

The Tower of Babel and the Midwives of Egypt: The Quest for Individuality and the Path to Redemption

Judy Klitsner

1. Genesis 11

(א) ויהי כל הארץ, שפה אחת, ודבָרִים אֶחָדִים: (ב) ויהי, בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם; וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְקֶעֶז בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר, וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: (ג) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ, הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים, וְנִשְׂרָפָה, לְשִׂרְפָה וְתָהִי לָהֶם הַלְבֵנָה, לְאֶבֶן, וְהַחֲמֵר, הִנֵּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר: (ד) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ עֵיר, וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם, וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ, שֵׁם פֶּן נִפְוֶז. עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ: (ה) וַיְרֵד ה', לִרְאֹת אֶת הָעֵיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל, אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ, בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר ה', הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשִׁפְהָ אַחַת לְכֻלָּם, וְנָה, הִחֲלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת; וְעַתָּה לֹא יִבְצֵר מֵהֶם, כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: (ז) הִבֵּה, נִרְדָּה, וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם. שִׁפְתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ, אִישׁ שִׁפְת רֵעֵהוּ: (ח) וַיִּפְּץ ה' אֹתָם מִשָּׁם, עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ, לְבִנֵּת הָעֵיר: (ט) עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ, בָּבֶל, כִּי שָׁם בָּלַל ה', שִׁפְת כָּל הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפִּיצָם ה', עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ:

And all the earth was of one language and of one set of words. And as they journeyed from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come let us make bricks and burn them hard (lit. “burn burnings”), and the brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, “Come let us build a city and a tower, with its top in the heavens, and we will make a name for ourselves, lest we scatter over the face of all the earth. And the Lord descended to see the city and the tower that humanity had built. And the Lord said, “If, as one nation and one language this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they propose to do will be out of their reach. Come let us descend and confuse their language there so that they will not understand each other’s language. And the Lord scattered them from there over the face of all the earth and they ceased building the city. Therefore, He called its name Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of all the earth.”

2. Rashi

דברים אחדים - באו בעצה אחת ואמרו לא כל הימנו שיבור לו את העליונים נעלה לרקיע ונעשה עמו מלחמה.

U-devarim ahadim. They came with one counsel and said, “Not all depends on Him [i.e. He had no right] to choose for Himself the heavens. Let us ascend to the firmament and wage war with Him.”

3. Haamek Davar

We must understand what they were afraid of [and that is] that some would leave for another land. This was certainly connected to the "devarim ahadim" among them, as they feared that since not all human thoughts are identical, if some would leave they might adopt different thoughts. And so they made certain that no one left their enclave. Anyone who deviated from the "devarim ahadim" that was among them would be sentenced to burning, as was done with our forefather, Abraham. What emerges is that their "oneness of speech" was an impediment, as they decided to kill anyone who did not think as they did.

4. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

הקב"ה טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו.

God imprinted each person with the stamp of Adam, and no one person is like another.

Buber

Not before a man... can say I, can he...to God—say thou, And even if he does it in a community, he can only do it "alone".

אלה תולדת שם שם בן מאת שנה ויולד את ארפכשד שנתים אחר המבול:

This is the line of Shem. Shem was 100 years old when he begot Arpachshad, two years after the Flood.

5. Exodus 1

(א) ואלה שמות בני ישראל הבאים מצרימה את יעקב איש וביתו באו: (ב) ראובן שמעון לוי ויהודה: (ג) יששכר זבולן ובנמן: (ד) דן ונפתלי גד ואשר: (ה) ויהי כל גפוש יצאי ירד יעקב שבעים גפוש ויוסף הנה במצרים: (ו) וימת יוסף וכל אָחיו וכל הדור ההוא: (ז) ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו במאד מאד ותמלא הארץ אתם: (ח) ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים אשר לא ידע את יוסף: (ט) ויאמר אל עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו: (י) הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה ונהיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שנאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ: (יא) וישומו עליו שרי מסיים למען ענתו בסבלתם ויבן ערי מסכנות לפרעה את פתם ואת רעמסס: (יב) וכאשר יענו אתו כן ירבה וכן יפרץ ויקצו מפני בני ישראל: (יג) ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרד: (יד) וימרו את חיייהם בעבדה קשה בחמר ובלבנים ובכל עבדה בשדה את כל עבדתם אשר עבדו בהם בפרד: (טו) ויאמר מלך מצרים למינלות העברית אשר שם האחת שפרה ושם השנית פועה: (טז) ויאמר בינלדכן את העבריות וראיתן על האבנים אם בן הוא ונהמתן אתו ואם בת הוא ונתנה: (יז) ותיראנן המינלות את האלהים ולא עשו כאשר דבר אליהן מלך מצרים ונתסנין את הילדים: (יח) ויקרא מלך מצרים למינלות ויאמר להן מדוע עשיתן הדבר הזה ונתסנין את הילדים: (יט) ותיאמרנן המינלות אל פרעה כי לא כנשים המצרית העברית כי תיות

הָנָה בְּטָרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמְּיַלְדֹת וְיִלְדוּ: (כ) וַיִּטֹּב אֱלֹהִים לְמַיְלַדֹת וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצְמוּ מְאֹד: (כא) וַיְהִי כִּי יָרְאוּ
הַמְּיַלְדֹת אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בְּתִים: (כב) וַיִּצְוּ פַרְעֹה לְכָל עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל הַבֶּן הַיְלֹוֹד הַיְאֲרָה תִּשְׁלִיכֶהוּ וְכָל
הַבַּת תִּחְיֶינָה:

These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt; with Jacob came each man and his household. Reuben, Simon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. And all those who issued from Jacob were seventy, and Joseph was in Egypt. And Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all of that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful and they and they swarmed and they increased and became very mighty, and the earth was filled with them. A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his nation, "Behold the nation of the children of Israel is greater and mightier than we are. Come let us deal cleverly with them [lit. him] lest they [lit. he] increase, and it will be when war occurs that they [lit. he] will join our enemies in fighting us, and rise up from the land." And they placed taskmasters over them [lit. him] to oppress them [lit. him] with their burdens; and they [lit. he] built storage cities for Pharaoh, Pitom and Ramses. But the more they oppressed them [lit. him], the more they [lit. he] increased and spread out, so they came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with hard labor. And they embittered their lives with hard labor, with mortar and bricks and with all kinds of work in the field—they enforced all labor ruthlessly.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one whose name was Shifra and the other whose name was Puah. And he said, "When you birth the Hebrew women and you see them on the birthing stools, if it is a boy kill him, and if it is a girl let her live." And the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had said to them, and they let the children live. The king of Egypt called to the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the children live?" And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they give birth." And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, he established households for them. Then Pharaoh charged all his people saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw in the Nile, but let every girl live."

6. Exodus 2

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לִוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת בַּת לֵוִי... וַתִּרְדּוּ בַת פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל הַיָּאֵר וַנַּעֲרִיתֶיהָ הִלְכַת עַל יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתִּרְאֵהָ אֶת
הַמַּבְּהָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת אֲמִתָּהּ וַתִּקְחֶהָ: וַתִּפְתַּח וַתִּרְאֶהוּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה נֶעַר בְּכָה וַתִּחַמְלֵם עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר
מִיֻּלְדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה:



A man of the house of Levi went and married the daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how good he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took a wicker basket... And she put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would be done to him. The daughter of Pharaoh went down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child."

7. Rashi

לרחץ על היאור - סרס המקרא ופרשהו ותד בת פרעה על היאור לרחוץ בו:

To bathe at the river. Transpose the verse and explain it: "And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to the river to bathe in it."

Shemot Rabbah 1:23

ותד בת פרעה לרחץ על היאור--לרחץ מגילולי אביה

Pharaoh's daughter came down to wash upon the river—to cleanse herself of her father's idols.