

IN MAN'S DIMINISHED IMAGE

by Rabbi Label Lam

And it was that the whole world was of one language and one common purpose. And it came to pass when they traveled from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said one to another, "Come let us make bricks and burn them in fire." And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with it head in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth. (Breishis 11:1-5)

Indeed, this account of the building of the "Tower of Babel" is a curious chapter in human history. Why did they travel "from the east"? Where were they going to? Why settle in a valley to build to the heavens?

A close friend of mine made a Bris for his son and was hosting a meal at his house. At my table was seated my friend's father with a silk Yarmulka perched precariously atop his head. Maybe he was a little uncomfortable being around all the beards and hats. He was talking incessantly about evolution and everyone was listening politely. When he started to speak about things millions of years old he interrupted himself with an aside, "Well you people don't agree with me because you're all religious!" I told him privately and politely, "We are not as religious as you!" He was taken- aback. "I'm not religious!" he said with a defensive certainty. I responded, "Nobody here is trying to convince you of anything or convert you into something you're not, yet you feel a need to peddle your opinion. You must be some kind of "ultra" religionist in your community of believers." After that he quietly retired to his white fish and we all spoke about other things pleasantly.

We managed to steal away for an entire Shabbos a cousin of mine, who is a famous off-Broadway actor. He enjoyed the "Friday Night" family scene enormously. At one point his jaw dropped open and he declared dramatically, "Where did we lose this?" The long summer Shabbos day was trying for his patience but he survived, barely. By the time the Havdala candle hit the wine he was standing by the door with his bags and ready to go back to Manhattan. We drove him back to the city lights, and he invited us into his apartment. The entire place was densely populated with posters, pictures, playbills, and memorabilia of everything theatre. It sort of reminded me of the way our walls, at home are covered with pictures of great Rabbis, and Jerusalem and the like. Before we parted he left us with more of his impressions, he said, "I didn't realize how much you were into it. I see you're as into Shabbos as I am into theatre."

Where was the generation of the Tower of Babel going? The Midrash tells us they're intent was to

move away from what came before (m'kedem). They said, "We don't want G-d or his goodness or the yoke of His kingship or to have to recognize Him or serve Him!" They settled in a valley to huddle together and remain unified in this singular purpose of denying G-d and religion. They became successful at making bricks and that led them to dream of creating a metropolis and multi-purpose monument to crown their collective accomplishment.

They morphed into a tyrannical secular cult with sacred rites and sanctified rituals all surrounding their commitment to the communal construction project with its "head in the heavens". Yaakov visualized a ladder of human potential with its head "striving toward the heavens". Instead of struggling, each man individually, to raise himself up and make himself more and more in the image of G-d they were inevitably frustrated in their attempt, with their idolatrous imaginations, to manufacture G-d **in man's diminished image**.

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