

A BUILDING TO NOWHERE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The whole world was of one language and of common purpose....Let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens...

Rashi: [Common purpose means that] they arrived at a shared idea. They said, "It is not appropriate that He should chose the heavens for Himself! We will ascend and wage war with Him.

They did not plan to go anywhere, nor to displace G-d from His heavenly position. They did mean to figuratively unseat Him, as it were. They were intent on not accepting an absolute distinction between His realm and theirs. This distinction would have left them powerless to resist His dictates. At this they balked.

They prepared to wage war against absolute submission to His Will. They understood that earthly conditions and events were largely determined by metaphysical rules and events in the heavens. They reasoned that this did not bar them from taking back more of their lives than previously possible. Man could understand those metaphysical laws. He could influence them and manipulate them. In so doing, Man would get a handle on the forces of the upper world, and by so doing, lessen their influence on his fate. Man would ascend in the sense of becoming part of the upper worlds through his direct involvement with them.

This approach, however, leaves Rashi vulnerable to objection. In Sanhedrin 109A, R. Sheila offers a slightly different opinion about the intention of the tower-builders. He says that they intended to reach the sky, strike it with axes, and thereby provide a way for the waters above to constantly flow to an earth that needed them. The gemara objects that if this were there purpose - if they needed the tower only as a way of climbing to the sky - it was foolish of them to build it in a valley. They should have taken advantage of the elevation of some hilltop. Because of this question, the gemara moves on to alternative explanations, or alternative understandings of R. Sheila.

Should we not address the same question to Rashi? If this generation intended to join themselves with the Heavens - to gain a foothold there, and become part of its workings - they should have a construction site at the highest elevation, not the lowest. (Even though they had no intention of literally climbing to the heavens, Rashi does imply that the tower was meant to give them height, so that they could there perform some ritual that would give them some power to manipulate the upper words. If height was their goal, starting their project in a valley was a poor choice.) Why does our Rashi ignore this challenge to his psbat?

We can explain, that Rashi did not mean that people used the tower to climb to a higher elevation, there to work their magic or whatever. Rather, the tower was designed to be an impressive monument. To the eye, it would look as if it touched the heavens, or as the pasuk^[2] says, "with its top in the heavens." It was what we would call a "skyscraper." Moreover, the tower itself was a conceptual analogue to the heavens, which stand apart and aloof from the world of Man. The tower's impressive height dwarfed Man, seemed to transcend the world of Man and occupy its own place. It did not matter where it was built. Its majesty spoke of a different, higher realm.

Despite this, the people of the generation of the dispersion planned to use their special knowledge to somehow insinuate themselves in the proceedings of the heavenly agencies. The very intrusion of Man where he does not belong is the battle against G-d that the story signifies to us.

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1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 11:1
 2. Bereishis 11:4
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