

OCTOBER 31, 2016

Parashat Noach

Leading from Below

He was righteous in his generation (Genesis 6:9)

תמיד היה בדרתיו (בראשית ו:ט)

The Sages in the Midrash asked an age-old question: What spurs human progress? Does it emanate from “above”—from leaders who push their followers to change and grow—or does progress stem from “below”—from a populous looking for change, who force their leadership to follow suit? The Sages offer no concrete answer to this conundrum. So, as occurs so often in Jewish thought, this question is the subject of a dispute in the Talmud. “One [opinion] said that every generation according to its leader, and one said that every leader according to his generation.” (Erchin 17a) In his work *Hegyonot El Ami* (p. 98) Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel, the former chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, connected this dispute to another dispute found in Rashi regarding Noah’s leadership.

Commenting on the description of Noah as a man who was, “righteous in his generation,” (Genesis 6:9) Rashi notes that, “Some of our Sages interpret this phrase as praise: Had he lived in a generation of righteous people he would have been even more righteous, while others interpret the phrase negatively: [Noah] was righteous in his generation, but in Abraham’s generation he would not have been considered at all worthy.” Rabbi Amiel notes that one’s opinion of Noah depends on whether you believe that leaders lead from above or follow from below. If you believe that leaders must lead from above, then we view Noah as a failure, for he failed to save anyone in his generation other than himself. If you believe that leaders follow from below, then the fact that Noah was not influenced by the degradation of his time speaks strongly in his favor. The Sages never concretely resolved this question of leadership from “above” or from “below.” The answer seems to depend on the leader and the community he or she leads. Sometimes leaders spur change, and at other times they actually stun and prevent change and growth, prompting the need for change to come from the people themselves.

Over the Sukkot holiday, the Washington Post ran a [feature article](#) chronicling a Sukkot celebration in which Oded Revivi, the mayor of the Jewish city of Efrat, “invited Palestinians from surrounding villages to come to his house and celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. A couple dozen Palestinians accepted the mayor’s invitation... [they] shared brownies, grapes, cookies, apples and coffee, alongside 30 Israeli settlers... Everyone talked about peace. Nobody really talked about one state or two states... Some Palestinian guests felt comfortable enough to complain out loud about how they are treated. Some Israelis mentioned the wave of Palestinian stabbing attacks against them.” The article described the courage of the Palestinians attending the meeting, and the true warmth that seems to exist between the residents of Efrat and the Palestinians living in the surrounding villages.

Sadly, the Palestinian Authority leadership, which has glorified terrorism and incited its populace to do acts violence against Israelis, clearly rejected the premise of the Efrat meeting. The [Washington Post reported](#) that the day after the meeting, “Four Palestinian guests who attended a Jewish holiday celebration on Wednesday at an Israeli settlement in the West Bank [were] arrested by Palestinian security forces... Relatives of the Palestinians say they were taken into custody after photographs appeared on social media and news websites about the unusual celebration in the Jewish settlement of Efrat, in which Jews and Muslims gathered together.” According to [the Times of Israel](#), a senior Palestinian security official said Sunday that “any Palestinian cooperation with settlers is viewed as violating the law, as he cooperates with the enemy.” Mr. Raviv, the mayor of Efrat, stated that, “It is absurd that having coffee with Jews is considered a crime by the Palestinian Authority. Initiatives that seek to foster cooperation and peace between people should be encouraged, not silenced. It’s time the Palestinian Authority asks itself whether it would prefer to fan the flames of conflict instead of working to bring people together.” Unfortunately, peace between Israelis and Palestinians is not made easier by the PA

leadership. Peace in the region will only come from courageous Palestinians willing to demonstrate meaningful interaction with courageous Israelis. ■

Celebrating Democracy

And the whole earth was of one language (Genesis 11:1)

ויהי כל הארץ שפה אחת (בראשית י"א:א)

Winston Churchill famously said that, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” This election season has left many of us yearning for Wednesday, November 9—the day after Election Day—when we will hopefully be able to put the divisiveness, bitterness and negativity behind us. Yet, the story of the Tower of Babel in Parashat Noach reminds us that thankfully, we are in fact blessed to live in a democratic society.

Following the emergence of Noah from the Ark and the repopulation of the earth, we read the brief story of the Tower of Babel. Humanity settled in the Plain of Shinar, where it endeavored to build a tower that would reach the heavens, “lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.” God, seeing the project progress, declares that as they are “one people and they have one language,” this represents a dangerous situation that demands rectification. God “confound[ed] their language” (verse 7) and “scattered them...upon the face of all the earth.” (verse 8) This strange story raises several obvious questions: What was wrong with humanity working together? Why did their single language and peoplehood present such a danger that it was necessary to scatter humanity across the earth? In his commentary *Ha'mek Davar* on the Torah, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) explains (on 11:4) that humanity’s unity represented grave danger because it was not natural, but rather it was enforced. He writes, “Since the attitudes of people are not alike, the [people] feared lest individuals abandon their views and adopts a different perspective. Therefore, they would watch to ensure that no person left their settlement. And, anyone who veered from the singular [collective] attitude that they shared would be burned to death, just as was done to Abraham.” According to Netziv, the Tower of Babel represented not a triumph of unity, but instead the attempt of a group to impose its will, ideas and ideology of all of mankind. They built the Tower of Babel to serve as a tool of a totalitarian state, to prevent different views and perspectives, as well as to prevent anyone from leaving. Had they completed the Tower they would have the ability “to forcibly prevent people from having attitudes different than their own, which [would] lead to murder and corruption that completely destroy civilized society.” The desire to impose unity of thought among people represents such a grave danger to human development that God “confounded our language,” making communication impossible, and also scattered people around the world, allowing each group of individuals the freedom to engage in its own ideas and beliefs.

At the end of the day, even after a distasteful and negative election cycle, the election season ends with the greatest expression of our democratic values: tens of millions of citizens exercising their democratic rights and choosing the leader they feel best fits their desire for our future. This simple act—one which we can never allow ourselves to take for granted—represents our collective ability to overcome the tyranny of totalitarianism that threatened humanity in Noah’s time, and continues to rear its ugly head in too many parts of the world today. In addition, as friends and supporters of Israel, we take great pride in this basic shared value of democracy that the United States shares with the Jewish state. For decades, every single American president has celebrated the bedrock value of democracy that forms the core of the solid bond between our two nations. In 1959, John F. Kennedy said that, “we will never turn our backs on our steadfast friends in Israel, whose adherence to the democratic way must be admired by all friends of freedom.” Ronald Reagan said in 1982 that, “Since the rebirth of the state of Israel, there has been an ironclad bond between that democracy and this one ... In Israel, free men and women are every day demonstrating the power of courage and faith.” In 2009 Barack Obama said that, “The American people and the Israeli peoples share a faith in the future and believe that democracies can shape their own destinies and that opportunities should be available to all. Throughout its own extraordinary history, Israel has given life to that promise.”

As each of us, go to the polls this Tuesday to choose the leaders we feel will guide our country over the coming years, let us celebrate and cherish this right, and commit ourselves to democracy and freedom not only here in America, but in Israel and around the world. ■

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