

Are You Made of Stone or Brick?

Category: Bereishis, Noach

When One World Trade Center was built, a discussion arose about the appropriate materials. What was the Tower of Babylon made of? What is the spiritual lesson?

What to do with Ground Zero?

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, there arose a debate about future use of ground zero. Some people said that it should be left untouched; the place where three thousand people lost their lives is sacred and should be treated that way. Others felt that - to the contrary - it should be entirely rebuilt and restored to its former majesty.

Mayor Bloomberg felt that the location must become a powerful monument and memorial to those who lost their lives. Instead of leaving it empty, he decided - together with the governor - to build a new building which would be the tallest in the western hemisphere. It would restore the World Trade Center, but also have a theme which memorialized the victims.

Various architects submitted plans. One idea was to build a fifty-five-story building with an antenna of glass reaching another eight hundred feet, topped by a massive light in memory of the victims and symbolizing America's freedom, equality and opportunity for all humankind.

The NYPD nixed this idea. They felt it was a matter of time until the next terrorist attack. In that event, an eight-hundred-foot antenna would crush the building below it and cause untold harm to the people in the area.

A tower of steel was also not an option. The architect of the new building shared how he had watched the attack on the World Trade Center from the window of his office in Manhattan. Watching the billowing smoke, someone asked him whether he thought it would fall. He answered in the negative. The steel was so strong, he explained, that it was impossible to be knocked over. He soon watched as the fire melted the steel and both buildings crumbled to dust.

They concluded that it needed to be built by the strongest available material – concrete. They fashioned the strongest possible concrete, far stronger than regular concrete, and built an inner frame for the building ensuring that it was unbreakable. Inside this frame, they housed the elevators to the building.

After ten years and four billion dollars, the tower reached the height of 1776 feet, representing the year of the United States' independence. Today, One World Trade Center is the highest building in the western hemisphere and the sixth tallest in the world – following the towers in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, China, Japan and others. For us, we are content with it being the tallest building in the United States.

The Original Skyscraper

In this week's Parsha, we read about the first skyscraper ever built. Or, more accurately, the first attempt at building one. After the Great Flood, a large number of people got together led by King Nimrod to build the most powerful city in the world, along with a tower which they would cap with an idol, symbolically rejecting G-d's sovereignty over the world.

They wanted to live in a homogeneous area without being separated by mountains, so they chose to locate their project in a flat-plain in Shinar, in southern Mesopotamia which is modern-day Iraq.

What materials did they use for their tower? They did not have concrete or steel. So, what did they use?

We might have assumed that they built it with stone, but Rashi comments that there are no stones in Babylon. Living in the plains, there weren't enough stones for such a project, so they invented the brick instead.

Stones are a G-dly creation – they are a part of nature which G-d fashioned. But bricks are a human achievement; the people mixed various materials together and baked them, thereby creating a strong substance for building.

G-d did not appreciate the tower. First, it was built to host a deity. But moreover, G-d did not like that they had invested everything into a tower, viewing as more important that life itself. The Midrash relates that when a brick would fall from

the tower, they would mourn and 'sit shiva,' but when a person fell from the tower they didn't pay attention.

If a society values bricks over human life, it has no future. Therefore, Hashem decided to disperse them throughout the world.

Stones vs. Bricks

What is the lesson for us?

The Rebbe once cited a teaching of the Alter Rebbe where he explained the spiritual difference between stones and bricks. As we said before, stones are creations of Hashem, while bricks are made by human intervention. "It's well-known," the Alter Rebbe said, "that a strong building can be erected with bricks just as with stones, but it necessitates preparation: the bricks become usable only after they are baked in fire. By placing them in a furnace, human beings create man-made stone which resembles the original creation of G-d."

The Rebbe pointed out that there is a difference between Israel and Babylon in this regard. Israel is the Holy Land - its holiness is dictated by G-d, not by man. Therefore, we find that it has stone, the original creation fashioned by G-d himself. Babylon, on the other hand, doesn't retain that natural holiness. Just as the bricks need to be collected, kneaded and baked by hand, its holiness is something that needs to be man-made, created through our own sweat and toil.

It may seem that a lack of stone in Babylon is a disadvantage, the Rebbe explained. But in truth, personal effort and toil can make a person achieve far more. By "kneading and firing" our souls, we can reach great spiritual heights.

In other words:

When a Jew lives in Israel, Judaism comes to him naturally. You don't need to be reminded that the holiday of Sukkot arrived - you see it everywhere you go. The street itself is Jewish. Sukkot and Lulavim are everywhere, and Sukkot vacation is in effect. Your Judaism is handed to you on a silver platter; it is given to you by G-d.

But a Jew in the Diaspora has a different experience. You need to remind yourself about your Judaism. The street won't tell you that it is Sukkot, because 'Babylon

doesn't have stones.' Here, nobody is born into an automatic Jewish environment; you need to create the bricks on your own. Children need to be educated and impressed with the importance of their heritage in order to remain Jewish. It may seem to be a disadvantage, but a Jew who is a brick - a self-sustaining Jew in the Diaspora - is far more resilient than the 'stone-Jew' of the Land of Israel.

A Jew connected to his roots in the Diaspora has a much stronger Jewish identity than the Jew who takes it for granted in Israel. It is specifically us - the Jews of the Diaspora - that have the power to bring Moshiach.