

Lacking Shared Language

Shabbat Noach 5786

October 24, 2025

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My son Daniel is annoyed. Apparently, **he** is allowed to text **me** using Gen Z language, but it's uncool for his Boomer dad to do the same. I know you want examples. He shares good news. I respond, "yayyyyy," with five y's. Or he says something profound, and I reply, "So truuuue"—this time, five u's. One might think that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, perhaps even that adopting language that relates to the younger generation would be praiseworthy. Maybe it is, but not from one's own offspring.

The reality revealed by these trivial examples is that language is ever evolving.

I recall the first time I heard someone introduce themselves with their pronouns. I was at L'taken, the social justice program I chaperone with our high school students under the auspices of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C. Much of the programming during those weekends is implemented by Legislative Assistants, mostly new college graduates. One of them, Liya Rechtman, was leading a workshop I attended with the teens. I have known Liya since she was born. Perhaps even before that, I had received the tidings, "It's a girl!" Moreover, I thought, looking at her, there could be no mistaking that she is a woman, so I had no idea why, as part of introducing herself, Liya said, "I use she/her pronouns." I immediately texted her mother—my friend, Rabbi Hara Person—to ask what that was about. She told me to ask Liya, and I was schooled.

Nowadays, my box Zoom screen has "he" in parentheses next to my name. I don't always introduce myself with my pronouns or insist that others do that, though I do invite folks to do so when I meet them for the first time, particularly in a group like our Judaism 101 class. I understand that, while my pronouns may appear to be self-evident, that may also be the case with others who do not identify with the pronouns that I wrongly imagine to be obvious. I am grateful for grace when I mess up another person's pronouns, and I hope that they, too, understand both that language is evolving and that I was already a certain age when this particular evolution began.

In Torah this week, after the story of Noah, from which Silas will read tomorrow, we encounter the Tower of Babel. The story begins, "All the earth had the same language and the same words," foreshadowing the end of the narrative,

when, alarmed that the common language is enabling the people to cooperatively construct a tower that reaches toward heaven, God resolves to “go down there and confuse their speech, so that no one understands what the other is saying.”ⁱ A medieval commentator, Chizkuni, imagines that seventy languages already existed, but that they all understood one another. Now, though, he writes, they will no longer understand each other’s languages.ⁱⁱ

“Seventy,” in biblical parlance, often means “a whole lot.” We know, of course, that the human family has more like seven thousand languages than seventy. In a Midrash, Rabbi Yochanan imagines that, at Mount Sinai, when God revealed the Torah, God’s voice “divided into seventy voices for seventy languages, so that all the world could understand. Each and every nation would hear the voice in the language of that nation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The trouble, too often, is that we cannot in fact understand one another, even when we are all speaking English. Worse, in our increasingly coarse public life, some make a virtue of not hearing what others are saying. An early example might have been when Hillary Clinton, running for President, referred to “half” of President Trump’s supporters as “a basket of deplorables.”^{iv} She could not hear the concerns of many rural and working-class white Americans. President Trump celebrates his eagerness not to speak the language of Americans who do not support him, campaigning last year with a slogan of, Kamala Harris is “for they/them. President Trump is for you.”^v

We all have a lot of work to do, if we want to understand one another. We need not all share the same language, but we do have to communicate. Our sages foresaw the problem as they contemplated the confounding of language at the Tower of Babel, with Rashi writing, “One asks for a brick and the other brings him lime; the former attacks him and splits open his brains.”^{vi}

Language has always evolved. As a rabbinical student, I learned that biblical Hebrew is quite unlike the Hebrew employed by our rabbinic sages in the Mishnah, written several hundred years later. A modern Hebrew reader may understand the Mishnah perfectly but will have trouble making heads or tails of biblical grammar. Even the meaning of key words changes from one period to the next. When the Bible tells us to care for the גר, for we were גרים in the land of Egypt, it is speaking about foreigners. By contrast, when the rabbinic sages talk about a גר, they are speaking about a convert, a person who has joined our people and is therefore explicitly no longer a biblical גר, a stranger.

Some folks claim that God created the world in a particular way and intended no change. For example, current American and Arkansas law recognizes

only two genders, with Governor Sanders insisting in an executive order that “sex is an immutable characteristic of the human body, rooted in biology **and the created order.**”^{vii}

The story of our Torah portion, though, is more complicated. At the beginning of this week’s reading, God finds God’s own creation to be corrupt. Therefore, God destroys virtually all of it with the flood, starting over with a new human family, all descended from Noah and his wife, representing only two progenies of the first human deemed fit to propagate humanity in a new reality. Similarly, at the Tower of Babel, God finds a problem in God’s own creation of one human family with a common language or at least the ability to understand one another. God then alters God’s own creation, causing humans to speak various languages, requiring translation if we are to understand one another.

The lesson may be that God continually creates and recreates the world, and even that God intends for creation to change and to develop over time. Yes, that’s challenging. Most adults among us are old enough to remember a time that was in many ways unlike the one in which we are living, even with a different version of English, expressions and usages that we could not have imagined when we were younger. Our challenge is to see the world as it is, an ever-changing reality with ever evolving language. Then, together, in all our different languages, even all our various ways of speaking English, let us celebrate the dynamic world that God has given us, ever since Noah and Babel.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 11:1-9.

ⁱⁱ Chizkuni to Genesis 11:7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shemot Rabbah 5:9.

^{iv} “Hillary Clinton says half of Trump’s supporters are in ‘a basket of deplorables,’” *CBS News*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCHJVE9trSM>.

^v @DonaldTrumpforPresident, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/VVU7pYq3WHw>.

^{vi} Rashi on Genesis 11:7.

^{vii} “Sanders Signs an Executive Order to Protect Arkansas Students, Women, and Girls,” May 2, 2024, https://governor.arkansas.gov/news_post/sanders-signs-an-executive-order-to-protect-arkansas-students-women-and-girls/. Emphasis mine.