



Towards the end of the Parashat Noach we read about the birth of Avraham, to whom God would later appear and instruct to relocate in the land of Canaan where he would establish a great nation. The Torah provides virtually no information regarding Avraham's upbringing or even about his adult life prior to his receiving his first prophecy. The Midrashic tradition, however, is replete with accounts and descriptions of Avraham's philosophical probing and his confrontations with the predominantly pagan society in which he lived.

Maimonides, in the first chapter of the *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* section of *Mishneh Torah*, presents his understanding of Avraham's early history, culling from a variety of traditional sources. He writes that Avraham first embarked on his philosophical journey on the road towards monotheism "once he was weaned," likely referring to the Talmud's comment that Avraham recognized the Creator at the age of three (*Nedarim* 32a). Maimonides appears to have understood this to mean not that Avraham concluded upon the existence of a single Deity as a toddler, but rather that his theological conclusions can be traced back to the intellectual curiosities that led him to begin probing already at age three.

Later, in *halakha* 3, Maimonides describes Avraham completing his process of philosophical exploration and definitively concluding upon the belief in monotheism as an adult. As is evident from both the early and recent commentators, there is some discrepancy between different editions and manuscripts of *Mishneh Torah* regarding the age at which Avraham finally concluded upon the existence of a single God. In some editions, Maimonides speaks of this process concluding when Avraham reached the age of forty, whereas in others Avraham's age is said to have been forty-eight. This discrepancy corresponds to conflicting passages in Midrashim and other sources. (See the *Mekorot Ve-tziyunim* in the Frankel edition of *Mishneh Torah*.)

Interestingly enough, these two versions of Maimonides' account might reflect two entirely different approaches as to how precisely Avraham reached this conclusion. The view that Avraham recognized God at the age of forty likely relates to the Mishna's comment in *Pirkei Avot* (5:20), "*ben arba'im le-bina*," that a person's intellectual development is completed when he reaches forty years of age. Indeed, the Meiri, in his commentary to this Mishna, points to Avraham as an example of this principle. The Meiri accepts the view that Avraham was forty years of age when he concluded upon monotheism, and he sees this as paradigmatic of the Mishna's rule establishing the age of forty as the point when one reaches his intellectual height. According to this view, Avraham's recognition of God as the single Creator was simply the natural culmination of his long process of study and analysis which he had begun thirty-seven years earlier, at the age of three.

According to the second view, however, that Avraham concluded upon monotheism at the age of forty-eight, it is likely that this recognition resulted from more

than merely philosophical and scientific research and exploration. Rav Shimon Ben Tzemach Duran (the "Rashbatz"), in the introduction to his philosophical work *Magen Avot*, suggests that the age of forty-eight was not selected randomly. Avraham's forty-eighth year, as documented in the historical work *Seder Olam*, coincides with the event of *Migdal Bavel*, the dispersion of the builders of the Tower of Babel. In truth, this can be inferred from the verses themselves. Rabbinic tradition teaches that the dispersion occurred in the final year of the life of Peleg, Avraham's great-great-grandfather (see Rashi to 10:25). Peleg had a son Re'u (11:18), who begot his son Serug at the age of thirty-two (11:20). Serug begot Nachor thirty years later (11:22), and Nachor's son Terach, who was born in Nachor's twenty-ninth year (11:24), begot Avraham at the age of seventy (11:26). Avraham was thus born 161 years after the birth of Re'u (32+30+29+70). Now the Torah tells that Re'u was born 209 years before Peleg's death, which, as mentioned, occurred the same year as the dispersion. Hence, Avraham was 48 years of age (209-161) at the time of the dispersion.

The Rashbatz thus contends that if we point to Avraham's forty-eighth year as the point when he concluded upon monotheism, this realization relates to the dramatic events of *Migdal Bavel*. The sudden confusion of languages that brought the building of the tower to an immediate halt demonstrated to Avraham the notion of divine providence and God's unlimited power and authority over mankind. According to this view, then, it was the events of the *Migdal Bavel*, rather than the natural process of exploration and research, that brought Avraham to his definitive conclusion that the earth is controlled by a single, omnipotent God.

Maimonides, in his presentation, makes no mention of any particular event that influenced Avraham during this process of philosophical probing. He clearly describes a process of study, thinking and reasoning which reached its natural conclusion with the recognition of the existence of a single Creator. We might therefore be more inclined to accept the version whereby Maimonides speaks of Avraham reaching his conclusion at the age of forty, rather than the age of forty-eight, and this is indeed the text accepted in the Kapach and Frankel editions of *Mishneh Torah*.