights that neither we, nor others, could have predicted.... For the study of Torah and for the type of humanistic insight we are discussing, as in real life, whether an insight has been earned, both spiritually and intellectually, is crucial in determining its validity and its value.¹

The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), so familiar to us that we may neglect to read it carefully, is notable for its economy of prose. While its narrative companion, the tale of the flood and the ark, is spread over four long chapters, the story of

* To whatever degree the type of “humanistic insight” I have tried to demonstrate in this essay “has been earned, both spiritually and intellectually,” it is due in large measure to my near quarter-century of learning from and with R. Shalom Carmy. In preparing this essay for print I went back to Shalom’s contribution to a volume I edited (see note 1) to re-read something he mentioned about Netsiv and *Migdal Bavel*, only to rediscover that it was a point suggested to him by this volume’s co-editor, Yitzchak Blau. Surely this is evidence of Shalom’s *mishpaha lomedet* at work.

1. Shalom Carmy, “The Manufacture of Sulphurous Acid: On Wisdom as a Catalyst in Torah Study,” in *Wisdom from All My Teachers*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: ATID/Urime, 2003), p. 76.

Migdal Bavel is compacted into nine verses alone. The reader is almost encouraged to see the tower story as a mere coda to that of the flood. Strengthening this linkage, *Hazal* (telegraphed to us through Rashi to v. 9) refer to the two stories as *dor ha-mabul*, the generation of the flood, and *dor ha-palaga*, the generation of the dispersion, setting up the same association, comparison, and contrast.

But is this so? Do our day school memories, often never supplanted by more mature readings, tell the whole story of the tower? Despite its height, is the message of the tower narrative drowned out by the waters of the flood?

Rashi's Explanations

“Now the entire earth was of one language (*safa ahat*) and uniform words (*devarim ahadim*),” opens our account, compelling Rashi to clarify the nature of “uniform words” — one word, one thing, one purpose: he explains that the people of the tower came with one plan (*etsa ahat*) which was sinful for three possible reasons (Rashi to v. 1, based on *Gen. Rabba* 38:6). Obviously, the nature of the sin being left unspecified by the Torah itself, the interpretive door is left open to *Hazal* and *mefarshim*, whose varied views of the sin provide different interpretations of the story as a whole, as well as whether the *Migdal Bavel* account is really an appendix to the flood or not.

Rashi first suggests that the people made some sort of claim against God: It's not fair that God lives in the “penthouse” and we're stuck here down on earth. We will go up to the heavens and fight a war with Him! According to this interpretation, they attempt to literally build a tower whose top would reach heaven, from which they would wage war on the Almighty.

Rashi's second suggestion is that they made a truth claim against the “One.” Building the tower was an attack on the idea of God's unity and primacy, or perhaps even His existence. “A tower with its top in the heavens” (v. 4) is metaphorical — in the same way we use “skyscraper,” which does not literally “scrape

the sky” but whose name conveys impressive height. They built a temple of idolatry to wage ideological battle against the notion of God’s oneness.

Rashi’s third interpretation plays on the phrase *devarim ahadim*, reading it as *devarim hadim*, or “sharp words” (at least according to one edition of Rashi): They thought that the heavens crumble once every 1,656 years (the period of time from creation to the flood), and calculated that the world was due for another destruction. The tower was built to reinforce the heavens, to hold back the rain. The error of this approach may lie either in the tower generation’s lack of trust in God’s promise that He would not bring another flood (Gen. 9:11) or in their arrogant notion that they could thwart His plan should He decide to wreak the destruction they feared. Either way, this interpretive tradition further connects the two stories.²

Rashi strengthens this connection in concluding his commentary on the story by directly comparing the flood and tower generations — asking whose sin was more severe. The generation of

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2. Usually, one has to observe a phenomenon a number of times in order to realize that there is a cycle taking place. Early civilizations may have noticed, for example, that once every 365 days or so, the seasons come full circle, or that the moon waxes and wanes over a period of 30 days, but it was surely necessary to observe these phenomena a number of times to determine that they represented a cycle. The people of the *dor ha-palaga* had not witnessed a cycle. They knew there had been a flood 1,656 years after creation. What made them assume it would repeat now that the same time had elapsed?

My friend R. Mark Smilowitz suggested to me that their sin may precisely be the attribution of what was clearly a miracle, a display of Divine will, as a natural, cyclical event devoid of any meaning or ethical value. The absurdity of attributing a onetime event as a once per 1,656-year cycle just underscores how far they were willing to stretch the plausible in order to avoid confronting the reality of a greater Being who judges us.

In all cases, Rashi’s three suggestions seem to parallel the three groups that R. Yirmiya bar Elazar suggests the tower generation had divided itself into (see *Sanhedrin* 109a).

the flood, while corrupt, did not reject God, but the generation of the tower, according to whatever interpretation you choose, did. Nevertheless, the *dor ha-mabul* was wiped off the earth, while the *dor ha-palaga* was “merely” dispersed over the land. Despite the fact that they rebelled against heaven, they had one great merit: a solid unity of purpose that caused them to be spared (even though they were united in evil counsel!), whereas the people of the flood, whose sin appears to have been less severe, were wiped out because they lacked unity.

The punishment of the *dor ha-palaga* was that their language was confused; they all began to speak different languages, and then they were dispersed. Since their language was mixed up, no one could communicate, which made it impossible to build the tower. The huge national project of constructing a tower whose head would reach the heavens could not possibly be accomplished, explains Rashi (v. 7), because one person would ask for a brick, and the other person — from lack of a common language — would give him cement, and then the first would raise a hammer and bash in the fellow’s head. Disharmony ensued, unity was broken, anger polluted the work, and the great undertaking was thwarted.

This explanation is interesting. Why should the fact that two people on a work crew cannot communicate necessarily lead one to brutally murder the other? When someone recently stopped me on the street and asked for directions in French, I wanted to help him, even though my two years of high school French utterly failed me. In all cases I was not inclined to hurt him! If I ask for the brick and you give me the mortar, I will simply have to point to the brick so that we can learn how to communicate. Why should lack of a common language automatically lead to homicide?

Reaching the Heavens

In truth, what was so wrong about the attempt to build the tower?

Why does the Mishna insist that the builders lost their share in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 10:3)?

Did these people really think that they could build a tower up to heaven, the “residence” of God? Children often imagine that God resides in a heavenly palace up above the clouds — an idea that they should eventually be disabused of, since God has no corporeal properties and really resides nowhere at all. Was this just a childish idea which that generation possessed? Even if they (mistakenly) believed that they could indeed ascend to the heavens, we know that they could not have, no matter how hard they tried. In that case, why did God have to stop them? Build your tower as tall as you want — sooner or later you will run out of bricks because your objective is impossible. We do not stop our toddler from playing with a Fisher-Price toy stove even though playing with a real stove would be terribly dangerous, because no matter how many times he turns the toy dial, nothing is really going to happen, no fire will ever ignite. Why did God have to stop a nonsensical plot?

This question is precisely what leads many commentators to interpret “a tower with its top in the heavens” metaphorically (as in Rashi’s second comment above). The *dor ha-palaga* did not literally think they could reach the heavens; they wanted to build the tallest possible building. The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 109a), in fact, records that *Erets Yisrael amoraim* mocked the very suggestion that the tower generation believed they might literally reach the stars, pointing out that were that the case, they would not have chosen a valley as the construction site, but would have started building on a mountaintop to get a head start.

Interestingly, Rav Yehonatan Eibenschutz insists that the literal reading of a tower tall enough to reach the sky is clearly a *guzma* (exaggeration), yet he reaches a startling conclusion. The stated purpose of the tower was to unify the people around one spot, “lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth” (v. 4). However, suggests Rav Eibenschutz, in the pre-modern era, before they understood how to make foundations for buildings, the taller a tower was, the wider the base had to be, as with the Egyptian

pyramids. To build a tower as high as the *dor ha-palaga* intended, the base would have had to have been so wide that the people living to the east of the structure would be very distant from those on the west — they would have become dispersed anyway, contrary to the very purpose of the *migdal*. Rav Eibeschutz concludes that the tower was not in fact very tall at all; rather it was a hollow turret filled with explosives or gunpowder, on top of which was a vessel (*sefina*). The force of the explosion would shoot the vessel skyward at escape velocity, and finally it would reach the moon, where that generation would be saved from the second flood. The tower was, in fact, a modern Noah’s ark; instead of building a boat, they built an escape capsule to the moon.³

However, most *mefarshim* do not present such fantastical interpretations. If the people were only interested in constructing a very tall building, we still face the puzzle of what was wrong with what the *dor ha-palaga* did. Is there any other possibility other than those posed by Rashi?

The Netsiv’s Explanation

The Netsiv (to v. 1) insists that the idea of gathering the inhabitants of the earth in one place runs contrary to the will of God, who commanded that humanity populate the world: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth” (the charge to majestic Adam I in Gen. 1:28). In order to build this huge tower, a vast amount of manpower and natural resources would be necessary. We might imagine that the Netsiv envisions the world population starving to death as a result. No one would be farming or raising animals

3. R. Yehonatan Eibeschutz, *Tiferet Yehonatan* to Gen. 8:21 (s.v. *vayarah Hashem*), pp. 20–21 in the standard printing. Interestingly, R. Eibeschutz died over 100 years before Jules Verne’s 1865 *From the Earth to the Moon*, considered the first science fiction account of space travel, with a similarly configured “space cannon.”

and creating a livable society, and that would have been contrary to the design of creation.

The Netsiv continues that it was not the content of the *devarim ahadim* per se that troubled God, but the very fact that they were *ahadim*; the very notion of there being one party line. This is a very different approach than that of Rashi, who even cites the unity of thought and purpose as a positive element and a mitigating factor in their punishment.

Obviously, the Netsiv argues, the account that they intended to build one city for all the people of the world is not meant to be taken literally. Rather, their intent was to build a capital; the other cities would surround the main city, from which the tower would serve as a lookout. From the tower, the leadership could keep an eye on all the outlying cities and villages, to make sure that they were not secessionist, that they were not looking to break with the collective groupthink of *devarim ahadim*. *Migdal Bavel* was Big Brother, it was the KGB, and therefore it had to be very tall.

Why were they so concerned about the possibility that people would break away? The problem, argues Netsiv, was their philosophy of *devarim ahadim*: they wanted to make sure that no one deviated an iota from the party line. Anyone who demonstrated any deviant behavior or thought would be killed — as they tried to do to Avraham Avinu. Their unity of purpose was that everyone had to subscribe to one ideology, and anyone who intended to separate himself would be put to death.

Netsiv points to the seemingly unnecessary verse 3 in the tower narrative — which tells us of the lack of natural rocks, and the need to fire bricks in a furnace. It seems odd that in a narrative of only nine verses, one whole *pasuk* is dedicated to a description of the building materials! When the Torah earlier states that Hanokh had built a city (Gen. 4:17), there is no mention of how it was built, or with what materials it was constructed. Why should we care if they built the tower with stones or brick or wood? Netsiv answers that the inclusion of the brick furnaces in our tale is the hint that *Hazal* found to the story of Avraham

Avinu and the fiery furnace of Nimrod (see Rashi to Gen. 11:28 for the account of the *kivshan ha-esh*).

According to the midrashic “imagination,” Avraham lived in the time and place of *Migdal Bavel* (see *Avoda Zara* 18b-19a). He is introduced to the reader on the heels of the tower story, and Rashi fills in the background by informing us that Terah reported his son Avraham to the authorities for his anti-idolatry ideology. King Nimrod threw Avraham into the fiery furnace (which was used for preparing the bricks), yet Avraham was miraculously saved.

Avraham Breaks with Society

The brick-burning factories must have been the cornerstone of Bavel’s military-industrial complex. It must have taken millions upon millions of bricks to even begin laying the foundation.⁴ The *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (Gen. 24) notes that these bricks were considered more valuable than the workers who laid them, for no one paid any attention if a worker fell from the heights, but each brick was priceless! One day Avraham passed by the “tourist attraction” of the building site, saw what was happening, and cursed them. Avraham knew that there was something wrong with people who could have such disregard for human life.

The Midrash paints a picture of Avraham Avinu, the renegade, being thrown into the *kivshan ha-esh* as the hammers continued pounding on the tower behind him, tying these events together.

Ramban tells the story differently than Rashi, not fully accepting the midrashic conflation of our text with the story of Nimrod’s furnace qua torture chamber. Because of Avraham’s departure from the reigning orthodoxies, he was put in jail, where the authorities debated with him. (Ramban knew what he was talking about; he too had to debate others in a contest that he could not possibly win.) The king was afraid that this dangerous thinker

4. See the various depictions of these scenes in art, especially the famous sixteenth-century paintings by Pieter Bruegel.

would pollute the population; he would cause them to stop their idolatrous beliefs. So he exiled Avraham. The Soviets had their Gulag; they had a country big enough to exile dissenters many time zones away, where they and their ideas could be isolated. Nimrod similarly sent Avraham far away — toward *Erets Canaan* — so that he would not influence others.

In making reference to the episode of the fiery furnace, Ramban seems to be telling us that the full Midrash need not be understood literally. In fact, Nimrod may have thought that killing Avraham would have made matters worse; he would have become a martyr. The best option was exile.

According to Ramban, Avraham's bags were already packed and he was already traveling when he received the command of *Lekh Lekha* (Gen. 12:1) — he was running away from Nimrod's regime, from the society of the *Migdal Bavel*. (Interestingly, Terah, who had betrayed his own son Avraham to the Thought Police, finally saw what kind of society he was living in, and he chose to leave with Avraham.)

If we read the Netsiv, Ramban, and the Midrash together, it is clear why Avraham could not have left the corrupt society of his own volition — the *Migdal Bavel's* awesome height. Avraham was a Natan Sharansky, a refusenik — if he tried to leave, he would have been locked up and “re-educated.”

The Netsiv lived in nineteenth-century Lithuania, while the Ramban lived in thirteenth-century Spain and later *Erets Yisrael*; one is a late *aharon*, while the other is a classical *rishon*. Yet the issues that they dealt with were remarkably and disturbingly similar. The Netsiv lived under a type of totalitarianism in tsarist Russia, while Ramban lived during a period of inquisition and disputation, which emphasized that there is one true doctrine that must be enforced. Everyone who disagrees must be converted or silenced. Such a regime poisons all of society. In such a society, there is a dehumanizing element; a brick becomes more important than a person. In Orwell's terms, the dissident becomes an “unperson,” as if he had never existed. The brick, the national project, becomes paramount, the individual a mere cog.

In such a society, the inability to communicate with others is an extension of the xenophobia, those who do not “speak your language,” either literally or ideologically, are assumed to be a dangerous influence. You’re better off just bashing in their heads.

This is connected to a basic debate between linguists regarding the nature of language. Noam Chomsky famously asserted the existence of a Universal Grammar common to all language and hard-wired into the human brain. (This is the theoretical basis for the Universal Translator device in the fictional realm of *Star Trek*: While seeking out new life and new civilizations, but without having the TV writers need to concoct a foreign language every week and the viewers read subtitles, each new language could quickly be translated in person-to-person encounters by having one speak his or her language until the Universal Translator gathers enough data to build a translation matrix, suggesting that all languages throughout the galaxy are actually the same at their root.⁵)

However, more recent research in the social sciences and neuroscience has begun to reveal the degree to which the specific language we speak shapes our thought.⁶ Orwell was certainly not a Chomskian; his Ministry of Truth, believing it can alter thought by tampering with language, periodically rewrites the dictionary of Newspeak, which is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of IngSoc [English Socialism], but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten,

5. Rick Sternbach and Michael Okuda, *Star Trek: The Next Generation Technical Manual* (New York: Pocket Books, 1991), s.v. Universal Translator, p. 101.

6. See Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

a heretical thought — that is, a thought diverging from the principles of IngSoc — should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.... Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.⁷

If there is no word in the only language available to you for such concepts as freedom or liberty or rebellion, you will be discouraged from thinking about such things. As the lexicographer Syme tells Winston Smith, “It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words.”⁸ The scope of language shapes thought and society; Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia certainly used this principle in their propaganda.⁹

The problem with the *devarim ahadim* philosophy is that it allows only one channel of communication, and provides only one vessel to contain thought. Avraham Avinu not only smashed the physical idols, he smashed this ideological idol as well, and was banished by the Thought Police, who understood the danger of introducing new ideas and the magnitude of his “thought crime” — his great enterprise of bringing monotheism and its moral message to the world. The reading of the Ramban and Netsiv, so different from that of Rashi, leads us to reevaluate our elementary school notion that the story of *Migdal Bavel* is the coda to the story of the *mabul*; it is, rather, the preface to the story of Avraham Avinu. This is not simply the second tale of ancient history preceding the “real” story, which begins with Avraham. The story of *Migdal Bavel* is necessary for us to understand the society from which Avraham broke.

7. George Orwell, “Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), pp. 246–247.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

9. On the relationship of controlling thought through propaganda see esp. chap. 11 of Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948).