

Decrying Lip Service; Humans Must Speak from Within

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I have always been fascinated by foreign languages. When I was a little kid I remember being in awe of how my papa could sing so deftly in Hebrew, as I sat up on my knees and watched him perform in our Temple choir. Years later in high school, I became so interested in Spanish language that I gave serious thought to becoming a Spanish teacher...*porque me encanta la lengua...me gusta mucho hablar y estudiar el Espanol...*

And of course studying Hebrew in a serious, academic setting gave me access to the meanings and nuances of sacred texts in our tradition that cannot be fully unlocked in translation. Recall what the great Israeli poet Hayim Nahman Bialik once said: Reading in translation is like kissing the bride through a veil. Believe me, no groom wants to do that! What is incredible about languages is not only their unique sounds and syllables, their cadences and intonations, but also their cultural importance. To learn a language, quite frankly, is to take a culture seriously. It is very difficult to understand a people or a society if you are unable to speak their language. Could anyone imagine, for example, dispatching a full-time diplomat to a country where he or she does not speak the language? Indeed many people in our own country believe that someone who wishes to immigrate to the United States must make an effort to learn English...not solely to communicate with other Americans, but also as an expression of serious commitment and allegiance to this particular society. The Swedish linguist Tore Janson calls languages “social facts.” Even in the name of a language one can identify political or cultural affinities. That’s why people in foreign countries are typically so happy when you at least attempt to speak their native tongue. Because no matter how much you butcher it, you are demonstrating a consideration and respect for their culture just by trying.

Now, I have also felt the profound insecurity and disorientation of being in a place where I did not speak the local language. I recall being in the Netherlands with Sari and not even being able to pronounce the multi-syllabic Dutch street names in order to ask for directions. Have you been to Amsterdam? Have you experienced this? Letters appear in combinations that never occur in English, and often words are 27 letters long...

Not knowing a language can make someone feel like the ultimate outsider. Nothing makes someone feel more lonely or isolated than being surrounded by speakers of a language you don’t understand. That’s why so many of your parents and grandparents spoke Yiddish at home...so that you wouldn’t know what they were talking about. Unfortunately, since Yiddish so often served as the secret parent language of the last century, future generations didn’t learn to speak it so now it is highly endangered and threatened with extinction outside the ultra-Orthodox community which continues to use Yiddish as its vernacular.

But the question is, if being able to speak a common language brings people together, builds community, establishes trust and allegiance, forges bonds among people, and not knowing a

common language creates barriers to understanding and segregation among people, then why is God so eager to split up the people in the generation of the Tower of Babel, who according to the Torah were of *safa chat u'dvarim achadim*, they were speakers of one language and one vernacular. Why wouldn't God be jumping for joy that people could so readily communicate with one another? I understand not wanting them to build a giant ziggurat, an enormous tower to the heavens...I understand not wanting them to all stay in one place rather than spreading out and populating the world. But God seems to take special aim at the linguistic uniformity of this generation. And indeed while they are eventually dispersed, the Torah also specifically states that God confounded their speech, *asher lo yishme'u ish s'fat rei'eihu* so that no one understood each other! And then the Torah says *al kein kara sh'ma Bavel*...and that's why the place was called Bavel, which sounds a lot like the English word 'babble,' because that's where God confounded the speech of the whole earth.

Now some people understand the function of this episode as an explanation of the existence of 6,000 plus human languages in the world. The diversity of languages had to happen at some point in human history, and so here is an ancient myth to explain it. The study of linguistics and the history of language suggests that divergent language patterns happened much more gradually and over a much greater geographical area. So while I'm not so convinced that Genesis 11 explains linguistic diversity, I do think there is something perhaps even more profound going on here.

The grandson of the Bal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, whose name was Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudokov, and lived in the 18th Century offered a poignant analysis of this story. He notes that when the Torah notices that all people at Babel spoke the same language the Torah uses the word *safa* for language. But, he says, the Torah has another word for language as well. And that is *lashon*. Why does the Torah use *safa* instead of *lashon* to describe the shared language of these people at Babel. Well he says, *Safa* comes from the word that means lips. *Lashon* comes from the same word that means tongue. Your lips are an external body part, while your tongue resides within. Right, the doctor never asks you to stick out your lips (unless you're getting botox injections), the doctor says stick out your tongue. The people at Babel spoke the language of the lips not the tongue. They spoke from the surface not from within. They paid lip service if you will, an idiom to this day that means to say something insincerely or disingenuously. This generation didn't speak deeply or personally about anything. In fact all we hear them talking about in this episode is bricks and mortar--edifices that will make them famous. They were the original materialistic culture. Nothing of the spiritual or moral or ethical or philosophical or emotional level is exchanged. Just self-aggrandizing, superficial kind of speech. This is what God had such a problem with! I didn't create human beings for this! God created people with the unique ability to speak. Now I'm a dog-owner, I know other animals can communicate. But people have a language repertoire far more complex, far more sophisticated than any other creature. And one of Adam's first tasks in the Garden of Eden is to use the power of language to name the animals. Speech is a critically defining element to being human. But not the kind of speech that stays on the surface. Not the lip service of Bavel. God wants us to use our *lashon*; To use our inner ability to speak, not just to make sounds, so that we communicate deeply, honestly, intelligently, with feeling and passion. By the way, isn't this precisely what people want to hear from the various candidates battling each other for national, state, and local offices? Oh I can't wait until the commercials are over; the sloganeering, and the sound bites. What is really to be learned from that kind of oratory? I don't feel like I'm being

taken particularly seriously as a voter when I am supposed to be convinced by catchphrases and rehearsed zingers that one candidate lobs at another. When I don't know what's true until I fact check all the rhetoric. That's because all of that kind of talk is *babel*. It's not heartfelt. It rings hollow and artificial. And it's not any different in our interpersonal relationships. We can tell when someone is really present, and when they're not. We know when someone is really communicating, and when they're shooting the breeze, chewing the fat, or running off at the mouth. Think of how many expressions we have for that kind of speech...that's cause we do it a lot.

The God who spoke the world into being wants us to really speak to each other...to go beneath the surface, past the pleasantries. When we are afraid to go there, or we keep that part of ourselves bottled up, or feel too proud to be open with the people closest in our lives, then we deny a part of our very humanness. In a few moments we will preface the Musaf Amidah with the words, *Adonai Sefatai Tiftach U'fi Yagid Tehilatecha*...O Lord, open my lips, so that my mouth may declare Your praise. An interesting formulation: Open my lips, so that what is deep inside of me can emerge. So may it be in our sincere prayer, and so may it be in all of the significant conversation and communication of our lives.