

Parashat Noah – About Life’s Priorities – October 19, 2012

Our Parsha is well known because of the story of the Flood and Noah’s Ark. However at the end of it we find another famous story which is not always studied with the same deepness as the former, maybe because the Torah only dedicates nine verses to its description:

“The whole earth used the same language, the same words” (Genesis 11:1)

With that verse the Torah begins the tale of the mythic “Tower of Babel”: Before nations and languages were created, humankind wanted to rise to the heavens and people built a big tower whose top reached the sky. G-d became angry and confused their languages, and they were dispersed all over the world.

Our sages tried to understand what exactly the sin of the generation of Babel was. What did they do wrong? Why God was upset? The Torah doesn’t give that information.

The Midrash, whose function is precisely to creatively fill Torah’s unanswered questions, tries to explain us the reason through a particular story:

The generation of Babel was so obsessive with the building of the Tower that they completely forgot life’s scale of priorities. Because its building was being so expensive (just imagine taking one of those huge stones and bringing it up to the head of the tower!) when an accident occurred and someone who was working on it fell down to the ground carrying a brick, all the people were concerned and cried not for the person who died, but only for the brick. They were saying: “What are we going to do?! How we are going to replace this brick?!”. No worry about the lost life...

According to the meaning this particular Midrash gives to the story, we would understand that the sin of the Babel’s generation was to confuse priorities. It is clear for God that is just not correct giving more importance to a brick (i.e. money) that to a human life.

I know this Midrash since I was a child. I remember my primary school *Morah* (“teacher” in Hebrew) giving us a cartoon showing the people crying around the broken brick while the dead person was lying alone in the ground. I always have had the image that drawing in my mind, and once, being a teenager, I asked myself: How can it be that the builders of the tower were so silly to prioritize a stone over a human life? Clearly, the biblical story doesn’t speak about slaves being exploited by their masters: It was a united generation, a group of fellows working together for a shared goal. So, what happened to them that they completely lost the understanding of what life is about?

With time I came to realize that the Midrash tries to teach us something deeper: The lesson is not about people who don't know what priorities in life are, is about people who perfectly know them but for any reason, they cannot live according to them.

And that is something that happens to us too: Everyone knows that worrying about money, more than life itself is a big mistake, but I also know so many people who work much more than what they really need just for making more money, and they don't realize that they are not enjoying enough with the children and spouse. Everyone knows people who put their future at risk, gambling with all their saving thinking they have good chances of winning. Everyone knows that a smoker, before being an addict to tobacco, is someone who made in some moment made a decision of trying a cigarette, perfectly knowing about the risks of that decision.

The lesson that we get from the story is much more than to review our life's priorities, is about what we can in order to be standing on that priorities, not forgetting them in the course of life, and being faithful to what we know is important. That is the real challenge.

Shabbat Shalom!

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