

STANDING AT THE Crossroads

THE MIGDAL VS. THE MIZBEACH

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

President and Rosh Yeshiva,
Yeshiva University and RIETS

Adapted from Rabbi Dr. Berman's Chag HaSemikhah address from the previous Chag (5782/2021) honoring Rabbi Joel Schreiber.

About five years ago, I received a call from Joel Schreiber, past chairman of the board of RIETS. I had made Aliyah about ten years prior and was living in Israel happily and comfortably.

Joel reached out to me to share that he knew I was asked to consider becoming the President of YU and he wanted to talk to me about accepting. Thus began one of the most passionate descriptions of the significance of Yeshiva University that I have ever heard. Joel is an ardent believer. I similarly spoke with my rabbeim, our senior Roshei Yeshiva, who were of course equally passionate about our Yeshiva. And I had to decide what to do.

Many of you have, in some form, also experienced these types of decisions for these are the years in which you will be asking yourselves these kinds of questions: Who will you marry? Where will you live? What position will you accept? Moments in which you stand at a crossroads and your decision will forever alter the course of your life.

What do you do at such moments? How

do you make these kinds of decisions? Or more broadly, as *musmakhim* of our Yeshiva, how do you, as rabbis, educate your students, congregants, lay leadership, community partners to best navigate the course of **their** lives?

What is true for individuals is also true of societies as a whole. There are pivotal moments in which history is determined, when society stands at a crossroads.

These are the moments, both as individuals and as societies, that are definitive and revealing. What are your values? What are your priorities? What are your fears and insecurities? Sure, we all speak about Torah and serving Hashem. But *tachlis*, when it counts, when something is on the table. Who are you? What do you stand for?

In the Torah there is a story about a society that stood at its own crossroads that provides some guidance as to how one addresses these kinds of questions. In the story we read of two very different responses: the *migdal* and the *mizbeach*.

At the end of Parshat Noach, we read of a society that was both drunk with their newfound power and scared for their lives.

It was after the flood and the world was repopulating.

וַיְהִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אַחַת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים.
And the whole world was of one language and of common purpose.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּנוּ נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה
לְשִׂרְפָה וְתַהֲי לָהֶם הַלְבָנָה לְאֶבֶן וְהַחֹמֶר הָיְה לָהֶם
לְחֹמֶר.

They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, forging them in fire, And the brick served them as stone, and lime served them as mortar.



We read that society was beginning to industrialize and discover. Instead of just using stones to build, as in their past, they began to harness and channel energy, fire, to create bricks, which broadened their range of opportunities. Technology, innovation, the social and economic order were beginning to evolve.

And what did they do with this newfound scientific ability?

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֵאשׁוּ בְשָׂמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן נִכְחוּץ עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ.
And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world."

Why a tower?

The Netziv explains that they were afraid. They saw people starting to spread across the world and they were worried that they and their ideas would be lost. So, they initiated this huge urban project with a massive blast-like furnace, a *kivshan*

ha-esh, for a mass production of bricks to build a tower tall enough so that they can always keep watch over the people and wherever people spread they will always look up and know that they are being watched. They were ensuring their continuity by policing the populace.

In fact, a close reading of the story reveals that they had something else to fear as well: their own mortality. Inexplicably, they were dying at a younger age than ever before. If you follow the ages in the genealogical sections that are often read too hastily, you will note that Shem the son of Noah lived 600 years. His son Arpachshad lived 438, Shelach his son 433, Ever 464, Peleg 209, Reu 239, Serug 230, Nachor 138, Terach 205. Chazal teach us that it was at the end of Peleg's life that Migdal Bavel happened, when life expectancy precipitously dropped by two hundred years.

And keep in mind that this was all in the context of living in the wake of a global

flood that wiped out the world. In fact, one midrash says that they were afraid of another flood happening so their plan was to build many towers as scaffolding to hold up the *rakia*, firmament, lest it collapse again, and waters would come flooding down.

All of these elements highlight the same essential point: Towers, policing, hiding behind walls — these are not the signs of strength but insecurity. And the society used their scientific and technological advances to *naaseh lanu shem* — to be remembered, to create some sense of permanence, to make for themselves a name.

This is the backdrop of the introduction to the hero of Sefer Bereshit — the hero of the Jewish people and all of humanity.

What is sometimes lost is that Avraham was alive during Migdal Bavel. *Seder Olam* writes that Avraham was 48 years old. The Netziv explains that the furnace

TORAT EMET	TORAT CHAIM	TORAT ADAM	TORAT CHESED	TORAT ZION
אמת TRUTH	חיים LIFE	אדם INFINITE HUMAN WORTH	חסד COMPASSION	ציון REDEMPTION
We believe in truth, and humanity's ability to discover it.	We believe in bringing values to life.	We believe in the infinite worth of each and every human being.	We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others in compassion.	We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and move history forward.
The pursuit of truth has always been the driving force behind advances in human understanding, from Socrates' wanderings through the streets of Athens to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution. People of faith, who believe in a divine author of Creation, believe that the act of discovery is sacred, whether in the realm of philosophy, physics, economics or the study of the human mind.	Jewish thought asserts that truth is made available to human beings not simply so they can marvel at it but also so that they can use it. Students studying literature, computer science, law, psychology or anything else are expected to take what they learn and implement it within their own lives as well as apply it to the real world around them.	Judaic tradition first introduced to the world the radical proposition that each individual is created in the divine image and accordingly possesses incalculable worth and value.	Even as we recognize the opportunities of human diversity, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of common obligations. In particular, every human being is given the same responsibility to use his or her unique gifts in the service of others; to care for their fellow human beings; to reach out to them in thoughtfulness, kindness and sensitivity; and to form a connected community.	In Jewish thought, the concept of redemption represents the conviction that while we live in an imperfect world, we have a responsibility to strive toward its perfection. Regardless of a person's personal convictions about whether social perfection is attainable or even definable, it is the act of working toward it that gives our lives meaning and purpose. This common striving is an endeavor that brings all of humanity together.
The Jewish people in particular affirm that beginning with the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God entrusted eternal teachings and values to us that we must cherish and study diligently above all else, for they represent the terms of the special covenant that God made with us. All people, regardless of their faith background, should value the accumulation of knowledge because it is the way to truth and a prerequisite to human growth.	When people see a problem that needs addressing, their responsibility is to draw upon the truths they uncovered during their studies in finding a solution. They must live truth in the real world, not simply study it in the classroom.	The unique talents and skills each individual possesses are a reflection of this divine image, and it is therefore a sacred task to hone and develop them. The vast expansive human diversity that results from this process is not a challenge but a blessing. Each of us has our own path to greatness.	The Jewish people's task to build up the land of Israel into an inspiring model society represents this effort in microcosm. But it is part of a larger project that includes all of humankind. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then redemption represents our responsibility to work together in the service of God to move history forward.	

Avraham was thrown into by Nimrod in the midrash was the industrial *kivshan ha-esh*, because Avraham had the courage to defy the common thinking and current order of the day.

And Avraham too had a building project.

When Avraham journeyed from his family's home to Bet El, he built not a *migdal* but a *mizbeach*.

And there are three elements to Avraham's building project. The first is the purpose of the building. And here too "shem" name, is the central theme — but not *na'aseh lanu shem*:

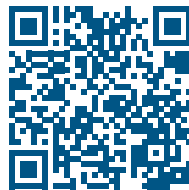
וַיֵּעַתֵּק מִשֵּׁם הַהָרָה מִקֶּדֶם לְבֵית אֵל וַיֵּט אֶהְלֵה בֵּית אֵל מִיָּם וְהָעִי מִקֶּדֶם וַיְבֹן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַה' וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה'.

Avraham built a *mizbeach* not for his own name, but to sanctify the name of G-d.

Avraham's building project was not about power but sacrifice. A *mizbeach* is an admission of humility, that there is a higher being and purpose. It is a tribute to the transcendent.

The second element is that Avraham during this whole time was thinking about his children and future descendants. As Rashi explains, he chose Shechem and Bet El to daven for bnei Yaakov and bnei Yisrael who would each face challenges in the future in those two places. All throughout his journey, Avraham never lost focus on his family and their future.

And the third element is his impact. Umberto Cassuto, the early 20th century biblical commentator remarks that these *mizbachot* stood at the crossroads of the land. He explains that there was a major highway that ran north and south in Israel and two thoroughfares that ran east to west. Together these roads crisscrossed the country and divided the country into thirds. Avraham built the *mizbachot* in those spots in Bet El and Shechem because these were the roads with the highest frequency of travel, so he placed himself at the crossroads to have the highest level of impact. Avraham's



See more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Berman at www.yutorah.org/teachers/Rabbi-Dr.-Ari-Berman

goal was never to simply worship Hashem himself but to spread the name of Hashem to others. So, he found the major arteries and pathways into society and publicly called out in the name of Hashem.

There were three elements to Avraham's building project, and it differentiated him from the society around him.

While they saw the transient nature of life and sought permanence by spotlighting their own name, Avraham understood that there is only one who is truly permanent – *malkhutkha malkhut kol olamim u-memshalltekha be-khol dor ve-dor*. And our goal is to attach ourselves to Him.

In addition, Avraham knew that legacy is not about making sure that your name lives on but that your values live on through your family, children and the next generations. That's legacy.

And finally, Avraham did not hide behind towers but stood at the crossroads and called out in the name of Hashem. He

understood that one cannot sanctify Hashem's name in this world by policing from afar but by direct interaction, one person at a time, with kindness and love, exemplifying, teaching and spreading our Torah values. A *mizbeach* is not as tall, but ultimately it is far more effective. It speaks to one's aspirations, not one's fears. It touches one's heart, it doesn't impose on another's will. The *migdal* is a display of power, a *mizbeach* is actual influence. Power comes and goes. It is transient by nature. Influence and impact can last forever.

For Avraham, the focus was on being an *eved Hashem*, on his children and their future, and his impact on the world.

Two responses to the same circumstances.

This frames the reason why today is such a celebration. For we are graduating the next generation of rabbinic leaders who embody our Torah values and who will build the *mizbachot* of the future standing at the crossroads of our community and society.

My dear musmakhim,

I have had the opportunity to spend some time meeting with each one of you and I have to tell you that I have walked away from our encounters so impressed by you and your aspirations.

And you truly run the gamut. One musmakh told me that he is interested in teaching upper elementary school because that is the age when children are impressionable without the natural front of a resistant teenager. Another has a passion for kiruv and is looking to find innovative ways to transmit the beauty of the Torah to those without a formal background. From talmidim who are committed to becoming yeshiva day school and high school teachers to those who are choosing to care for and guide our communities as rabbanim. From those who will assume communal lay leadership roles giving shiurim and divrei Torah to those who are growing to be our next great poskim and dayyanim. We have musmakhim living in Israel and musmakhim who stretch throughout the US and diaspora communities. Many have already written sefarim and you are all burgeoning talmidei chachamim.

And every one of you embody our Torah values: commitment to Torah, *yiras shamayim*, *middos tovos*, fine character, *mentschlichkeit*, caring.

Ruach habriyos nocheh hemanu

Ruach HaMakom nocheh hemanu

This is the hallmark of our yeshiva.

And everyone in the Jewish world knows this. Over Sukkot, I was in Yerushalayim and had a meeting with the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, and he said to me that we need Yeshiva University graduates and especially Yeshiva University rabbis.

Everyone in the Jewish world and beyond saw what happened the last year and a half dealing with COVID. How our poskim, rabbanim and mechanchim led with the full plethora of our values — truth, wherever it is found like in science and

medicine, life, valuing each *neshamah*, caring for others, concerned about the health of not just ourselves but our community and our neighbors.

And I have to tell you that people are scared. We too are standing today at a crossroads. While there are advances in science and technology, innovation and entrepreneurship, that are creating new vistas in improving quality of life and human flourishing, at the same time there is a profound sense of insecurity especially in our community with the rise in anti-semitism and anti-Israel rhetoric, with traditional values under attack, the erosion of civic and political discourse, and extraordinary fears about health. We have lived through and are still living through the *mabul* of our generation and there is not only much underlying trauma but still deep uncertainty about the future.

In so many ways, it feels like we today are living in uncharted waters without a map. Of course, for us, even when there is no map, we know we have a compass. For our Torah values are our compass and they enable us to navigate through all times, even the most challenging. But we need the people who are carrying that compass; the leaders who will stand at the crossroads, who will model the values of the *mizbeach*, comforting, loving and guiding the next generation on the road ahead.

This is a moment when we truly need YU rabbis.

And that is one of the main reasons I am here today.

In your life, my dear students, you will personally face significant life decisions and be called on to guide others who are navigating the crossroads of life.

I have spoken to a number of you who are considering these kinds of questions yourselves right now and they usually entail a measure of risk. I remember the words of my rebbi, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein ztz'l, when speaking to him

about making Aliyah he said to me “that there are those who live their lives risk averse, that’s not how I lived mine and that is not how I encourage my talmidim to live theirs.” There is always risk — so remember this tripartite formula from Avraham’s journey which could be instructive to you. What choice will help me be a better *eved Hashem*? How will my decision affect my family and children? Will it help me or hinder me from the kind of impact of which I am uniquely capable?

For me, listening to Joel, speaking to our Roshei Yeshiva, hearing how they believe in you, was profoundly inspiring, and a key element to my life decision.

For I believe in you, our Yeshiva believes in you, your family and friends who surround you today along with the wider Jewish world — all believe in you.

You are our hope and our future.

And so, my bracha to you today is to embody the values of our yeshiva and build lives of meaning and impact. May Hashem bless you with good fortune and happiness. May you find joy in your life, love in your heart and purpose in all that you do. I have been inspired by seeing how you have handled this chapter in your life, which gives me profound confidence in the way you will write yourselves into the next chapter of the great story of the Jewish people, bringing joy and redemption to those whom you love and to all those around you — *simchah le-arztekha* and *sasson li-irekha* — joy to the cities in which you reside and to our eternal city of Jerusalem; joy to your homes and joy to our homeland.