

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #08: Chapter 5b – The Golden Idol (continued)

Let us return to the sin of the generation of the Tower – the generation of Nimrod. From the text, it appears that the essence of the sin was the city,^[1] while *Chazal* emphasize the brazenness of the tower. But from God's words, the problem appears to be something else:

"Behold [they are] one people, and they all have the same language, and this is what they have begun to do; now nothing will be withheld from them, [of] all that they plan to do." (*Bereishit* 11:6)

What could possibly be wrong with unity? We usually regard it as an ideal! Could God possibly fear the power of a united mankind?

Let us return to Nevukhadnetzar. In response to his command, as well, we find unity among all the nations and languages. In his time, culture is shared "each country according to its writing and each people according to its language;" unity is achieved through a single melody, a single orchestra, which is understood by all peoples and all languages. The advantage of music over language and words is that it is universally recognized. God decreed division amongst the languages of the world so that there would be no repetition of the sin of the sort of unity which produced the Tower of Babylon, but by means of music, Nevukhatnetzar bypassed God's decree:

"...When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the golden image that Nevuchadnetzar the king has set up." (3:5)

What is the sin of unity? A closer study of the personality of Nimrod as a "mighty hunter before God" may shed light on this question.^[2] The people were not one, and the language was not one. Rather, the people were "of one" – they were the nation of a single man, Nimrod. The language was the language of a single man – Nimrod. The builders were not united in their purpose, but rather were all directed to the purpose of single man, Nimrod, the mighty hunter, who ruled over them. The collective conscience, the collective initiative, and the collective thinking were not an expression of agreement and unity, but rather of the tyrannical, cruel reign of a single man, who thought and planned for everyone. And who was Nimrod? A ruler with a fondness for charred flesh, who brought about uniformity of thought and belief in an idea by means of a terrifying fiery furnace, into which he would cast anyone who dared to think or believe differently from him. As in Communist Russia and other totalitarian regimes, everyone said the same thing, with no dissent; everyone echoed the words of the ruler.^[3] The tower was

built for the glory of the ruler, and we assume that it was meant to become Nimrod's palace, just as Nevukhadnetzar's edifice was meant to be a monument glorifying him.

But can man build a tower that reaches to heaven?^[4] The heaven (*shamayim*) is not a blue curtain suspended somewhere in infinite space. Throughout *Tanakh*, heaven is where the line of the firmament passes, separating us from the upper worlds, which extend from the clouds upwards. Rain falls, in *Tanakh*, from heaven, and the clouds are themselves in heaven.

At the beginning of the story of Nimrod, we read of how man invented bricks and mortar – an invention which facilitated the construction of structures that were taller than what had previously been possible to build (since stones are heavier than clay, and the cement joining them did not allow for high walls).^[5] To build a tower up to the level of the clouds is not an impossible task. We may assume that the plans would place a balcony at the top of this edifice, where Nimrod could sit and look out over his subjects, who would all give homage to him. From his lofty perch above the clouds, he would gaze upon them together with the rays of the sun shining down, while they would raise their heads towards the cloud of his glory and pass before him.

Nimrod's plan could have succeeded. But the Torah records that people spread, or were dispersed, from there. No explanation is given in the text for this phenomenon. It may have happened in a miraculous fashion – and we will discuss this possibility further. However, it is also possible that they were scattered in the wake of the defiance of a single individual who stood up to Nimrod's tyranny – Avraham. As we see in the case of Haman, a tyrannical regime built on the shaky foundations of mass intimidation is never stable. Sometimes, in fact, one person alone is enough to completely undermine it. The connection between the dispersion of the people of Babylon over the face of the earth, and Avraham, founder of God's people in the world, may be hinted to in the Torah:

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of men, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. (*Devarim* 32:8)

This also explains the juxtaposition of the story of the Tower with the journey embarked upon by the family of Terach, including his son, Avram, towards the land of Canaan – at first on their own initiative, and later continued at God's command.

Many generations later, Nevukhadnetzar recreated a similar situation, in a similar manner, ordering a uniform and simultaneous prostration throughout his universal kingdom to the image which he had set up. Chanania, Mishael and Azarya disrupted his plan. Perhaps their actions were also a stage in the redemption of Israel from the Babylonian exile and the return to *Eretz Yisrael*, echoing the example of Avraham, and also realizing the promise in the dream which Daniel had interpreted.

Avraham in his time, and these three men in theirs, combined rebellion against totalitarian dictatorship with love and fear of God and adherence to His command. In so doing, they embodied the message that would ultimately be recorded in the *midrash*:

“And the tablets – they were the work of God, and the writing was God's writing engraved (*charut*) upon the tablets” – do not read “*charut*” but rather “*cherut*” (freedom), for there is none who is free but he who engages in the study of Torah. (*Avot* 6:2)

3. Informers

Let us now turn our attention to a particular expression that appears in the narrative: "Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and brought accusation against the Jews." (3:8)

The expression "to bring accusation," which appears here in the Aramaic is borrowed by Onkelos for his translation of the verse, "You shall not go about as a talebearer (*lo telekh rachil*) among your people, nor shall you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (*Vayikra* 19:16); Onkelos translates, "*la teikhol kartzin*" – you shall not bring accusation. The concept of "*rechilus*" in Halakha usually concerns Reuven telling Shimon that Levi spoke *lashon ha-ra* about him – thereby causing Shimon to become angry at Levi. This is also the main example used by the Chafetz Chayim in his laws of *lashon ha-ra*. This example explains why the Rambam deduces the laws of *lashon ha-ra* by means of *kal va-chomer* from tale-bearing:

Who is a talebearer (*rachil*)? One who gathers information and goes from one person to the next, saying: “This is what X said; I heard such-and-such about X.” Even if what he says is true, this [practice] destroys the world. There is an even greater sin than this, which is included in this prohibition, and that is *lashon ha-ra*, meaning that he speaks badly of someone else – even if what he says is true... But a speaker of *lashon ha-ra* is one who sits and says, “X did such-and-such, and his ancestors were such-and-such, and I heard such-and-such about him” – and he says negative things about him. Concerning this the text says “May God cut off all smooth lips, the tongue that speaks proud things.” (*Hilkhot De'ot* 7:2)

The Rambam maintains that *lashon ha-ra* is even worse than tale-bearing (that is, neutral gossip), since speaking negatively about a person's actions is more serious than a gossipy story, as in the example he cites. The Chafetz Chayim agrees, as he sets forth at the beginning of his book. The Ra'avad, however, disagrees, maintaining that gossiping is a more serious transgression.

Onkelos's translation of the Torah's prohibition of "going about as a talebearer among your people," based as it is on our verse in *Daniel*, indicates the severity of the transgression of tale-bearing. This is tattling of the worst kind. The verse describes a person informing on his neighbor to the authorities concerning a transgression that carries the death penalty – as the informers in our case did to Chanania, Mishael, and

Azarya, before Nevukhadnetzar. Therefore, the verse continues with the words, “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” – indicating that the informer's words will lead to the victim's death.^[6]

Tale-bearing is mentioned as a grave transgression in the days of Yehoyakim:

Take heed each one of his neighbor, and have no trust in any brother, for every brother acts subtly and every neighbor goes about as a talebearer... Their tongue is a sharpened arrow, it speaks deceit; one speaks peaceably to his neighbor with his mouth, but in his heart he lies in wait for him. (*Yirmiyahu* 9:3, 7)

This refers to the despotic rule of Yehoyakim (which we discussed briefly in the first *shiur*), who accustomed his subjects to informing on one another. The imagery of an arrow to describe the tongue is appropriate, for the mouth is like a bow, and the tongue emerges from it like an arrow, truly possessing the power to kill a person through talebearing – especially when it is uttered before the king.

This also explains the *halakha* stated in the Yerushalmi:

There are four things for which a person suffers in this world, but the main punishment awaits him in the World to Come, and these are they: idolatry, sexual immorality, bloodshed, and *lashon ha-ra*, which is compared to all of them. (*Peah* 1:1)

On the face of it, this seems difficult to understand. Can the transgression of *lashon ha-ra*, as severe as it is, possibly be compared to idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed all combined – sins in the category of "one should be killed rather than transgressing them"?^[7]

As formulated in the Talmud Bavli, *lashon ha-ra* means maligning one's fellow and demeaning his dignity. But in the Yerushalmi, *lashon ha-ra* also means talebearing – in the sense of informing to authorities, as in the case of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya.^[8] Informing to the Roman authorities usually led to the person being put to death with torture; this explains the severity of the act of speech.

As we shall see later on, a similar case occurs in chapter 6, when Daniel is cast into the lions' den. That story appears to originate with the attempt by some members of Darius's court to somehow implicate Daniel, who had risen to the highest position in the kingdom after the king himself.

4. The Miracle

Let us pause to consider the nature of the miracle by which Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya are saved from the fiery furnace. We recall that according to the *midrash*, when Nimrod cast Avraham into the furnace, the angel Gavriel said to God:

"Master of the universe, let me go down and cool the fire and save the righteous one from the fiery furnace." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "I stand alone in My world, and he stands alone in his world; it is appropriate that the One Alone [on High] should save the one alone [down below]." But because God does not withhold reward from any of His creations, He said, "You will merit to save three of his descendants." R. Shimon the Shiloni said: When the wicked Nevukhadnetzar cast Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya into the fiery furnace, Yurkami – the angel of hail – stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said to Him, "Master of the universe, let me go down and cool the furnace and save these righteous ones from the fire." Gavriel said to him, "The might of God will not thereby be manifest, since you are the angel of hail; everyone knows that water extinguishes fire. But I am the angel of fire; let me go down and cool it on the inside while heating it on the outside, thereby performing a miracle within a miracle." Then the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Go down." (*Pesachim* 118b)

Three types of miracles are described in this *gemara*: 1) A miracle brought about by God Himself, such as what happened to Avraham after being cast into Nimrod's fire; 2) A miracle brought about by Gavriel, angel of fire, such as Gavriel had suggested in the time of Avraham and was agreed to in the time of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya; 3) A miracle at the hands of Yorkami, the angel of hail – which, in our context, arose as a possibility but was not effected in reality.

It may be that a miracle at the hands of the angel of hail means miraculous intervention by God to save people in such a way that the circumstances appear natural. Sufficiently strong rain, hail, or wind could extinguish the fire of the furnace. Even if this were to happen in the middle of summer, such intervention by God would be cloaked in the disguise of natural forces, and the miracle would be considered a hidden one. We often tend to integrate this sort of mental picture in our understanding of the narrative even where the text gives no hint of it, with the understanding that the text thereby helps us by using concepts familiar to us. This is in accordance with the principle set forth by the Rambam,^[9] who maintains that a miracle which goes against the laws of nature will occur only as a last resort, to resolve a situation which cannot be resolved in any other manner. This view is also expressed in Abaye's disdain for someone who experienced a miracle which involved an altering of the laws of nature.^[10]

A miracle at the hands of Gavriel, angel of fire, would involve changing the nature of fire such that it would not burn those cast into the furnace – which is our usual understanding of what happened. This would amplify the message of God's protection of His faithful followers who sanctify His Name.^[11]

A miracle performed by God Himself, and not at the hands of Gavriel – an experience merited by Avraham, but not by Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya – may include, aside from the personal salvation, the idea of overt war against the perpetrators of the injustice. "The Lord is a Man of war;" in the splitting of the Reed Sea, He not only saved Israel, but also waged war against their enemies and drowned them.

This sheds light on the difference between the miracle experienced by Avraham and that experienced by Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya. The latter three ultimately remained in exile, together with their brethren, and Nevukhadnetzar remained ruler over them.^[12] The miracle, as important as it was, was no more than a one-time event. In the wake of what had happened to him, Avraham left Nimrod and Ur Kasdim, moving on to Charan, and from there to *Eretz Yisrael*, to lay the foundations for God's nation. It is possible that thousands of followers, who believed in his message and attached themselves to him, went along.^[13] Nimrod lost his despotic kingdom of Babylon, his nation was scattered, and his tower – the Tower of Babylon – was destroyed. God Himself had fought against him, and this despotic human kingdom disappeared from the world forever.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] The word "city" appears more often than the word "tower" does, and in the conclusion, we read that "They ceased to build the city;" in other words, God's aim in confounding them was attained insofar as they ceased to build the city – meaning that this had been the essential problem.

[2] A "mighty hunter" (or "hunter hero" – *gibor tzayid*) is not a person who carries home the biggest game. The term recalls the textual reference to Esav, who was a "man of the hunt (*ish tzayid*), a man of the field" – a man who went about at the head of a gang of four hundred men and who, according to *Chazal*, would "hunt" women from their husbands and rape them and transgress the five most serious transgressions in a single day.

[3] The reality of "one language and one speech" is dramatically evoked by Morton Rhue (pen-name of Todd Strasser) in his book *The Wave* (Dell, 1981).

[4] Our line of interpretation here is different from that of the "*peshat*" commentators – Rashbam, Radak, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni and others – who explain that the intention was to build a tall tower, as in the expression "cities great and fortified up to the sky" (*Devarim* 9:1).

[5] A discussion in *Bava Batra* 3a addresses different building materials and how more advanced materials could change the height of construction relative to its thickness.

[6] According to *Chazal*, the second part of the verse is a prohibition against a person standing by idly while his neighbor is in danger: "From where do we know that one who sees his friend drowning in the river, or being dragged by a wild animal, or being attacked by robbers, is obligated to save him? We learn it from the verse, 'You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor'" (*Sanhedrin* 73a).

[7] Rabbenu Yona poses this question in his book *Sha'arei Teshuva*, *sha'ar* 3, *siman* 202, and suggests various possible explanations. His main proposal is that *Chazal* compare the severity of a one-time act of idolatry, sexual immorality, or bloodshed with the constant habit of speaking *lashon ha-ra*.

[8] This reflects the usage of the term in *Eretz Yisrael*, as proven by the Ein Gedi inscription discovered at a synagogue in that area cursing anyone who speaks *lashon ha-ra*: "... or who spoke *lashon ha-ra* about his friend **to the nations**" (lines 10-11). See Y. Naveh, "On Mosaics and Stone – Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions From Ancient Synagogues" (Jerusalem, 5738) [Heb.]. This indicates clearly that the act involves informing to authorities. The continuation of the inscription mentions, *inter alia*, the curse of "one who speaks *lashon ha-ra*": "He Whose eyes roam over the entire world and see hidden things – He will set His face against that man and against his descendants, and will uproot him from beneath the heaven. And all the people said, Amen and Amen, Selah."

This recalls the covenant of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval, where we read: "'Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret' and all the people said, 'Amen'" (*Devarim* 27:24). *Chazal* explain this verse as

referring to *lashon ha-ra*, but it is possible that this community in Ein Gedi interpreted it as referring to informing before non-Jewish authorities.

[9] *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8:1 and elsewhere.

[10] "It once happened that the wife of a certain man died, leaving an infant, and he did not possess money to pay a wet-nurse. A miracle occurred and he developed breasts, like a woman's two breasts, and he suckled his son. R. Yosef said: How great this man must be, if such a miracle was performed for him! Abaye replied: On the contrary! How inferior he is, in that the laws of nature were [i.e., had to be] changed for him!" (*Shabbat* 53b).

[11] Reflecting the understanding of R. Yosef in the previous note.

[12] The *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 93a) actually records a dispute between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua and the Sages in this regard. According to the Sages, Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya left Babylon and went up to *Eretz Yisrael* following the episode of the fiery furnace, and they studied Torah with Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol, who is (like them) described in Zekharia's prophecy as a "brand plucked from the fire" (*Zekharia* 3:2). Apparently, the Sages in this *beraita* sought to compare Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya with Avraham, who started his journey towards *Eretz Yisrael* in the wake of the experience of being saved from the fiery furnace. The difference between the respective miracles performed for them remains, however, in that God fought against Nimrod, who had passed this sentence on Avraham, but at this stage, He did not wage war against Nevukhadnetzar, who had passed the same sentence on Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya (as we will discuss later). Therefore, they were saved by an angel, while Avraham was saved by God Himself.

[13] See Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, chapter 1.