

Drashah Noah 5770—Finding the Right Words

One of the best, and least talked about, parts of living in Israel for an extended period of time is vacation. Coming from the States, it would be a significant expense—both financially and time-wise—to travel to parts of Asia and Europe. But from Israel, it's really just a short plane ride. This is how it happened that over Hanukkah break from my studies at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, I traveled with four friends to Istanbul. I have many stories to share of the diverse and interesting history, the beautiful architecture, the incredible sensory overload of the Grand Bazaar—please feel free to ask me about them at Kiddush! But for right now, I want to share an experience my friends and I had visiting the Galata Tower.

The Galata Tower was built in the 14th century during an expansion of the Genoese colony of what was then Constantinople. Its current position puts it right near the old Jewish neighborhood. When it was built, the tower was the tallest structure in the city. While it has since been surpassed in height, at nearly 67 meters tall, it's still not short, and one can see it from nearly any point in Istanbul. It's an easily recognizable part of the skyline. After we visited the top of the tower,

and appreciated the panoramic views of the city, we found our way onto a nearby street to check out some of the souvenir shops. One in particular caught our eye because of its awning, which was in English. Turkish is different from almost any other language in the world, and we were always grateful for any chance to see or communicate in our native language. But sometimes the English we got wasn't what we would have expected. This case was no different. The awning read, "I'm sorry we are open."

After having a good laugh at the unusual message of this shop's awning—was this a comment on the quality of the merchandise?—the five of us tried to imagine how such a mis-translation could have come into being. We surmised that Turkish must have an expression—like the English "excuse me" or the Hebrew "סליחה" that can mean both "I apologize" and "May I have your attention." After a week of struggling to understand and be understood by the local residents, this awning gave us an opportunity to appreciate both the humor and the challenge of trying to communicate with people who don't "speak our language."

In our parasha this morning, we learn of another tower, the Tower of Babel. This story is a perplexing and brief one, comprising only 9 verses. We learn that the whole world spoke the same language and came to settle in the land of Shinar. There, they used their ease of communication to choose a solitary goal—forming bricks and building a tower, with its top in the heavens, so that they may become known throughout the world. God saw this as it was happening and decided to stop it, by confounding their language, keeping them from speaking to each other and forcing them to become many different nations.

What went wrong here? A community that “speaks the same language” is an enviable one. After all, what community, especially a Jewish one, can be in constant agreement or decide easily on goals? Perhaps this is the Torah’s way of prefiguring anti-trust law, or of saying that extreme unity can be dangerous. However, there are two things about this story that I find telling. First, there’s a big gap in the account—we know nothing about what the people of Shinar did wrong. We’re missing some important information. Commentators and scholars spill much ink noting that the sins of Noah’s generation are documented, but not the sins of the generation of the Dispersion,

as they are known, and go to great lengths to describe their degenerateness. Second, the punishment: God did not destroy the world again, nor send a plague to wipe out the sinners. God confused their languages, keeping them from communicating easily. Missing details, confounded speech—in my mind, this is a story about communication.

The first thing we learn about the people of this generation is that they speak one language—presumably this would make their communication flow more easily. We would expect them to be particularly sensitive to each other, enlightened in their interpersonal interactions. Sadly, this seems not to have been the case.

According to a rabbinic Midrash (Pirkei Rabi Eliezer, 24) this is what happened with the people of Shinar. They became so focused on their goal of building bricks that it was all they could talk about. How to form the bricks, how to fire them, how to place them in the tower. These were the primary concerns of the people. When a worker fell from his place, high on the tower's scaffolding, it was for the destroyed bricks that they expressed remorse, not for the injury or

loss of life. Their communication became so streamlined that it didn't have room to be humane, or even human.

We know this from our own lives. That people who speak a common language would find it easy to understand one another seems like a truism. But communication is difficult—even when our interlocutor is speaking the same language, sometimes we miss each other, don't understand what's being said. We can all think of times when we've been hurt by, or caused pain to, our friends, our children, our partners through the use of words. We misunderstand, we speak rashly, we have a hard time finding the right thing to say. Our words can show how much we care about one another, and also how easy it can be for us to disregard the other. At least as much as words have the power to build connections, they can also betray us.

My husband, Jeff, is an elementary school teacher. Last year, he taught a class of first graders who came from Spanish speaking homes. While he taught them in English, they often required extra support to aid in their comprehension. Once, during reading time, one of his students approached him with a question about the

passage on mountains they were reading. She was having trouble with a word—she could read it, but didn't know what it meant. The word was "rock." Jeff's Spanish is pretty good, but he didn't know the word for "rock," so he couldn't simply translate. He had to approach his student thoughtfully and figure out how to explain to his student what a rock was. Thankfully, it turned out not to be that difficult—she knew what a rock was, but not the English word for it. But Jeff and I both took away from that situation a greater appreciation for how difficult it can be to acquire a second language, as well as a realization that a language barrier is not the only potential barrier to communication.

This also is a message we can appreciate. When we expect there to be some difficulty in communication, such as when the two parties don't speak the same language, we almost automatically devote care and attention to helping increase understanding. Sometimes, when something is too easy, too comfortable, when we expect to be readily understood, we don't give our full focus. Facing this kind of a challenge forces us to stop, regroup, and approach the situation with

sincerity and mindfulness. How can we adapt this carefulness to communication with those we expect to understand us?

The answer lies, I believe, in our approach. We tend to approach communication, especially verbal communication, as an exercise in getting our point across to another. We become more concerned with speaking “at” someone than speaking with them. Especially with those closest to us—those with whom we share both a literal and a more figurative common language—we expect them to understand us easily, and we expect to understand them without real effort. And even when we’re missing each other’s message, we don’t realize it.

When we encounter a language barrier, we experience the frustration of not being understood. This can raise our level of consciousness. If we can’t be understood, then our partner in conversation can’t be understood either. The language barrier makes the need for understanding plain, and it’s easy for us to take steps to ensure that all parties are understood. We shift our focus to fostering understanding. This is a necessary component of all communication, even communication with those we think speak our language.

Truthfully, even when we're literally speaking the same language as the person we're talking with, we may not be. In order to communicate well, we must devote careful attention to listening to what the other is saying—what do they mean? Where are they coming from?—and not just focus on hearing the words. To communicate well, we must be just as interested in understanding the other person as we are in being heard by them. Moreover, we must seek to be understood, not just to speak. We must approach each interaction as though we are trying to learn the other person's language.

This puts God's response to the people of Shinar in a different perspective. Rather than being punitive, it was instructive.

Communication had become too easy. Their shared language kept them from paying attention to how they spoke to one another.

Instead of using words to support one another, they spoke harshly, insensitively. By confusing their languages, God was forcing them to think carefully about how they would seek to understand and be understood. From their example of a literal language barrier, we are inspired to pay close attention to how we communicate. By focusing

first and foremost on listening, on understanding, we can decode the many languages we use with each other. This approach is one that requires self-awareness and patience, but it is an approach that brings honor and love to our verbal interactions. May we remain aware that we all speak different languages, and may our ability to communicate thoughtfully, to listen to each other, bring us true understanding.

Shabbat Shalom.