

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



TO TELL THE TRUTH

One of my favorite TV game shows back in the 50s and 60s was To Tell The Truth. The premise of the show was to identify a semi-celebrity from two imposters. The three would all claim to be the person who had done something of interest; written or invented something. Only the true person was required 'to tell the truth'. I remember the personality one time was Israel's representative to the Miss Universe contest, and they all asked questions about Judaism, only to find that Israel's beauty queen was Moslem. Anyway, this was all based on the quaint idea that people of note would actually tell the truth. Times have changed.

What's this got to do with this week's Torah reading, No'ach? Glad you asked. There's a very mysterious incident in our parsha, the Tale of the Tower. God descends to inspect this amazing public works project and deems it unworthy, resulting in the dispersion of humanity and the birth of different language groups. What did they do wrong? Actually, no one knows.

Rabbis tend to associate the behavior

of that generation with whatever belief system they want to denigrate. I remember hearing sermons that the sin was Fascism, Communism or any hated 'ism'. But the Sfat Emet looks for the answer to the identity of that generation's grievous sin in parshat Ha'azinu: Remember the days of old, Consider the years of generation to generation... When God Most High divided up the nations - when He divided up humankind (D'varim 32:7-8).

According to the Rebbe, and other authorities, the two generations mentioned are the generation of the Flood and that of the Tower. Verse 8, of course, refers to the punishment of the Tower builders. But why were they dispersed, and not destroyed, like the people of the Flood? Well, their sin wasn't as bad. The Flood sinners robbed, pillaged and raped, committing CHAMAS. This second group rebelled. What was their rebellion? They didn't listen to the end of verse 7 in Moshe's speech: Ask your father, he will tell you about it; ask your elders, they will give you the details.

Who were these 'fathers' and 'elders'? The Midrash claims that they are prophets and Sages. But in the context of the Tower story, I think it's No'ach and his sons. According to

traditional dating No'ach dies five years after the Tower incident, and the righteous Shem and Ever were around as well. There were Tzadikim available to advise the people about heeding God's will, but either they didn't get involved or weren't heeded. The verse from D'varim seems to indicate that they were not listened to.

Every generation has elders and history which must be closely analyzed. That's what Moshe Rabbeinu is teaching us in his final poetic charge to us his eternal students. The time of the Tower clearly didn't seek out the evidence that displeasing God is a disastrous decision. There must have been leaders who harangued the masses with promises of greatness. They must have told their adoring fans to ignore facts and evidence; just be mesmerized by my promises.

Truth was not in vogue. Catastrophe was the result. That's how Moshe related the tragic incident to our ancestors and to us.


Sadly, gullibility never disappears from human history. Our times seem especially prone to this horrendous phenomenon. Not long ago I watched a YouTube video of a politician blithely, comfortably relating a total falsehood about himself, while on a

split screen we could see that person doing and saying the exact opposite of his present narrative. The time difference was less than two years between the incident and the false representation. Recently, there was an interview with another prominent politician describing how colleagues often admit privately their public lies.

The 'frum' world is not immune to this phenomenon. Professor Zev Lev z"l, founder of Machon Lev, Jerusalem College of Technology, told a story about one of his son's Bar Mitzva presents. The young man received a book of biographies of Gedolim, and in it was the statement that Reb Moshe Feinstein zt"l never read newspapers. The boy then asked, 'But, Abba, when you took me to meet Reb Moshe, he was reading a newspaper. What should we do?' Prof. Lev said that they should go ask Reb Ya'akov Kaminetzky zt"l, with whom Prof. Lev had lived as an orphaned child. Reb Ya'akov was clear: Discard the book!

It's okay to disagree agree about issues, but don't lie to buttress your argument. One can suggest that it's a good idea to avoid newspapers, but don't make up alternative facts to make your point. This concept covers every aspect of our lives. As Daniel Patrick Moynahan famously said,

**'You are entitled to your own opinion,
but you are not entitled to your own
facts.'**

**On that old, quaint TV show, the
'famous' guy was expected to Tell
The Truth. How times have changed.
It often seems that we've given up on
history and truth and facts. But
Moshe Rabbeinu was clear:
Remember, heed, study history! The
alternative is horrendous, a total
destruction of society. **