Another Brick in the Wall

By Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

WC Fields famously said, "Never work with children or animals [they steal the spotlight.]" Though no one ever accused him of being a Torah scholar his insight was certainly applicable to this week's Torah portion.

Parshat Noah, the second portion in the book of Genesis and my Bar Mitzvah Portion is perhaps the most universally known and at least by children; most adored in all the Torah. In part no doubt this is because it has not one animal by every animal and they come in pairs. So beloved and recognizable is this Torah portion that we tend to forget that there is more to it than the animals coming on the ark two by two, the dove,

the rainbow and our ancient ship builder Noah. Tucked in at the end of the book that bares his name is a small and poignant story about how the people (Noah's descendants) focused their energies after the waters and fear receded and they were once again on dry land.

"All the earth had the same language and the same words," (Genesis 11:1) we are told, and they gathered in the land of Shinar and said, "Come, let us build a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over all the earth!" (11:4).

A midrash explains: Many, many years were passed in building the tower. It reached so great a height that it took a year to mount to the top. A brick was, therefore, more precious in the sight of

the builders than a human being. If a man fell down, and met his death, none took notice of it, but if a brick dropped, they wept, because it would take a year to replace it. So intent were they upon accomplishing their purpose that they would not permit a pregnant woman to interrupt herself in her work of brick-making when she went into labor. Molding bricks she gave birth to her child, and, tying it round her body in a sheet, she went on molding bricks. (Yashar Noah)

How do you measure your day? I once asked a friend of mine who happens to be a brick layer and he explained that universal standard for a good day of brick laying is a 1,000 brick day. It got me thinking what would be my 1,000 brick day, what is my universal standard for a successful day?

As a parent I could say its getting all the kids, washed, fed, off to school and soccer, hockey, back again, homework done, teeth brushed and in bed at a reasonable hour.

As a professional (more universal than Rabbi) I could say its getting into work on time, responding to all my emails and messages, those are probably the modern day version of bricks, meeting with clients, acquiring new business, and getting home in time for dinner with my family.

What makes those days good days is not the quantity of work I do or interactions I have, it's the quality. The brick layer, if reasonably competent in his task can be irritable, anti-social, half asleep and day dreaming as he lays each brick. He can

take his anger out on the bricks, he can curse at the bricks as he schleps them up the wall. He can listen to music, talk on the his cell phone; it doesn't matter as long as the wall is solid at the end of his day and it contains 1,000 bricks, it's a good day of brick laying.

People are not bricks we can't take out our anger on them without consequence, we can't ignore them or tune them out if the purpose of our day it to interact with them with care, compassion and attention. The great sin of the Tower of Babel was that they treated the people like bricks and the bricks like people. They wasted the one thing that sets them apart from the machines that if they existed in those ancient times could have built the Tower even better – they neglected their humanity. When the bricks of our life become

more important than the people in it, we too build a tower that is an affront to the purpose of our creation.

The midrash continues that after God confounded the people's language and scattered them throughout the globe the tower remained, "a part sank into the earth, and another part was consumed by fire; only one-third of it remained standing. The place of the tower has never lost its peculiar quality. Whoever passes it forgets all he knows."

When we treat people like bricks we forget what we know about ourselves and about others, we forget that the measure of our day is not how many bricks we lay, how many emails we respond to, how many lunches we pack, children we schlep

– the measure of our day is whether each of those people and ourselves feel valued as a person, a blessing and gift from God in our lives and not a brick.