מדרש

Midrash

ON GENESIS 11:1

Why peace spared one sinful generation but not another

Bereshit Rabbah 38:6

The sages offer several readings of the generation of the Dispersion's "common speech": some interpret it as blasphemous unity against the Lord and against Abraham, others as unity in shared property, and others as unity in mutual love and peace among themselves, which is why—unlike the generation of the Flood, steeped in robbery—a remnant of them survived. From this the midrash draws its central lesson: peace is so great a value that even a generation guilty of grave sin is spared destruction on its account, while discord brings punishment even upon Israel. AI SUMMARY

Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yoḥanan, Rabbi Elazar says: “And common speech [udvarim aḥadim]” – obscured speech [diburim aḥudim]. The [sinful] acts of the generation of the Flood are stated explicitly, while the [sinful] acts of the generation of the Dispersion are not stated explicitly. Udvarim aḥadim – they said harsh words regarding “the Lord is our God, the Lord is one [eḥad]” (Deuteronomy 6:4), and regarding “Abraham was one [eḥad]” (Ezekiel 33:24) – in the land. They said: ‘This Abraham is a barren mule, he does not beget children.’ Regarding the Lord our God, they said: ‘How arrogant of Him to select the upper reaches for Himself and to give us the lower reaches. Instead, let us come and make a tower and craft an idol at its top, place a sword in its hand, and it will appear as though it is waging war against Him.’

Another interpretation, udvarim aḥadim, all their items were united [aḥudim] among them – what was in the possession of this one, was in the possession of that one, and what was in the possession of that one, was in the possession of this one. The Rabbis say: “One language” – this is analogous to one who had a wine cellar. He opened one barrel and found it to be vinegar; a second, and found it to be vinegar; a third, and found it to be vinegar; [he said:] it is obvious that all of it has gone bad.

Rabbi Eliezer said: Which is worse [for a king], the one who says to the king: ‘It is either me or you in the palace,’ or the one who says: ‘I am in the palace and you are not?’ Certainly, it is worse when one says to the king: ‘I am in the palace and you are not.’ So, the generation of the Flood said: “What is the Almighty that we should serve Him? What good will it do if we encounter Him?” (Job 21:15). The generation of the Dispersion said: ‘How arrogant of Him to select the upper reaches for Himself and to give us the lower reaches. Instead, let us come and make a tower and craft an idol at its top, place a sword in its hand, and it will appear as though it is waging war against Him.’

Yet those of the generation of the Flood, no remnant of them remained, while those of the generation of the Dispersion, a remnant of them remained. The explanation is that the generation of the Flood, because they were steeped in robbery, as it is stated: “They move boundaries; they rob a flock and herd it” (Job 24:2), that is why no remnant of them remained. But these, [the generation of the

Dispersion], they loved each other, as it is stated: "The entire earth was of one language," that is why a remnant of them remained.

Rabbi says: Great is peace, as even if Israel engages in idol worship, but there is peace among them, the Omnipresent says: 'It is, as it were, that I have no power over them, since there is peace among them,' as it is stated: "Ephraim is attached to idols, leave him" (Hosea 4:17). But once there was divisiveness between them, what does it say? "Their heart has separated; now they will be punished" (Hosea 10:2). You thus learn: Peace is great, and dispute is despised.

"Udvarim aḥadim" – the act of the generation of the Flood was stated explicitly; the act of the generation of the Dispersion was not stated explicitly. Another matter, "udvarim aḥadim" – they said sharp [ḥadim] words, saying: 'Once every one thousand six hundred and fifty-six years, the firmament collapses. Come and let us prepare supports; one to the north, one to the south, one to the west, and the one here will support it to the east.' That is what is written: "The entire earth was of one language and of common speech."