

The Tower of Babel

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Whenever I read the story of the Tower of Babel I think about how thousands of years ago a scheme to build a huge building came to nothing because the people were inhuman. They were indeed united but unity in pursuit of evil is what the Nazis had. Sometimes division is healthier because it encourages human variety.

And then I think about synagogues. How many magnificent synagogues have been built over the years and now are empty or converted to some other use because the Jewish population has moved away or changed. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We Jews have always been ready to get up and move on either because we wanted to or were forced to.

A thousand years ago the biggest synagogues and yeshivot were in Bari and Otranto in Southern Italy. Now there is nothing left. Instead Jerusalem is bigger and more populated than it has ever been and other diaspora centers have replaced Bari and Otranto. Just as a hundred years ago Jewish life in Iran flourished and now it is just a shadow of its former self. Instead Iranian synagogues are being built in the USA.

Yet Buildings are in themselves are meaningless. They may be works of art, design as well as glory and vanity but stones in themselves are just stones. And it's the same with humans, the outer shell is not nearly as important as the inner spirit.

Usually synagogues are built when one person has a vision and then sets about achieving it. Committees are less effective. The Tower of Babel seems to have been the idea of a committee. The men of Babel wanted to build a Tower to make a name for themselves. But they lacked the humanity and concern that any successful community needs to thrive. And in the end its human goodness God requires not big buildings