

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Noach)

Late June 1976; passengers boarding Air France flight 139 discover it is now stopping in Athens en route to Paris. Some, like George and Rivka Karfunkel don't want to board; Athens airport was renowned for its terrible security; indeed it was from this very airport a plane was hijacked in 1970. But their luggage is already on board so they board as well...

In Athens, two Germans join the flight: Brigitte Kulma, and Willie Burs along with two Arabs who are connecting from Bahrain. There was no security inspection for transit passengers in Athens so they were able to board with the weapons they brought from Bahrain... The two Germans were members of Baader Meinhof and the two Arabs were members of the PFLP (Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine), an organization founded by Wadi Hadad, who broke off from Yasser Arafat whom he did not consider radical enough ... he was the same individual who masterminded the Maalot massacre in 1972 when 22 children were murdered.

Five minutes after takeoff they hijacked the plane, refueling in Benghazi and eventually ending up in Kampala, Uganda, in the old airport terminal. (The new terminal continued to service flights throughout the affair...)

One hundred ten Ugandan soldiers guarded the old terminal including the guard towers, to protect the terrorists. The terrorist gave a deadline: on July 1, if their demands were not met they were going to start killing hostages. Almost immediately, while still in Benghazi, the terrorists began calling out names; it did not take a genius to quickly figure out what they were doing: not thirty years after the Holocaust, German terrorists were separating the Jews ... ninety three Jews and Israelis were separated and, along with the crew who refused to leave, were taken to Uganda.

Yitzchak Rabin who was Prime Minister, upheld Israel's policy of not negotiating with terrorists, and eventually approved the mission, led by Yoni Netanyahu to fly thousands of miles, through enemy territory, to rescue the hostages and bring them home.

There is a legend about Yoni Netanyahu; just before boarding the planes and beginning radio silence he gathered his men, Israel's most elite commandoes, and tried to put into words why they were doing what they were about to do, risking everything for people they did not even know, many of whom were not even Israelis. Simply put: '... we may not know who they are but they are our brothers and sisters, and we are going ... because if we don't go no-one will.'

A moment that recalls the well-known Jewish axiom: ***Kol Yisrael Areivim zeh ba'zeh***: All Israel (i.e. every Jew) is responsible for (literally 'mixed in' with) every other Jew. Ultimately, we are all one.

Achdut: Unity; a powerful idea, which cuts to the core of what the Jewish people are all about. And ultimately it's not only about Jews; we are meant to be a model for the world of what brotherhood and unity is all about. What could be more beautiful than true unity, when we all put aside our differences in deference to something greater than ourselves ...

This week's portion, Noach, however, seems to suggest otherwise:

Everyone knows the story: the world created with such hope and light has sunken into a morass of idolatry and violence, to such a degree that there is no longer a point to its continued existence. After all, if G-d and G-dly ethics no longer matter, then we no longer matter. So G-d brings a great flood that destroys the world and pushes the 're-start' button with Noah; the world gets a second chance.

Yet, later in the portion it looks like humanity is about to make the same mistake. Deciding to build a city and a monstrous tower, rabbinic tradition suggests they were literally going to war with no less than G-d Himself! Only this time, despite the fact that all of mankind seems united against G-d, the world is not destroyed; why? Why this time does G-d spare the world? Of course, one might suggest that G-d promises he will never bring another flood, but technically (as pointed out by a good friend, Dr. Meir Becker in our shul this past Shabbat) G-d has no shortage of options; if you don't want to destroy them with a flood; explode them with fire!

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah*) suggests that what saved the builders of the Tower of Babel was that they were unified (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 11:1), and unity is a good thing which is beloved before G-d, so they were spared.

A beautiful idea, save one detail: the Bible makes very clear that the punishment (read: consequence) of the Tower of Babel was (ibid. v.6-9) that G-d causes them to speak many languages and scatters them across the face of the earth! Why would Hashem undo the one thing that was their greatest merit?

It would seem unity is a double edged sword; being of one mind and one purpose is not always good. We need only recall the horrible images of tens of thousands of Germans with their outstretched arms yelling *Seig heil* all together as one, to realize just how dangerous unity can be. Indeed, sometimes allowing for divergent opinions is what helps to *create* healthy unity.

One of the worrying phenomena on campuses today is how easily opinions that do not seem to follow the consensus are shot down, their authors ostracized and belittled. And this dangerous trend is not limited to left wing liberal campus groups, Democratic Bernie Sanders fans, or sycophants who surround President Trump (or any president for that matter).

I recall how difficult it was back in 2005, in the midst of the expulsion of the Jews from Gush Katif (the Gaza strip) to suggest that the rabbis advocating no-one should pack their belongings (because 'G-d would never let such a folly to occur...') might have been mistaken (just as the rabbis telling Jews not to leave Poland were clearly mistaken....)

Perhaps this week's portion of Noah is teaching us that unity is meant to build bridges, not towers and walls...

Something to think about...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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