

Thinking Torah

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Parashat Noach:

Nimrod the Mighty

Who is Nimrod? The Rabbis pictured him as a savage warrior, an evil king, and the instigator of the Tower of Babel. And yet, the Bible mentions him in just a few rather ambiguous lines! This week, we shall study together the short parsha that will introduce us to this central figure of the post flood world. We shall attempt to probe the persona known as Nimrod. We shall see that the classic commentators are in conflict as to how to relate to him. Let us begin with the "evidence" and then maybe we will be able to judge for ourselves.

Chavruta Study

1. Look at the basic source : BERESHIT 10:8-12
 - * Who is Nimrod? What did he do? Is he viewed in a positive or a negative light by the pesukim?
 - * Where does Nimrod begin his empire?This information connects Nimrod to another episode in our Parsha. What is it? (If you are not sure, see 11:2,8-9)
 - * What is the root of the word Nimrod?
 2. See RASHI on these verses. How does he view Nimrod?
 - * According to Rashi, what does Nimrod hunt? How does he read/translate the phrase "gibor tzaytid lifnei Hashem"?
 3. Look also at the IBN EZRA on 10:8-9. What is his view of the role of Nimrod?
 - * How does he interpret Nimrod's name?
 - * According to Ibn Ezra, what does Nimrod hunt? How does he understand the phrase "gibor tzaytid lifnei Hashem"?
 - * Whose opinion is closer to "p'shat". Rashi or the Ibn Ezra?
 4. See the RAMBAN (v.9) who discusses both Rashi and the Ibn Ezra.
 - * Whose opinion does the Ramban prefer? Why does he prefer that opinion?
 - * How does the Ramban view Nimrod's "strength" (gevurah)? What was Nimrod's agenda? And why was it wrong? See also the RADAK on passuk 9 who expands on the view of the Ramban.
 5. Look over the entire Chapter 10 to get a wider view. Why do we need all the detail in this Chapter? How does the Nimrod story fit in? (see the Ramban again).
 - * Rashi connects this story with the story of Migdal Bavel (11:1-9). On the basis of the pure Torah text, why might there be room to make a connection?
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The Midrashic tradition portrays Nimrod as one of the most frightening and insidious of Biblical characters. Here is a shortlist of the acts attributed to Nimrod:

It was Nimrod who initiated and organised the Tower of Babel project with the aim of fighting non other than God himself!

It was Nimrod who sought to dispose of the believer Abraham, by throwing him into the flames of an enormous furnace.

In later history, Nimrod's heir is the other 'hunter' - Esav (25:28). According to the Midrash, it was Esav who stalked and killed Nimrod, taking from him his magical hunting camouflage. Esav and Nimrod. A fearful combination. (Sources for Midrashim: Nimrod and the Tower of Babel : Avot Derabi Natan #24. Nimrod and Avraham - Bereshit Rabba (BR) Ch.38. Esav killing Nimrod BR 65:16 and see also another version of the Midrash - BR 63:32)

If we may conclude, Nimrod is a powerful man of violence with enormous influence. Indeed he is a man whose name personifies his life mission; Nimrod from the root MRD - *mered* - rebellion. Chazal ask, how can a warlord and emperor rebel? After all, he is the king! He has no-one against whom to rebel. He is in control! – Answer: The only 'thing' which Nimrod would want to resist and oppose is a force that seeks to control him, to stand in his way. That 'thing' is God. Nimrod the rebel rebels against the only power which can possibly oppose him. He wages a war against God. He makes God his enemy.

This is the Midrashic tradition. But do we receive that self-same impression when we look at the pesukim in our Parsha?

A HUNTER IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

"Cush fathered Nimrod. He was the first man of might on earth. He was a mighty hunter before God; hence the saying 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord.' And the beginning of his kingdom were Bavel, Erech, Akkad and Kalne in the land of Shinar. From that land emerged Ashur who built Nineve and Rechovot-Ir and Kalach. Resen was between Nineve and Kalach. This was the Great City." (10:8-12)

A casual reader of these few lines would not blink at this description. It all seems very normal, harmless, benign. A mighty king, rules over an expansive kingdom. Where is the evil, the rebellion, the heresy? From what source did the Rabbis draw their negative view?

The phrase which tells us of Nimrod's hunting - "before God" - facilitates a very different reading from that of the Midrash. This reading turns our assessment of Nimrod on its head. Ibn Ezra translates this phrase as meaning "in the presence of God". This translation will radically affect the way we view Nimrod. Let us read the Ibn Ezra in his own words :

"Don't pay too much attention to a name (Nimrod - *mered* - rebellion) if its meaning is not expressly pointed out in the Biblical text. Nimrod was the first to show mankind's might over the animals for he was a 'mighty hunter'. The phrase 'Before God' tells us that Nimrod would build altars to God and sacrifice the animals that he caught to God. This is the straightforward reading of the text (*derech ha-p'shat*) however the Midrash chooses a different reading."

Suddenly, we picture Nimrod as a God-fearing king who controls the wild animals who instill fear into the population of Shinar. Nimrod catches these beasts, dedicating the animals to God. Here is a monarch leading his nation in the direction of God. What image could be more positive, what could be more inspirational to a God centered worldview than Ibn Ezra's vision of the Nimrodean Empire?

NIMROD - REBEL

RASHI following the Midrash, chooses to view Nimrod in a negative light. Nimrod is the rebel supreme, instilling stirrings of religious rebellion, a rejection of God throughout the world. Rashi presents Nimrod as the instigator of the Tower of Babel.

"(8) TO BE A HUNTER : leading the entire world in rebellion against God with his ideas in the generation of the dispersion (Tower of Babel). A MIGHTY HUNTER - He would snare peoples minds with his powerful rhetoric influencing them to rebel against God. BEFORE GOD lit. in the face of God - He wanted to anger God in a direct confrontation. HENCE THE SAYING 'LIKE NIMROD A MIGHTY HUNTER BEFORE THE LORD' - whenever we see an evil arrogant person who knows of God but freely chooses, brazenly, to reject His authority, we proclaim him to be 'like Nimrod - a mighty inciter in direct confrontation with the Lord'."

The central phrase which is being read with very different meaning is the phrase : "Gibor Tzayid Lifnei Hashem". Rashi reads it as "the arch-persuader confronting God". The Ibn Ezra reads it as " A mighty hunter in God's presence". It is quite astounding to see Rashi and Ibn Ezra sitting side by side in the Chumash. We could not have more contrasting readings of this verse, and we emerge with diametrically opposed impressions of Nimrod as a person.

Rashi is puzzling here. The Ibn Ezra's interpretation is much closer to "p'shat" and is a straightforward textual reading. We read Rashi and wonder how he weaves this Nimrod-Tower of Babel connection.

We might suggest that Rashi is puzzled by the epithet Gibor Tzayid - Gibor usually indicative of military prowess; Tzayid - of hunting expertise. How is this title used alongside the account of Nimrod's imperial leadership? How could Nimrod's hunting expertise assist him in his role as emperor? Rashi finds his clues in the Midrash which puts Nimrod at the scene of Migdal Bavel and re-interprets the word "Tzayid" to indicate a power of persuasion and propaganda (much as the identical phrase with Esav - see 25:27-28).

Rashi has other supports for his Nimrod-Tower of Babel connection A vital clue might be the geographical location for this happening. The Tower of Babel is constructed in SHINAR (11:2), the very Shinar where Nimrod begins his rule. It is also called BABEL (11:9) which is , once again the place of Nimrod's beginnings. We also hear of Nimrod's connection to Nineve: "He BUILT Nineve ... the great (or large) CITY." (10:11-12) But see the story of Migdal Bavel: "Let us BUILD a CITY and a tower with its top in the heavens." (11:4) A close reading leads us to think that this might all be one unit, a single story.

"HeChel"

But, I believe there is one other critical textual connection. It rests in a single word: The word "Hechel" (10:8 and 11:6).

This word comes up many times in Bereshit and each time its understanding is ambiguous. The word *huchal* / *vayichal*/ etc. - from the root CH-L -L - can be related to the notion of beginnings (*Lehatchil*) or very differently, to the notion of "Chillul" - profaning a holy thing. (even the word *chillul* frequently means initiation of sorts; see *Devarim* 20:6.) Let us take a first example (I would advise you to open a *chumash* to look this up).

4:26 "And Seth, in turn, bore a son and he named him Enosh. It was then that Man began to invoke (or "profane") the Lord's name."

The phrase does not explain what men began to do in Enosh's time. According to the Rambam (*Hil. Avoda Zara* 1:1),

"In the days of Enosh the sons of men fell into grave error ... they argued, 'since God created the stars and spheres to govern the universe .. they deserve praise and glorification...' .. they began building temples to the stars and offering them sacrifices..."

Rashi also talks about Enosh initiating a new *avoda zara*. Both Rambam and Rashi translate the word "*huchal*" in its pejorative understanding (*chillul HaShem*) and thus they read the phrase as; "It was the that man began to profane the calling of God's name."

Ibn Ezra, however, states: "Then they began to actively pray to God." He understands the word "*huchal*" simply as "began" with no other connotations.

This ambiguity is relevant to a number of other places: See 6:1:

"And it came to pass when man began/rebelled (*hechel*) to multiply on the earth. See 9:20 "Noah the tiller of the soil was the first to (or "profaned himself") plant a vineyard. He drank from the wine and became drunk ...".

This word appears as a central verb in the story of Nimrod AND with the Tower of Babel.

With Nimrod:

"He began (profaned) to be a powerful hunter before God" (10:8)

Tower of Babel:

"And this they have begun (rebelled) to do?" (11:6)

The same words - the same ambiguity.

Rav Menachem Leibtag once suggested that the issue here is all the same. This issue relates to Enosh, Nimrod, the Tower of Babel, Noah's drunkenness. They are all described with the same phrase and in the interpretation of that phrase, there is a fundamental ambivalence. What unifies all of these cases? The word *huchal* can mean 'to begin' or 'to profane' and in the double meaning lies the question. Each of these stories marks a new beginning that can go in one of two ways. Each beginning is innocent enough but, these initial moments are both optimistic and dangerous; there is potential for immense growth, and for disastrous failure (*chillul*).

Let us review our examples. Noach plants a vine which certainly might have been used for the best of reasons. Instead, he gets drunk. It all goes wrong. The same with Migdal Bavel. Potential for a perfect society is transformed into a self-destructive ideology. This ambivalence is reflected also in the way that ChaZaL perceive Enosh. They say that his Avoda Zara began as a means to reach God. He intended good (eg. The Sun an intermediary to God) but it all went wrong and ended in Chillul. (see also the Midrash quoted by Nechama Leibowitz in "Studies in Bereshit pg.97.)

But how does this apply to Nimrod? According to Rashi, he is evil; according to Ibn Ezra, he is a Tzaddik! The Ramban will assist us.

VIOLENCE AND SUBJUGATION.

The RAMBAN offers a new approach.

"In my opinion, he was the first to begin ruling over others through sheer might and brute force. He was the first monarch. Up to this point there had been no wars and no king ruled until Nimrod used his strength to become king over Bavel. He then set out on a conquest of Ashur and expanded his empire building fortified cities in his might and power."

RADAK expresses this in a more forceful way :

"He began to show his might, to conquer one or more nations becoming king over them. For, until he arose no man had aspired to rule over a people. This is the force of the words "in the land" (v.8). The text records the boundaries of his kingdom and the cities he conquered, since, up to the point of his rise, there was no notion of King; each nation simply had its own judges and leaders."

Nimrod is the first conqueror; the first human being to see himself as master of nations and conqueror of lands. The first person to vanquish, oppress and capture. He was the first king.

Is Nimrod bad? Is government "bad"? No! Government, armies and the like are simply a tool. They are a tool that should be used to serve the nation, to look out for the good of the people. However, there are times when a government is looking for nothing other than power. Governments that see simply to perpetuate their control turn into oppressive abusive regimes, dictatorships and the like. This is the question raised by the word "hechel".

"*Hu hechel lihyot gibor Ba'aretz.*" What "hechel" was it going to be? Was Nimrod - the first king, the first monarch - a force for the people and the good of mankind, or was he a source for oppression? Did the "hechel" become "chilul"? The Ramban explains that he abused his strength. He used his government to oppress and not to facilitate, to control the masses rather than to further freedom.

(By the way, this approach might explain the connection to Migdal Bavel. Migdal Bavel is about a good society who set their agenda as furthering themselves and only themselves: "Let us make a name for ourselves." A society must have noble goals over and above their own fame and power.)

PUTTING NIMROD IN CONTEXT

The context of the Nimrod story is the creation of the kaleidoscope of peoples. Chapter 10 sees the description of the development of a world of seventy nations :

"These are the groupings of Noach's descendants, according to their origins, by their nations; and from these the nations branched out over the entire earth after the Flood" (10:32)

Cassutto (1883-1951 Italian Bible scholar who made Aliya and became a professor at Hebrew University ... wrote the book "From Noah to Abraham" from which this is taken.) points out that the entire Chapter 10 does not simply intend to teach us genealogy. We don't need the Torah to tell us that sort of data. Rather it aims to show us that :

"The new race of mankind that emerged after the Flood was a unity It sprang wholly from one couple and all the peoples were brothers to each other. This outlook serves as the foundation for the prophetic latter day messages that "no nation shall lift up sword against nation and neither learn the arts of war any more."

Against this harmonious backdrop of a world, growing in all its diversity of language and geographical location, we are told about a different regime. We look on as one man establishes a kingdom and then progresses and expands. It begins in Babel but very soon stretches to wider regions. How is this great empire built? It is built by "the first man of might on earth.... a mighty hunter". Why would he have to be a hunter, a man of might, if his aim is peace and promotion of harmony between people. It looks very innocent on the outside but is this merely a false impression? Read between the lines!

WHO IS MIGHTY?

Nimrod may be the embodiment of evil precisely because of this point. He was the first person to use force in such a grandiose way; in the direction of subjugating and conquering entire cities, whole nations. This sin has a human dimension AND a Godly dimension.

In human terms, oppression of others, controlling their destiny, is an affront to the basic state of man as a free being. Man is born to be in control of his own life. Capture and enslavement is taking that which is not yours, and it is the taking of the commodity most dear to us: our freedom. Which human being dares to restrict the freedom of his fellow man?

But we cannot ignore the Godly dimension. By setting himself up as a controller of men, Nimrod puts himself in the place of God. Men are not supposed to live in servitude to a man. They are meant to serve God (see Vayikra 51:55 and Rashi there). Which human being sees himself so Godly that he may lord over other men?

Nimrod's primary title is the "*gibor*", expressing his strength or might. In our tradition might is expressed inwardly. The true mighty man is a person who is in control of himself and his passions, not a controller of others. "Who is mighty ? - He who controls his desires" (Mishna Avot 4:1)

Shabbat Shalom