

CHAPTER 11

by Rabbi Label Lam

Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words. And it came to pass when they traveled from the east, that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly"; so the bricks were to them for stones, and the clay was to them for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth." And HASHEM descended to see the city and the tower that the sons of man had built. And HASHEM said, "Lo! [they are] one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they have commenced to do. Now, will it not be withheld from them, all that they have planned to do? Come, let us descend and confuse their language, so that one will not understand the language of his companion." And the Lord scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore, He named it Babel, for there HASHEM confused the language of the entire earth, and from there the Lord scattered them upon the face of the entire earth. (Breishis 11:-9)

It is no wonder that the story of Tower is found in chapter 11. It's the first corporation to declare bankruptcy. Even though they had a monopoly it still failed. HASHEM thwarted their project by confusing their languages. How did changing their languages frustrate the building of the tower? Rashi explains, on the verse that says that they did not understand each other, "This one asked for a brick and the other one brought him mortar and so he stood up and split his head open."

I was learning this Rashi with a group of beginners and I shared with them my honest frustration with this Rashi. It sounds almost cartoonish, pardon me. Is that the way it works in our world. I went to a local store right before Shabbos because my wife tells me we need plastic table cloths. The only store that was still open was a Spanish speaking establishment. I asked the fellow if he has plastic table cloths and he and leads me to the back of isle 8 and there he shows me shower curtains saying, "plastic" and pointing.

It took a few minutes of charades and pantomime until we came to understand that what I was looking for was not in the store, but at no point did I even think to do violence, as frustrated as I was. Is this the way the world behaves?

Jeffrey gave an unbelievable answer. He reminded us of something we had learned earlier and applied it perfectly. I had told them that I was learning the story of the tower with a very wealthy young businessman, Laurence, who interrupted the lesson with a somewhat irreverent statement.

"Rabbi, I don't like this story!" I asked him why not and what he told me was fascinating. "In all the episodes we learned, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noach and his sons, there was human drama, people had names and personalities but not here". Then I realized how true his words were. "'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name.'"

No names! He's right! It was a faceless and nameless society. People did not count. The communal project reigned supreme over the individual. The Midrash affirms this. When a brick fell they had a week of national mourning, Shiva. After all it took years to create and get it into place. Yet when a human died while building the tower, the proverbial broom swept'm out of the way.

Jeffrey said that according to the way we live this Rashi doesn't make sense but matched to the values of that failed society it makes perfect sense. If the grocer delivers the wrong product, what's the big deal!? He still has inherent value that is infinitely higher than his usefulness to me. However if the person's only value is based on his ability to contribute to the communal project then he is rendered worthless like a broken clock and tossed into the garbage heap.

I know of a number of successful business that were sold by lifetime owners who knew the name and the birthday of every person in the company from the elevator guy and the cleaning lady to the CEO and when they ended up in the hands of some bean counters they went belly up. That's the story of **chapter 11**.