

The Power of Language Parashat Noach

By Rabbi Jason Miller

I'd like to relate an encounter I had while on a camp bus several years ago. A twelve-year-old Israeli boy, who was visiting his grandparents in Manhattan for the summer, was sitting in the seat next to me. This was his first day on the bus, and I could tell he was a shy, quiet boy, but I thought I would engage him in conversation. He was reading the first Harry Potter book in Hebrew, and this was the first time I had seen the Hebrew version. I asked him if he liked the book, to which he replied (without lifting his eyes from the page) that he had already read the English version and enjoyed that one more. So, I asked him what was so different in his Hebrew edition. He then lifted his eyes from the book, and told me how he felt about the Hebrew version: "It loses something in translation," he said.

So, there you have it, I thought. Even this young twelve-year-old seemed to perceive the nuance of language. Of course Harry Potter loses something in its translation. And I'm told that the American English version of J. K. Rowling's book doesn't retain some of the "Briticisms" from the original. Language, *safah*, *langue*, *sprache*, *lingua*, *lengua* – it's no small issue. If communication is important, then the language in which we communicate is all the more so.

At the end of this week's Torah portion, Parashat Noach, we see precisely how important language is to humanity. To this point, all humans communicated in the same tongue. Nothing had to be translated.

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words, we are told. They said to each other, 'Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men built. The Lord said, 'If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.' So, God said to the angels, 'Let us go down and confound their speech, so that they may not understand one another's speech.' Thus, the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it is called Babel; because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Before the building of this *migdal*, this tower in Babel, we all spoke the same language. Now, of course, this is no longer true. Think about a televised session of a General Assembly meeting of the United Nations in which all those delegates are wearing headphones, having the speeches translated into dozens of languages. Think about all those language dictionaries at the bookstore, all those cassette tapes and classes offered to learn a new language. The noise in the Olympic Village where the athletes are housed at the Summer Games could be described as a "Babel of Languages." We are a world of tongues. And this can be both a blessing and a curse.

The text of Judaism is Hebrew, whether Torah, rabbinic literature, or the liturgy of our prayer services. Hebrew is the indispensable language of the Jewish people. Anything in translation and you lose something. But does this mean that we should not study our Tradition in translation? Does this mean that God only understands us in Hebrew?

A well-known story is told, often on Rosh Hashanah, about a young boy named Daniel. Daniel, as the story goes, is a boy who would be described using today's terminology as "learning disabled." You see, try as he might, Daniel was not able to learn Hebrew at Religious School; he couldn't master the simplest of prayers like the Shema Yisrael as his classmates and siblings could. While sitting in synagogue during Rosh Hashanah services, Daniel was unable to participate as the other children could. So, he took out this shiny, silver flute (a gift from his parents) and began to play his instrument. While his family was embarrassed by this act, the rabbi seemed to get it. The rabbi explained that Daniel was praying to God

in his own way – in his own special language. The rabbi explained to the congregation that if God is so powerful, then God certainly understands prayer through a flute.

God understands our prayers, be they in Hebrew, in English, in another language, or even through the sounds emanating from a musical instrument. Several rabbinic legends exist teaching that the Torah was broken into seventy languages so everyone could understand. And we know that if one prays with *kavvanah*, with true intention, then those intended prayers get through to the intended receiver, to God. Throughout rabbinic literature, in the Talmud and Codes, we often see the repeated phrase “*im kiven et libo, yatzah*” – that is to say, if the individual directed his or her heart, they have successfully accomplished the commandment. So, if an adult chooses to pray as Daniel does in the story, with proper intention while playing a flute in synagogue, then has he fulfilled his responsibility?

Many Jews are not comfortable with the Hebrew language. And this is nothing new. We need only look back at the history of the Torah reading. For centuries, the custom was to have someone translate each verse of the Torah reading into the vernacular after it was chanted from the Torah in Hebrew. The Targum, or Aramaic translation, was offered since so many in the congregation did not understand the Hebrew. Today, we all have a manuscript of the reading translated into our vernacular in our hands during the Torah reading.

Toward the end of the biblical narrative, in Deuteronomy, we learn *b’ever haYarden b’eretz Moav ho’eel Moshe b’er et haTorah ha’zote leimor* – “On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this teaching.” What does it mean that Moses, our leader, undertook to expound this teaching? In the *Etz Hayyim* Humash commentary on this verse, it quotes the commentator S’fat Emet, who wrote, “Moses interpreted the Torah in many languages, so that future generations of Jews in many lands would have access to the Torah in a language and in terms that they could understand” (982).

As a Jewish leader, I want every Jew to be able to understand the Torah. Likewise, I want every Jew to understand what it is that she or he is saying during their prayers. I want the vast library of rabbinic legend and lore, the Midrash, and the great legal works of the Jewish people, to be accessible to the entire global Jewish community. It is for this reason that I embrace the translations of the Torah and the Talmud, the prayer book and Hebrew literature, into so many languages. If an English translation allows one more Jew to embrace the beauty and wonder of our sacred liturgy, then it is a worthwhile tool. If Hebrew is a barrier, we need to remove that barrier.

Now, just as I can stand up here and tell you that praying to God and studying Torah in English is acceptable and encouraged, I also feel an obligation to repeat, “Hebrew is the indispensable language of the Jewish people.” Just as its name, *l’shon ha-kodesh* tells us, Hebrew is “the holy tongue.” Every Jew must learn Hebrew. Our prayers or the Torah text or the Psalms or the Midrash in translation is a great entrée, but it is only that.

In his publication, *The Sacred Cluster: The Core Values of Conservative Judaism*, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch writes:

Hebrew] was never merely a vehicle of communication, but part of the fabric and texture of Judaism. Words vibrate with religious meaning, moral values, and literary associations. Torah and Hebrew are inseparable and Jewish education was always predicated on mastering Hebrew. Hebrew literacy is the key to Judaism, to joining the unending dialectic between sacred texts, between Jews of different ages, between God and Israel. To know Judaism only in translation is, to quote Bialik, akin to kissing the bride through the veil... The revival of Hebrew in the last century-and-a-half, [...] is as singular a feat as the creation of the Jewish state.

Just as my grandparents would speak Yiddish to each other when they didn't want their children – my mother and her siblings – to understand their conversation, my brother and I speak Hebrew with each other when we don't want our parents to understand. And while she has lost out in both cases, as my mother speaks neither Yiddish nor Hebrew, she shows no frustration nor scorn when my brother and I speak Hebrew in front of her. It is only pride. The pride that her children feel so comfortable with the language of our people and of our heritage.

There is nothing like being able to go to Israel and get directions in Hebrew – and understand them. Or to order a Falafel in Jerusalem, in Hebrew. And of course, studying Torah in the language in which it was originally written is a feeling that every Jew should have. One can learn Talmud in translation, but getting the puns of rabbinic literature and the creative wordplays will be an impossibility. Yehuda Amichai in English is still marvelous, but it is not the language he writes in, nor thinks in, nor is it the language in which he best expresses himself. To go to one of David Broza's concerts and actually understand the Hebrew love song he is singing is a wonderful thing.

To learn Hebrew is to appreciate the cleverness of the language. To appreciate that from the three-letters *shin*, *lamed*, and *mem*, we have the words *shalem* (wholeness), *shalom* (peace), *meshulam* (paid), *shilem* (retribution), *hishtalem* (to be profitable), *shalmon* (a bribe), and *shlemoot* (perfection). When you hear the rabbi use the term "*refuah shlema*" in shul, you might not know what he's talking about. Yet, recognizing that *shlema* sounds like *shalem*, you figure out that *shlema* has something to do with wholeness or completeness, and it was spoken in the context of someone being sick. Thus, you understand that it is a wish for total recovery from illness.

I encourage everyone to learn Hebrew. If you learned Hebrew when you were younger, but need to brush up on your skills, I hope you will make this a goal. There are enough teachers here at our shul to help you. Take a beginner's class. Acquire a private tutor for yourself. Hebrew resources abound. Buy Hebrew language tapes. Buy the Hebrew versions of your favorite children's books for your kids. Perhaps take that trip to Israel you've been thinking about and enroll in an ulpan (an intensive course in Hebrew comprehension).

We humans haven't all spoken the same language since the time of the building of that infamous tower in the post-flood days. There are, by most estimates, five to ten-thousand different languages spoken here on Earth. But only one of those many languages is the holy language of the Jewish people. God hears our prayers in any language – or no language at all. However, there is something beautiful about the Hebrew language – it's authentic. It's the language of our heritage. The Hebrew language connects us together as a people. Make it a resolution for this New Year. Do it for yourself. Do it today!

Shabbat Shalom.