

מתוקים מדבש



Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Bemachashavah Techilah

In the *Shemoneh Esrei* for Yom Tov, we thank Hashem saying, "You chose us from among the nations, loved us and desired us, and You lifted us from among the languages." Importance is given not just to our nationhood but also to our bond of common language.

George Orwell made our generation very aware of how language shapes thought. In the book 1984, Big Brother attempted to control the thoughts of its citizens by creating a language, Newspeak, in which it would be impossible to express or even frame thoughts that were subversive to the government.

I was recently reminded of this idea when someone on the net asked the old question, "Is Judaism a race or a religion?" On the one hand, your Jewishness is typically inherited from your mother. This would lead one to think of Jewish identity as racial. On the other hand, we accept converts, as would a religion.

As I see it, this problem is an illusion, caused by pigeonholing. Why must it be one or the other? Because English has these two terms readily available, we – without even thinking – try to force this concept into one of these two categories. English, though, was created by Christians, and need not have a term that describes how Judaism views itself. We don't even notice how the language channeled our thoughts. The Orwellian idea that certain thoughts would become impossible seems a bit extreme; a word that is needed but not provided in the language can be de-

scribed in a phrase and then reduced to a new term or idiom. However, the presumptions about which ideas exist and come to mind to later shape our more developed reasoning are insidious.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary to this week's *parashah*, makes a similar observation. Hebrew has no word for "religion." It is an alien concept. "Religion" connotes a belief system, rituals, ways of escaping the world into G-d's comfort. But Judaism is about bringing G-d's ways into how we act and react in the everyday world.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik speaks of the gulf caused by language as one of the reasons against engaging in ecumenical dialogue on religious issues.

"... [T]he logos, the word, in which the multifarious religious experience is expressed does not lend itself to standardization or universalization. The word of faith reflects the intimate, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible cravings of the individual for and his linking up with his Maker. It reflects the numinous character and the strangeness of the act of faith of a particular community which is totally incomprehensible to the man of a different faith community. Hence, it is important that the religious or theological logos should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities whose modes of expression are as unique as their apocalyptic experiences. The confrontation should occur not at a theological but at a mundane human level. There, all

of us speak the universal language of modern man. As a matter of fact our common interests lie not in the realm of faith, but in that of the secular orders.⁸ There, we all face a powerful antagonist, we all have to contend with a considerable number of matters of great concern. The relationship between two communities must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated. In these matters, religious communities may together recommend action to be developed and may seize the initiative to be implemented later by general society. However, our joint engagement in this kind of enterprise must not dull our sense of identity as a faith community. We must always remember that our singular commitment to God and our hope and indomitable will for survival are non-negotiable and non-rationalizable and are not subject to debate and argumentation. The great encounter between God and man is a wholly personal private affair incomprehensible to the outsider - even to a brother of the same faith community. The divine message is incommunicable since it defies all standardized media of information and all objective categories. If the powerful community of the many feels like remedying an embarrassing human situation or redressing an historic wrong, it should do so at the human ethical level. However, if the debate should revolve around matters of faith, then

one of the confronters will be impelled to avail himself of the language of his opponent. This in itself would mean surrender of individuality and distinctiveness.”¹

The linguistic-semantic gulf is simply insurmountable. Real dialogue is impossible. Ideas that the other thinks he understands are intrinsically shifted into an alien set of concepts and categories, becoming something other than what the faith community truly believes and perceives. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s note #8 provides an interesting touch. “The term ‘secular orders’ is used here in accordance with its popular semantics. For the man of faith, this term is a misnomer. God claims the whole, not a part of man, and whatever He established as an order within the scheme of creation is sacred.” Rabbi Soloveitchik’s description of the gulf caused by a difference in language is hampered by his need to use English, with its Christian history, to describe it! As in Rabbi Hirsch’s comment about the word “religion”, he notes that this is simply not a Jewish dichotomy.

Another example Rabbi Hirsch offers is “virtue”. In Latin languages the root is “vir”, manliness, virility. The German equivalent, “Tugend,” is from “taugen,” meaning useful. In

¹ Tradition, vol. 6, no. 2, “Confrontation” pp. 23-24, available online at <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/articles/soloveitchik.htm>

Hebrew, the word associated with ideal actions is “mitzvah” a commandment. The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, pointed out that “mitzvah” also had connotations of the root מצו, and could indicate “to aim” or “to focus”. There is no way for a Hebrew speaking person to talk about doing the right thing without some level of his mind getting vague hints that the “right thing” is “doing what G-d commanded so that we may achieve His goals for us.”

The difference is not only in vocabulary, but also in grammar. For example, in English, there is a clear distinction made between “He is a builder” and “He is building.” In Hebrew, both are “bonei”. The phrase “Bonei Yerushalayim” can be saying that Hashem “is building Jerusalem,” or that He is “the Builder of Jerusalem.” People are capable of deluding themselves with statements like, “I’m not an angry person, it was a one-time thing that I acted in anger. It was out of character.” However, if such outbursts are possible, that possibility is part of who we are. In Biblical and Classical Hebrew, there is no difference between who one is and what one is doing at the time. The distinction someone may be fooled into making when thinking in English is not part of the presumptions carried with you when thinking in Hebrew.

The Torah begins the story by telling us “The whole earth was of one language and uniform ideas

(devarim).”² The source of the problem was not only that their ability to communicate aided their plans, but that this common language also led them to being of like mind. One person was able to mislead an entire generation.

According to traditional histories, Avram was 48 when the Tower of Babel was built. He was an adult who consciously chose not to participate in the endeavor. As a reward, when the other clans were given their own languages, causing them to spread out and become separate nations, Avram was not so punished and still spoke and thought in Hebrew. Because Avram showed the ability to use rather than abuse this powerful tool, it was left in our hands for the generations.

The gift of speaking Hebrew, then, is no small thing. It is not just exposure to a holier mode of speech. Hebrew gives us the tools to organize our concepts along the same categories Hashem used in conveying to us the Torah. Instead of asking whether Judaism is a race or a religion, with the connotation of those words, we can look at Bnei Yisrael, Klal Yisra’el, Am Yisrael, and Adas Yisrael, and the meaning given those terms by the Torah.

² Bereishis 11:1

RABBI GIL STUDENT

Bakeish Shalom

The story of the Tower of Babel is very brief but has nevertheless sparked the imagination of generation after generation. What did the people involved do wrong to merit a punishment? Were they punished or merely stopped?

Commentators have plumbed the depths of these passages and have arrived at brilliantly creative explanations. The Netziv famously attributed the mistake of this generation to the desire to become urbanized and

gather everyone together in a central location.¹

But there is more to this story, as the Netziv recognizes and is clear in

¹ Ha’amek Davar, Bereishis 11:1-9

Chazal. The Midrash Rabbah² quotes R' Elazar ben R' Shimon who comments on the phrase “‘*Vayehi benasam mikedem* – and as they migrated from the east’ (Bereishis 11:2) – they migrated from the *Kadmono shel olam* (G-d).” Their entire attempt to urbanize was only after an attempt to distance themselves from G-d.

Midrashic phraseology often misleads readers into thinking that a comment is merely a play on words when really it represents a deep understanding of the biblical usage of language. Such is the case in the above passage. R' Elazar ben R' Shimon seems to be making a play on words for homiletical purposes. *Kedem* has the same basic letters as *kadmon*. However, there is more to his observation than the phonetic similarity.

R' Michael Samuel³ points out that the usage of the word *kedem* in Bereishis is very instructive as to its meaning. After Adam sinned and was punished by G-d, “He drove Adam out and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim...” (Bereishis 3:24). Adam was punished and was driven out of the garden of Eden, away from the close supervision and providence of G-d, into a more distant existence. Similarly, after Kayin sinned and was punished by G-d, the Torah tells us “Kayin left the pres-

² 38:7

³ In a forthcoming commentary on Bereishis tentatively titled Echoes of Sinai: A Contemporary Orthodox Torah Commentary, on Bereishis 3:24, 4:16, 11:2.

ence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Bereishis 4:16). The last phrase, the directional information, is superfluous unless we understand it to tell us that Kayin had been, like Adam before him, punished with a lower level of connection to G-d, an alienation from the existence of Eden. “East” tells us of distance from the life of Eden that was characterized by a simplicity and a closeness with G-d.

Thus, the Midrash is telling us that the generation of the Tower of Babel were not punished by being sent east, i.e. away from G-d, but willingly and knowingly chose on their own accord to move east, away from G-d. They desired a life of independence, away from G-d’s presence and His demands on people.

Additional support for this explanation can be found in the story of Lot. After agreeing with Avraham to part ways, Lot went to the east. “So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they parted from each other” (Bereishis 13:11). Lot’s leaving of Avraham was not merely the creation of a physical distance but also of a spiritual distance. Lot left both Avraham and Avraham’s ways, turning himself towards a much less spiritual life that allowed him to feel comfortable in S’dom. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the Midrash Rabbah⁴ comments on this verse also

⁴ 41:7

that Lot journeyed from the *Kadmono shel olam*.

The preface to the building of the Tower of Babel puts the entire episode into a different perspective. The people began with an intent to push G-d out of their lives and this made their actions into rebellion. One can even suggest that the actions they took were not inherently bad. Urbanizing can be a great boon for society and for people. The economic and social benefits can lead to great spiritual benefits as well. However, when the action is prefaced by an intentional attempt to rid oneself of G-d then the otherwise positive act becomes negative.

There are many cases where this is so. The Chovos HaLevavos⁵ divides acts in life into three categories: *mitzvos*, *aveiros*, and *reshus* (commandments, sins, and optional acts). However, he further divides the *reshus* category into those that are done with positive intentions and those done with negative intentions. The positive acts, due to the praiseworthy intent, turn into *mitzvos* while the negative acts become *aveiros*. Thus, concludes the Chovos HaLevavos, there are really only two types of acts in life – *mitzvos* and *aveiros*. It seems possible to suggest that the building of the Tower of Babel was an act of *reshus* that, due to the negative intentions of the people, entered in the category of *aveirah*.

⁵ 3:4

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Sefasai Tiftach

It is an ingrate who asks for something without taking into consideration the steps that must be provided to reach that goal. In general, any significant request also entails requesting that first the means be there to use the thing requested, and second the repair of whatever

one did to deprive oneself of or break the thing requested. In other words: to request the positive steps necessary for the final goal, and a cure of the negative steps that had already been taken away from it.

The middle thirteen *berachos* of *Shemoneh Esrei* are *bakashos*, re-

quests we make from the A-lmighty. Twelve of them were part of the original structure, with *Birchas HaMinim*, a request for justice to be meted out to the wicked, added by Shmuel HaKatan on the behest of the Sanhedrin at Yavneh. The original twelve *berachos* follow the above

principle to produce a formal structure.

We are in reality making four basic requests, and each is broken down into three components: a) providing a state where the request can be granted in its fullest; b) curing what is currently wrong with the item in question; c) satisfying the need itself.

1 - Personal Redemption

1a) *Da'as*: The domain for personal redemption is one's own soul. The request for *binah* is for a perfection of the self through the proper insight, wisdom, and the ability to put them into action.

1b) *Teshuvah*: However, the mind is sullied by the habits and priorities inculcated by past sin. Therefore, in asking for personal redemption we must also ask for help with *teshuvah*, returning to G-d.

1c) *Selichah*: Through having perfection of soul and returning to Hashem, one is ready for *selichah*, to be treated by Hashem as He did in the past, to have a productive and loving relationship with our Creator.

2 - Physical Contentment

2a) *Ge'ulah*: National physical contentment is only possible in our homeland. We begin with the domain, a request to return to Israel.

2b) *Refu'ah*: Someone who is ill invests his effort not toward contentment and satisfaction, but in seeking his health. Removing the impediment to contentment means curing all of Israel's sick.

2c) *Shanim*: Israel is a unique land in that it has a rich soil but an unreliable water supply. The message that wealth or poverty comes from Hashem is driven home as the land's fortune waxes and wanes with the rain He sends us. We ask for physical blessing, for the rains – both literal and figurative – that give us the wealth and means to pursue our dreams.

3 - Justice

3a) *Kibbutz Galuyos*: In order to have a just society, we must first have an independent society. We ask for the ingathering of the exiles, so that we can have a domain in we can establish a judicial system.

3b) *Mishpat / Minim*: Perhaps the greatest hiding of G-d's role in history is the lack of obvious justice in the world. Children learn quite early that "it's not fair!" We therefore request from G-d the opportunity to see His Justice manifest in history. In Yavneh, when we saw the fall of the Jewish People and the rise of a corrupt and evil Roman Empire, when Jew turned fellow Jew in to the authorities and entire movements arose to pull people away from Torah, this was expanded to include an explicit request to see the wicked punished.

3c) *Tzadikim*: But the true culmination of divine justice is the reward of the righteous. King David wrote "I was a youth, and I also grew old, but I never saw a *tzadik* abandoned and his children begging for bread."¹ His children might beg, yes, but never because he was abandoned. However, how many of us are Davids capable of seeing this truth? We ask Hashem that everyone see His Justice, that the righteous prosper.

4 - Universal Redemption

4a) *Binyan Yerushalayim*: Every Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* performed the special service of the day and, if the Jewish People were truly repentant, they were atoned of their sins. Hashem would grant them the certainty of knowing this when the tongue of red wool turned white. In fact, every day, through the worship in the Temple, the teaching, halachic decision-making and judging of the Sanhedrin, through the prayer of the people and the songs of the Levites, one had the ideal environment for coming close to G-d.

4b) *Mashiach*: According to the Rambam, the jobs of the messianic king are: bringing Israel back to the

Torah, fighting the wars of G-d, building the Temple, and unifying all of humanity to worship Hashem.² The job of the messianic king is to cure the ills of exile, both of the Jewish People and of the Divine Presence.

4c) *Shomei'a Tefillah*: The true and full redemption is not only the ideal society living in the ideal venue, it is when that society lives as a full covenantal partner in dialogue with G-d. Therefore, the culminating request is that He listen to our prayers.

We ask Hashem for personal closeness to Him, national wealth, the Hand of Divine Justice in history and a national covenantal partnership with the A-lmighty. Note the lessons the Men of the Great Assembly convey in their choice of requests: First, every request must acknowledge the details of what is required. Also, it must acknowledge that what we are asking for must be granted despite past mistakes and our limitations. Second, when it comes to personal needs, we ask only for our spirituality. However, our concern for others begins with their physical where-withal, and progressively ascending to religious fulfillment.

² Rambam, Hilchos Melachim uMilchomosei-hem 11:4

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¹ Tehillim 37:25