

UNITY AND CONFORMITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The main theme of this parsha is that unity in the cause of evil is a terrible vice. The generation of the flood found only one dissenting voice to its program of licentiousness, robbery and oppression. That voice, Noach, was weak and ineffective in turning the people away from conforming to the will of the majority in creating a totally evil society. Unanimity usually is a result of conformity and conformity for the sake of conformity is hardly a virtue. Eastern Europe is just emerging from the grey pallor of conformity that was the hallmark of Communist rule. 99.5% majorities won elections and everyone hailed the Leader, the Party, and the Brave New World, which bore no resemblance to the actuality of life under tyrannical rule. As much as we desire and treasure unity of purpose and people, a unity which demands conformity is a negative feature in human society. The conformity of the generation of the flood led to its annihilation.

The second example of uniformity as a negative in society that the parsha describes is the uniformity of the generation of the Tower of Babel. Everyone spoke the same language and everyone had the same thoughts. A society that was brainwashed into conformity had "few things to say." It was as though the whole world of that time was the North Korea of today. This time the Lord chose not to destroy that generation but rather to force it to divest its rigid conformity. A different language, a different culture, different ideas, different strokes for different folks, all of this was part of God's plan for humanity. The Talmud teaches us "dispersion of an evil society is a boon for that society and for the world generally." An Abraham could not have arisen and been successful in introducing the then radical idea of monotheism to the world if there was only one language, one ruler, and one conformist society. The Heavenly Father is hard-pressed to be appreciated in a society of Big Brother. And thus the dispersion of the people of the generation of the Tower of Babel is to be seen as a most positive development in the evolution of human civilization.

The rabbis in the Talmud stated, "Just as no two human beings are ever exactly alike physically, so too no two human beings ever share exactly the same opinions and thoughts [about life and events.]" The rabbis were not complaining about this state of affairs. They were merely pointing out the reality of the human condition. Thus they saw unity of purpose for good causes - those advocated by the Torah and Jewish tradition - as a positive goal to be achieved. But they warned us not to confuse unity of purpose with conformity of thought and style. Conformity is an outer feature of life - everyone dressed the same and apparently behaving in like fashion - while unity is more a matter of the heart and soul, of the inner self of the Jew. We should never forget the role of our

father Abraham - the prophet called him, "one, unique" - in rejecting conformity and advancing the true unity of God and man, of society and the Jewish people, in the pursuit of goodness, justice and kindness towards all. The parsha of Noach should obviously be seen as the introduction to the story of Abraham and of the unique nation in the world that he founded - Israel.

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