



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

High-Rise Ambitions

The first high-rise building in the world was the Tower of Babel.

That generation had a dream of erecting a building so high that it would even reach the heavens.

There is a high-rise dream in Yaakov's life too. He envisioned a ladder that was so tall that the top was in heaven and the foot was on earth.

Why was Yaakov not criticised for thinking so high?

First, he left it as a dream. Second, he was not motivated by personal ambition: unlike the builders of Babel, his aspiration was not merely "to make a name".

Third, his thoughts were of God: on his ladder there were angels of God constantly ascending and descending.

The symbolism of Yaakov's ladder was of God and man in spiritual communication.

Like the men of Babel, and like the patriarch Yaakov, we all have our dreams.

When we dream of status and power we run the risk of ending up in ruins like the generation of Babel.

When we dream of ideas, ideals and encounter with the Divine, we have a good chance of blessing and success.

When the Midrash analyses the Tower of Babel it suggests that it was not only the aim that was reprehensible but the way it was implemented. The driving force of the ambition led the builders to forget humanity and decency.

It did not worry them during the building works if a human fell down and was injured or killed, but only if a brick fell and was shattered. The lesson is that whatever task we embark upon it should not be at the expense of behaving like a Mensch.

Unfortunately history has not learned. High-risers still tend to climb to power at the expense of other people.

Some of our worst modern dictators have committed terrible crimes against their own people. The threat they pose to the world lies not only in their ambitions but their belief that human beings are expendable.

Nimrod: The First Monarch

Nimrod was "a mighty man in the land" (B'reishit 10:8).

Some of the ancient sources thought this meant that Nimrod behaved in a high and mighty way, the first human being to do so.

According to Radak (David Kimchi), Nimrod was the first to impose himself on a nation as their king.

Until then, every people had its judges, but there were no political leaders. Nimrod was thus the founder of the idea of government.

In Radak's view, this was not a bad thing; indeed, the Perek reflects that without government, people would "eat each other alive" (Avot 3:2).

Abravanel, who was a great advocate of republicanism, preferred to believe that Nimrod had forced himself upon the people, established the principle that monarchy goes with tyranny, and built great edifices to big-note himself.

Though Jewish thinking tends to prefer republicanism, our experience is that not all monarchs are bad and not all republics are good.

The great advantage of a republic is however that any citizen can become part of the ruling team, at least in theory, and a ruler is not there by divine right but because his people

have elected him and can remove him. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH