

**Hebrew, Prayer and National Identity**  
**Rabbi Michael S. Siegel**  
**Parshat Kee Tavo**  
**August 27, 2021**

How do you say Computer in Russian, Computer?

In Spanish? Computadora

In Japanese: Com puu tor

Globalization has affected every aspect of our lives including our language. As most technological advances have been made in America it makes sense that the English terms would make their way around the world in their original form.

The fact is that our language reflects our living reality.

That would explain why the Inuit language, spoken by the Arctic indigenous **population** of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland has 90 terms for snow. Their language is a reflection of their reality.

*Which language do you think has the greatest number of words for rain?*

You might think the English but you would be wrong.

**Japanese language** has 50 Japanese nouns for rain. It rains a great deal in Japan and the Japanese love to talk about the weather.

Which language has the most words for love

I would have thought French: L'amour, the language of love.

But actually, It Is the ancient language of Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism which has 96. Who knew that Sanskrit Is the actual language of love.

And which language has the most names for God? Hebrew of course! Hebrew is unique in that it not only reflects the physical reality of the Israelites but their spiritual life as well

It a language that reflects a deep Intimacy with God.

God calls out to Abraham with the Hebrew words: Lech Lecha: Go forth!

God engages with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai in Hebrew:

אַנְכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּי יָם:

I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

Hebrew is also the Language of the song of songs which is understood as a mestaphor for the relationship between God and Israel portrayed as two lovers:

Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Lee: I am for my beloved as my beloved is for me.

Hebrew is the language of the timeless relationship between God and Israel. It is also the language of the continuing dialogue between God and Israel as reflected in the fact that the vast majority of the Siddur, the Jewish prayer book, the Mahzor that we will open on the High Holidays

is written in Hebrew the language of relationship between God and  
Israel.

Would it surprise you to know that while the Siddur is written In Hebrew, that when it comes to the act of prayer a person can offer them in their spoken language if they are not familiar with Hebrew.

It is true!

According to the majority view of our ancient rabbis, when an individual prays the majority of the Siddur can be offered in one's spoken language whether that be English, Russian or Japanese if reciting them in Hebrew would impact your ability to offer them with the proper intention, or the proper focus.

The word for intention In Hebrew is Kavanah.: A famous saying of the 11th century philosopher Bahya Ibn Pakudah encapsulates the thinking of our Rabbis on this topic: "Prayer without kavanah is like a body without a soul."

Here are their arguments:

In regard to the Shma, "Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord is One" because it begins with the word Shmah, which can mean hear or understand, the rabbis taught the worshipper must understand what they are saying: in this case we are affirming that there is one God.

When it comes to the Amidah, the standing prayer, the Rabbis argue that because we request Divine mercy it is important for us to know what we are saying for the prayer must come fully from our heart to be accepted.

The more that you study the rabbis on this subject, the more that it appears that they are doing everything possible to ensure that a person can understand the words of prayer even if it means reciting our most important prayers in a language other than Hebrew. Perhaps this was also a response to the historical nature of the moment. Since the destruction of the First Temple many Jews were living in the Diaspora, and even in Judea Hebrew had given way to Aramaic. In such a reality people needed to connect with the prayers themselves and deepest concerns of their hearts as they stood before God even if it meant offering them in a language other than Hebrew.

There is one major exception to the rule and It just so happens to be In this week's portion. This morning, our Bat Mitzvah, Naavah taught us, the power of memory when it comes to the celebration of First Fruits. The Torah makes clear that this much more than an agricultural festival, but a moment of national memory. Each of the farmers was to approach the Mizbeach, the holy alter of the national worship space with their basket of first fruits. They would put it down before the Priest and make a declaration beginning with the words *Arami Oved Avi, my father was a wandering Aramean*. The declaration begins with Jacob and moves through the suffering in Egypt, God's role in taking us out of Egypt, and ends with these words:

וַיְבִאֵנוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן-לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ:

*He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

וְעַתָּה הִגַּה הַבָּאֲתִיל אֶת-רֵאשִׁית פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתָּה לִי יְהוָה וְהִנַּחְתָּו לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

*Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O LORD, have given me.” You shall leave it before the LORD your God and bow low before the LORD your God.*

According to tradition, these words, these five verses must be recited in the Temple at the time of Shavuot in Hebrew. Even though, the spoken language of the Jews of that time was not Hebrew. I wonder if you can guess what happened.

Here is how the Mishnah describes it:

*At first those who were able to recite it on their own did so, while those who could not were assisted by a prompter. When the latter group, out of embarrassment ceased to bring their first fruits, the procedure was changed so that everybody was led by the prompter*

Why can we pray in languages other than Hebrew but we must offer this formula in Hebrew, even if the farmer might have difficulty with it? Even when we have to resort to having a prompter have each farmer repeat after them? Why not just let the Farmer recite the formula in the language they are most comfortable?

While the Rabbis offered their own reasons having to do with the manner in which the text was presented, I want to offer my own reason. This moment before the Alter was a moment of national memory. This is not your story, or my story, it is our story, our central narrative. We share It with every Jew on earth and every Jew who ever lived. This is the story that connects us to one another across time and across space. I believe that the Rabbis direct us to recite in Hebrew not because it was originally given in Hebrew, but because our story should be delivered in our national language, the language that connects Jews together.

I offer this lesson about language, and the use of Hebrew as we approach the High Holidays.

Tonight, we will gather for Selihot and we will hear a unique service that reintroduces us to the High holiday liturgy, its melodies and its words as

our congregation will be led by Cantor Rachel Brook. I offer the teaching of our tradition regarding prayer in languages other than Hebrew to encourage you to feel free to make liberal use of the beautiful English translations of our Mahzor enhanced by the inciteful interpretations. For according to our tradition what remains paramount is that each of us have the opportunity to pray from our hearts in the best possible way for each individual. But I also want you to feel free to make use of the transliterations on the page because when we sing as a community it will be largely in Hebrew.

Like the formula for first fruits, the Mahzor is the prayer service for the Jewish people. Avinu Malkeinu: Our Father, Our King, not Avi Malki: My Father, My King. We may offer the meditations of our heart as individuals, but we stand in prayer as one people. Just as we tell the story of our national identity in Hebrew, we pray aloud in the language that we share with each other and our ancestors. On these days of awe, we pray as one people before the God who brought us out of Egypt in our national language.

We are chanting the same words of Kol Nidre that will be chanted in Moscow

When we say Mi Yicheyeh u'mi yamut: who will live and who will die, we are saying the same words as Jews in London or Salonica

When the Cantor chants Hineni she offers the same Hebrew words that will be chanted by leaders of Jewish congregation in Capetown or Jerusalem.

We are one people standing before God praying in our ancient language.

In the same way that we tell our core story in the language that it was given, on the day that we stand before the throne of the Almighty we speak

in the intimate language of God and Israel: Hebrew: a language that breaks down the walls to time, and connects us In the realm of space: Hebrew brings us together as one people during these days of celebration and judgment and links us to our God, or as we say in our Mahzor:

*Kee Anu Amecha Ve Atah Eloheinu:* For we are your people, and you are our God.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!