§3. THE GENERATION OF THE DISPERSION

[Ran commences a lengthy analysis of the episode of the Tower of Bavel and the Dispersion,⁸¹ which connects with the discussion at hand. He begins by noting that the reason God dispersed that generation is not readily apparent from Scripture:]³²

“זֶה הָיָה עִנְי בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל “⁸² בֶּן עָפָא אֲשֶׁר בְּהִתְק רָאָה שְׁנֵי בָנָיו וְהֵם צְרִיכִים עִם כָּל זֶה בִּהְיוֹתָם – This principle applies even in the case of righteous people who share an evil trait, such that we see that Yaakov, our father, peace be upon him, applied this in his appraisal of his two sons, Shimon and Levi: ‘וֹם דָּרָנָא תֵּחָלֵשׁ וְתֶחְס גּוֹר: ‘אֲחָי תֵּחָלֵשׁ וְתֶחְס גּוֹר:’⁸³”⁸⁰ – he said (Bereishis 49:7): ‘I will separate them within Yaakov, and I will disperse them in Israel’. Yaakov’s rationale was that since they shared an evil trait, it was crucial that they be separated, so that it would not grow through their unification.

56. The text of the Mishnah in the standard printed editions differs somewhat from Ran’s citation. Possibly, however, Ran intends to present a condensed version of the Mishnah.

57. Thus, according to Ran, the benefit from the dispersal of the wicked is not a generic prescription for preventing the wicked from collaborating in their evil endeavors (as Rashi indeed explains it), but rather is applicable specifically when they share certain evil traits, which would be strengthened by their banding together.

80. See beginning of Bereishis 49:7.

81. This discussion appears also in Ran’s commentary on the Torah (Feldman ed., pp. 140-144).

82. The passage appears in Bereishis 11:1-9, as follows: (1) The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. (2) And it came to pass, when they migrated from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. (3) They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire.” And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them as mortar. (4) And they said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth.” (5) Hashem descended to look at
The city and tower which the sons of man built,
(6) and Hashem said, “Behold, they are one people with one language for all, and this they begin to do! And now, it will not be withheld from them all they proposed to do! (7) Come, let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another’s language.” (8) And Hashem dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. (9) That is why it was called Bavel, because it was there that Hashem confused the language of the whole earth, and from there Hashem scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

83. Stylistic citation of Yeshayah 59:10.
84. Stylistic paraphrase of Il Shmuel 24:17.
85. Stylistic paraphrase of Bereishis 31:36.
86. Stylistic citation of Shoftim 20:11.
87. This is clear from the fact that numerous commandments are geared to foster peace between man and his fellow, and from the fact that the prophets constantly call for mankind to achieve peace between different peoples.
88. This teaching appears as well in Sifri, Nasso, Piska 42; and Tanchuma, Tzav 7, Shoftim 18.
89. The verse is being expounded as follows: If Ephraim is joined (i.e., if the Israelites are together and at peace with one another), [then even if he worships] idols, let him be (Tanchuma, Tzav 7 with Eitz Yosef ad loc.).
90. [Although Ran frames his objection to the
For according to those who say that [the people in that generation] agreed that it was unfair for God to claim for Himself the higher realm, leaving only the lower realm for man, and hence they built a tower in an attempt to rise up to the sky and take it for themselves, it is perplexing: And if their sight was dimmed and the eyes of their intellects blinded, so that they had indeed imagined that such a foolhardy scheme was sound, it would be fitting for their foolishness to save them from punishment, just as a deranged person is not held responsible for his actions!

—and the verse states similarly (Tehillim 2:4): He Who sits in heaven to laugh, the Lord will mock them. Furthermore, if they had indeed sent forth their project of raising supports for the heavens so foolish that he wonders if there is perhaps some deeper explanation for this Midrash, while Abarbanel asserts that there is "no doubt" that these Midrashim contain secret teachings and allusions.

Midrashic explanations as textual (in that they deviate from the plain meaning of the Scriptural text), some of his questions are essentially logical in nature.

91. They sought to gain the heavens and wage war with God (Bereishis Rabbah 38:6, cited by Rashi to v. 1). [See more variations of this explanation in Tanchuma, Noah 18 and Sanhedrin 109a.] It is possible that Ran means to allude to another Midrashic explanation (also cited by Rashi) as well, to wit: The people who lived in the aftermath of the Flood rationalized that such an upheaval occurs [naturally] every 1656 years, so if they built supports to rise up to the sky and thereby prevent it from collapsing, they would have nothing to fear. This explanation of their heresy is also subject to the questions Ran presents below; see his Commentary to the Torah.

92. Perhaps they were wicked, but surely they were not fools! (Ran in his commentary to the Torah). Abarbanel further points out that the generation included sages such as Noach, Shem, Eiver, and Avraham, making it more unlikely that the masses would fall for a folly of that magnitude without being corrected. He also wonders why — if they sought to support the heavens from collapsing — they would choose to build their tower in a valley! However, cf. Ibn Ezra to v. 2.] Ran in his commentary to the Torah considers the idea of raising supports for the heavens so foolish that he wonders if there is perhaps some deeper explanation for this Midrash, while Abarbanel asserts that there is "no doubt" that these Midrashim contain secret teachings and allusions.

93. See Koheles 12:3, and see also Shabbos 152a.

94. At first glance, one would assume that Ran does not mean that their foolishness should actually exempt them from any punishment, since, after all, they were not technically insane; but rather that their "insanity" should have been a mitigating factor in their deserving punishment, since they were driven more by folly than by wickedness. However, it seems from Ran’s next question that he means that they should have been totally exempt due to technical insanity; see note 96.

95. According to the explanation of Metzudos ad loc., this verse pertains closely to the matter at hand, as follows: If the nations attempt to combat God, how futile and comical is their vain threat, for He is in heaven. In any conflict, the adversary on higher ground has the advantage even if he is weak; how much more so if he is strong, like God! [Possibly, Ran takes this a step further, interpreting God’s “laughter” at the nations’ ludicrous endeavor as derision without punishment (see Abarbanel).]
hand against that which is fundamental (i.e., their intentions were heretical), how would it have been a sufficient punishment to simply disperse them?\[96\] Surely, it would have been fitting for God to smite them in accordance with their wickedness!\[97\] Furthermore, this explanation is not satisfactory, because from the plain sense of the passage it appears that they were not punished for what they had already done, but rather because of what was possible to result in the future from their actions.

Furthermore, this rule applies only to Jews (see Midrash Shocher Tov, Yehoshua 22:24.).

96. That is, even if for some unknown reason God considered them rational and liable for their actions (Ran’s previous question notwithstanding), the narrative is still difficult, since they should have been punished more harshly than they were. [This seems to indicate that Ran’s previous question was that they should have been completely exempt due to insanity, for if he meant only that their punishment should have been mitigated, then Ran’s two questions here answer one another: Perhaps God mitigated the more severe punishment for heresy due to their “insanity”! Rather, Ran means to ask that they should be totally exonerated due to their folly, and if not, they should have been punished according to the full extent of their sin.]

97. Ran, Commentary to the Torah. [The Midrash actually raises a similar question in contrasting the sin and punishment of the Generation of the Flood with that of the Generation of the Dispersion: Why in the former case, which did not involve heresy, but “only” lust and theft, were all of the wicked annihilated in a flood, while in the latter case, which involved heresy, the sinners were merely scattered to the corners of the world? The Midrash’s answer is the principle cited by Ran above; namely, that the love and friendship between those of the Generation of the Dispersion saved them from destruction. Apparently, Ran considers this answer insufficient to explain why God would permit heretics to live.]
[Ran now presents his explanation of this passage:][100] All of these matters put the wise person in a state of perplexity, and require clarification.

And [the clarification] follows from, and is founded on, the root principle that we have stated above; i.e., that the grouping and gathering together of the wicked who share evil traits is injurious, regardless of whether they are presently exerting themselves in evil actions or they are not presently exerting themselves in that (i.e., their fraternization is harmful regardless of whether they are engaged in evil at the moment), just as the grouping of the pious is beneficial, regardless of whether they are presently exerting themselves in righteous deeds or whether they are presently inactive.

As explained above, this is alluded to [in the verse] when it states (Koheles 4:11): Also, if two sleep together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?

[Ran connects this to the Generation of the Dispersion:]

And this was the underlying idea regarding the Generation of the Dispersion, for there is no question that at that time, all the people of the world held various foreign beliefs, and the only thing that they all agreed upon was idolatry, aside from the outstanding individuals and the few people who contemplated and saw that the Light of the world, i.e., God, is good.

them to the four corners of the earth, they would be protected from a single event affecting them all at once (see also Rashbam, Radak, andRalbag).

— Abarbanel contends that this too is foolish, since one city and tower could not possibly suffice for all the people of the world and their progeny. See Abarbanel for further objections to this approach.]

[100. Ran presents this same explanation, with some modifications, in his commentary to the Torah.

101. See above, at note 67.

102. Literally, were founded upon.

103. Stylistic paraphrase of Tehillim 34:9.]
However, even these outstanding individuals were not able to call on mankind to serve Hashem with a united resolve,\(^{104}\) out of their fear of the nations living in their lands and ruling over them. In those generations, it occurred to him what occurred.\(^{109}\) And this is a slight revival — and there is no doubt that for those righteous individuals, and a tiny minority in those generations, the division of the nations and governments was advantageous and beneficial, — that when a period of forced apostasy begins in the land of Yishmael, the refugees flee to the land of Edom,\(^{108}\) and when the opposite occurs (i.e., during periods of forced apostasy in those lands), they flee from the land of Edom to the land of Yishmael.\(^{109}\) And this is a slight revival for us in our servitude;\(^{110}\) i.e., this state offers us some relief from our oppressors.

104. Stylistic paraphrase of Tzephaniah 3:9.

105. That is, the first one to urge the nations to abandon their idolatry and instead serve God.

106. [Literally, occurred to him what occurred.] In Avraham’s early years, he destroyed the idols of his father Terach. Terach reported his son’s “crime” to King Nimrod, who ordered that Avraham be thrown into a furnace for refusing to acknowledge the pagan deities. However, Avraham miraculously emerged from the furnace unscathed (Rashi and Ran to 11:28, citing Bereishis Rabbah 38:13).

107. Ramban (to 11:28) and Ran (to 11:1 and 12:1-3), in the course of explaining the chronology of events of Terach and Avraham’s travels, tell that they left Kasdim for Canaan to escape from Nimrod and his minions, rather than as a result of God’s command (see Ramban there for why there was then a need for God to later command Avraham to go to Canaan). Cf. Rav Saadiah Gaon to 12:1 (with note 1 in Kafich ed.), Ibn Ezra, and Radak.

108. The Rabbis often refer to Rome as Edom; [see Insight: The Fourth Kingdom of Daniel’s Vision [end] to Derush 5].

109. The history of the Jewish people fleeing from land to land in search of safety is unfortunately long. Just a few years after Ran’s passing, the horrific massacre of 1391 erupted in Spain, forcing droves of Jews (including Ran’s student Rivash and also Rashbatz) to make their way to the Muslim lands of Algeria and Morocco.

110. Stylistic citation of Ezra 9:8.
And at that time the whole earth was of one language and of common purpose, other cities that are great and fortified up to the heavens were of one language and of common purpose, and they agreed for the entire world to appoint one head to be leader and ruler, and [the people] should not be scattered and divided under their different governments.

To that end, they chose a valley that they found to have ample room to build their capital, and they agreed for that end, they agreed to build a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, that is to say, exceedingly tall, as much as possible.

This usage of “heaven” is meant in the same sense as a later verse (Devarim 1:28, 9:1): cities that are great and fortified up to the heavens, which obviously does not mean that they reached the “heavens” literally.

They desired to build this imposing tower because it is fitting for one who was chosen to rule the lower world to have a great palace and tower, such that seeing the tower inspires all viewers with dread and fear, and that it should be visible from afar.

111. Ran makes clear in his commentary to the Torah that this city was not intended to house the entire world’s population, but only those who lived in and frequented the center of the world’s government. [This differs significantly from Ibn Ezra’s explanation, that all the people of the world were to live in this city, a notion Ramban dismisses as clearly impractical.]

112. That is, in Ran’s view they certainly did not intend for the tower to literally reach “the heavens,” as that would be impossible.

113. The Gemara in Tamid (29a and Chullin 90b) states that there are instances where the Torah spoke in hyperbole, illustrating this with the verse at hand. Obviously, the cities’ walls did not actually extend to the heavens, and this description is just an exaggeration.

Maharsha (to Chullin loc. cit.) explains (citing Aruch ‘ע’ גוזמא) that this expression means that the fortifications were so high that one had to tilt his head to look upward as high as possible (as if to heaven) to see their tops.

114. [Possibly, Ran specifies that this is seemly for a ruler of the “lower world,” because only in that realm are these two goals — inspiring dread and
Now, these men at that time sinned neither in action nor in thought, for their plans in practice and in theory involved no immediate sins. 

And this is what it means when it says (v. 5): *Hashem descended to look at the city and tower which the sons of man built;* that is to say, He descended to the end of the matter and observed what would result from their unity, and even though at the moment it was not evil, nevertheless, the gathering was bound to result in evil for them and evil for the world. 

— And this was because all of them were of one mind with regard to idolatry, i.e., they were all idolaters. 

Furthermore, that valley which they chose as the location for their capital was in the land of Shinar, and its head and king was Nimrod, who headed the endeavor of idolatry, to the point that he persecuted Avraham our father. 

The impression of omnipresence — paramount for maintaining authority.]  

Since their plan involved only banding together into one society, without any heretical aims. 

According to the Midrashic explanations cited above, that their very act of building was a rebellion against God, it seems that this verse is meant anthropomorphically (figuratively assigning human characteristics to God), stating that God “descended” to examine their sinful actions (see Rashi). However, according to Ran, God’s “descent” refers to His examination of the inevitable results of their actions (see Radak; see also Ibn Ezra and Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 1:10). 

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117. This is because, as Ran explained above, a union of entities sharing a specific evil trait will automatically compound that trait, even if they do not intend or act to make that happen. 

118. As stated in Bereishis 10:10: *The beginning of [Nimrod’s] kingdom was...Calneh in the land of Shinar.* 

119. This follows Eruvin 53a and Pesachim 94b, which teach that Nimrod led the whole world in rebellion against God. [Rashi to Pesachim actually connects this teaching to the incident at hand, stating that Nimrod instigated the plan to build the Tower of Bavel; but that is in accordance with Rashi’s understanding that the tower’s purpose was to aid them in a battle against God.]
father, peace be upon him, when [Avraham] challenged [idolatry], as is well known and alluded to above.\(^{120}\)

\[^{120}\text{Ran continues with God’s response in v. 6:}\]

"Behold, they are one people with one language for all, and this they begin to do! And now, it will not be withheld from them all they proposed to do!"

"For when, for there is no doubt that those earlier generations of devoted idolaters had exerted themselves to raise up and exalt their idol, and to make people forget the Name of the Holy One, blessed is He."

"But until that point, they had not had the ability to accomplish this, because of the division between the governments and lands, since there was always some escape for those who worshiped Hashem, blessed be He, as explained above, — which would no longer be the case if the proposal of their agreement continued unhindered. If all the world’s idolaters united under a single banner, there would be no opportunity for God’s faithful to flee persecution by taking up residence in another land at odds with the first.\(^{123}\)"

\[^{121}\text{— and therefore [the verse] states (v. 6):}\]

"And Hashem said, “Behold, they are one people with one language for all, and this they begin to do!” And now, it will not be withheld from them all they proposed to do!"

\[^{122}\text{— for now, if they are successful in carrying out their plan of unifying, it will not be withheld from them to accomplish what they had originally proposed to do.}\]

\[^{123}\text{This does not contradict what Ran wrote earlier, that the builders of the Tower of Bavel had no evilintentions, because Ran here means only that wiping out the loyal service of God was their original aim, which had never happened since it had never been possible. Once it would become feasible with their union, they would indeed endeavor}\]

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120. See note 106.

121. Ran explains immediately what it was that they had “proposed to do from the beginning.”

122. According to Ran, it will not be withheld is a declarative statement, that if left to their own devices, mankind would accomplish all that they had originally proposed to do [as Ran explains further below] (see also Ibn Ezra and Radak). This is unlike Rashi, who interprets this as a rhetorical question: Should it not be withheld from them all that they planned to do?

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to make it happen, but that was not their intention in seeking to join all the peoples of the world together.


125. [Tractate Pesachim, as we call it today (in the plural) is so called because the tractate was divided in earlier times into two tractates, one known as "Pesach Rishon" (first Pesach) and the other as "Pesach Sheni" (second Pesach). "Pesach Rishon" consisted of the first four chapters of the tractate and the tenth, which deal with the prohibitions of chametz, the requirement to rid oneself of all chametz before the festival begins, and the various laws of the Pesach Seder. "Pesach Sheni" referred to the remainder of the tractate, which deals with the laws of the pesach offering (Meir, in his introductory comments to the tractate).]

126. The standard printed edition contains minor deviations from Ran’s version here. For another Gemara discussing a similar theme, see Avodah Zarah 10b.

127. This took place in the context of the war mentioned in II Shmuel 8:13, which was fought by Yoav, the general of David’s army, against Edom (Rashi to II Shmuel). These Edomites were descended from the nation of Amalek, the oppressors of Israel throughout history, whose annihilation is mandated by the Torah (Devarim 25:19; see Bava Basra 21a-b and Rashi to Shemos 17:16). [In fact, the apostate’s following analogy was not valid, since the Edomites (Amalekites) were longtime foes of the Jews and had attacked them many times. Nevertheless, he was given a response based on his very own premise, viz. that this was a massacre of innocent people.]

128. He’aros from R’ Eliashiv to Pesachim ad loc. ד”ה ליתנהו גבייכו.
Amero Leh: genom derome, be'cha be'hitznu b'che'cha skalpön. Hene hohor. Mi sakeh hashivot miskhatot, 130 akono r' levoh miskhatom baleh malkha. Welb, baroh miskhatb horeh horeh beteh hohai onego la'lehah, be'lah, 131 mi ra'eh, tibbord huv She'mosh momon, la'eyne, mi la'ey huv ra'ahim le'huk, 132 fired se'el zehmatom, mi ge baleh leluw, mel she'el zehom, mel she'el qibot: mel she'el qibot.

— [The apostate] answered him: genom derome, be'cha be'hitznu b'che'cha skalpön. “By the Wall of Rome!” 129 With this thought we go down and with this thought we go up! [That is, we grapple with this very dilemma constantly.]” Hene hohor ve'se'ath hashivot miskhatot — Thus, we are taught that the cause turning away their wrath from destroying us is only that their government does not encompass the entire world, thereby allowing us to escape and turn world opinion against those who annihilate Jews.

[Ran returns to the Generation of the Dispersion, explaining God’s response to their plans:]

Welb b'hitbom miskhatb horeh horeh beteh hohai onego la'lehah, be'lah be'ra'eh la'ey huv zehmat yerech, 134 mel she'el qibot. Therefore, since the intention of that generation at that time was not for evil, 131 only that Hashem, blessed be He, saw the evil that was to inevitably follow from it, 132 mel she'el qibot mi ra'ahim le'huk — He did not punish them, as they were not deserving of punishment at that time. 133 mel she'el qibot mel lishom — Rather, He confounded their counsel and even confused their language, mel she'el qibot — for there was also a benefit in confusing the language and thereby rendering them unintelligible to one another. 135 mel she'el qibot — In conclusion, this is the essence of the matter:

129. He swore by a pagan deity (Rashi ibid.). [They referred to it as a “wall” possibly because of their belief in its protective powers.]

130. Stylistic paraphrase of Tehillim 106:23.

131. That is, at that time their intention was not for evil (see note 123).

132. [It is worth noting that God’s scrutiny of their intentions and the likely future outcome of evil is unrelated to the classic philosophical conundrum of how to reconcile God’s certain knowledge of the future and man’s absolute ability to choose good or evil actions (see Insight: Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will to Derush 3, which discusses this latter point). This is because in this case Ran attributes God’s knowledge of the future not only to His omniscience, but to the basic principle that the joining together of evil forces is bound to lead to an evil result.]

133. And God judges a person only according to his present state, not according to his future transgressions (see Rashi to Bereishis 21:17).


135. Abarbanel (Bereishis Ch. 11, Chorev ed., pp. 310-311) challenges Ran’s explanation of this passage with a series of questions. One question he poses is: If God’s purpose was to fracture the earth’s governments, as Ran contends, that would not explain why He confused their languages. For it is possible for a king to rule over nations with different languages, as we see in the case of King Achashveirosh (see Esther 1:22). However, it seems that Ran actually anticipated his question with this line, since he stresses that there was a benefit “also” from confusing their languages. Presumably, this is because the natural barrier of disparate languages makes it considerably more difficult to maintain long-term rule over a nation with a foreign tongue, even though it is technically possible.
Ran's now returns to elucidate Koheles's observation that compounds are subject to the limitations of their constituent elements. Ran pointed out above that this contradicted his own assertion (buttressed by several statements of the Sages) that advanced complex compounds are demonstrably more perfect than their lesser, baser elements. The basic answer Ran gives is that, as explained above, entities joining together generally amplify their positive qualities, while their negative qualities intensify only when they share the same negative quality. Hence, when entities with different positive and negative qualities join, their positive qualities are amplified, while their negatives traits remain unchanged or are even nullified. As a result, a compound is often more perfect than its elements:

God saw that that gathering of the wicked was bound to result in evil, since they all shared a single evil characteristic (i.e., idolatry), for it is impossible to have a group of gathered constituents of a single evil characteristic, where the group is not more evil than [its constituents] or at least equal to them.

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