

Stollen Moments – Noach – November 2, 2024

PARASHA SUMMARY FROM WWW. REFORMJUDAISM.ORG

- God decides to cause a flood that will destroy the world, sparing only Noah's family and the animals that Noah gathers together on the ark. (6:9-8:22)
- Life starts over again after the Flood. The Noahide Commandments are listed, and God uses a rainbow to make a symbol of the first covenant. (9:1-17)
- People start to build a city and the Tower of Babel. God scatters the people and gives them different languages to speak. (11:1-9)
- The ten generations from Noah to Abram are listed. (11:10-29:2)

Genesis 11

וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אַחַת וּדְבָרִים אַחָדִים: וַיְהִי בְנוֹסְעֵם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמָּצְאוּ בְקַעֲוֵה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְּבָנָה לְאִבּוֹ וַתַּחֲמֹר הִנֵּה לָהֶם לֶחֶם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה | נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עֵיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נִפְּוֶץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאֹת אֶת־הָעֵיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכָל־ם וְזֶה הַחֲלֹם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבְצָר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: הִבֵּה גִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ: וַיִּפְּץ יְהוָה אֶת־מִשְׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לְבַנֹּת הָעֵיר: עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׂמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׂפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשְׁם הִפְּיִצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: {פ}

1 Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. 2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.”—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.— 4 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.” 5 יהוה came down to look at the city and tower that humanity had built, 6 and יהוה said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. 7 Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another’s speech.” 8 Thus יהוה scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel, because there יהוה confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there יהוה scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Questions for Discussion

- What’s wrong with everyone speaking the same language? Would we better off if we did?
- What’s the transgression with the Tower of Babel?

Commentaries

Rashi on Genesis 11:1

(1) שפה אחת ONE LANGUAGE — The Holy Tongue (Hebrew) (Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 19).
(2) ודברים אחדים AND ONE SPEECH — They came with one plan, saying: “He has no right to select the heavenly regions exclusively for Himself; let us ascend to the skies and make war upon Him”. Another explanation (of דברים אחדים which is taken to mean “words referring to “One”): words regarding the Sole Being (God) in the Universe. Another explanation of ודברים אחדים is: they spoke דברים חדים “sharp” words; they said, “Once in every one thousand six hundred and fifty six years (the period that elapsed from the Creation to the Flood) there is a heaven-shaking, just as there was in the days of the Flood. Come. then, and let us make supports for it” (Genesis Rabbah 38:6).

Rashbam on Genesis 11:4

(1) הבה נבנה לנו עיר, according to the plain meaning and the commonly held opinion that the people of that time were punished for their grandiose plan of building a Tower which was meant to reach the heaven, what are we to make of Deuteronomy 1,28 in which Moses described cities of the Canaanites as having walls as high as the heaven? Why were these walls not destroyed by God? We must revise our opinion of why the people were punished, and accept that their principal sin was in not fulfilling God’s basic directive to be fruitful, to multiply, and to populate the whole earth, not just a small valley. Their declared objective had been not to scatter (verse 4) The fact that God forcefully scattered them afterwards shows that their sin must have been their failure to do so voluntarily.

Rabbeinu Bahya, Bereshit 11:4:4

Looking at this story from a rational point of view, the words “and let us make a name for ourselves,” must be understood thus: the people of that generation were very advanced in matters of philosophy and even technology. However, they used their intelligence in a sinful manner. They constructed the city and tower to protect themselves against a deluge of fire, seeing that God had promised not to again bring a deluge of water....They tried to isolate and tame the power of fire in order to neutralize its deadly effect so that it could not engulf their city, as we have found also in our generation that some scholars [scientists] know how to harness some of the strength of lightning.