

Parschas Bo 5772

REBUILDING BABYLONIA – IN EGYPT

In Moshe's appearances before Pharaoh, he employs a curious appellation when referring to the Almighty. As stated by Moshe in the beginning of this week's *parshah* when he once again beseeches the monarch to release Yisrael:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹקֵי הָעִבְרִים... שְׁלַח עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי.

“So says Hashem, **G-d of the Ivrim** (literally, Hebrews): ‘... Send my nation, and they shall serve Me’” (*Shemos 10:3*).

To appreciate the profundity of this title – and why it was chosen at this particular time – it is worthwhile to first examine the greater context of the Egyptian episode. What were the underlying aims of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jewish people?

THE GRAND PLAN – MORE THAN MERE PYRAMIDS

In the *Az Yashir* hymn, the Torah refers to the enemies of the Jews as קָמִיךָ – “those who rise against You (Hashem)” (*ibid. 15:7*). As Rashi explains, the opponents of Yisrael are, in effect, opponents of Hashem Himself.

And so it was with Pharaoh as well. In yet another brilliant exposition, R' Yehonasan Eibshitz (*Tiferes Yehonasan*) identifies the real target of Pharaoh's designs: his fight was actually directed against Hashem.

An apparent student of history, Pharaoh was well aware of another attempt to wage war against the Master of the Universe: namely, the attempt to build the tower at Bavel

(Babylonia). The precise intent of the original tower-builders is the subject of much discussion amongst the commentators, but the consensus seems to be that their efforts constituted a rebellion of sorts against the Almighty's Will. As such, Divine Intervention thwarted their plans, as Hashem introduced foreign languages, disrupted their communications and construction and caused a dispersal of different peoples across the land.

Pharaoh sought to pick up where the tower-builders left off. By contemplating their situation, he felt that he knew what had sidetracked their efforts and how to avoid the same obstacle. The passage of the tower begins with the statement, “And all of the land was of one language” (*Bereishis 11:1*), identified by Rashi as *Lashon Hakodesh* (“The Holy Tongue”, i.e., the language of the Torah). That is, they began as Hebrew-speakers, but when their language was switched, their project was doomed. Why did Hashem seek to divert them specifically from *Lashon Hakodesh*? To Pharaoh it seemed clear that therein lay the key to completing the project.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION

What was the secret of this sacred language? The supremacy of this tongue over all others is well established and reflected in numerous areas of *halachah*. For example, regarding the passages written on the parchments of *tefillin* and *mezuzos*, the Mishnah tells us (*Megillah 1:8*):

אֵין בֵּין סְפָרִים לְתַפְלִין וּמְזוּזוֹת, אֶלָּא שֶׁהַסְפָּרִים נִכְתְּבוּ בְכָל לָשׁוֹן, וְתַפְלִין וּמְזוּזוֹת אֵינָן נִכְתְּבוֹת אֶלָּא אֲשׁוּרִית.

“The only significant *halachic* difference between Scriptural texts and the texts of *tefillin* and *mezuzos* is the following: Scriptural texts can be written in any language,

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whereas the texts of *tefillin* and *mezuzos* must be written in *Ashuris* (i.e., *Lashon Hakodesh* [*Tiferes Yisrael*]).”

But it was far beyond the heightened level of sanctity (as reflected in the aforementioned *halachah*) which Pharaoh perceived as essential for the tower’s successful completion. Rather, it was the immense power contained in these words and letters, for they carried real *creation* potential. As Chazal tell us (*Berachos 55a*), it was through the combining of various letters of the sacred alphabet that the very world was fashioned through the Word of Hashem; one who knows the secret of these combinations can harness this power of creation.

And so, Pharaoh concluded, this must be why Hashem introduced foreign languages amongst the original tower-builders; for it could only be successfully completed with the language of Creation. Thus, Pharaoh thought smugly that he had outwitted the Creator at His Own endeavor,

so to speak. He co-opted that nation that was noted for its tenacious loyalty to *Lashon Hakodesh*, their native tongue, and he forced them to engage in his pet project: rebuilding the Tower of Bavel.

TWO CAN PLAY AT THAT GAME

What Pharaoh didn’t realize, however, was that he was not the only one seeking to duplicate the Tower episode. In connection with that event, one of the righteous descendants of Shem, son of Noach, stood as a bulwark against the evil designs of the builders of the Tower of Bavel. He rebuked the masses for engaging in this project and prophesied about its eventual demise (*cf. Rashi, Bereishis 10:25*). The name of this upright individual was **Eiver**, and, in fact, one of his righteous descendants stemmed from the same spiritual “root”; this was none other than Avraham, father of the Jewish people, who is identified in Scripture as Avraham “**Ha’Ivri**” – reflecting an association with his progenitor, Eiver (*cf. Bereishis Rabbah 42:8*).

Provided with this background, we can now understand Moshe’s usage of the term “G-d of the Ivrim” in his dealings with Pharaoh. As R’ Yehonasan explains, Moshe sought to shake Pharaoh from his swagger. In effect, he was tipping off the despot that he was onto his plan – and that it was destined to failure. “You think you can succeed with your diabolical scheme, hijacking speakers of *Lashon Hakodesh* to rebuild the Tower of Bavel and fight against Hashem. But don’t forget Who stands behind this nation and Who sent me to deliver them: none other than the ‘G-d of the Ivrim.’” Moshe was reminding Pharaoh that this nation comes from the root of Eiver and shares his potency. And just as he railed against the original attempt and accurately predicted its demise, so, too, will the G-d of the “Ivrim” ensure that your efforts at rebuilding and rebelling will end in failure.

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