

This Is Who We Are
The Language of Jewish Identity
Kol Nidre ☆ Yom Kippur Eve
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When our children were young, they would tell us that our family dinner table conversation was different than most of their friends'. "Different how?" I asked. "There is much more interaction, they said, hardly a quiet moment; often talk on different subjects going on simultaneously; and, in our case, even jumping from one language to another – English, Spanish, some Hebrew here and there."

We Jews are a verbal people. Our Torah begins with the "word of God" that creates worlds: "And God said, let there be light! And there was light." Words have creative, even magical power. *Abracadabra*, an ancient Aramaic word, means – *Abra* – I will create; *kadabra* – as I speak. Words can hurt or heal; soothe or irritate; seduce or alienate; make peace or proclaim war.

The Talmud is a sea of words. Medieval Jews produced philosophers, grammarians and poets. Not granted the benefit of self-rule, nor the right to own land or join the trade guilds of pre-modern Europe, we gave the world statesmen, writers and storytellers.

Some civilizations are proud of their great architecture and technology; others of their warriors and conquests. We Jews have contributed words. Words, words, words. The title of one of Sandy's most recent children's books is *When God Gave Us Words*. Words are at the heart of what it means to be a Jew.

Tonight we began our prayers with our beloved liturgy, this Kol Nidre: "May all the vows that we have offered or will offer in the coming year, which we cannot or do not fulfill be annulled and cancelled."

What a strange assertion. Do our words count for nothing? Are they meaningless?

In fact, the prayer means that words matter so much that we need an entire congregation, in the presence of all the Torah scrolls as witnesses, to be able to annul what we said that we did not mean; what we promised and could not fulfill. In other words, you cannot go about wantonly saying things and expect to casually take them back. Words matter. They are containers of truth.

Jewish wisdom teaches that words are like arrows. Why would words be regarded as arrows rather than, say swords? Because, the rabbis taught, when a person takes a sword out of its sheath, and changes his mind, he can return it before it does any harm. However, an arrow, once released from the bow, cannot be taken back.

This past year, many words have become arrows. From words that incite, to those that demean; from insults to curses; from hateful rhetoric to lies, there is no end to the way words are abused. News is fake and truth is not truth. And words no longer seem to matter. What

have we done to the beauty of poetry, the precision of logic and science, the inspiring words of awesome oratory?

With the closing of the BJE, this year we are introducing the teaching of the Hebrew language into our Sunday School curriculum. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan spoke of Hebrew as the “key to the treasure chest” of our heritage. I’d like to invite you to take a look into that treasure chest as we consider our ancient yet modern language, particularly the words that serve as identity markers to define us and our historic ancestry. What do these words say about us? What truths do they speak about who we are?

Modern Israel serves as a link between the Hebrew language and our identity. The State’s founding document, the Declaration of Independence (May 14, 1948), defines its aspirations:

“In the Land of Israel, the Jewish people came into being. In this land was shaped their spiritual, religious, and national character. Here they created a culture of national and universal import, and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.”

“Pioneers, immigrants and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language,... and created a thriving community...loving peace...and aspiring toward independent nationhood.”

Israel is a word that speaks of a dream fulfilled, of deserts blooming, and a refuge for the exiles. For some today, however, Israel is a word that denotes a nation-state which privileges Jews over all other Israeli minorities, and enthrones Orthodoxy as the official religion.

This issue of identity has acquired special relevance, as Israel recently passed a controversial law that affirms Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish people, granting special privilege and recognition to the Jewish nature and purposes of the state. The legislation has been a source of much controversy and elicited criticism of the Netanyahu government by Israeli minorities, particularly the Druze and other Arab communities. The new law has been a source of great concern to diaspora Jewry, across denominations. The very President of the State of Israel, along with rabbinic and lay leaders and organizational bodies have issued critical responses to the Nation-State bill.

This law comes after a year when an agreement to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel (Western Wall) was scuttled; a law was passed denying equal rights to same sex couples, and a Conservative Rabbi was arrested for conducting a Jewish wedding ceremony.

Israel’s Declaration of Independence already clearly established the State of Israel as the fulfillment of Jewish national aspirations. But it also celebrates Israel’s democratic, pluralistic and egalitarian character. It states:

“The State of Israel will be open to Jewish immigration and ingathering of exiles. It will devote itself to developing the land for the good of all its

inhabitants. It will rest upon foundations of liberty, justice and peace as envisioned by the Prophets of Israel.”

Israel is a nation that is both a refuge and a dream, and at the same time a complex and challenging political reality. As a Zionist, I admire Israel’s pioneering, progressive, democratic spirit which, according to its own founding document, guarantees complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex. Our young Jews want to see Israel as a model of these values. The fact that other nations in the area do not uphold them is irrelevant and no reason for Israel to retrench and retreat from its moral ground. While Zionism sought to normalize Israel as *K’khol Hagoyim*, “a nation among the nations,” let us never give up the vision of being *Or Lagoyim* – a “light unto the nations.”

(On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about personal identity – “This is who I am.” Tonight, I’d like to reflect on our collective identity – “This is who we are.”)

A little history and Hebrew lesson about the words that define us....

Our earliest identity term in the Torah, is IVRI: Abraham the “Hebrew.” The term points to the Habiru, a semi-nomadic people of mixed ethnic stock. This description fits Abraham. The Torah explains IVRI – Hebrew, to mean “one who crosses over.” Abraham crossed the rivers from the great civilization of Mesopotamia, to journey to the “Land of Promise.” He crossed both geographic and cultural boundaries. Abraham’s blessing is that through him and Sarah, “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” Abraham is the father of multitudes, and, indeed, Christianity and Islam see themselves as Abrahamic religions.

Abraham’s son, Isaac, is a pretty ephemeral figure in the Bible. It is his grandson, Jacob, that towers and gives us a new name. Jacob’s struggle with a divine messenger results in his name change to **Yisrael**, “one who wrestles with God.”

During his fateful encounter, Jacob struggles with who he was, one who had lied to his father and cheated his brother, to become a new person, ready to own his words, his truth, his destiny. He emerges from Jacob, the “crooked one,” to Yisrael, the “Upright one.” The Torah also speaks of us as Jeshurun, from *Yashar* – “upright.” We are B’nei Yisrael, the descendants of the “Upright One of God.”

The name Israel will yield to the term **Jew/Yehudi**. The family of Jacob/Israel grew in Egypt to become twelve tribes. In blessing his sons at the end of his life, Jacob/Israel exalts **Yehudah/Judah** above his brothers: “Judah, your brothers shall praise you ... they shall bow before you.” “The scepter shall not depart from Judah....” (Genesis 49:8-10) Judah is the ancestor of King David and of the Messiah.

The term Jew is then, of relative recent vintage, (the last 2400 years, give or take). It derives from **Yehuda/Judah**, and the land the Greeks called **Ioudaia** and the Romans **Iudaea**. It is a geopolitical, national designation.

Beyond IVRI, ISRAEL, YEHUDI – Hebrew, Israelite and Jew, the tradition proposes other designations for us:

- We are *Am Yisrael*. The people of Israel. The term *Am* denotes kinship. We are the family or household of Israel – by descent or consent, by birth or by choice.
- We are a *Goy*. The term does not mean exclusively a “non-Jew.” We are one of the “*goyei ha’aratzot*” – the nations, the “gentiles” of the world. Abraham is blessed to become a *Goy gadol* – a great nation. We are called to be a *Goy kadosh* – a nation living by holy values.
- We are an *Edah*, a community of “witnesses.”
- In worship we are a *Kahal Emunin* – “a faithful congregation.”
- We are members of the *B’rit*, a “Covenanted community.”

Terms of endearment abound. But, what happens when someone uses a word we hold dear and misinterprets it, denigrates it, insults it? We have a responsibility to speak what is true. We do not allow someone who hates you to define who you are.

Some use the word Jew in a derogatory fashion. For some, “Jew” is restricted to those who are born of a Jewish mother or have converted under Orthodox rabbinic auspices. Some claim Jews are “Torah True” if they believe and practice Orthodoxy. For others, a Jew is someone who wishes to be part of the Jewish community and joins in fellowship. It is open to all.

Language is precious. It communicates truths, identities. It can scorn or praise, inspire or insult. Freedom of speech is a right that we must safeguard, but that does not mean that everything we think should be said, nor everything we say be repeated, nor every form of speech be given a public forum. Stephen Carter wrote: “The proposition that all speech must be protected must not be confused with the very different proposition that all speech must be celebrated.”

It is a stain in the history of Western civilization that from church pulpits and political platforms, from a patronymic of pride and glory, the term Jew was tainted as a term of contempt. In early modernity, even many European and American Jews preferred not to use the term “Jew.” They deferred to “Hebrew,” as in “Hebrew Congregation.” Sometimes the term “Israelite” was preferred, as in the “Alliance Israelite Universelle.”

But the term Jew is back. Our children wear it proudly. We celebrate “Jewish” holidays, we eat “Jewish” food, tell “Jewish” jokes. We are Jews by birth and Jews by choice. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan coined the term “Jewish peoplehood.” We consist of diverse races, we come from different cultures, nationalities, and practice our ancestral faith in different ways. We are an evolving “civilization.” We are united not by uniformity of religious practice, but by shared purpose, a shared memory and a sense of common destiny.

What does the future agenda demand of us as Jews, young and old; in Indianapolis and in the United States; in Israel and in the diaspora?

The demographic study of our community conducted this past year by the Federation affords us a glimpse into Jewish identity in our city and state: A few of the findings.....

- There are 8500 Jewish households in Indianapolis, with 23,500 people in them, of which about 18,000 identify as Jews. Our median age is 35.5.
- Eighty-nine percent claim a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and are involved in Jewish activity as member of a synagogue, JCC or Jewish organization.
- Forty-four percent of those polled express a strong connection with Israel, and 38% somewhat of a connection.
- Fourteen percent of respondents experienced some form of anti-Semitism in the past year; 29% of households have had a child under 17 experience anti-Semitism. The recent vandalism at a sister congregation has heightened our awareness of this concern.
- Close to ten percent of Jews in Indianapolis are Jews by Choice.
- Sixty-two percent of children in interfaith households are being raised as Jews.

The study disclosed that we are a young community with a high level of pride. But a demographic study gives us only a still picture of who we are, not a moving picture of where we can go. We need to find opportunities to expand engagement, to invest in our synagogue and communal organizations with our treasure, talent and time. We need to find cooperative ways to create new gateways to make Jewish living desirable, affordable, accessible and welcoming for all.

In the morning prayers we say these words:

Ash'renu - Happy are we!

Ma Tov Helkenu - How good is our portion!

Uma na'im goralenu - How pleasant our lot!

U'ma yaffa yerushatenu- How beautiful our heritage!

Do we mean it?

Do we live it?

Is it true?

Do we believe that it is good to be a Jew?

Some years ago, a person I was preparing for conversion to Judaism wrote:

"Judaism is a religion of life... of daily practice ... that sacralizes the mundane. It is a faith of ancient, deep soulful traditions. Judaism is ... study and argumentation ... doing and experiencing. It is a religion of minimal dogmatism ... more concerned with ones' behaviors than with formulaic recitations of faith.

Judaism is ... the moment, the ritual, the beautiful metaphor... Judaism is ... infinite dimensions... genuine community."

I welcome you to a new year filled with all of these promises and possibilities. As our young people study the Hebrew language in the synagogue, let us also engage with the words of our ancestors.

So, as my closing Hebrew lesson today, I invite you to repeat after me these words of commitment:

Ash'renu - Happy are we!

Ma Tov Helkenu - How good is our portion!

Uma na'im goralenu - How pleasant our lot!

U'ma yaffa yerushatenu- How beautiful our heritage!

May we be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a year of health and joys; a year in which our words will matter; and our deeds lead to peace.

L'shanah Tovah tikatevu v'tehatemu.