

IS UNITY ALWAYS GOOD?

IN
CONJUNCTION
WITH THE
SHABBOS
PROJECT

THE SOURCE

THE TOWER OF BABEL-GENESIS 11:4

And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth."

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֶבֶה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֵאשׁוּ
בְשֵׁמִים וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן נִפְּוֹץ עַל פְּנֵי
כָּל הָאָרֶץ:

Discussion Question

What did the people of the Tower of Babel do wrong and how did it relate to their unity?

Discussion Question

Why did the people want to make a name for themselves? Is there anything wrong with that?

Discussion Question

What was the goal of mixing up the languages of the people? Was it a punishment or a solution to the problem?

Discussion Question

After the languages were mixed, was the possibility for unity lost?

Insight #1

Everyone was unified and bound to a single philosophy of life and the Tower allowed them to supervise people, ensuring that nobody rejected their philosophy.

R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin,
Ha'amek Davar, Bereishit 11:4

Digging Deeper: According to R. Berlin, were the people of the Tower displaying unity or conformity? What is the difference between the two concepts?

Insight #2

Unity is only good when the goal is to improve the lives of others. Once they said 'let us make a name for ourselves,' their motives became selfish rather than altruistic and God had to break up their unity

R. Ephraim Luntchitz, Kli Yakar, Bereishit 11:1

Digging Deeper: Do motivations and actions go hand in hand? Can they be separated?

Insight #3:

When an orchestra plays music, it appears as if each musician is competing with the other, each one playing different notes and tones. In reality, the opposing voices create harmony.

R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein, Baruch She'Amar, Tefillot HaShanah pg. 277

Digging Deeper: How do you think R. Epstein applies this to differing opinions about the Torah? How can the metaphor be used to determine when diversity will produce positive or negative results?

CASE STUDY

Shira and her friends walk every Shabbat afternoon to a nursing home to visit some of the residents. Michal approaches Shira and says "I represent a group of people who visit the local hospital every Friday. Perhaps we should join together so that our numbers are larger and the local newspaper might run a story about us." Shira doesn't see any real benefit in combining the two groups. Should she combine them simply for the sake of unity?

How would you apply the lessons of the three insights to the case study? How do these lessons apply in your life?

STORY

R. Aryeh Levin was well known for his love of all Jews. After the Six Day War, he went to visit some injured soldiers in the hospital. One of the soldiers was surprised that a complete stranger would come to visit him and asked if R. Aryeh knows him. R. Aryeh responded that they had met previously when both of them stood together at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

A Tzaddik in Our Time pg. 135

Additional Texts for Further Exploration

God said, "Behold, there is one nation and one language for all of them." R. Yehuda and R. Nechemiah [presented different interpretations]. R. Yehuda said: since they are one nation and one language, if they repent, I will accept them. R. Nechemiah said: what caused them to rebel against Me? Is it not because they are one nation and one language?

Bereishit Rabbah, Parsha no. 38

ויאמר ה' הן עם אחד ושפה אחת לכולם, רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה, רבי יהודה אומר הואיל והן עם אחד ושפה אחת אם עושין הן תשובה אני מקבלן, רבי נחמיה אומר מי גרם להם שימרדו בי לא על ידי שהם עם אחד ושפה אחת.

בראשית רבה, פרשה לח

What perspectives do R. Yehuda and R. Nechemiah offer on the unity of the people of the Tower?

If a person fell and died, they wouldn't pay attention to him/her but if a brick fell, they would sit and cry and say: how are we going to replace it?

Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 24

ואם נפל אדם ומת לא היו שמים לבם עליו, ואם נפלה לבנה היו יושבין ובוכין ואומרים מתי תעלה אחרת תחתיה.

פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק כד

What insight does Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer give to the value system of the people?

If the community has a common mission, even if there are millions in the community, there is no need for an artificial connection; the mission of each individual is the connection and the common denominator that connects them all is [service of] God. However, if the community wasn't created to serve the individual, but rather, the opposite, the community exists to "make a name for ourselves," it is understood that there is a need for compulsion or deception in order to get individuals to subscribe to this view ... This sin is described well in Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer chapter 24: If a person fell and died, they wouldn't pay attention to him/her ...

Commentary of R. Shimshon Refael Hirsch, Bereishit 11:4

אם הציבור מתאים לייעודו - אפילו יש בו מיליונים - אין צורך בקשר מלאכותי ביניהם; תודעת היחידים היא הקשר, ונקודת האיחוד הוא ה'. אולם, אם הציבור לא נוצר למען היחיד, אלא להיפך, אם הוא אומר "נעשה לנו שם", הרי מובן, שיש צורך בכפייה - או בפיתוי מלאכותי - כדי להביא את היחידים לידי כניעה והתמסרות ... חטא זה הוגדר יפה בפרקי דר' אליעזר פרק כד: אם נפל אדם ומת לא היו שמים את לבם עליו...

פירוש הרב שמשון רפאל הירש, בראשית יא:ד

How does R. Shimshon Refael Hirsch understand the insight of Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer?

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We'd love to hear your feedback on the Shabbat Table Discussion Project. Please be in touch at shabbatable@yu.edu