

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2016 Sermon Slam
Stephen Baum
“Who is it whom I address?”

I write software for a living, and every now and then I have to create a dialog box which presents some labeled information, and usually asks the customer for more information. Easy enough. But suppose the dialog will be presented in a number of different languages, and the labels will be translated. An old rule of thumb, learned painfully after a number of mistakes, is to assume that the labels will take about 30 percent more space when translated. English, it turns out, is rather terse, at least when compared to French, Italian, German, or Spanish.

Hebrew, though, is an exception. It makes English look verbose, and probably takes, on average, about 30% less space on a form. Part of that is simply a matter of all those missing vowels. Part of it is that many things that require a word, or multiple words, in English become a simple prefix or suffix in Hebrew. It is a language that packs a lot of information into a small amount of space.

Next week’s portion, *Naso*, is largely about human behavior, or misbehavior, the strains it places on a community, and how to allow for those behaviors while also providing mechanisms for reintegrating people who, for a time, are outside of the camp. It has three verses which provide the basis for *t’shuvah*, the way in which we return to the proper path. But enough of context, I want to talk about one word.

It is a verb: *l’hitvadot*. Translated, it means to confess. But the interesting part is that it is a reflexive verb. This is hard for those of us whose primary language is English – English doesn’t have reflexive verbs. (My 30 second grammar lesson here – a transitive verb is one that can take a direct object. The subject of the verb performs an action, the object receives the action. A reflexive verb is one where the direct object is the same as the subject. In English, one typically uses reflexive pronouns attached to transitive verbs for this, for example, “I wash myself”, or “Don’t run with scissors – you might hurt yourself.” But in many languages, including Hebrew, this concept can be expressed in the form of the verb itself.

Leonard Cohen, in the song “Teachers”, asks the question quite nicely:

“Who is it whom I address?

Who takes down what I confess?”

In the larger context of the verses in *Naso*, one might say in English that I confess the wrong that I have done to the person I have wronged. But the nature of this verb suggests that there is a step before that one. Those of us who are blessed with the ability to feel guilty for a wrong doing often find that we have hidden the nature of that act from ourselves. In order to begin *t'shuvah*, I must first confess to myself, in order to make concrete the real intent and import of my wrong doing.