

PARSHAS NOACH - THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Origins of Totalitarianism¹

"Come, let us build us make bricks and burn for a burning." The bricks served them for stone, and the mortar for clay. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth."

They must have been proud of themselves, at how effectively they had improved upon nature. They were not the first to build, but they devised a technology that was a sea-change from earlier days, when construction was limited by the number of stones people could locate. These moderns scoffed at such limitation. Why content ourselves with what we find, they argued, when we can create what we need, when we need it? Bricks, our man-made stones, will be a vast improvement upon the old order. While we are at it, we can do better than rely upon the clay that others use, when they can find it. We will mix our own mortar - when and where we need it - and not worry about local shortages of clay. We will gear up for large production of bricks, without even specifying what fuel to use to keep the fires going. Hence, "we will burn for a burning." (Note that the pasuk does not tell us what they burned. It conveys the impression that it didn't really matter. Giddy with thoughts of their guaranteed success, they planned to burn anything and everything that was available.) We will do all of this in a plain, a place devoid of the trees and rocks that all others have needed until now. We will build the first wonder of the ancient world.

Hashem's reaction strikes us as curious. "Hashem descended to see the city and the tower." Minimally, it tells us that the project was not sinful in its own right. Something subtle had to be detected, weighed and judged. The motivation and intent of the builders - something that could be known only to G-d - determined whether the enterprise was a good thing, or a terrible precedent.

Their own pithy description underscores the danger of their undertaking. "We shall make ourselves a name." So much of what has been wrong with societies and civilizations springs from this brief expression.

Communities are much like individuals. They have missions, and they fulfill them only when those missions keep G-d and His wishes primary. The failure of communities to focus on G-d, however, is far more dangerous than the failure of an individual. Individuals often learn their lesson, if not sooner, then later. In the course of a lifetime, many individuals have to confront their mortality and their limitations. Communities need come to no such realization, because they are invested with real

power and vibrancy. A thriving community will not necessarily be brought to its collective knees.

Additionally, when communities sense their power, they become ends to themselves, instead of what they should be: tools to help all their members achieve their purpose. When communities see themselves as important in their own right, individual rights are quashed and abrogated. The community no longer serves the individual man, but the individual serves the community. Man becomes simply a pawn in the service of the collective or the nation-state. "We will burn for a burning." Not only everything but everyone can be sacrificed. All can be swallowed up by the insatiable need for fame and power.

The power that the community breathes into itself needs to express itself by triumphing over something else. The arrogance of a successful community easily targets the will of G-d, for Whom it cynically decides it has no more use. Religion is for the weak, they tell themselves, but we are strong. If the purpose of the community is not serving G-d, as it should be, it must invent some ersatz goal. The glory of the nation, "making for ourselves a name," the honor of the state substitute for the morality and elevation that could make Man happy. Instead, he is taught that he can know no greater purpose than giving his life for his flag, and sending his children to the killing fields of wars for vainglory.

The builders of the tower had good reason to fear that they "be scattered upon the face of the earth." In a proper society, no one worries about the disappearance of the aggregate entity. A proper society seeks only to facilitate each individual's fulfillment of his purpose and moral goals. It has no other purpose, no other reason for its existence. No artificial mortar needs to hold it together. The common commitment to doing G-d's bidding is all that is needed to keep people bound together. If, for some reason, a community would agree to disband, no one would mourn its loss. The community is there only for the well-being of the people. When a community decides that it must memorialize and perpetuate itself, it can only mean that it has abandoned its focus on G-d, and replaced Him with itself. When that happens, G-d and the rights of the individual are both jettisoned.

A beautiful medrash[2] encapsulates all of this in a simple contrast of images. If a person fell from the tower under construction, no one paid much attention. If a person nearing the top dropped a brick from his hand, people mourned. Life became cheap; what mattered was the success of the project.

Chazal also identify the leader under whose direction the tower rose. It took a cunning, charismatic leader to get people to deny their own value and worth relative to the collective. People like Alexander the Great and Napoleon understood that people will lay down their lives for a colored piece of ribbon. In the ancient world, Nimrod anticipated their success in whipping up the enthusiasm of the masses. Nimrod was not the first giber, or warrior admired for his strength and courage. He was, however, the first to merge giber with tzayid, or hunter[3]. He did not hunt animals, but humans[4], using the force of his personality to craftily lure them into a rebellion against G-d

Himself. Chazal teach us this despite the fact that the words that follow immediately are lifnei Hashem - before G-d - which ordinarily signifies activity consistent with His Will, not opposed to it. This, too, was part of his diabolical modus operandi. He convinced the adoring crowds that his agenda was pleasing to G-d, was conducted in His Name and in His honor. Nimrod was the first of many to co-opt the language of good in support of evil

The tower, it turns out, was not a strange, isolated incident in antiquity. The tower still stands as a beacon of darkness, encouraging powerful and charismatic leaders to ply their amorality upon masses of people all too willing to give up their freedom and lives for the glory of the State. It adumbrated much of what would follow in the millennia to come - especially in the times we call modern.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 10:8-9, 11:3-4
 2. Pirkei De-Rabi Elazar 24
 3. Bereishis 10:9
 4. Rashi, citing Bereishis Rabbah
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