

Parashat Noah

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THE TOWER OF BABEL

- What do the “*Bereishit*” narratives (*Parashot Bereishit* and *Noah*) have in common?
- What was the sin of the generation that built the Tower of Babel?
- Is unity positive or negative?
- How were those who built the tower punished?
- Does the punishment fit the sin?

A. The “*Bereishit*” Narratives

The book of *Bereishit* deals with two time periods:

1. The beginning of the book (Ch. 1–11) deals with the era of “*Bereishit*” (Genesis).
2. The second part (Ch. 12 – end) describes the period of the Patriarchs.

“*Bereishit*” - Universal Narratives

The “*Bereishit*” narratives share a common theme unique among the stories told in the Torah. These are universal stories that concern all of humanity,¹ as opposed to the other stories of the Torah, which focus on specific individuals and the nation of Israel.

Each of these episodes affects all of mankind: the story of Creation describes the creation of the entire world; the first man is the father of all of humanity, and the story of his sin influences every generation;

¹ N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 68

the Flood tells of the corruption of all of mankind and the resulting destruction and re-creation of the world, with Noah as the father of the new human race.

The Tower of Babel (Ch. 11, v. 1-9) is a universal story as well. This is evident in the first verse of the story: “And **all of the land** had one language...” This introduction indicates that the story relates to “all of the land,” meaning all of the people on earth.

From an Ideal World to the Real World These universal narratives teach us fundamental lessons about humanity. They record the struggle between an ideal world and the reality of human nature. They show that the physical world cannot be ideal, and describe the gradual fall from the ideal world to a world on a lower level – a world which allows humanity to exist.²

2 The world begins with the divine creation of the Garden of Eden, described as a place which is wholly good (Bereishit 2:8-14; Ez. 28:13; *Bereishit Rabba* 20:10; *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 8:19). Yet, the first mishap occurs even before the creation is complete, when a “tree of fruit” is created instead of a “tree which makes fruit” (see Rashi on Bereishit 1:11, “*Etz Pri*”). The *midrashim* add another issue in the creation of the sun and moon (see Rashi on Bereishit 1:16, quoting the midrash). Subsequently, the sin of the first man leads to his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and deterioration to a point where his very survival is impossible without suffering. Later on, the sins of the generation of the Flood lead to the destruction of most of the world, after which the eating of meat is permitted – although it had been prohibited at the beginning of creation (see Rashi on Bereishit 1:29). This permission signified more than anything else the spiritual low which the world had reached since the beginning of creation, and God’s “concession” (so to speak) regarding the

The Tower of Babel is a “*Bereishit*” story – in fact, it is the last of the “*Bereishit*” stories. What does this account come to teach us about humanity? Why does this particular story conclude the period of “*Bereishit*,” followed by the transition to the period of the Patriarchs? A deeper analysis of the text may reveal the answers to these questions.

B. Building the Tower

VAGUE DESCRIPTIONS

(1) And all of the land had one language and one word. (2) And it was as they traveled from *Kedem*, and they found a valley in the land of Shin’ar, and they settled there. (3) And each man said to his fellow, ‘Let us make bricks and burn them in a furnace,’ and their bricks became stones, and their mud became substance. (4) And they said, ‘Let us build a city and a tower which reaches the Heavens, and we shall make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over all of the land.’

**Innocent
Action,
Harsh
Response?**

The story begins with a description of the people’s actions: all of the people speak one language, and

laws that he had set for mankind at the beginning of creation, “replacing” them with new laws (see *Chazon HaTzimchonut VeHaShalom* of R. Abraham Kook, particularly sections 1-3). During the generation of the Flood, God Himself attests to His disappointment in the world: “And God saw that the evils of man were abundant in the land... and God regretted that He had made man in the land...” (Bereishit 6:5-8).

there is complete unity among them. They begin wandering in the world, find themselves a place to settle permanently, learn to make bricks and begin to build a city to live in.

This description is neutral, and does not indicate anything problematic in the people's deeds. So we are surprised to read the continuation of the story: God is not pleased with the people's actions, and He makes sure to dissolve the unity among them, scatter them and put a stop to the building. Through God's actions, we learn that the story is not so simple, and we wonder: what was wrong with their actions? Can building a city and a tower be problematic? Isn't unity a positive thing?

**Unclear
Language**

Indeed, as we delve into the story, we discover that from the beginning, there are hints that the story is not as simple as it may appear from a superficial reading. For example:

“And all of the land had one language and one word” – what does the phrase “one word” mean? Is it synonymous with “one language,” or does it describe something else? If it is synonymous, why is it necessary? And if it is not – if this phrase expresses another idea – what is it? The commentators suggest a number of possible explanations for this expression. Some claim that it describes unity of language,³ while

3 This is how Ibn Ezra explains verse 1: “And the reason for ‘one word’ – since today in every language one can find words which are not understood by all of its speakers, [but] in that

others say it describes a uniformity of ideas.⁴ In a midrash, the Sages explain the phrase “one word” as referring to the people's plan to rebel against God.⁵ The fact that there are many different interpretations indicates that the phrase “one word” is not easily understood, and cannot be unequivocally defined.

“And it was as they traveled from *Kedem*” (v. 2) – what does this mean? Should we interpret it as referring to a place called Kedem,⁶ or might they have been traveling from the east (*kedem*)?⁷ Perhaps this is not a description of direction, but rather of time: the journey took place in an ancient (*kadum*) time?⁸ Or, as the Sages explained: a journey from the Ancient Origin (*kadmon*) of the world⁹ – a separation from God? The midrash and commentators raise all of these possibilities. Every interpretation is grounded in the language of the Bible, but each has its own

time the languages of the wise man and the fool were one.”

- 4 This is Rashi's interpretation of verse 1: “And one word’ – they came **with one intention** and said, ‘It is not for Him to choose the upper spheres for Himself, we shall go up to the Heavens and make war on Him.’”
- 5 See *Bereishit Rabba* 38:6.
- 6 As Rashi interprets verse 2.
- 7 The word “*mi-Kedem*” appears in the Bible 23 times, of which 11 describe a direction – “from the east.” This is Ibn Ezra's interpretation of verse 2.
- 8 The word “*mi-Kedem*” appears 10 times with the meaning of “ancient time,” such as: “...who told of this in ancient times (*mi-kedem*)...” (Yeshayahu 45:21) and: “...from you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from ancient times (*mi-kedem*)...” (Micha 5:1).
- 9 *Bereishit Rabba* 38:7.

difficulties¹⁰ – such that we are left with another phrase whose meaning is not completely clear.

In addition, the reason for the journey from *Kedem* is not mentioned, and the circumstances surrounding it are left vague.¹¹

A Vague Story

Even at the beginning of this seemingly simple narrative, we find that the descriptions used are vague. We feel that we are not being told exactly what happened. This feeling of uncertainty accompanies us throughout the story, as we shall see later on,¹²

10 If “*Kedem*” were the name of a place, then this story would relate only to the sons of Shem, who lived in Har Kedem (according to ch. 10). However, the text indicates that it describes all of humanity (see also Ramban’s commentary on verse 2).

It is likewise difficult to understand “*Kedem*” as meaning “east,” since the survivors of the Flood left the ark at Mount Ararat, and settled there. This area is actually north of Babel, not east of it (Y. Aharoni, *Karta Atlas*, p. 13, map 4). In addition, when a direction is noted, it must be relative to a place, as in other sources: “East of...”

The interpretation of “*mi-Kedem*” as “ancient times” is strange in this context, since the description of a journey generally includes a location or direction.

Thus, all of the “simple” interpretations are problematic. The midrash realizes this difficulty, and suggests a homiletic explanation.

11 Here, too, the commentators fill in the gaps left by the text. For example, Rashi’s commentary on verse 2 states: “And they traveled from there to find a place that would hold them all, and could not find any other than Shin’ar.”

12 What was the purpose of building the tower and the city? What does “make ourselves a name” mean? Why did the people fear being scattered, and how would a tower solve this problem?

What was the sin that led God to punish this generation? Unity? Building the tower? Making a name for themselves?

and begs the question: why is the story written so obscurely?

The Torah, as a text of divine origin, cannot be accused of mistakes or imperfect expression. It seems that the Torah deliberately chose to tell the story in a way that was not clear. What purpose does this vague style serve? What lessons can be learned from it? We shall try to answer these questions below.

GLORIFYING THEIR NAME

Technological Progress – the Invention of Bricks

Verse 3 describes the invention of bricks. This detail seems trivial to the story, and could have been described more simply: “And they made bricks, and said, let us build a city and a tower.” However, the Torah chose to devote an entire verse to this advance in technology.

It seems that this point is not trivial at all – in fact, it is a crucial element in the story. Why is this detail so important? We will return to this question later.

Building a City and a Tower

Verse 4 describes the actual building:

“And they said, ‘Let us build a city and a tower which reaches the Heavens, and we shall make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over all of the land.’”

Their common language? Settling in one place? Each of these seems to be a positive thing. Why does God dissolve the unity between the people and destroy their work?

What worries God, as described in verse 12: “And now, nothing of all that they plan to do will be held back from them?”

How did God intervene – by confusing the people’s language or by scattering them over the earth?

The beginning of the verse continues in a neutral tone when describing the people's actions: they would like to build a permanent city and put an end to their wandering. Even building a tower "which reaches the Heavens" may have an innocuous explanation, such as Radak's:

"The city [they built] in order to dwell in it, and the tower in order to see great distances, to watch over their cattle and livestock, and as a signal to the shepherds... so that they would know how to return to the city. 'Which reaches the Heavens' – this means a tall tower."

Purpose of Building (1) - "We shall make ourselves a name"

The second part of verse 4 describes the people's motivation behind building the city and the tower, and gives two reasons for it:

1. "We shall make ourselves a name,"
2. "Lest we be scattered over all of the land."¹³

The people's first purpose is "to make themselves a name." This is another phrase that requires explanation. The phrase "to make a name" appears a number of times in the Bible in the context of fame and honor.¹⁴ According to this explanation, the

¹³ Some commentators (see *Hizkuni* on verse 4) saw this phrase as an additional description of the people's actions and not as a reason for them. We have chosen to interpret this as a reason for the building.

¹⁴ "And I shall make you a great name, as the names of the greatest men in the land" (Shmuel Bet 7:9); "And David made a name" (Shmuel Bet 8:13), "And make yourself a name" (Jer. 32:20); "And made Yourself a name that endures to this day"

people are building a tower – a large and impressive structure – for their own glory. However, there is an important difference between the phrase as it is used here and what is meant by "making a name" in the rest of the Bible. In other contexts, "making a name" refers to making a name for God – glorifying God's name, not man's – or glorification of man's name as a result of a great deed. Neither of these motives is present in the description of the people building the tower. This context highlights the arrogance of the current generation: the purpose of building this great tower is glorification of the self. They built the tower, not in remembrance of some historical event, or to honor God, but to make a name for themselves. The text emphasizes this point through the word "ourselves" – "we shall make **ourselves** a name." This word expresses their self-absorption and focus on the glorification of man.

Thus, the verse "we shall make ourselves a name" becomes central to our understanding of the story. The importance of this concept is emphasized by two literary techniques:

1. The story of the Tower of Babel appears between two genealogies of the descendants of Shem (lit. "name"),¹⁵ which directs our attention to the concept of names.
2. The alliteration of *shem-Shem-shamayim* repeats

(Daniel 9:15; Nechemia 9:10), and others.

¹⁵ See Bereishit 10:21-32 and 11:10-32.

itself throughout the story, and highlights the contrast between the *shem* (“name”) of the people and *HaShem* as an honorific name for God. The words “a tower which reaches the Heavens [*Shamayim*]” directly precede the words “we shall make ourselves a name [*shem*].” This sequence hints to a connection between making a name and reaching the Heavens – this generation plans to make a name for itself by ascending to the Heavens and invading the divine realm: they want to be like God. **The expression “a tower which reaches the Heavens” is clearly not as innocent as it seems – rather, it expresses a desire to rebel against God.** In addition, as the word *Shem* appears in the Bible many times in reference to God,¹⁶ this phrase may have an additional meaning: that **the people wish to make themselves into a *Shem* – to become equal to God.**

Human arrogance – the drive to make a name for oneself, the desire to glorify the name of man – is a rebellion against God and his sovereignty in this world. The tower which seemed so innocent at first is, in fact, an expression of this arrogance and rebellion against God. This idea is expressed in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

(11) The eyes of the arrogant will be shamed, and human pride humbled, and God alone shall be exalted

 16 See, for example, Devarim 28:58: “If you do not keep all of the words of this Torah, written in this book, to fear this honored and glorious Name [*HaShem*], the Lord your God.”

on that day. (12) For God will have a day over all of the proud and haughty, over all of the arrogant – they will be shamed. (13) Over all of the high and lofty cedars of Lebanon, and all of the oaks of the Bashan. (14) And over all of the towering mountains and the high hills. (15) **And over every tall tower and every fortified wall.**

“LET US MAKE A NAME” VS.

“HE CALLED OUT IN THE NAME OF GOD”

This conclusion is supported by a comparison between the story of Babel and the narrative of Abraham,¹⁷ which follows immediately afterward. Abraham, following God’s command, sets out on a journey, during which he calls out in the name of God: “And he built an altar to God and he called out in the name of God” (Bereishit 12:8). Abraham does not try to bring glory to his own name, but to God’s. In contrast, the previous generation in Babel wanted to make a name for themselves. The ironic result was that the names of those who built the tower were lost entirely – they are not mentioned once throughout the narrative. Abraham, however, who called out in the name of God, was promised that “I will magnify your name” (12:2). **The phrase “let us make ourselves a name” is the key to understanding the entire story, since within it we find the very source of the problem –**

 17 See also: Y. Zakowitz, *Mikra’ot BeEretz HaMar’ot*, ch. 4, p. 54-55; Yehuda Elitzur, “*LiPshuta shel Dor HaPlaga*,” in *Mechkarim BaMikra UVeMachshevet Yisrael*, vol. 2. Israel Society for Biblical Research, 5751.

the arrogance and pride of these people, who wish to advance on Heaven and blur the boundary between man and God.

OUR SAGES' INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY: IDOL WORSHIP AND REBELLION AGAINST GOD

The Sages explain that the people wanted to build a “tower that reached the Heavens” in order to rebel against God:

“They said, ‘It is not for Him to choose the upper spheres for Himself, and leave us the lower. Let us make a tower, and place an idol atop it with a sword in its hand, so that it shall look as though it is making war on Him’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 38:1).¹⁸

This midrash paints a vivid picture of the tower and the idol meant to do battle with God. The phrase “which reaches the Heavens” was interpreted by the Sages as a metaphor for rebellion against the Kingdom of God. The people were not willing to defer to God’s authority, and instead they rebelled against Him. **This idea, illustrated so strikingly by the midrash, is the same one that arises from a careful reading of the text.**

UNITY AND LIVING IN ONE PLACE

The second reason given for building the city and the tower is “lest we be scattered over all of the land.” This generation seemed to fear the natural order, and

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<sup>18</sup> Also in *Midrash Tanhuma* 58:18, with slight changes.

this is a description of their attempt to deal with an unavoidable truth: as they reproduce, they will inevitably be forced to spread out and “scatter.” This is their attempt to prevent such a thing from happening. Why? Why is the possibility of spreading out so unthinkable to them?

This generation understood the importance of unity – a force which allows a group of people to accomplish great things. They fear dispersion because it would weaken them, and could lead to estrangement between different groups and even war. They fear that, instead of using their strength in a constructive way, they will be preoccupied with fighting amongst themselves, leading to weakness and destruction. This is a reasonable concern, and their desire to stay united seems a positive thing.

#### Unity of Language and Place

As we look through the narrative, we see two recurring expressions in the story (each of which is repeated five times):

1. “All of the land”<sup>19</sup>
2. “Language”<sup>20</sup>

**Both of these motifs form the basis of the unity described in the story**, and in both of these areas the people are divided in the end. At first, all of mankind (or “all of the land”) were unified by one language, and sought to settle in one place, in order to prevent

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¹⁹ Verses 1, 4, 8, 9 (twice).
²⁰ Verses 1, 6, 7 (twice), 9.

**Purpose of
Building (2) –
“Lest we be
scattered”**

being scattered over the land. By the end of the story, God has dissolved the unity of language, and causes mankind to be scattered over the earth.²¹ This leads us to understand that God opposed the idea of humanity being concentrated in one place, and wanted them to spread out over the land.

Resisting
Nature
and God's
Will

Commentators who emphasize a literal reading of the text (Rashbam, Rivash, Radak and Ibn Ezra) contend that the fear of being scattered is problematic. **Settling in one place ran contrary to God's will that mankind fill the land**, as he commanded Adam: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land" (*Bereishit* 1:28). This generation, in its desire to stay in one place, is in conflict with God's will. In fact: people, looking upon nature as God created it, wish to challenge it – they do not want to be scattered, they do not want to die – **they seek to become the leaders, the rulers, of great name.**

Technology -
Potential
Opportunity,
Potential
Risk

The people attempt to harness all of their talents and abilities – a plan which relies on the unity among them – in order to develop a technology that will allow them to challenge future events.

In answer to our original question, the text focuses on the invention of bricks because this signifies the development of man's ability to manage nature and accomplish things which are not "natural." This ability was given to man by God, in order to allow him to improve the world. God is interested in man

²¹ See below regarding the difference between the two motifs.

developing the world. Indeed, God put man in the Garden of Eden in order to "work it and keep it." But at the heart of this opportunity lies the danger: man can use his abilities to develop the world, but he can use those same abilities to act against the will of God, rebelling against Him and destroying the world.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY

Narrative
Vagueness =
Moral
Complexity

The story of the Tower of Babel, as we mentioned above, opens with a neutral description of human unity and technological advancement. The Torah does not portray man's actions as inherently negative;²² in fact, these very actions have the potential to be positive. However, in verse 4 we realize that this generation has decided to use its abilities for a negative purpose: this technology and unity allowed them to conceive of a plan to challenge God's will.

The Sages explained the vague descriptions at the beginning of the story as expressions of rebellion against God. However, the Torah chose to convey this in **vague, innocent terms**, and not as an unequivocally negative act. Why?

This choice of words indicates that **unity and**

²² Compare to the stories of the Flood and Sodom, where the corruption of the people is emphasized from the outset: "And God saw that the evils of man were abundant in the land... And the land was corrupted before God and filled with violence..." (*Bereishit*. 6); "And God said, 'The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is grave...'" (*Bereishit*. 18:20). This stands in stark contrast to the neutral description of the Tower of Babel.

technology are not inherently negative – they can be positive, even vital. However, after the fact, it becomes clear that the people of this generation chose to misuse the abilities that God gave them. The creation of bricks and building of the tower were done in order to challenge God’s sovereignty: God will not control what happens in the world. **There is another power in the world that can overcome God’s will.** What power? Man himself. This way of thinking is a form of idolatry – a kind that worships not an idol, but man and his abilities.

The Common
Goal –
Glorifying
Man’s Power

The connection between “making a name for ourselves” and “lest we be scattered” is now clear: we, humanity, shall glorify our names, become powerful in the world, and defy nature and God’s decisions.

This idea is expressed in a midrash, and cited by Rashi in his commentary on verse 1:²³

“They said, ‘Once every 1,656 years the heavens collapse, as they did in the days of the Flood, so let us make supports for them...’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 38:1)

The people thought that they would be able to prevent God from bringing another flood, that they could prevent all natural disasters from befalling them.

 23 The words “as they did in the days of the Flood” were added by Rashi. The midrash describes only the fear of the sky collapsing – i.e., a fear of natural disasters, and not necessarily linked to God’s actions.

RECONCILING THE MIDRASH AND THE TEXT

Midrash: The *midrashim* that describe the tower as a sin of idolatry or an attempt to rebel against God seem, at first, to be removed from the story: where does the text say that the tower was a form of idolatry? Where do the people mention a desire to fight God or prop up the sky?

Vivid Depiction of a Deeper Meaning

However, as we have seen, a deeper reading of the story does reveal the building of the tower to be an act of rebellion against God. The midrash, with its vivid imagery (the idol seemingly making war on God, the people’s attempts to reach the heavens, pillars built to support the sky), conveys the idea that the root of the problem was rebellion against God.

A simple reading of the midrash, with all of its dramatic detail, certainly does not fit with a literal reading of the text. However, the idea expressed by the midrash is identical to the one in the text. **The details of the midrash are a means of expressing this idea**, which does not contradict the text – in fact, it demonstrates a more profound understanding of the text, and expresses **the deeper meaning behind the narrative.**

C. God’s reaction

The second part of the story describes God’s reaction to the people’s actions:

(5) And God descended to see the city and the tower that the people were building. (6) And God said, “Here, they are one people with one language, and this is what they begin doing? And now, nothing of all that they plan to do will be held back from them. (7) Let Us go down and corrupt their language, so that each man will not understand his fellow’s speech.” (8) And God scattered them from there over all of the land, and they ceased building the city. (9) Thus the place was called Babel, for there God confounded [*balal*] the language of the land, and from there God scattered them over all of the land.

God’s
Descent –
Intervention
or
Observation?

God descends from the heavens to observe the people’s actions. This descent might be **an act of ridicule toward the people**, who thought they would be able to reach the heavens – since in actuality God must descend in order to reach them.

However, when compared to similar passages in the Bible, this may be interpreted as **God coming down in order to intervene in the world**.²⁴ Until this point, people had acted independently of God; now, God begins to interfere. God’s descent and revelation to the world are generally accompanied by a monumental change in the natural order, which we see here as

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24 See the story of the Exodus (Shemot 8:3), God’s revelation at Sinai (Shemot 19:11-20), the sharing of Moshe’s divine inspiration with the seventy elders (Bemidbar 11:17-25), Miriam’s punishment of leprosy (Bemidbar 12:5), various prophecies which call for God to descend and reveal Himself in the world (Yeshayahu 31, 63; Micha 1; Tehillim 18) and others.

well. In addition, descent can be understood as **an expression of observing the people’s actions, “getting down to the bottom of things.”**<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the next verse reveals the source of the problem: “**They are one people with one language.**” God confirms that the fundamental issue is the total uniformity of the people.

Fear for  
the Future

There are a number of significant points in God’s speech:

1. There is no outright condemnation of a specific act, but rather a description of the situation: “They are one people with one language, and this is what they begin to do?”
2. God expresses concern for the future – “And now, nothing of all that they plan to do will be held back from them.” What is God concerned about? How could God fear human actions?
3. There is no specific reference to the city tower – they are not the essence of the problem.
4. The story is once again vague: what is it that they “begin to do?” What is “what they plan to do?”

According to God’s words in this verse, the reason for scattering the people is **not a punishment for past deeds**, but rather **out of concern for the future**. God is preventing humanity from reaching an undesirable state.

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25 As in the story of Sodom: “I shall descend and see if their deeds are [as evil] as the cry [describes]...” (Bereishit 18:21).

“And this is what they begin to do”

God clarifies that root of the problem is unity, which caused the people to begin doing something problematic. This seems to be a reference to the unfinished city and tower. This interpretation is favored by Rashi and Rav Sa’adya Gaon, as well as M.D. Kasuto. Another possibility, cited by Y. Kiel in *Da’at Mikra*, is that the city and the tower are the only the beginning, and may lead to more dangerous things.

“Nothing of all that they plan to do will be held back from them”

These two explanations also help us understand the continuation of the verse, in which God expresses the following concern:

“And now, nothing of all that they plan to do will be held back from them.”

God’s fear is that if people continue using their unity in the same way, they will manage to do something against His will: they will complete the city and the tower, make a name for themselves, and avoid being scattered all over the world. But God’s concern here may also extend to the long term – that the people might **continue to act against God’s will in the future**.

The Problem with Unity

The beginning of the verse indicates that unity is the heart of the problem. Why? Isn’t unity a positive thing?

Through unity, people achieve power – perhaps **too much power**. They begin to feel that they are capable of controlling the world and opposing God’s will – to

the point where they perceive themselves as equal with God.²⁶ In addition, unity makes the people feel **similar to God**, since God is One. This facet of unity has the potential to be used for evil²⁷ – for taking God out of the picture, and rebelling against God.

God gave humanity the power of unity and creativity, and He wants them to be used, provided that they are used with recognition of God’s authority.

Recognizing Man’s Limitations

Man must recognize that he is not omnipotent. There will always be areas beyond his control – and it is in these areas that God’s sovereignty is revealed. Man is mistaken in his belief that “nothing of all that they plan to do will be held back from them.”

Losing Unity

The Tower of Babel story describes a fundamental change in humanity: the initial situation was unity among all mankind. Unity was a positive and ideal

²⁶ It is hard to ignore the similarities between God’s description of His concern here and His words following Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden: “Here, man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil, and now, lest he reach his hand...” The same formula is used here: “Here, they are one people with one language... And now, nothing of all that they plan to do...” God’s concern is the same in both cases: that man will use his growing power to affect the world negatively.

²⁷ The word “all” is used repeatedly throughout the story, usually in the context of “all of the land.” However, it also appears in God’s voicing of His concern: “And now, nothing of all that they plan...” This total unity can bring with it other, undesirable events. According to some of the commentators, the problem lies in the very fact that there is a uniformity of thought, as opposed to a variety of opinions and ideas. This phenomenon generally indicates the dominance of one group over the rest of society, and does not allow for a proliferation of ideas.

situation; it was to be a unity of language, and ostensibly one of all people serving God. God was interested in the people remaining united, but also willing to scatter over the world and fill it. Mankind understood the great strength that lies in unity, and therefore tried to increase their unity by preventing dispersion. This total unity would enable them to become massively powerful and almost godlike, able to contemplate rebellion against Him. It was this situation that God wished to avoid, since the world cannot exist in a state of rebellion against God. God was forced to break the unity between human beings, even though unity is the ideal state. This breach of unity prevented the collective uprising of all human beings against God, and thus enabled the continued existence of mankind and the world.

D. Dissolving the unity between human beings

Did God scatter them or confuse their language?

How does the loss of unity come about? Verse 7 describes God's **plan**: dissolving the unity through **confusion of languages**. Verse 8 reports God's **actions**: **scattering** the people across the earth. Did God confuse the languages, and consequently the people dispersed across the land?²⁸ Or did He cause the dispersion, resulting in different languages?²⁹ Both

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28 See Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, Abarbanel and Malbim.  
29 See Ibn Ezra.

are possible. But perhaps the main thing is the result: the unity between the people is completely broken. Humans are no longer united in their language, and they are scattered across the earth.

Confusion of Language – the Essential Change

These verses can also be understood in yet another way: Initially, human unity was to be only in language. Despite their common language, people were supposed to spread out across the earth, to fill the world that God created. The failure of human beings was building a city which would prevent this distribution.

Once this failure becomes apparent, God intervenes and causes a fundamental change in human nature, a change that would dissolve the natural unity that had existed until then: **humanity would no longer have “one language.”** Thus, the initial unity between human beings was violated. This change also repaired the failure of humanity: following the creation of multiple languages, the people naturally dispersed across the country, so that God's original intentions were realized.

## E. Summary

From Unity to Separation

The Tower of Babel is one of the *Bereishit* stories – a universal narrative, which deals with a fundamental aspect of humanity. It describes the fall from the ideal of unity to a state of separation, which, while

not ideal, makes it possible for the world to continue to exist.

The Torah's presentation of the story is vague, and the initial sense is that the people's actions are not negative. God's response is not described as a punishment for a serious act of corruption. It seems that the Torah deliberately chose to describe the events in a positive light, and write in an obscure style, in order to convey a complex message: the initial state of human beings was ideal, and their actions were not necessarily negative – in fact, they could have been positive and even vital. Unity and creativity are positive forces, and God deliberately created man with these traits.

However, in this case, humans directed these positive abilities toward negative goals. They used their unity and ingenuity to resist the will of God and the laws of nature that He enacted. They sought to rebel against God and His kingdom in the world, and make themselves the rulers of the world, powerful and renowned.

Following this corruption, it became clear that the world could not continue to exist in its ideal state, since the people had used the positive potential of unity for negative things. Therefore, God caused a fundamental change – a breakdown of the unity among all people – to prevent rebellion against God, and allow the world to continue to exist.

**Spiritual  
Ramifications  
of the  
Separation**

This fundamental change is described by the Abarbanel in his commentary on chapter eleven (p. 180):

“In the confusion of languages there were two elements. First, abandoning the common language; and second, selecting a new language for each nation.”

“For this purpose, God appointed celestial ministers, **so that He could remove from the people His language and the sacred unity of His providence.** From that point onward, these ministers would lead and influence the nations – one for each nation, language and country.”

Abarbanel extends and deepens the significance of the Tower of Babel. Not only were humans physically separated and dispersed, but there was a **substantial change in God's method of ruling the world**: until this point, humanity had been **ruled directly by God**. Their social and linguistic unity was meant to be a means to **total unity in doing the will of God**. However, this generation chose the opposite: rebellion against God, and the world could not continue to exist in this state. The loss of unity was not only a superficial change, but an essential one: human beings were **removed from the direct leadership of God**, and **placed under the guidance of “ministers” (angels)** – each of these “ministers” being, of course, subject to God's will. The separation is not only external – it is an internal spiritual separation, which distances the people from each other and from God.

The Last  
of the  
*Bereshit*  
Narratives

The Tower of Babel narrative **concludes the *Bereishit* period**. After the dispersion of this generation, the ideal of a human race led directly by God disappears. In its place is a new reality of different nations, led by angels (“ministers”), under the indirect, distant leadership of God. This leads to the necessity of one nation being chosen by God to call out in His name in the world.

Indeed, immediately after the narrative of separation begins the story of Abraham, from the descendants of Shem,<sup>30</sup> the man chosen by God to start the nation which calls out in God’s name in the world.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Apparently, it is no coincidence that *Shem’s* descendants were chosen to be the ones to call out in God’s name in the world.

31 This point will be elaborated upon next week.