

BUILDING TOWERS - FOR WHAT?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

After the destruction of civilization in the great flood a new generation arose and searched for a way to immortalize itself - so that their existence would withstand any new natural disasters. They gathered in the Tigris-Euphrates valley and there built the great city that would be called Nineveh. And to guarantee that their achievements would be forever remembered, they embarked on building a colossal structure - a great tower pointing towards - and seemingly even touching - the sky.

It was the first ancestor of our modern-day skyscrapers. This was the great technological leap forward in the discovery of creating bricks as a building material, which enabled such a project to be imagined and executed. The Torah specifically relates to us that the sole purpose of this tower soaring heavenward was "to build for us a name" - a remembrance, an eternal monument to human technology and ability that later generations would gaze upon in awe and admiration.

It was a testament to the human ego and its accompanying hubris. That is perhaps what Midrash is implying when it states that, ".....we will prop up the heavens" with this tower. They were saying that puny man could successfully defy God and nature and immortalize itself with its technological wonders and its insatiable ambitions.

Every dictator in history has sought to immortalize his achievements in stone and marble lest his greatness become unknown to future generations. Almost all of these memorials have failed to live up to their original purpose. The slaves who built the pyramids of Egypt are more well-known than are their pharoanic masters.

The Parthenon and Coliseum lie in ruins and Nineveh itself has long since disappeared from the map of the world. And the great twin towers of the World Trade Center of New York City are also no longer with us.

The irony of all of this is that none of the great architectural monuments of the ancient, medieval and modern world were felled by nature. There was no need to prop up the heavens in order to save Nineveh from destruction. Nineveh and all of the other great monuments of the ancient world were all destroyed by human beings who were themselves bent upon creating their own eternal monuments to their own achievements.

It is part of the inborn competitive nature of human beings to attempt to destroy the immortality of others as a means of guaranteeing one's own immortality. Thus we continue to hound people who

are already in the grave, searching for scandal and blame. The Torah itself tells us that the tower at Nineveh was never completed because people did not understand each other's language - basically, they could no longer cooperate one with the other.

The fractiousness and parochialism of humans towards each other is what truly stands in the way of human immortality. Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant summed up this lesson in his pithy remark: "Concern for the needs of others in this world is my entry ticket to the World to Come." Torah values and its observance coupled with good deeds, not physical monuments, are our guarantors in achieving immortality.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com