

Noach October 21, 2017

הָבֵה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתֵם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ:

Genesis 11:7 *Come, let us go down there and jumble their language so they will not understand each others' speech.*



This week's Torah portion begins with the well-known story of Noah and the flood. What follows is a list of several generations, along with the statement, "everyone on earth had the same language and the same words." (Genesis 11:1) The text then states that the people of the earth were eager to "make a name for themselves" by building a tower that would literally "elevate" them to the heavens. G-d disapproves of the bricks and mortar and, taking note of the way people worked together to build their skyscraper, confounds the languages of those people and scatters them all over the earth. The building of the tower ceases, the people scatter all over the world, and the place

in which the incident took place is named "Babel." This is a wonderful biblical narrative that explains why people in different parts of the world speak different languages. Yet, we know that many languages are strongly influenced by neighboring populations and by migrating peoples.

In their book, Jews and Words, Amos Oz and his daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger write, "All our tongues and cultures are constant shoplifters. Good for them. Hebrew is no exception, but it is a particularly delicious example...you cannot do Judaism without gazing deeply into the eyes of the Hebrew language and civilization." (page 175) Oz and Oz-Salzberger tell of the extensive "borrowing" of a language from surrounding languages and they affirm the unique inextricability of Jewish experience and culture with the Hebrew language.

The same sentiment was felt by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, an early immigrant to *Eretz Yisrael*, who urged that a modern Hebrew language be integral to modern Zionism. Ben-Yehuda is known to have created the first household in which a child spoke "modern Hebrew," since he insisted that both he and his wife would make Hebrew the exclusive language for communicating with and teaching their son.

However, Ben-Yehuda's passion for Hebrew as the language of new immigrants was not accepted by all early Zionist leaders. Theodor Herzl preferred German, while others advocated for Yiddish. The religious orthodox Jews insisted (and many still do) that Hebrew was *lashon kodesh* (a holy language) and objected to its use in secular society, continuing instead to use Yiddish for their everyday language. The Turks, who ruled over Palestine at the time, felt that establishing Hebrew as the official language would have a significant political impact, causing local Arab communities to react negatively to a potentially budding

Hebrew culture. But, by 1914 the Haifa Technion (university), then under construction, [accepted Hebrew as its language of instruction](#). Ben-Yehuda became increasingly confident that he would succeed in his efforts to make Hebrew a living language for Zionism. Though it took 14 years, Ben-Yehuda, with the support of Ahad Ha'am, created the *Va'ad Halashon* (Language Committee) in 1904. His own passions were matched by school teachers who were intent on having a formal committee regularly determine rules for the modernization of the Hebrew language so they could, in turn, teach the next generation.

In 1922, the British Mandate authorities declared Hebrew one of Palestine's three official languages, along with English and Arabic. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda died the same year. The *Va'ad Halashon* has been active ever since, though its name changed to *Ha'akademia L'lashon ha'Ivrit* (The Academy of the Hebrew Language) in 1953. It is considered an academic institution for standardizing terminology and spelling of new Hebrew words. It remains a serious academy where scholars invest time and research in their work, while being open to public suggestions for the creation of new Hebrew terms.

Israel's Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption considers knowledge of and confidence with Hebrew as important for immigrant integration into Israeli life. Therefore, newcomers are entitled to free Hebrew courses offered by municipalities. As they sit in absorption centers, immigrants meet over their common goal - to begin speaking Hebrew - a key element to becoming Israeli.

### **Discussion Questions:**

Is it appropriate for Israel to invest so heavily in Hebrew language education for new immigrants? As Americans, we are considered a "melting pot" of many nationalities with some immigrants never mastering English at all. What are the difficulties new residents without fluency face? What losses are sustained when new generations are unable to speak the mother tongue of parents or grandparents?

One of the ideological concerns of the Academy of Hebrew Language is whether or not foreign words should be replaced by words constructed from Hebrew. Words such as *televisia* (television) or *autobus* (bus) could be created from pre-existing words in thoughtful reconstructions. Some people insist on words constructed from Hebrew roots, believing that a more pure language elevates the status of Hebrew in the Jewish State. Others are fine with foreign words (pronounced with an Israeli accent!), thinking that it's a great way for the modern State of Israel to connect to global culture. Discuss the merits of each of these views.

### **Additional Resources:**

CIE's curriculum: [Israel and the Hebrew Language: A Nation's Choice](#) is available as a downloadable ebook.

Libby Kantorwitz, [Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and the Resurgence of the Hebrew Language](#), JewishMag.com, December 1999.

Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, [Jews and Words](#), Yale University Press, 2012, page 125.

Shuly Wassertrom, [Hebrew Gets an Update: Can you guess what the New Word for Avatar Is?](#), Jerusalem Post, September 3, 2014

[The Academy of the Hebrew Language](#)