

Sharing a Language with G-d

Category: Bereishis, Noach

Did you know that there are Germans who speak an ancient dialect peppered with Hebrew?

The Strange German Town

In 1981, an Israeli diplomat was on a trip with his grandchildren in South Germany, when they stopped for the night in a small town called Schopfloch in Bavaria, an hour and a half from Frankfurt.

They spent the night in the home of an elderly woman. As they settled down, the granddaughter said to her grandfather in Hebrew, "I'm thirsty, I want *mayim*." To their surprise, the woman got up and brought over a cup of water.

Then the grandson complained, "Grandpa, I'm hungry, I want *lechem*," and the woman got up and brought over a loaf of bread.

Surprised, they asked her how she had understood their conversation, and she said that the German dialect in their region includes many 'Israelite words,' so she had picked up the meaning of their conversation.

As it turns out, this region in the south of Germany, and especially that specific area, was home to Jews since the 15th century. The area belonged, at the time, to Duke Etingen. He agreed to give the Jewish community a letter of protection that allowed them to engage in trade with money and animals in the nearby town of [Dinkelsbühl](#), but it was forbidden for them to live there; they weren't even allowed to stay after dark. Therefore, they lived in Schopfloch and walked back and forth every day.

In their business proceedings, they used a lot of Hebrew and Aramaic, because their Yiddish was too similar to German to be able to keep secrets. This gave rise to an entire dialect of Hebrew and Aramaic words — mainly with regard to commerce — that became commonplace. The local population, many of whom worked together with or for the Jews, learned many of these words and began to use them. At one point, almost a third of the local population was Jewish.

This dialect is known as [Lachoudisch](#), which is a corruption of the words, Lashon Hakodesh—the Holy Tongue. They used to count according to the alef-bet. Instead of counting 1 2 3, they would say, “olef, beis, gimel.” They would go to the *kotzev* (a corruption of *katzav*—butcher) to purchase *yud-beis beitzim* (a dozen eggs). From 20 to 100, they would count in Hebrew — *esrim, shloshim, arbaim*, and so on.

The teacher of the school will teach Hebrew months — Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev and so on, and the name for a dog was *Keilev* (from *kelev*). The bank was known as *mezuman* (cash) and the municipal building was called *shofet* (judge). The hospitality center was called *yushpiz* (from the term *ushpizin*) and animals were called *beheimes*.

Until today, there are elders in that community who still proudly speak their ancient and almost forgotten language, and it serves as their form of secret communication when they don't want others to understand.

A dictionary of the [Lachoudisch](#) dialect includes 400 words, but researchers believe that it included many more when the language was used in daily life.

This also affected the way they treated the Jewish people. The locals are proud to point out that on kristallnacht, they did not destroy the Jewish community buildings. For example, the Jewish cemetery — with over 7,000 marked graves dating back to the year 1620 — was left untouched. The synagogue was torched, but the fire department was quick to put out the fire — not so much out of love for their Jewish neighbors but out of concern that it would burn down the entire city.

Hebrew

What is the Hebrew language all about?

In Jewish tradition, as mentioned, it's called Lashon Hakodesh, the holy tongue. It's the language of the Torah and all of the holy writings; it's the language of the ten commandments; G-d created the world with this language.

Until the advent of modern hebrew, this language was only used for sacred purposes. Jews studied Torah and prayed in Hebrew, while using a second language for their mundane activities — Aramaic in ancient times, Yiddish in

Europe, and Ladino in Sephardic communities.

However, for the first 2000 years from creation, everyone spoke only Hebrew. In this week's Torah portion, the Torah says, "and the entire land spoke one language..." (Noach 11:1). Rashi explains that that language was the holy tongue, the language of creation (Bereishis 2:23).

And that's how it remained until the story of the Tower of Babel...

Progress

At some point, a large group of people gathered together in Babylon with an ambitious mission: they were going to build the greatest city that had ever existed. These were not just builders; they were the Innovation Generation, they were inventors and creative minds. Until their day, homes were built out of stone; those needed to be carved out of mountains, painstakingly shaped, and carefully put together. It was back breaking labor.

But this young generation invented a brick. They would take some dirt, mix it with water, dry it in the sun and bake it on a fire — and there you had a nicely shaped stone. From there, it was quite easy to simply pile them one on top of another. This was a job that even women and children were able to do.

When they began their ambitious plan, they decided to include a grandiose project — a tower that would reach the sky - a skyscraper.

Word got around about the progress that was being made in Babylon, and everyone wanted to visit. Tourists streamed from all over, migrants came to fill the endless jobs, and the managers even invited Abraham to come see their wondrous project.

The Midrash relates that Abraham came to visit. He saw that the tower had steps on its east side and down its west side. Workers would carry bricks up on the eastern side and go down on the western side; the project was meticulously planned and perfectly executed.

But then he saw something that horrified him. If a worker fell down from the tower to his death, nobody paid attention. But if a brick fell, it was a tragedy. "They would sit and cry, 'woe is to us, when will another one come into place.'"

Horried, Abraham cursed them, saying that G-d would confuse their language (Pirkei D'Rabbi Elazar 24).

Escaping the Noahide Laws

What was the source of the problem?

After the great flood, G-d gave Noah and his sons seven commandments, the seven noahide laws, all of which are centered around the basic obligation to believe in G-d and build a civilized society.

This entire project, to build the Tower of Babel, was an attempt to escape those obligations. The people of that generation didn't want to observe G-d's commandments; they wanted to be free to behave as they desired. But when there is no fear of G-d, it is no surprise that a brick could become more valuable than a human being.

However, they had one important, redeeming factor; they were united. G-d created the world such that a united front is victorious. The Rebbe once noted that the power of unity is so strong that they had the ability to, so to speak, wage war against the will of G-d.

As the verse says, "And G-d said: they are one nation and one language . . . And they will not be held back from whatever they seem to do," therefore, the only solution is, "let us go and mix up their language, so that a person should not understand the language of his friend." As Rashi describes it, "a man asks for a brick and his friend brings him cement; the first person stands above him and smashes his brain" (Noach 11:6-7).

Once they did not speak a common language, the project was an utter failure. They abandoned it and spread out throughout the entire world. (Sichos Kodesh 5737 v. 1 p. 166).

Until that day, the entire world spoke the holy tongue, but from that day onward, humanity has been divided into many languages. They all have their basis in the holy tongue, and our task is to use and elevate those languages in a holy way.

When we translate the words of the Torah to all languages, and when we use those languages to study Torah and do G-d's work, we rectify the mistake of that

generation. And then, as the prophet says, "I will transform all nations to a clear language, so that they all call in the name of G-d and serve him together."
(Tzefania 3:9)