The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Noach: The Challenge of Technology

1. The whole world had one language and common ideas. 2. As people moved eastward, they found a valley in Shinar and settled there. 3. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11)

- What is the problem with the Tower of Babel?
- We see a unified society – one language and common ideas – which is productive and wishes to remain as a collective. What could be the problem with this society?
- Why does God disperse them?

Many readings have been made here, some stressing the imperative of human diversity, others the dangers of totalitarianism. Our approach will focus on the surprising detail of Babel's brickmaking as mentioned in verse 3. Why is the process of firing bricks so critical to the story?

The society of Babel made a tremendous scientific breakthrough. Babylon is a diluvian (flood) plain. There is no stone, only mud and clay. One cannot construct anything more than a hut of mud, reinforced with straw and twigs. But with heavy rain, that won't hold up too much. But now, this unified society makes a huge technological discovery. They take clay and bake it in a kiln and create "artificial stone."

They turn this brick making into a national project – "Let us make ourselves a name" – by building, and building. A city and a tower are planned. What purpose could the tower serve? They feel theirs is the most technologically advanced society that has

ever lived, that they can reach the very heavens, and that they are impervious to the unsettling forces of nature. They conclude that they have the power of gods. They dream that their city will endure for all time such that their society will never disintegrate. Their technology is their unifying force.

But technology becomes the focus of everything. People get left behind.

> If a person fell and died, they wouldn't pay attention to him/her but if a brick fell, they would sit and cry and say: how are we going to replace it? (Pirkei D'R. Eliezer ch.24)

Technology should serve society; society should not serve technology.

God mocks their hubris.

They imagined that they could reach heaven? – "God **came down** to look at the city and tower that man had built."

They wanted to concentrate all of humanity in a single city? – "the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth."

They celebrated the symbol of industrial advancement; the brick – לבנה? – "let us go down and confuse – נבלה – their language" … a reordering of l-v-n to n-v-l is a beautiful linguistic flourish that poignantly expresses how the confusion of their language undermined and disintegrated the society which worshipped the power of the brick.

So please discuss:

- Is this a reasonable understanding of the story?
- What aspects of modernity might resonate with this reading of the Babel story?
- In what ways does our technology eclipse our human relations and sensitivity?
- Do we let technology drive our society or do we ensure that technological advances enhance and improve the agenda of society?

Shabbat Shalom!