

Words

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Languages are amazingly varied and flexible, despite all academic attempts to reduce them to simple formulae. We have always struggled to explain why almost every tribe had its own language, why we or God could not have made do with one. It would have made life and international relations so much easier. There are a range of stories and myths to explain this obvious failure. Hermes brought languages as gifts to mankind. Eastern myths preferred to blame goddesses, myths of gossiping housewives. A South American version is that as a result of a great flood the survivors lost touch with each other. Africa liked the idea of eating being to blame—cannibalism or a poison plant. A Bantu myth says that famine caused humans to go their separate ways. Lots of versions saw languages as gifts of goddesses specifically. We of course have the story of the Tower of Babel, and it was all part of God's plan to prevent us from uniting against Him (or Her or Whichever).

Down the ages, including in my childhood favorite Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, we have tried to find explanations. As with many things in our universe, we might not be able to know why, but we can examine what is. This is what gives historians, anthropologists, and biologists the opportunity to earn a living wage and sometimes good book reviews.

It is well known that languages are influenced by local conditions. That's why Arabic has so many different words for camels of various gender, age, and capability. Or why English is full of so many technical words for seafaring vessels and tackle and gear. And French for gustatory variety. Or why Biblical Hebrew has so many words for fear, being constantly under assault, and invasion. In English some authors (such as Gerald Manley Hopkins or James Joyce) invent words that sometimes can be guessed but more often cannot and so provide an industry for scholars to argue about. I love examining the origins of words in English, but I love even more the wealth to be mined from the Hebrew language, which is of course thousands of years older.

In Hebrew there were no vowels originally and words shared common roots. Which led both to confusion and fascination as to which words shared certain common letters. The Hebrew for judge shares the same root letters with a fool. And the fact that letters also stand for numbers has created a whole genre of *Gematria* (numerology in English, and the Aramaic is obviously connected to the Greek word geometry).

In Hebrew the same word often has multiple uses. The root *SaFaR* means to talk, count, write, and tell. Sometimes what we call Janus words (after the Roman god who faced both ways) mean opposites. The root *KaDoSH* can mean holy, yet it can also mean profane. A person set apart to be a good person or a person set apart to be corrupt. The word root *CHaTaH* can mean to sin but it also means to purify. And Hebrew also has words that only exist in the plural. *Mayim* means water, but there is no singular—only waters. And no word for face, only *Panim*, faces. (*Partzuf*, a word now used in Hebrew for a face,

is talmudic and comes from Greek.)

As with any other language, there are certain Hebrew words that recur more than others. Like prepositions, conjunctions, human actions like talking, walking, giving birth, and dying. Others like good, bad, water, sun, moon, and so forth. Those kinds of words are ones we would expect to be repeated in the Bible. But there are just as many words used in biblical texts that emphasize the positive features of house, family, children, life, and covenant. And if one expects to see lots of words expressing commands, it is significant that almost as many concern obligations of support, justice, righteousness, love, and joy.

Even so it always surprises me how often the Bible uses the word for a stranger and the obligation to be nice and sensitive to him or her. Of course, one can always select to make a point. So those who wish to see Judaism in a negative light will claim the Old Testament focuses on the fear of God and ignore all those more common references to loving God. On commands to kill, rather than to make peace or let live.

All this is background to my point that the frequency of certain kinds of words in a text are clues to the values and ideas the text wishes to emphasize. Why, for example, is the word *Simha*, Joy, repeated and emphasized only in the last book (Deuteronomy), just before they arrive in Canaan, and only once elsewhere in the Five Books? Is it because up until coming into their own land there was little to be joyful about?

In the Book of Deuteronomy there are certain words that are to be found uniquely or predominantly. *Makom*, referring to the Temple, as opposed to *Mishkan*. *Horev* instead of *Sinai*. Some will say that this indicates different timeframes or authors. But I think these word patterns indicate something else, a subtle message and emphasis. Place names change all the time. The Bible keeps on saying that this place was called by this name once, but now it has another name. It is another way of saying that names don't matter as much as what happens there. Stones can be walked on by good people and bad people. The stones remain the same.

Makom is another word that can mean opposites. It can refer to one specific place, like a Temple or to everyplace, everywhere. I believe it is intentional. The One Place, the center of Israelite sanctuary-based religious life, was an essential way of keeping the tribes together. It did not work too well. Even Judean kings desecrated Solomon's Temple (and Herod did not add too much spirituality to the Second Temple).

With the exiles, Jewish life changed towards a prayer- and study-based core that could be pursued anywhere. The One Place became anyplace, everywhere. Which is why the rabbis started using the word *Makom* for God. As we do today when we comfort mourners. Or at the Seder table. One place doesn't always work. It didn't with the Tower of Babel.

Makom leads us away from overemphasis on one place to think of many. Away from a place over there to a place in here, within our hearts. Which is where the idea of God belongs, despite our constant tendency to push the idea of

God into a different place and space outside.