

LEAVE THEY MUST

by Rabbi Label Lam

The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. And it came to pass, when they migrated from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come let us make bricks and burn them in fire." And the brick served them as stone and the bitumen as mortar. And they said, "Come let us build us a city and a tower with its head in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed across the whole earth." HASHEM descended to look at the city and the tower which the sons of man built, and HASHEM said, "Behold, they are one people with one language for all and this they begin to do? And now should it not be withheld from them all they proposed to do? Come, let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another's language." (Breishis 11:1-8)

What's so terrible about unity of purpose? Why should their efforts be thwarted?

I was learning this section with a young man who told me that he honestly found it less intriguing than other Torah accounts we had learned together. I asked him why he found this less compelling. After thinking a bit he made a keen observation that opens up the whole story of the Tower of Babel. He said, "There are no individuals mentioned here!"

Any one person was entirely sublimated to the needs of the community. Every statement is a collective voice. It is in essence a faceless generation. All worked to build the city and construct the tower. What's the big problem?

The Midrash offers an insight into the perversity of their value system. The bricks they manufactured were such a rare and precious commodity and considering the effort and time involved getting them way up and into place was so extensive that when a brick fell they would sit and cry mournfully, "When will another one arise in its place!" However when a person fell and died they paid no mind!"

With this maybe we can understand Rashi on the verse, "Come let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another's language." Rashi explains, "This one will ask for a brick and this one will give him mortar and then this one will stand over him and split his head open." Isn't that strange! Is that how people who don't speak the same language interact? If someone gets a wrong delivery on some minor item is this a motive to murder the customer service agent? What's Rashi telling us? What kind of bizarre scenario is this?

I suffered with this question aloud before a class of basic learners and one clever young man offered an explanation that is confirmed by the Midrash. Let's say I plug in my toaster and it fails to

function. What do I do with it? Simple, throw it in the garbage. I have very little room for sentimentalism even if we worked closely on breakfast for years. Ours is a pragmatic relationship.

What if a person fails to meet my needs? He still has intrinsic worth as a human, as one who reflects the image of G-d! The apparent fault in the generation of the tower was that human life had lost any value beyond what it could produce for the Gross National Product. When some one delivers a wrong item, under normal circumstances, we try again? Not here! It was understood that the moment that communication would be confounded then one would see the other as a mere road-block, as an object of frustration to be categorically eliminated.

About this the "Path of the Just" points out that there is a type of blindness which is worse than even total blindness. Like a drunk driver who believes he sees straight may wrongly presume "a man is a pillar and a pillar is a man", so is a value system that treats people like they are furniture and furniture like people. Is functionality the sole test of worthiness? The Torah testifies that a society that devalues the sanctity of life may leave behind many buildings and artifacts but leave they must! Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).