

Hashem appears to react to the people having made a skyscraping tower.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכָלֶם וְזֶה הַחֲלֹם וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבָּנֶה מֵהֶם כָּל
אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת:

“And Hashem said, ‘Behold, one nation and one tongue for all of them. And this is the profanity they are doing. And now nothing is restrained from them, that they plot to do.’” (Bereishis 11:6).

What were the people doing wrong? Why did Hashem feel it important to intervene? If unity is something that Torah hashkafa strives for, why did Hashem interceded to create a world where unity will never exist again?

Gemara Avodah Zarah 53b says, *the remnants of the tower are allowed to be visited as it is considered abandoned. It used to be a place of idol worship – after it was abandoned – but no one returned even in peacetime.*

Rashi says, *they possessed the advantage of one people with one tongue and this is what they chose to do.* Rashi seems to imply that they are doing a sin but he does not say so. There may be another interpretation in their actions and in Rashi’s comments.

Ibin Ezra says, *Hashem said this to the celestials. They had one religion as different religion creates jealousy.* Ibin Ezra is saying that even if they were one nation with one tongue, had they had different religions they would not be unified.

Sforno says similarly, *the way to sow discord is create different languages or religion among them. If they were unified their plan would have been successful. Their plan was idolatry.*

Chizkuni says, *they each knew all seventy languages.*

Haamek Davar says, *they were one people in that they followed one custom. This is the beginning of their transgression. They are together now, but if they finished the tower then they would use violence to prevent any opposition to the tower.* This is problematic for two reasons. First, it means that Hashem is preventing them from unifying because in the future they will commit violence. They should be dealt with at that time. Second, what makes Haamek Davar think that they suddenly will not be unified if they are unified at this point?

Radak says, *Hashem talked to the angels. The people were of one mind and they maintain their unity by having the same tongue.* וְלֹא יִבָּצֵר means *shall this goal not be denied to them? Unless we frustrate their plans.*

The people emigrated from the east – presumably where Noach and his descendants settled after leaving the ark. (Bereishis 11:2). They said to each other to build bricks and use clay as mortar. (Ibid 11:3). Until then, it appears, building was done with piling stones. Now they talked to each other, advanced science, and

discovered the ability to make bricks and use mortar. Buildings now could be built taller. Having discovered this, they wanted to build a city and a tower. (Ibid 11:4). The purpose of the tower is as stated: “Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we will be scattered on the face of the entire earth.” (Ibid). This context of the pasuk.

“And Hashem said.” Hashem was talking to the earth. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם. “And the Lord said, ‘Let us make a person in our image and likeness.’” (Ibid 1:26). Hashem was talking to the earth, as it says, “And the Lord created the person in its image. In the image of the Lord, He created it.” (Ibid 1:27). The pasuk repeats the creation of the image because it refers to two different images. First, the pasuk uses the word אִבְרָא because the person was created from something else. He was created from earth. (Ibid 2:7). Thus, “its image” refers to the earth’s image. The earth was already created and man was formed from the earth. He had physical qualities (a carbon-based lifeform requiring nutrients, minerals, and water for survival). Then the pasuk uses אִבְרָא for “in the image of the Lord.” This is because the image of the Lord was something new that was being created for the first time, but derived from nothing else. *Bara* denotes a new creation from nothing. And that is why the pasuk seems to repeat itself. The earth was a partner in creating man. *Let us create a person.*

Hashem now returned to His partner, the earth, to discuss the matter of this advancement. The pasuk says “Come and descend and mix up their tongue.” (Ibid 11:7). However, that pasuk cannot mean descend in direction, because it already said, “And Hashem came down to see the city.” (Ibid 11:5). It means to make the people descend, to bring them down from their tower.

“Behold! One nation.” הֵן means they but also means behold, denoting a surprise. What can surprise Hashem? And why would one people surprise Hashem? They all descended from Noach, so why would they not speak the same tongue and be one people? “And these are the sons of Cham, according to their families and their tongues.” (Ibid 10:20). This refers to Cham having different languages. While it is obvious that the section of ancestry eclipses the time of this episode (it says Nimrod’s land was Bavel and Bavel is only named after this episode) it does give a reason that Cham would be left out. It also says about Cham’s son, “Cursed be Canaan, he shall be a slave among slaves to his brethren.” (Ibid 9:25). How can there be unity when one people are a slave and develop their own language?

However, a careful reading of the pesukim answers this. “And they traveled from the east.” (Ibid 11:2). It does not mean the entire population traveled from the east. It means a group of the people traveled from the east. If so, what was so surprising about their unity?

“And one tongue for all of them.” This cannot be surprising. It already said, “And it was the entire earth was one tongue.” (Ibid 11:1). This was not a surprise but an announcement. Behold! These people are one nation and one tongue. They talk to each other for the advancement of mankind. The only way they could advance is “and a man talked to his fellow.” (Ibid 11:3). They had to collaborate.

“And this is the profanity they do.” Some commentaries translate it as “the beginning” but that would be with a η . What were they doing wrong? They were building a tower and trying to make a monument to themselves so that they would not be forgotten. There is no mention of idol worship, violence, or another sin. They were unified and yet, that is a profanity. The answer is in the solution that Hashem enacted.

The Torah says, “Come, let us descend and confound – over there – their speech, that they do not listen, a man to his fellow’s tongue.” (Ibid 11:7). Hashem was targeting this place, in the land of Shinur – later to be known as Bavel – that the communication should break down. In this way, they were “scattered from there over the face of the entire earth.” (Ibid 11:8). The solution was to scatter them. The problem was they’re not wanting to be scattered. (Ibid 11:4). The purpose of the city and the tower was so that they can all be in one place. *Behold! They can communicate well and advance technology, but they are using that to remain in place. They are people of the earth and they are meant to inhabit the entire earth.* When the Lord partnered with the earth to make a person, the pasuk says, “They shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heavens and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.” (Ibid 1:26). They were not meant to be cooped up in one city. Their dominance was meant to spread worldwide.

The people came from the east – where they all spoke the same – and they wanted to stop spreading out. Their technological advancement was not for travel or planting or industry. It was to build large cities with tall towers to house the known world. They came from the east to find a location to build their city.

Behold! Man has ceased his purpose by ceasing global travel, settlement, and dominance. People were already in the east. If they did not continue west, they would never reach the Land of Canaan, Africa, Europe, and beyond.

This was not a sin and punishment situation. This was meant for world advancement, so that people do not stagnate. They must explore and dominate the world, and then use that for mankind’s benefit. Hashem was talking to the earth, “let us descend.” I will come to your level because this is an earth problem. Man is not exploring the entire world. Hashem did not want to break the unity. Speech separates man from beast. Hashem then attacked them at their tongues. “They should not listen man to his fellow’s speech.” (Ibid 11:7). They should not listen to one another. Some should break off and explore and move on. It was not meant to break unity. It was meant only so that they not be of one mind but go forth on their own.

“And now, they cannot be restrained.” They should not be holed up in this one city. They have to be allowed to wander the earth. There is so much good the world has to offer. Solely settling between two rivers will not benefit mankind.

“All that they plot to do.” Mankind is capable of incredible things. Necessity is the mother of invention. They invented bricks and mortar to advance building because they wanted to stick with their own language speakers. Thus, they needed to build a city and a tower to house everyone. They also wanted to build a monument to their kind so that the world will not forget them. A monument by nature stands in one place. They put a stake in the ground, that was where they would remain.

However, destiny had more in store for people. Hashem simply made it that they no longer listened to the idea of staying put. "They ceased building the city." (Ibid 11:8). They scattered and wandered across the earth. They each came up with their own ideas and countries, inventions, advancements, explorations, and discoveries. The problem was "And it was the entire world was one tongue and unified goals." (Ibid 11:1). Mankind needed varying ideas, goals, and languages so that the maximum benefit can be achieved by the collective. They may have had other languages like Cham. There it says "languages" not "tongue." The people understood each other and talked in one voice. That is what Hashem broke up.

This can be seen in Gemara Avos d'Rabbi Nasan 12:7 that says, *love everyone and that will save humanity. The people of the tower had unity so Hashem simply scattered them. Those in Sodom were destroyed.* The Gemara is saying that the people of this project did have unity. Hashem scattered them, not as a punishment, but for their own benefit. Sodom did not have unity. Evil in it of itself creates a situation where unity cannot exist. If there is unity then there cannot be evil. Haamek Davar is correct, if there was evil then the situation would have descended into violent chaos. These people were not sinning. They were simply staving off mankind's progress. Hashem returned to his partner and they gave mankind a little nudge. This solution was not to create disunity. It was simply meant to facilitate an environment where new ideas, discoveries, and breakthroughs can be achieved.