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HIR – The Bayit

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## *“Lessons from Babel: Language, Coexistence, and Speaking Hebrew”*

The English-speaking beginner’s Hebrew student inevitably encounters a strange clash between Hebrew and English, encapsulated in the pithy saying, “who (hu/הוא)” means he and “he (hee/היא)” means she! And the addendum I recently learned, “dog (dag/דג)” means fish!

This is a small example of a basic truth we all know and encounter all the time: if you don’t speak the same language as another person, you can’t understand them. Without a common language, it’s very hard for two people to relate to one another.

Nowhere in the Torah is this more apparent, I think, than in this week’s parashah in the story of Migdal Bavel, the Tower of Babel.

I want to look a little more closely at this story and develop this point about the centrality of language in relationships, share a few words about a language I think we all strive to understand more, and then share a personal linguistic exploration I am in the midst of in order to deal with my own personal language confusion, my own Tower of Babel.

The Migdal Bavel story is about a lot of things: authority and resistance to it, ego and the place of the individual, the role of technology, and the tension between unity and uniformity.

It’s also, perhaps most centrally, about the institution of language. Language figures in the beginning and end of the story and at its center.

The issue of language comes to a head towards the end of this short episode. God has seen the building initiative that this unified human mass has undertaken and doesn’t want to see it come to fruition, and responds:

*הָבָה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ: (בראשית יא/ז)*  
*Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. (Genesis 11:7)*

God states God’s intention to confuse everyone’s language. I would expect the next verse to say that God does it. And the next verse does say what God does, but it doesn’t seem to be what God said God was going to do!

*וַיִּפֶץ יְקֹוֹק אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: (בראשית יא/ח)*  
*So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.*

God states God's intention as confusing everyone's language, and then God's recorded action is to disperse everyone, something totally different.

What accounts for this discrepancy between God's intention and God's action?

I think this is what a rather gruesome Rashi on 11:7 here, paraphrasing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah 38:10*), is getting at:

*לא ישמעו - זה שואל לבנה וזה מביא טיט וזה עומד עליו ופוצע את מוחו.*

*Not hear/understand – one would ask for brick, and the other (now speaking a different language and not understanding the request correctly) would bring mortar, and the first would rise against him and crack his skull.*

Once the people of the earth could no longer understand each other, they got so frustrated that they couldn't even live together.

This is how Rashi closes the gap between God's stated intention and God's action. The latter was merely a consequence of the former. God said God would confuse their language. God did. The impact of that was that people could not understand each other. They became angry with each other. And they could no longer live together. So they dispersed. By confusing their language, God essentially dispersed them over the face of the earth.

When we can't understand each other, we can't live together.

We've all experienced language barrier frustrations of many kinds. I even find myself getting aggravated when I am speaking the same language as someone but the cell phone reception is choppy – “What did you say?” “What did you say?”

Thank God, I'm not cracking any skulls, but **there is something deeply unsettling, frustrating, even angering in not understanding or not being understood.**

**We can only coexist when we can understand each other, when we speak the same language in some way.**

This is as broad as the broadest definition of language: values language, love languages. And it is as simple as actual spoken languages. We can only coexist when we can understand each other, when we speak the same language.

Of course the world is filled with translators and translations. Thank God for that. But it's just not the same. My hunch is that even if they had had translators at the Tower of Babel, for better or for worse, they would still have stopped building and dispersed. Speaking the same language, in an unmediated way, is important for connecting with people.

I feel this about Yiddish. I don't speak much Yiddish. Even when speaking with someone who speaks English, but whose primary or first language is Yiddish, I feel that communication gap. That I don't totally understand them. And they feel that, and they feel that they don't totally understand me. There is a certain disconnect, and even a mutual disappointment. I still hope to learn more Yiddish. With some of our most precious older community members, my lack of Yiddish weakens an aspect of our relationship.

We can only coexist when we can understand each other, when we speak the same language.

**What I've been thinking about lately is that this is not just true about our relationship with people and community, but with our tradition. With Torah.**

If we don't speak the same language as the Torah, it is harder to coexist comfortably, intimately, trustingly, with it. It's harder to really understand, relate to, and live with the Torah.

Thank God for translations – but we know something is lost. It's not the same to study the Torah, or Gemara, or Halakhah, in the original Hebrew, or even Aramaic. We should use translations when we need them, but we know we are missing something.

The centrality of Hebrew language in Jewish tradition is one of the first things we discuss with prospective converts in our Bayit's conversion program. Hebrew language is not a requirement, but, I always tell prospective converts, it is a key ingredient for success in your Jewish journey. For truly feeling at home. Not just in Jewish community, but in your individual relationship with text, tradition and God. You will feel more whole when you speak Hebrew. Things will fall into place.

And so it goes for all of us on our Jewish journey. Hebrew language is so important.

And it's a tall order. Biblical Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, Modern Hebrew. All are important.

When we do begin to understand Hebrew, there is a spiritual richness and connectedness that is hard to even describe. To connecting with our past, present, and future, all simply through the Hebrew sounds penetrating our ears into our comprehension, or articulating those sounds off our tongue and lips. It's connective, it's spiritual, and it's powerful.

And the divide I sometimes feel between American and Israeli Jewry, while it is about a lot of things, would be easier, more bridgeable, if I – if we – spoke more of the same language.

Speaking Hebrew is not a mitzvah. It's not a necessary precursor to being Jewish or upholding the Torah. But our tradition powerfully highlights the importance of speaking Hebrew.

Listen to how the Sages interpret Deuteronomy 11:19, a verse that is a part of daily prayer as the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the Shema. The verse, speaking about the Torah and commandments themselves, says:

*וְלַמְדֵתֶם אֹתָם אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶקְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: (דְּבָרִים י"א/ט)*  
*Teach them to your children to talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 11:9)*

The verse is talking about talking about the mitzvot. But the Sages explain:

*מבאן אמרו: כשהתינוק מתחיל לדבר, אביו מדבר עמו לשון הקודש ומלמדו תורה... (ספרי דברים, פרשת עקב, פיסקה מ"ו)*  
*From here they said: When a child learns to speak, the parent speaks with them in the Holy Tongue, the Language of Holiness, and teaches them Torah.*

“Teach your children to speak in them” – teach your children to speak about them in their language, the language they were given in, in Hebrew!

In contrast to other sources that mention Hebrew but place it after Torah study, this source argues not only that one should teach and speak with their children in Hebrew, but that that comes first! It’s *not* a mitzvah, but it *is* the foundation, the cornerstone, of the whole Torah endeavor!

Rambam testifies to the lack of seriousness with which our communities have treated this duty for centuries.

Commenting on a passage in Pirkei Avot (2:1) that speaks about being as careful with a “light mitzvah” – one people do not attribute importance to, as with a “severe mitzvah” – one people recognize the gravity of, Rambam writes:

*אחר כך אמר שראוי להזהר במצוה שייחשב בה שהיא קלה, כגון שמחת הרגל ולמידת לשון קודש... (פרהמ"ש להרמב"ם אבות ב/א)*  
*Then it says that one should be as careful with a mitzvah that is treated as though light, like Festival joy and like teaching Hebrew... (Rambam’s Mishnah Commentary, Avot 2:1)*

Hebrew language is at the core of our relationship to Torah. We see that for centuries we have been exhorting each other to strengthen our focus on Hebrew. To take it seriously. And that hasn’t been easy.

We all come from different backgrounds when it comes to Hebrew. We all have different facilities with language. And we all have busy lives.

What I learn from Migdal Bavel is that a key ingredient in strengthening our relationship to our Torah is to learn to speak its language.

I keep working on this project and trying to grow in it, and I invite you to take whatever your next Hebrew language step is, whether learning the alefabet, working on understanding the meaning of tefillah, trying to translate Torah as you listen on Shabbat morning, taking a Hebrew class, trying to speak more conversational

Hebrew with a friend or neighbor, I encourage us all to take the next step. I am trying to listen to the Israeli radio news regularly this year. I still can't understand Israelis speaking Hebrew – it's too fast for me. I hope listening to the news on Israeli radio will help – in addition to connecting me even more to Israel.

I want to close with a personal sharing.

As I mentioned, Hebrew language is powerful and central not just because it mediates our relationship to our Torah. It also grounds our relationship to our Hebrew-speaking Israeli cousins.

That's one of the many reasons I choose to try to speak primarily in Hebrew with our children. I want them to feel at home in Israel – connected to Israel, with as few barriers as possible, including the accent. And so do I!

So to achieve that, I started to speak in an Israeli accent when I started speaking Hebrew to Ilan when he was born four years ago. At home, we spoke Hebrew, sang songs, davened, made Kiddush and benched, in an Israeli accent. At shul, I continued davening and teaching the way I grew up, in an American Hebrew accent.

And so I had my own personal Babel, my own language confusion. I rolled my reshes with my children, but not at shul.

Now, thank God, my children come to shul. They hear me daven and teach and make Kiddush here, and my accent worlds have collided!

Many people differentiate between their pronunciation styles in conversational Hebrew speaking and in davening or leining, but I am experimenting with merging those worlds. With speaking and davening and singing all my Hebrew in an Israeli accent, the one which has become most familiar and comfortable to me over these last four years.

This is one of the many things I am so grateful to the Bayit for. This is a space, a place, a community, where we are encouraged to experiment, evolve, and grow. That includes the rabbis, and that means a lot to me.

So if you hear me start to shift to an Israeli *mivta* (accent), from Rosh Hodesh to *Rrrosh* Hodesh, please know that I am exploring creating a consistent Israeli *mivta* for myself inside our Bayit as well as out. Feel free to join me if you wish. To feel a little closer to our Israeli cousins when we speak our shared language.

As we begin a new year (I think I am still allowed to say that on Rosh Hodesh Marheshvan?!), let us claim our mother tongue, bit by bit. Let us find our home in Ivrit, and let us find Ivrit in our homes, and in this home, our Bayit.

Shabbat shalom!