

A Journey of Six Thousand Miles
Kol Nidrei 5777; October 11, 2016

A story, shared by a colleague [Rabbi Aryeh Azriel]:

The great Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard walks down the street in Copenhagen. He sees a sign in a store window, with the words, "We Sell Hats" beautifully carved and illuminated. He thought it was his lucky day, since, as it happens, he needs a hat. He steps into the store and says to the clerk who greeted him that he wants to buy a hat. The clerk looks confused and says: "We don't sell hats here." Now it is Kierkegaard who is confused. He turns and points at the sign. "Oh, that!" the clerk says. "No, no, you don't understand. We don't sell hats. We sell signs."

I know that for so many of us, stepping into a Jewish event, especially a service, can be confusing, and disorienting. It may be that we come for one thing, and discover that there is something else going on. We may not even be able to put our finger on the disconnect, on what is so different from what we expected. Even if what we find is positive, is a source of comfort or connection or inspiration, even then... it can be, in some hard to articulate way, not what we thought it would be when we came.

And this, from another colleague [Rabbi Bob Alper]:

It was years ago, before he was a rabbi; indeed, before he knew much about services at all. He was in Israel, and he heard a haunting chant, and he followed the sound all the way into a building. It was a service, and Yemenite – so even the accent wasn't familiar. He ventured in, and sat down towards the back, next to a man who seemed nervous. He didn't have a clue what was going on. But he just does what the man next to him does. When the man rose, he rose. When he sat down, he sat down. Everything is fine, until the man rose, he rose, and everyone starts laughing and pointing... The man next to him shoves him back down into his seat. Turns out, it's a baby naming, and the leader of the service has just said: 'Will the father of this girl please rise.'

If you have ever felt clueless or cowed in coming here, you are not alone. One of the keys to feeling less intimidated in a Jewish service is to realize that at one point or another everyone feels intimidated in a Jewish service. Even future rabbis. Sometimes, even current ones.

Actually, doing what people around you do works pretty well – most of the time. But, not always. And it's... probably not the best long-term strategy.

It can seem like a code or a clique, insider baseball, bowing this way and shifting that way and lifting on your toes, and everyone knows it but you. Well, first of all, everyone does things differently, and most of us feel like we only know part of this puzzle anyway. But more importantly: all of it, all of it, every motion, every gesture... it's all just a tool to take us to a different place.

Don't worship the tools. Study them, learn them as you can, sure – but don't worship them. They are all secondary. You shouldn't feel better -- or bitter, puffed up -- or embarrassed because you know a few more of these customs, or a bit less. They are a means to an end. They are all instrumental.

Except, perhaps, for one.

My friends, I am going to take on a tough topic with you tonight. It's not a controversial question of social justice, nor a deep moral dilemma open to honest debate – but it is, nonetheless, one of the single most challenging subjects I have ever addressed with you. I am going to speak with you... about Hebrew.

There is some irony in taking on this topic tonight. Of all the moments in the Jewish year, of all our rituals and customs, this evening is, perhaps, the one most defined by the music. The haunting power of this night is more about the melody than the message.

And if we were to address the words in the prayer itself, there is another irony. That is because the words, the chant, the incantation... *Kol Nidrei*, like the Kaddish, is not in Hebrew. It is in Aramaic.

But the topic, I think, does fit the timing. Because ultimately this is about resonance, and a depth of connection. It was the voice of a Cantor on Kol Nidrei night which reached a young Franz Rosenzweig, literally walking on his way to a church to convert to Christianity, so the story says – it called him, it kept him... and led him to become one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the last century.

And, of course, this is also a night on which we come together in greater numbers, and in greater nuance, than at any other time of the year.

בְּיִשְׁבָּה שֶׁל מַעֲלָה וּבְיִשְׁבָּה שֶׁל מַטָּה,
עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דַּעַת הַקָּהָל,
אָנוּ מִתְיָרִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעַבְרָיִימִים.

In the sight of God,
and in eyes of the congregation,
we come together as one, on this Night of Repentance.

And so, on this night of absolute inclusion, bringing together the most devout and the most distant, I want to speak of this single step which we can take, towards each other, and towards a stronger, deeper, richer, more meaningful Jewish life.

Many years ago, the writer Cullen Murphy had a feature article in the *Atlantic Monthly* about my father, and his field of work. The story, with accompanying bright red magazine cover, was called "Watching the Russians." My family likes to say that it was on the strength of this article that he was, just after that, hired as editor of the magazine. And as the editor he later wrote something that has stayed with me ever since. His column one month was about the disappearance of languages.

Current estimates are that one language loses its last native speaker and passes into history every two weeks. At this rate, nearly half the estimated 7000 languages now spoken in the world will be gone over the course of the next several decades.

What does it mean, for a language to disappear? No one thinks in it anymore, no one learns it as a child; the echoes of association in its poetry and philosophy, its literature and art are all... empty. No intimacies are shared in it; no one dreams in it anymore.

But more than that: when a language fades whole concepts vanish with it – insights, wisdom, ways of looking at the world. Language is not just about words. Words are shorthand, a cluster of concepts, vessels for values,

transmitters of tradition; they convey culture, a worldview and not just a dictionary definition. That is what makes translation an art, precision impossible. What is “*voilà?*” “Behold? There it is?” The translation can't convey the tone, the mystery, the twinkle in the eye.

The column described a number of dialects on the verge of extinction – with terms in each of them which will be gone once the last speakers pass on. One example: a single word, in an Asian island dialect with just five speakers still alive, which means “the sardonic expression of regret for something you knew was the wrong thing to go after but really wanted to work out anyway.” (In English I think we call that the “political concession speech.”)

What does this have to do with us?

In all of history, there have been many languages that have gone extinct. Only one has ever been revived. Only one. It happened over the past hundred years. And that language is – or it should be – part of our Jewish lives.

The legend is that the Russian-born lexicographer Eliezer ben Yehuda, convinced that a people in its own land needed its own language, turned to his wife Devorah on their passage to Palestine and announced: “this is the last sentence I will ever speak to you in Russian!” The couple was said to converse only in Hebrew ever after -- which was a challenge, since a spoken version of the language no longer existed.

The true story may be a little more gradual than that. And, of course, the revival was only possible because Hebrew had limped along in a semi-

comatose state, in prayer and in publications, in papers and poetry. It was experiencing a modest revival in academic discourse and scholarly journals even before Ben Yehuda's more ambitious agenda. To paraphrase Monty Python, it's not dead yet.

But it is true that through force of personality and a sheer act of will, this man made it live again. And it is also true that Eliezer and Devorah's son, Ittamar Ben-Avi, was the first child in two thousand years raised with exclusive exposure to Hebrew. He was the first native-born speaker of the language. Hard on a kid; at least anyone learning the language today has lots of company – and more fun along the way! [As a personal footnote: my first year of rabbinical school, in Jerusalem, I rented the apartment of Ben Yehuda's granddaughter. Every day I walked past a locked room in the apartment, with all of Ben Yehuda's papers in it.]

Curiously, some of this revival could have happened here. There were Hebrew journals, newspapers and literary works being published on this continent at the end of the 19th century. In fact, as historian Gary Zola notes, if you lived in 1900, and you had to place a wager on where the future of the Hebrew language lay, it would have been a better bet to say: the United States.

But that was not be. And we are left with what we have today.

In 2011, the American Jewish writer Leon Wieseltier published a provocative essay called "[Language, Identity and the Scandal of American Jewry](#)." Now, any of you familiar with Wieseltier know that he pulls no

punches. If I had written this piece I would have been... softer. A little more...diplomatic. But I think this is really important to hear.

While Hebrew had not been spoken, had not been used in an everyday way for centuries, it has played an active part in Jewish life for the entirety of our history. It is the language of our ancient sources, our sacred literature, our common prayer. In dialogue with Aramaic it is the language of Talmudic discourse; with Arabic the language of medieval thought; with Russian and German the language of Eastern European culture. Even absent native speakers and daily usage, still it echoed in us and through us; it resonated with our thinking and enriched our lives.

Except in America.

In his essay Wieseltier writes:

The American Jewish community is the first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop, and perpetuate the Jewish tradition *not* in a Jewish language. By an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write Hebrew, or Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered.

The assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history. And this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin.

Here is the part of his essay I don't agree with: Wieseltier basically claims that the contributions of American Jews have been communal, political and in service to American society as a whole – but that American Jews have made no lasting or significant contributions to *Judaism*. For a dozen different reasons I categorically disagree with him on this. I believe that real Jewish

creativity comes out of the English-speaking Jewish communities of the world – and some of what we do here is so spiritually important that Israelis, frankly, have a lot to learn from us. About Judaism.

And God forbid I should be misunderstood tonight. I think what we do is authentic; I believe that our Jewish lives are real, and potentially filled with meaning. As a rabbi my role is to facilitate your journeys, to start where you are, to embrace and encourage and support. I have learned more than I can say... from so many of you. And I *really believe* that spiritual wisdom and insight can come to us even based on English, and its echoes and associations. And I know that not everyone *can* do this. It's hard. My mother, z"l, had a Bat Mitzvah as an adult, and learning the language was very hard for her. We have transliteration in our books for a reason; it is there to reach out, not read out, to welcome and include anyone who does not, or does not yet read Hebrew.

But here's the part I do agree with Wieseltier about: that what we are trying to do here – a Jewish culture not rooted in Hebrew literacy -- is indeed unprecedented, and that, in this case, more would be better. Better, richer, deeper, what cultural specialists call a “thicker” identity.

And I agree with him that this is by and large a kind of choice, an act of will. We are, after all, the single most successful Jewish community in the history of the world, in terms of professional status, academic achievement, and intellectual depth, to say nothing of material measures. And how many years of high school and college languages did most of us take? Learn the

letters? Let another language into our lives? At the *very least* take where we are to the next level? Of course we can. Or, most of us can. If we thought it was important, we would have done it already.

My friends... it's important.

So, then, here is what I want us to do about it:

First of all, we are where we are. And, again, repeating this because it is also important: we welcome, we value, we cherish everyone on a Jewish journey of any kind – and that includes many who are not born or not officially Jewish in our families, in our communities.

Second, on most highways you'll get in trouble if you accelerate too quickly. I'm not calling for fluency, just familiarity. Whatever your level of Hebrew, take it to the next rung. Wherever you are, one step forward. Or – getting greedy -- maybe, over time, two.

Look, a vibrant new Jewish culture flourishes six thousand miles away. It is hard to convey how intertwined Israeli daily life is... how saturated it is, how enriched it is with imagery linked to the language of our people. Just two quick examples: The weekend supplement to daily newspaper, the additional section is called...*Musaf*, which is the name of the “additional” part of the service on Shabbat and holidays. And, in an example I shared two years ago, an American DC Comics show which was brought to Israeli television and named *Eshet Chayil* – “Woman of Valor,” which is a passage from Proverbs

recited to a woman in traditional homes on Erev Shabbat. Do you remember what program it was? *Wonder Woman*.

We are living through one of the greatest and most creative *Jewish* cultural revivals in all our history. And – because of an absent skill, a linguistic gap -- American Jews are increasingly at risk of just missing it.

But a journey of six thousand miles begins....

So here's how to start:

First, I am going to be adding a light layer of learning to some services this year. It may be just one word, or one root at a time. Hebrew is an amazing language! It is so structured, so logical; if you know the rules, and you know a particular root, you can actually understand something – or guess how to say some things -- that you have never heard before. You can't do that in English! So we'll share, one root at a time. It's a beginning.

Second: You have a chance to move forward on this Jewish journey with a great teacher! Our former Director of Education, Rabbi JoHanna Potts, offers Adult Hebrew at different times, for different levels. There is an introduction for those new to the letters, and a deeper exploration of concepts and meaning using texts from the book of Genesis. There is intermediate reading and vocabulary, focusing on prayers and the Haggadah. Sit at your Seder this year with new eyes and new skills! A [flyer](#) about all of these is in the lobby.

Third: I want to go further, with an additional commitment. We all have different aspirations, abilities and interests. Let's offer concierge Hebrew, catered to your needs. In the spirit of what we once called Shalom at Home, we had said that if any group of ten of you came together and wanted to study something, we would find a time and a place and a person to offer that. I am making the same offer with Hebrew. Gather a minyan; get nine other friends, figure out where you want to start, and what you want to learn – and we'll find a way to make it happen.

And if 20 of you can come together, we will even figure out how and when to offer, once again, the one day Hebrew Marathon, teaching you to read Hebrew in a single day.

Or, even, individually. Meet with me, or Rabbi Ackerman, and we'll point you to ways you can move forward, even on your own. This includes helping direct you to other resources in the community. We are here; we are happy to help you find whatever that next step might be. [Personally...]

We want you to take that step, from wherever you are, to a new place along the way. Step forward, do this and I believe... I really believe... it will deepen, strengthen, and enrich your Jewish life. And...it's good for the Jews.

But don't take my word for it. One congregant writes:

I chose not to learn Hebrew growing up in a Reform Temple. So prayers as an adult were bereft of meaning and services more an obligation than an opportunity. I have since taken classes here that focus on both reading and comprehension. Now I can find my place in the prayerbook,

without having to ask my wife. When you can read and get a sense of the prayer you are more likely to be comfortable, and feel connected. [Mike Gerecht]

For another, the process has been

more about building community than anything else. It has helped me to feel connected to a group as well as to Judaism and spirituality. My goal is just to continue learning. It is the process much more than the destination. I enjoy sitting in a room with others who are interested in the same material and having discussions about topics that don't come up in other areas of my life. [Toby Lowe]

Or:

Taking on something extra in my schedule was a big deal, but worth it. I never learned the structure or meaning of a service. One of my goals is being more comfortable saying Kaddish. When my father passed away, I wasn't able to say it without the transliteration. Sadly, at some point I'll have another need to say Kaddish. I want to do so comfortably. I'm somewhat surprised that learning Hebrew and feeling more comfortable at services has become important to me. It happened over a period of time. It's also a great way to get to know more Temple members.

And:

Learning Hebrew has been the last step in the process of feeling like I truly belong to a Jewish community and connects me to a history going back five thousand years. [Mike Rubin.]

My friends, we see around us this political season the apparent lesson that facts don't seem to matter. Or, at least, reinforced by research we can say that raw data and information are... secondary to something else.

Look, you won't remember most of the details of what someone tells you. Even your rabbi! But what you will remember, in the inner core, in the part of your soul which matters most, what you will take with you... is how someone makes you feel.

So know this, please! Please! I don't want to make anyone feel bad about the "not" part of our lives. And I also am not that concerned about how much any of us "knows." What I'm after is something else. It's the sense of connection, the act of literally reading yourself in that is so important here.

Picture this, if you can... Imagine! Imagine how you'll feel... when next year you come back here. And what you experience is an echo that goes further. A meaning that is magnified. One more door, open to you, because you have come...with a new key in your hand.

If I can help you find *that* feeling, of ownership and connection and resonance and depth, it will be a sign to hang both our hats on. If I can leave you with that... it will be a gift that keeps on giving, long into the future.

L'shanah Tovah.