

## Hebrew as the language of the Jewish People Kol Nidre 5773

People ask me great, challenging questions all the time. Why was Abraham willing to slay Isaac, Rabbi? Why do bad things happen to good people, Rabbi? And, Rabbi- will A-Rod finish out his contract before his body breaks down completely?

Some questions, I have no definitive answer to.

But other questions, I can say with confidence, I know how to respond to. One of these recurrent questions comes to me in different forms. "Why do we pray in Hebrew, rabbi?" "It's not a language I know." "Rabbi, Why do we have to spend so much time in Hebrew school?" "Why do we need to go to Hebrew school at all, Rabbi?" All of these excellent and valid questions can be boiled down to this one: "Why Hebrew for a modern Jew?"

This is a question I can answer. But before I do, I have to tell you a story.

If you have, at any time in your life, found Hebrew to be difficult to learn, if you've ever found it annoying, imagine what it must have been like to be Ben-Zion Ben Yehuda.

Ben-Zion, you see, was the first native speaker of modern Hebrew. That's kind of a cool claim to fame, don't you think? Except, of course, that Ben-Zion didn't have the opportunity to choose this path, and absolutely none of the kids he went to school with spoke Hebrew. When kids complain about going to Hebrew school, we should tell them the story of Ben-Zion Ben Yehuda, whose father, Eliezer, refused to let his son be exposed to other languages during childhood. Eliezer even once yelled at his wife, Hemda, after he caught her singing a Russian lullaby to the child.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda first appears in history as a Litvak yeshiva student, then as a Sorbonne student and Francophile. Then he becomes an idealistic Zionist, and fervent supporter of the Jewish settlement of Uganda. Finally, after his arrival in Jerusalem in 1881, he becomes a teacher, a journalist, a newspaper publisher, a lexicographer, a word coiner, and a devoted Hebrew revivalist. He had a ridiculous idea: to take Hebrew, for 2000 years the language of Jewish prayer and study but NOT of everyday speech, and make it a living, breathing, evolving, spoken language. Ben Yehuda's goal: to take the language of the prophets and the rabbis and make it a language that people could write love letters in, that taxi drivers could argue with each other in, that businesspeople

could cut deals in, that Jews around the world speaking dozens of languages could create a society in.

It was a crazy, utopian idea. Imagine for a moment, that suddenly the descendants of the Romans decided to revive the language made immortal in the poetry of Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, and the theater of Seneca. A desire to make it part of the present, to turn it into an ideological—that is, national—drive, would need to occur, persuading the Imperium Romanum, which flourished roughly between Julius Caesar’s rise to power in the first century BCE and the fall of its western part in 476 CE, that it ought to return today in Italy. And the drive would state that Latin, not Italian, is the true tongue.

Impossible, no? And yet, that is what happened with our language, Hebrew.

The word for doll, *bubah*, was born after Ben Zion asked his father, (REPEAT AFTER ME) “Ma zeh? What’s that?” pointing to a toy in the shape of a girl that his mother had knitted for his sister. Since no word in Hebrew existed for the object, Eliezer went to his room and pored over the ancient Hebrew texts, looked in French and German dictionaries, and coined a new word. It resembles French and German words, and is based on the Hebrew phrase *babat ha’ayin*, the pupil of an eye, implying something small and dear—“the apple of one’s eye.” *Bubah*.

And Ben Yehuda came up with my family’s favorite Hebrew word, (REPEAT AFTER ME) *glidah*, ice cream, because *galid*, in ancient Hebrew, is a synonym for ice, and *glidah* sounded to Ben Yehuda like its Italian sister, *gelato*.

This crazy Jew Ben Yehuda —my teacher Rabbi Steve Bob calls him *meshugenah ladavar*—did this over and over again, scouring ancient and medieval Jewish Hebrew sources so that he could coin thousands of authentically Hebrew terms, which would allow modern Jews to speak our own language to each other in school, at home, and on the street.

For his efforts, the rabbis of Jerusalem excommunicated Ben Yehuda, and got him in trouble with the Turkish authorities. Many religious Jews wanted to reserve Hebrew for sacred study and prayer. They were aghast at the thought of soldiers, politicians, waitresses, and ladies of the night speaking Hebrew.

Ben Yehuda’s audacious dream, that Hebrew would be the everyday spoken language of the Jewish people, was hardly a guaranteed thing. If you’re skeptical of the

importance of Hebrew in modern Jewish life, you're in good company. No less than the founder of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, wrote in his famous treatise, "Der Judenstadt, The Jewish State," "We cannot converse with one another in Hebrew. Who amongst us has sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that language! Such a thing cannot be done." Many of the founding fathers of Zionism, in some ways like folks who ask me "Why study Hebrew," thought it cumbersome to teach the masses a language they perceived as fossilized. Why waste energy in such tasks? There were numerous other worthy endeavors, many believed. But when Herzl entered the Zionist circle and came to know their aspirations and the state of their Hebrew education, and when demands came in to translate "Der Judentstadt" into Hebrew, Herzl grasped the importance of revivifying Hebrew, not only in literature but in speech, as a living language.

And in 1919, only 40 years after Ben Yehuda arrived in Jerusalem, the British mandate declared Hebrew as one of the three official languages of Palestine. At his death, 30,000 Jews from every walk of life attended his funeral.

As the exiles gathered to Palestine and then Israel, Jews speaking more than 50 languages and constituting more than 70 international cultures descended on Israel. Hebrew bonded the diversity of Jews around the world. I read somewhere that, when Ben Yehuda began his quest in the 1880s, people came to swear at him in 50 languages. Now, they all simply say, (REPEAT AFTER ME) "Todah rabah. Thank you."

Cecil Roth, in his book *Was Hebrew Ever a Dead language?* summed up Ben Yehuda's contributions to the development of our mother tongue: "Before Ben-Yehuda, Jews COULD speak Hebrew; after him, they DID."

The fact that Elyssa and I lived in the same garden apartment complex in Jerusalem as Ben Yehuda and his family had 100 years before may have something to do with my fascination with him... Nearly every morning when I would open the gate of our apartment complex to head off to my studies at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, there would be a group of school-children facing the gate, with their teacher telling them about Ben Yehuda. My own studies for the rabbinate became inextricably linked with Ben Yehuda's single-mindedness.

Today though, Eliezer Ben Yehuda's story sounds unduly doctrinaire; we now know that multilingualism—not unilingualism—is the key to language facility. We understand how

charming and quaint Ben Yehuda's story seems in retrospect. But rabbi, why Hebrew for the modern Jew? I'm getting there.

First, a cool set of statistics with which you can impress your friends. Today there are approximately 8 million Hebrew speakers in the world. While that pales in comparison to the billion people who speak Mandarin, and the 500 million whose native language is English, the surging of Hebrew is nothing short of miraculous. At the end of the 19th century, the estimate of Hebrew speakers globally was not even a meager ten thousand. Not since the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE have all Jews used a single language!

Yes, but why do I have to learn Hebrew in order to become a bat or bar mitzvah? In a minute.

Did you know that the Hebrew letters in our machzor are actually the Phoenician alphabet? But when was the last time you met a Phoenician, or someone who could speak or even pronounce Phoenician? There are no remaining speakers of Hittite or Assyrian or Babylonian or Akkadian. There is Hebrew. And Chinese.

How is it that of all the ancient languages in which the great works of literature were written, so little has survived? Many thousands of languages have disappeared. Even Chaucer's English is now a foreign language. But Hebrew lives. As does Chinese, as I mentioned, although the only thing I know about it is that it has survived.

Our ancestors during Second Temple times weren't proud of their Hebrew language. They replaced the richness of biblical Hebrew with Aramaic, which was the spoken language of the ancient world. Our Kol Nidre and Kaddish prayers are remnants of the days when Jews spoke and understood Aramaic. But, wonder of wonders, when a Polish Jewish girl met a Moroccan Jewish boy in later generations, they did not speak the Aramaic they learned every day in their prayers. When they wrote to each other from the ends of the earth, they used Hebrew, and not Aramaic.

At the Passover seder, we sing, "Avadim hayinu hayinu; ata b'nei chorin, b'nei chorin." How much sweeter it is to sing about our past enslavement and our modern freedom in the language that binds us as a people? The Hebrew chain is gleaming, calling out for its people to grasp it.

Why Hebrew? Why bother? Okay, I'm ready to tell you. Because Hebrew is, in a way, the foundation stone of the Jewish people. More than the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, it

is the rock of Jewish existence—a language that we have lived for more than 3,000 years. Author Ilan Stavens writes, “Hebrew is an ethnic, religious, and transnational vehicle of communication used by Jews worldwide.”

Ancient Egyptian has been forgotten. Ancient Greek is no longer in use and in its place there is a completely different language. It’s true that biblical Hebrew has also changed quite a lot, but what we use today is still recognizably the same language. Of all the ancient languages, Hebrew has survived—the Jewish people have survived—perhaps because the wanderings of the Hebrews gave rise to a language that was, and in some way still is, the homeland of the Jewish people.

What keeps a language alive? What keeps a people alive? Power? Apparently not. The language of a small nation like the Jews, a nation that did not exist for many centuries, and never constituted a powerful empire, has survived. It is our language that has served to reconstitute generation after generation of the Jewish people.

A French rabbi in the 19th century wanted to know what to do about a certain woman whose husband had abandoned her—and only a Yemenite rabbi knew the answer. And the sole language they had in common, since Aramaic was no longer commonly used, was Hebrew. There is a hypothesis that the international mail service was invented by Jews in order to find other Jews, to get answers, to exist. Therefore the language, which was supposed to have disappeared, was the connection.

Language is a critical piece of collective identity. Hebrew is our communal anchor. As it has wended its way from Genesis to Daniel, from Mishna to midrash to Maimonides, to its revival a century ago as an everyday vernacular, Hebrew all along has acted as a rich repository of cultural meaning and memory.

When you read the Hebrew poetry of Hayim Nachman Bialik and Yehuda Amichai, you are propelled forward and backward through the centuries of Jewish experience. There is something heady and intoxicating about learning a language that links members of an ethnic group near and far, today and yesterday, and tomorrow, too.

And if you really want to understand the deepest layers of meaning of our sacred texts, Hebrew is the language to read it in. My Hebrew professor at the University of Wisconsin once said, “Reading the Torah in translation is like making love through a sheet.”

And there are Jewish concepts that can only be expressed in Hebrew—words like (REPEAT AFTER ME) Davka, which, depending on the context, means something like “because I said so,” or “in spite of it all” or “just to annoy someone.” As a mother of my acquaintance sometimes asks her children, “Are you doing that davka because I told you not to?”

At the very least, we who want our children to excel in everything should see Hebrew as an acquired cognitive skill like any second language. Hebrew’s root structure makes it particularly analytical. Think about the Hebrew letter combination samech-pey-resh. Playing with these three letters, almost by magic, we can tease out the words book, author, library, story, tell, count, and number. Studying Hebrew can make you smarter. There, I said it.

Why Hebrew? It is the glue that has bound our people together for at least three thousand years. It is the glue that binds us to the 12 million other Jews in the world today, whatever else might be our deep divides. Hebrew links us to the richness of our Jewish cultural, religious, and national past. It binds us in our longings. Hebrew is not only a system of sounds; it is an existential condition, a way of being, of establishing contact with others and with God and perhaps, even, ourselves. It is our unity. It ties us to our past. Hebrew is a miracle.

When I work with kids and adults studying Hebrew, and when I am privileged to witness our amazing educator, Rebecca McVeigh, teaching as she has, patiently and diligently for years now, I watch Jewish self-confidence grow. I watch in awe as Hebrew learners own their Jewish identity in a way that many of them never thought they would. Rebecca and I watch the hunger for Jewish learning in general grow, as the literal roots of Hebrew words alternatively spark memories of things they didn’t even know they knew, and spark questions and more questions about things they didn’t even realize they longed to learn.

Why Hebrew, you ask? On this subject my view is succinct: the future of the Jewish people depends on it. We cannot and should not be the generation that breaks the chain. We must not dissolve the glue. And more importantly, when we embrace Hebrew in a serious way, our Jewish identities are strengthened and deepened; our commitment to Judaism becomes an insatiable longing.

Fortunately for you, no, I’d say, wisely on your part, you have invested yourself in a congregation that takes Hebrew learning seriously. And we’re taking this opportunity, the year 5773, the 90th yarhzeit of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, to focus on Hebrew as the

language of the Jewish people. Starting with the learning sessions tomorrow afternoon from 2-3:30 p.m., which will focus on different aspects of the Hebrew language, we invite you to embrace Hebrew learning this year more than ever. Rebecca and I will be offering Hebrew classes for adults on a variety of levels. We'll do more Hebrew learning in services over the course of the year. Every Shabbat, there will be a bulletin board in the social hall with Hebrew vocabulary, both modern and from the weekly Torah portion. And you can look in Temple Topics for Rega Shel Ivrit, A Moment of Hebrew, in each issue. I'm also announcing on these High Holidays the formal plans for our next congregational trip to Israel, over winter break 2013, which will have among other special things a focus on Hebrew. We're exploring the possibility of offering a winter break Hebrew intensive Ulpan program here at the synagogue, so let us know if you'd be a chalutz, a pioneer, in that program. And lastly for now, the Lifelong Learning Committee is sponsoring a Scholar in Residence program to be held the weekend of October 12-14 with Dr. Yossi Leshem, my teacher and a professor of Hebrew language at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Dr. Leshem will teach us about the roots of Hebrew, and about the rich inheritance of which we are the sole beneficiaries.

We'll be rolling out other facets of this special learning theme, and we hope that you'll take my comments this evening as an agitation to learn some more Hebrew this year, whether you don't know an alef from a bet, or if you can already parse a Hebrew verb. There's always more to learn. I predict that if you put your mind to immersing yourself in your Hebrew language, you will find your Jewish life enriched. Don't take my word for it though: try it.

When linguist and author Ilan Stavens made a pilgrimage to Ben Yehuda's grave on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, he noticed that it had been spray-painted multiple times. A friend told him that when a member of the Ben Yehuda family was informed about the desecration, apparently at the hands of ultra-Orthodox Jews who still think that Hebrew should reserved for prayer and study, the family member asked, "In what language was the graffiti splashed in?"

"In Hebrew," was the answer

"Ah," said the family member. "Then Ben Yehuda won."

One thing I am sure of. We must not be spray painters on the father of modern Hebrew. If you study Hebrew because it's what Jews have always done, (REPEAT AFTER ME)

aizeh yofi—how wonderful. If you study Hebrew because it links us to Jews all over the world today, (REPEAT AFTER ME) mitzuyan—that's excellent. If you study Hebrew because it's a central part of what we'll take on our future Jewish wanderings, that's (REPEAT AFTER ME) tov m'od- very good. Make this the year you embrace your Hebrew heritage. Make this the year that affirms that Ben Yehuda won, in Jerusalem, and beyond.

Gmar chatimah tova. May you be sealed for blessing in the book of life.