BS”D

***Parshas Noach***

The unity that the people of the Tower sought was stifling and left no room for other ways of thinking. Everyone would be the same.

**The Tower of Bavel**

*By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron*

In the portion of Noach, we read how all of mankind wanted to build a tower which would be a symbol of unity for the human race. G-d disapproved of this and caused mankind to speak different tongues and be scattered all over the earth. What was so wrong with wanting to live peaceably and harmoniously together? Why did G-d punish them for seemingly innocuous or even positive behavior?

Some commentaries (Rashbam, Ohr HaChaim) say that man was enjoined by G-d to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The tower-builders wanted all of mankind to stay in one place and not spread forth. G-d caused them to become disunified so that they would fulfill their human destiny and fill the earth.

The Ramban does not accept this interpretation. Rather, the intention of the builders of the tower was some form of rebellion against G-d. But how exactly were they rebelling against G-d?

I'm going to cite three classic commentaries, each of whom has a particular interpretation of our story.

The Akeidas Yitzchak explains that the people of that generation felt that the purpose of life was to attain stability. They looked at the heavens and saw the unchanging orbits of the sun and the planets and the unchanging stars. They wanted to pattern their lives accordingly. So they built a city where life would be stable and unchanging. They built a tower toward the heavens, for the heavens was their model.

The idea of striving for the spiritual, searching for the transcendent and finding G-d was foreign to them. When G-d dispersed them, He was actually instructing them. Seek more from life than comfort and stability. Look for the transcendent. The eventual unity of mankind must be based on shared spiritual values and on the knowledge of G-d, and not on material comfort.

The Sforno explains that the unity that the people of the tower sought was stifling and left no room for other ways of thinking. Everyone would be the same. Everyone would worship the same particular idols. There would be one king who ruled all. There would be one tower that was everyone's center. If this way was followed, mankind would never discover different ways of thinking. Mankind would never discover the true G-d.

Only by creating disunity was there hope for different ways of thinking and living. Only the separation of mankind from one another made it possible for independent thinking to flourish and for the human race to come to know G-d.

By the way, the Sforno has an interesting interpretation of the sentence, "G-d came down to see the city."  The term to come down is used when a certain activity is not clearly bad. Here, for example, the people were outwardly creating a peaceful society. But "coming down" means recognizing what this would eventually lead to. Eventually, mankind would be stymied and stunted by this form of unity. Therefore, G-d chose to disband this kind of unity to give mankind the ability to grow.

The Kli Yakar suggests that the desire of the people to live in one place in unity and speak one language was in and of itself a good and noble idea. What ruined it was the addition of the sentiment expressed in the phrase, "Let us make a name for ourselves."  They wanted to have fame and power and renown. This would lead, G-d foresaw, to internal power struggles within the community. Which person would be the leader? Who would rise to the top? Which person would "have the name?"

Having a selfish reason for living together would result in internal struggle and strife. Instead of having to contend with different nations warring against each other (which is what they wanted to avoid), they would have to constantly fight with one another, as each individual or group sought to be the one with "the name."

G-d dispersed them. Better disunity than a false unity that was corrupt from within.

The truth is that living in peace and harmony is a dream that the prophets of Israel looked forward to. "Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall no longer study war," the prophet Yishayahu tells us (2:4). But for this to take place, there must be an underlying spirit of unity among the people. That spirit must come from knowing G-d, which means mankind must understand and accept the principles of G-d, the principles of righteousness, of justice, and of holiness. When there is an internal unity with real G-dly values, then and only then, can we attain the external unity of peace among the nations. "For then, I will make the people pure of speech. They will call out in the name of G-d and serve Him together." (Zephanyah 3:9)

Then unity, true unity, will be attained. The center of humanity will be not the Tower of Babel, but the holy temple on G-d's mountain. “And many people shall go and say,  ‘Come let us go up to the Mountain of G-d … that He may instruct us in His ways and that we may walk in His paths,’ for Torah shall come forth from Zion and the word of G-d from Jerusalem." (Yishayah 2:3)