

# So You Want to Be Famous

PARSHA INSIGHTS - NOACH (5758)

**“IF ONLY PEOPLE WOULD THINK OF ME AS A TZADIK...”**

In today's *parsha* [Torah portion], there is a powerful message regarding the hopes people sometimes have about their reputations. It will become clear that our job is only to do what is right in the eyes of G-d. This might not ALWAYS earn us honor and favor in the opinions of all human beings, but we must adhere to this agenda.

The topic of the *dor haflaga* [generation seeking aggrandizement], the tower of Bavel, is well known. “Let us build for ourselves a city and a tower whose peak is in the heavens, **AND LET US MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES...**” (11:4). What exactly transpired here? What did they want?

We will see **one** approach, a fascinating *Midrash Rabba* (38:1), to explain their actions. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin will also aid us in understanding this episode.

This group of people maintained that the great flood, the *mabul* [flood], was not the work of Hashem, but a totally “natural” phenomenon. It was not at all associated with the heinous sins of that generation. As the *Midrash* states, they doubted the structural integrity of the sky, claiming that the firmament was not firm. Their distorted mentality led them to believe that once every 1,656 years (the time from creation until the flood - mentioned in *Maharzav* on this *Midrash*), the sky shrivels; the result is a devastating deluge. After all, it is known that the *rokia* [firmament] is supposed to separate “between the waters which are below...and the waters that are above” (*Beraishis* [Genesis] 1:7). If this *rokia* fails, torrents of water rain down on the helpless inhabitants below. According to their calculation, the *mabul* was scheduled to happen again, 1,656 years after the first one!

What could be done? Simple! Support beams needed to be created. These would hold up the sky from the north, south, west... but the one on the eastern side of the world was to be erected first, since this is where the population was located then. Thus, each tower had to have its top situated in the heavens. This is the only way they could serve their purpose of preventing the next great flood.

As an aside, *the Oznaim L'Torah* points out the silliness of these people. This “flood pattern” was really no pattern at all - it had only happened once! A *chazaka* [an established fact or expected pattern] is usually solidified only after three (or in some cases two) times. There is no such thing as a *chazaka* after only one time. Who said the sky would deflate again after another 1,656 years? But this is the attitude of the skeptics and heretics who apply “scientific” rationale to G-d's wondrous miracles and cataclysmic judgements. When such occurrences come their way, they try to explain them away as “mother nature” at work again. Thus, their forced deduction was that the *mabul* was just such an event, destined to recur like clockwork every 1,656 years. We see how “correct” their scientific analysis was, says Rav Sorotzkin - this number of years has passed so many times, but no flood has come. This is because Hashem affirmed that there would not be another *mabul*. It is certainly NOT because of four ridiculous beams built to prevent the sky from falling! Anyway, their construction work was “disrupted” by Hashem before they could even get past the first tower.

But what was their motive? They stated explicitly: “**...and let us make a name for ourselves**” (11:4). Rav Sorotzkin remarks that they hoped to gain a reputation as humanitarians unmatched in their contribution to society. All humankind would laud them as the generation who saved the world from a second, third, fourth... flood. It is clear from the Oral Torah that there was PLENTY of time until the next scheduled deluge, and yet these good Samaritans began constructing the support towers so far in advance. As a result, the coming generations would heap praises upon these construction workers, pointing out that all their efforts were ONLY for the coming generations. Such selfless people they were, dedicating all their energies to the survival of the world! This was the “name” or acclaim they apparently hoped to earn.

What lesson is there in this for us? The Lutzker Rav remarks that there is a “sickness” or obsession among people to get themselves a good name in the world. Remember, this is a transitory existence; true life and bliss are only in *Olam Habo* [the World to Come]. Many individuals and groups forget this, and they go to all efforts for the sake of KAVOD [world acclaim and respect]. At times, their undertakings are antithetical to the teachings and values of the Torah. Such was the attitude of the *dor haflaga*, which we have been discussing. They attempted to build an edifice, a monstrosity, to hold up the heavens. Their underlying theme was that the great flood was a

scientific coincidence, not a punishment for the abominations of the *dor hamabul* [generation of the flood]. The sky needed to be secured to prevent a recurrence, and THEY would be the ones to do it and gain the honor for their achievement. They were committing a grave sin for the sake of fame!

Rav Sorotzkin laments the fact that numerous individuals and organizations have fallen prey to this fixation, this craving for recognition. Perpetuating our name and remembrance should NOT be our primary goal. Doing G-d's will should be our main focus, and any acknowledgement and praise must be purely incidental. Such recognition can help motivate us at times, but we must not zoom in on it or "ingest it as an overdose" of *kavod*. As my *rosh yeshiva* [head of religious school], Rabbi Wein, has stated on many occasions, "compliments are like perfume - they are to be inhaled, but not swallowed". We may pay casual, superficial attention to compliments, but we should not take them too seriously. Why not? Because this can lead to the pursuit of honor as an obsession, the emotional illness which consumed the people building the tower of Bavel. The Lutzker Rav points out that dignitaries and common people alike may be ensnared in the trap of *redifas hakavod* [the harmful pursuit of honor]. Some are even willing to risk their share in both worlds just so that society will know them as "*tzadikim* and *chasidim*" [pious people].

A story about the *Chofetz Chaim*, brought in *Lekach Tov, Bamidbar* [Numbers] page 104, summarizes our discussion. He was scheduled to travel to Moscow on behalf of his yeshiva. He wished not to divulge the time of his arrival so people would not come to the station and give him the royal greeting he deserved. Of course, HE did not feel such a reception was appropriate. He did succeed in this, but one of his disappointed admirers asked why the *Chofetz Chaim* deprived them of the opportunity to greet him the way a *gadol* [great Torah scholar] should be received. The *Chofetz Chaim* chuckled and replied in the following manner. "I am sure you eat *kugel* on *Shabbos* [the Sabbath]. If you get a craving for *kugel* on Friday, I am also sure that your wife advises you to eat just a bit now, but this special food must be saved mainly for *Shabbos*. *Kavod* - honor - is *kugel*. It is only to be eaten on 'the day which is totally like *Shabbos*' - *Olam Habo*. If someone cannot control himself, and he eats it up on 'Friday' - in THIS world, he will be forced to be hungry on *Shabbos*..."

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