

## “The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose.” (11:1)

We talk about *achdus*, unity, as the ideal ingredient for success among people. Yet, the Torah suggests that the sin of the people who built the tower of *Bavel* was precisely their unity –one language – one common purpose. Obviously, their unity was not an asset. When is harmony among people a detriment and when is it to their benefit? Moreover, in the *Yerushalmi Megillah* 1:9, *Chazal* clearly state that the people spoke seventy different languages, when in fact the Torah states that the punishment was to disperse them and divide them into different languages. Last, in giving a name to the place where the building of the tower took place, the Torah calls it *Bavel*, which means to disperse, because “from there Hashem scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” If they spoke seventy languages prior to the dispersement, what changed after they were scattered?

*Horav Shimon Schwab, z.l.*, explains that while unity is certainly a positive quality, it depends greatly on the purpose for which the unity is used. Let us first focus on the languages and the types of communication between people that existed at the time. Language is an expression of each individual nation based upon its culture, society, way of life and other various circumstances which are endemic to that individual nation. While it is true that different languages existed before the dispersion, people were still able to understand one another, so great was the harmony among men. When people get along and there is a strong meeting of the minds, the language barrier just seems to fade away. *Rav Schwab* posits that even after the dispersion, when people and their lives changed to the point that they no longer understood each other, one common thread remained: music. Every country makes its own music, with its own individual sounds, notes and lyrics. Yet, one who is proficient in the area of music can read and understand anyone’s music. It is a universal language. Hashem dispersed the people and mixed up their languages, but their music stayed the same.

As a result of the unique harmony among men that reigned at the time, people understood each other and became like one family. United, mankind began to think that “they” were “it.” They thought that with everyone playing a supporting role to his friend and neighbor, each was actually self-sufficient. They no longer needed G-d. They could go at it on their own. Indeed, this is why the Torah does not clearly state their actual sin. It only writes that they were of one language and one common purpose. This common bond among men is what led to their infamy. Nimrod rallied the people against the Almighty. “We can do it ourselves!” he declared. “Why should we listen to Hashem?” In order to abrogate their misguided unity, it was essential that each person be acutely aware that in order to endure, he must have *Siyata d’Shmaya*, Divine assistance. Unity does not take the place of *emunah*, belief in Hashem. It was necessary for Hashem to “descend,” to bring Himself down, to give people a more penetrating understanding of His greatness. Hashem intervened and prevented the gap between Heaven and earth from growing. The pernicious goal of the tower’s founders was halted.

Hashem confused their ability to communicate with each other. The Torah uses the word *v'navlah shum sfasam*, "so that their language will become confused/dried up" (11:7). *Horav S.R. Hirsch, z.l.*, explains that the word, *v'navlah*, is a derivative of *naval*, which means to wither. The immediate result of Hashem's *yeridah*, descending/closing the gap, was the withering of their speech. There certainly was a confusion of their language, and consequent ability to communicate with each other, but it happened because people had a greater and more profound grasp of Hashem. The more they understood Hashem, the less they needed one another, because they now realized that they could not exist without Him. Thus, their prior ability to communicate with each other, to understand one another despite the gap created by variant languages, naturally deteriorated. Language became an insurmountable barrier, since the ability to act as one with one another decreased. This is why the place became known as Bavel, because there Hashem *bolal*, scattered them. *Bolal* also means to "mix in;" Hashem "mixed in" a perception of Himself into their ability to communicate with each other. The result was a dispersal of nations throughout the world. Unity among people is wonderful, as long as it is meaningful and produces *achdus HaBoreh*, a belief in the unity of the Creator.