

Parshat Noach 5783

Throughout Tanach, divine punishments have explicitly stated causes, however, in the case of *Dor Haflaga*, a crime is committed and punishment meted out, yet the nature of the crime is ambiguous. An interpretation of their crime is that the aim of the tower was to reach the heavens and prevent Hashem from destroying them again. They choose to build in a valley, and they must make their own bricks before they can start building, as there are no stones available in valleys (Rashi 11:3). Surely, if they were trying to build a tower that could reach to the impossibly high limit of the heavens, they would give themselves a head start by choosing a tall mountain to provide foundations, with abundant natural building resources?

R' S. R. Hirsch does not believe there is a problem with the act of building the tower: 'Hashem came down to look at the city and tower that man had built.' (11:5) Since further investigation was required, the tower building cannot be the essence of the sin. R' Hirsch claims that the sin was in the purpose of building, rather than the tower itself. Is it truly possible for all living mankind to come together as one and say 'let us make a name for ourselves' (11:4)? And if they are all making one name for themselves, who are they trying to prove themselves to? Either it is the One above them, or it is the being subordinate to the collective grouping of all mankind - the individual. Individual humans have different and limited skills. In a harmonious community they come together and combine these skills to a greater whole. However, there is a risk that this combination of positive skills makes the group oblivious to its componental limits. The community itself becomes its highest goal, forgetting the individual parts that created it. They declare their superiority by specifically choosing a difficult area in which to build; they need no help from G-d or nature to provide stones. To prove a point the community must renounce its allegiance to morality and the individual must sacrifice its life. The Midrash in Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Chapter 24) says: *If a man fell and died, they paid no heed to him, but if a brick fell they sat down and wept, saying, "Woe is us! When will another one come in its stead?"* " At this point R' Hirsch's words start to sound hauntingly prophetic of the horrors that transpired in the two centuries after he lived. Writing about how these circumstances are often driven by a charismatic leader - in the case of Migdal Bavel by Nimrod and in subsequent history by Alexander the Great and Napoleon - R' Hirsch states "a nation's ambition to make a name for itself and magnify its national glory spells disaster for its moral mission ... History, for the

most part, tells only about towers of imaginary glory which Nimrod and his successors enticed, or forced their nations to build." Summing up the philosophy and methods of many murderous totalitarian regimes in the 20th and 21st century: nationalistic ideologies prioritised over an individual's needs and great building and military projects promoting 'imaginary glory', often funded while their citizens starved. As Goebbels said, "Socialism is sacrificing the individual to the whole".

Within this context, R' Hirsch explains "*lest we be scattered all over the face of the earth*" (11. 4) not as a fear of the power of God, but that their power over the people would cease. The community did not exist in a moral form for the sake of the individual, but the individual existed to serve the community which can only continue with constant subjugation and grand unifying projects like tower building. We can see that the punishment at Migdal Bavel was not only appropriate, but a salvation for the individual. By providing groups with their own language and dispersing them across the Earth, it made it impossible for one tyrant, dictator or empire to rule all peoples of the world.

How is a community based around service of Hashem better? R' M. Leibtag quoting Rashbatz calculates that Avraham recognised G-d in the same year as Migdal Bavel, possibly influenced by that event. Avraham continually rejects the approach of *Dor Haflaga*. He promotes his beliefs to others, but does not force them to follow him and argues with G-d over the destruction of Sedom. Throughout Tanach and Agadata we see leaders question and challenge Hashem and the people question and challenge their leaders; when done for the right reasons - *Leshem Shamayim* not to make a name for themselves - they are praised and rewarded. This is a society that respects the individual, because we recognise that each individual comes directly from Hashem.

Parshat Noach presents the pitfalls facing a Godless society: either riven by robbery and immorality, or a community that overwhelms the individual with nationalistic ideologies and vanity building projects. History teaches us of the destructive nature of these societies when taken to the extreme, but our society too has symptoms of all of these behaviours. With these stark warnings we can begin to learn in the rest of Sefer Bereshit about the other path available, a society built around ethical monotheism chosen by Avraham which we in Klal Yisrael have proudly inherited and aspire to live up to.