

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter II: Noach (Gen. 6:9–11:32)

Essay 8. The punishment of Babel

מדרש "ויהי כליהאראץ שפה אחת ודברים אחדים": שאמרו דברים חדים על "ה' אלהינו ה' אחד" ועל אחד היה אברהם בארץ. אמרו אברהם פרדה עקרה ואינו מוליד, ועל ה' אמרו לא כל הימנו שיבור לו את העליונים עכ"ל. והוא תמוה מה היתה פוננתם בקשר הזה לומר מה' ואף מאברהם יחד, ועוד מהו זה שאמרו אברהם פרדה עקרה.

There is a **Midrash**:

“And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech.”¹ . . . That [means that] they spoke [against] two who were singular, against “The L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is One,”² and against Abraham, who was only one man³ in the Land. They said: “This Abraham is a barren mule and cannot produce offspring.” Against G-d, they said, “He has no right to choose for Himself the uppermost [Heavens] and assign us the lowermost parts [i.e., the Earth]. But come, let us build a tower at the top of which we will set an idol holding a sword in its hand, which will thus appear to wage war against Him.”

- Gen. Rabbah 38:6

This is strange. What was their intention with regard to this, to speak of G-d and Abraham together? Also what was their intent when they said that, “Abraham is a barren mule”?

ואיתא בפרק י"א דסנהדרין נחלקו לשלושה פתות. אחת אומרת נעלה וכו', ואחת אומרת נעלה ונעשה מלחמה. זו שאומרת וכו', הפיצם ה'. זו שאומרת נעלה ונעשה מלחמה, נעשו קופים ורוחות שדים ולילין ע"כ.

It's brought in the 11th chapter of tractate Sanhedrin:

Rabbi Yirmiya bar Elazar says: **They divided into three factions; one said: Let us ascend** [to the top of the tower] and dwell there. And one said: Let us ascend [to the top of the tower] and engage in idol worship. **And one said: Let us ascend**

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¹ Gen. 11:1.

² Deut. 6:4.

³ Cf. Ezek. 33:24.

[to the top of the tower] **and wage war**. [With regard to] **that** [faction] **that said**: Let us ascend [to the top of the tower] and dwell there, **G-d dispersed them. And** [with regard to] **that** [faction] **that said**: **Let us ascend** [to the top of the tower] **and wage war, they became apes, and spirits, and demons, and female demons.** And [with regard to] that [faction] that said: Let us ascend [to the top of the tower] and engage in idol worship, [it is written]: “Because there the L-rd confounded the language of all the earth.”⁴

- Sanhedrin 109a

וְגַשׁ לְדַקְדַּק דָּמָה עָנְנוּ שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ קוֹפִים וְכוּ' עִם מָה שֶׁרָצוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת מִלְחָמָה. וְתִירֵץ הָרַב בְּעַל יָפָה תֵּאָר שֶׁהִפְתָּ שְׂאֵמְרוּ נַעֲשֶׂה מִלְחָמָה הִיוּ חוֹשְׁבִים לְהוֹרִיד שְׁפַע עֲלֵיהֶם בְּהִכָּרַח מְטֻבֵּעַ מְלֶאכֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל יַד הַכְּנוּתִיָּהֶם וְעַל כֵּן הָיָה עֲנֹשָׁם שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ קוֹפִים וְלִילִין שֶׁהֵם מְצוּאִים חֲסָרֵי הִיצְיָרָה וְלֹא יְכוּלוּ לְהַשְׁלִים עֲצָמָם לְהִיּוֹת בְּדֶרֶךְ הָאֲנָשִׁים וְכָל שֶׁפָּן לְהִכָּרִיחַ לְהִבִּיא עֲלֵיהֶם שְׁפַע בְּרָכוֹת עַכ"ל.

It's necessary to check what the connection is between “they became apes etc.” with the fact that they wanted to wage war. The author of the Yafeh To'ar⁵ explained that the faction that said “let us wage war” were thinking to bring down abundance upon themselves by the force of the impression of their [idolatrous] preparations upon the Heavens. Therefore, their punishment would be that they were made apes and female demons, that they would be found lacking in creation and could not complete themselves to be in the way of the people, let alone to forcibly bring upon themselves the abundance of blessings.

וְקָרוֹב לְפִירוּשׁוֹ הָיָה נִרְאֶה לומר שֶׁפְּנוּנָתָם הִיְתָה לְהִבִּיא עֲלֵיהֶם שְׁפַע וְטוֹבָה בְּכַשׁוּפֵיהֶם בְּהִכָּרַח אֲפִילוּ נֶגֶד רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה, דְּבִפְרָק קָמָא דְחוּלִין אֲמַרִּינוּ "אֵין עוֹד מְלַבְדוּ" אֲפִילוּ כְּשֵׁפִים, הֵיאָה אֵיתָתָא דְהוּוֹת קָא מְהַדְרָא לְמִשְׁקַל עֲפְרָא מִתּוּמֵי פְרַעֲיָה דְר' חֲנִינְא. אָמַר לָהּ: שְׁקוּלִי, לָא מְסַתְּיֵעָא מִיְלִתִּיךְ "אֵין עוֹד מְלַבְדוּ", כְּתִיב! וְהָאֵמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: לָמָּה נִקְרָא שְׁמָם 'כְּשֵׁפִים'? שֶׁמְכַחִישִׁין פְּמִלְיָא שֶׁל מַעְלָה. שְׂאֵנִי רַבִּי חֲנִינְא, דְנִפִּישׁ זְכוּתִיהָ ע"כ.

His interpretation seems to be saying that their intent was to bring upon themselves abundance and goodness through the force of their sorcery, even in opposition to the will of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as in the first chapter of tractate Chullin:

[Regarding the verse:] **“There is no other beside Him,”**⁶ Rabbi Chanina says: **“And even sorcery [is ineffective against the will of G-d].” A certain woman would try to take dust from beneath the feet of Rabbi Chanina [in order to perform sorcery on him and harm him]. He said to her: “Take it, [but] the matter will be ineffective for you, [as it] is written: ‘There is no other beside Him.’”**

⁴ Gen. 11:9.

⁵ Yafeh To'ar was written by Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac Ashkenazi Jaffe (d. late 16th century), rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Constantinople.

⁶ Deut. 4:35.

But doesn't Rabbi Yochanan say: Why [is sorcery] called *keshafim*? [It is an acronym for] *mach'chishin pamalya shel mala*, [meaning]: **That they diminish the Heavenly entourage [indicating that they function contrary to the will of G-d]. **Rabbi Chanina is different, as his merit is great** [so sorcery has no effect on him]. That suggests that at least some rabbis believe that sorcery could have some effect upon the physical world.**

- Chullin 7a

והשתא קאמר המדרש הם היו רוצים לעשות מלקמה כלומר בכח כשופיהם להביא עליהם שפע רוב טובה אף נגד רצונו של הקב"ה. ולא היו מאמינים שבזמן שאין רצונו של הקב"ה בכך אפילו הכשופים אין להם שום כח פדכתיב "אין עוד מלבדו". והיו מביאים ראיה לדבריהם שהרי אברהם פרדה עקרה שאף על פי שהיא צדיק ונפיש זכותיה וירא אלהים, אין לו כח להטיב לו ומכל שכן שלא יכחיש הכשופים. משום הכי, מדה פנגד מדה נעשו שדים וקופים וכו', ואתי שפיר שאמרו על "ה' אֶחָד" דהיינו על "אין עוד מלבדו" ועל אברהם שהיה עקר לפי שפגלו היה כה ואין לו כח חס ושלוש לשנות המזל.

Now, as the Midrash says, they wanted to wage war, as if to say, by the power of their sorcery to bring upon themselves abundance and much goodness, even in opposition to the will of the Holy One, Blessed be He. They couldn't believe that when something is not the will of the Holy One, Blessed be He, that even the sorcerers have no power, as it is written, "There is no other beside Him." They brought evidence to their words that Abraham was a barren mule, that although he was righteous and had great merits and feared G-d, [that G-d] did not have the power to do [Abraham] any good, and moreover that he couldn't weaken the sorcerers. Because of this, as measure-for-measure punishment, they were turned into demons and apes. Based on their mistaken understanding, it made sense to them that they said regarding "the L-rd is One," that is, against the One for Whom we say, "There is no other beside Him," they said that He has no right to choose for Himself the uppermost Heavens, and against Abraham they said that he was barren, because his luck was such, and they mistakenly believed that [G-d] had no power, G-d forbid, to change the luck of Abraham.

אמנם כדי לדקדק לשון דברים חדים ומה הם אלו דברים חדים, יש לומר דבסבא דמשפטים קאמר דאל אחר איסתרס דלא עביד פירין. וענין פירושו בספר אדם ישר (בדירוש הקליפות), ועל זה פירשו לנו המקובלים "לא יתנה בה עקר נעקרה" דהיינו הנכר והגובה של הקליפה לא יהיו להרע לה שגם היא נקראת "אלה גבלת עליה."

Indeed, in order to clarify the language of "one speech" [literally, "singular words"] and what these singular words are, it can be said that in the Zohar section entitled *Sava d'Mishpatim*, it says that "another god [i.e., idolatry] is sterile . . . and produces no offspring."⁷ That is, that the world was unified in having idolatrous beliefs, and their sorcery was completely ineffective at circumventing the will of G-d. See the explanation in *Adam Yashar* (in the essay

⁷ Zohar II:103a.

on *kliptot*),⁸ and on this, the Kabbalists explained for us the verse, “there shall be no sterile male or female among you,”⁹ that is, that the male and female of the *kliptot* will not be harmful to you, for it is also called, “a terebinth wilted of leaf.”¹⁰

וכך היתה פנונתם רעה לומר אתם אומרים כי אל אחר איסתרס דלא עביד פירין והם היו אומרים חס ושלום אדרבא. והראיה שאבברהם פרדה עקרה והוא צדיק אהד בעולם ואם כן הטומאה "פרה ורבה" ולא הקדושה חס ושלום, וזהו דברים חדים שהיו באמת חדים. ולכן מחמת הטעם הראשון שאין לו פח נגד הכשופים ואף מחמת טעם השני שאינו עושה פירות חס ושלום היו אומרים לא כל הימנו שיבור לו העליונים, שאינו ראוי לכך חלילה וחס, ומשום הכי מדת כנגד מדת נעשו קופים ושדים וכו' שאינם לא מן העליונים ולא מן המתותונים.

Thus, it was their bad intention to say: “You say that another god is sterile . . . and produces no offspring,” and they were saying this to the contrary, G-d forbid. I.e., the idolators were saying, “How can you followers of Abraham, the monotheist, say that our gods are impotent, whereas we believe they have power. Furthermore, Abraham has no children, and apparently his G-d, Whom he considers to be all powerful, cannot even help his servant Abraham.”

The evidence was that Abraham was a barren mule, even though he was a singular righteous person in the world. If so, the impurity of idolatry would be “fertile and increase,”¹¹ and not the holiness, G-d forbid. Those were the “singular words” of the idolators, that really were singular.

Therefore, because of the first reason, viz, their mistaken belief that He has no power against the sorcerers, and even because of the second reason, that He does not create offspring for his beloved ones, G-d forbid, they said, “He has no right to choose for Himself the uppermost [Heavens]. They thought that He was not suitable for this, G-d forbid.

Because of this, as measure-for-measure punishment, they were turned into apes and demons, who are not part of the uppermost [Heavens], and who are not part of the lowermost parts [i.e., the Earth].

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⁸ Chaim Vital (1542–1620), Kabbalist and principal student of the Ari Z”L. *Adam Yashar* was not printed until 1885, but circulated in manuscript from 1719.

⁹ Deut. 7:14.

¹⁰ Isaiah 1:30.

¹¹ Gen. 35:11.