

Over the past few months, I have gotten to know a bit about Babel's Blessings – a grassroots language school in England, which runs affordable language classes for adults. Mixed in with courses in Arabic, Bengali, Spanish and Turkish are lessons in Yiddish, Yiddish Song, Torah Chanting – Leyning, and a B'nei Mitzvah program, especially for those who did not have a bar/bat mitzvah, didn't like theirs, or did it in the wrong name/gender.

The funds raised in teaching these courses is used to help run a programme of free English classes for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Now, the first time I hear the title of this program, I was confused. I didn't understand it. Babel's Blessings? Who's Babel? The name of the main donor? A communist thinker I'm not familiar with? And while I'm sure students in the program are blessed to participate, why does Babel get to give out those special blessings?

Student Rabbi Lev Taylor soon explained to me that the term comes from a story in this week's Torah portion – the Tower of Babel.

The experience of that conversation reminded me deeply of one of the best lectures I ever sat through in university. Brazilian Jewish Professor Jonas Zoninsein z"l – who, wrote one of my recommendations for rabbinical school – gave a fascinating hour and a half long talk about the international monetary system, tracking from harvest to port taxes to sale, the mythical item 'x' – 'Cacau' was funded, created jobs, and eventually made its way to market. And I'll never forget his last words of the lecture.

"And in the end," he said, "you have chocolate". Because with those words, I realized he was talking not about mythical good "x" – but about Cocoa. And suddenly it all made sense. It suddenly made sense, and at the same time, it was suddenly severely limited.

I am sure I am not the only one who has had an experience like this. And I know I am setting myself up for many of these moments of confusion, of Othering, and of – hopefully – finally moments of clarity.

על-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמֵהּ בְּבָל כִּי-שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׁפַת כָּל-הָאָרֶץ

Al Ken Kara Sh'mahh Bavel – Ki sham Balal Yud Hey Vav Hey S'fat Kol Ha'aretz.

And that is why it is called Bavel – Babylon – because there the Eternal confused the languages of the all the land. (An aside, the name of the city probably was *baba -El* like *Baba Kama* or *Baba Metzia* – the Gate to God – but this provides a different etymology.)

The pronunciation of Babel and Babel isn't the only confused piece of language around this Torah portion. Let me read a section of it in more detail.

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יָרָד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם:

The Eternal came down to look at the city and tower that man had built,

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשִׁפְהָ אַחַת לְכָל־ם וְזֶה חֲחֻלָּם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא-יִבְצָר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת:

and the Eternal said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.

הָבֵה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שְׂפֹתֵם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שִׁפְתֵי רֵעֵהוּ:

Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."

Let US go down? Adonai EchaD. God is ONE. What do you mean – let US go down!? If it wasn't the Torah, I would be scandalized.

RASHI:

הבה נרדה

COME, LET US GO DOWN — He took counsel with His Judicial Court because of His exceeding meekness (Sanhedrin 38b)

Radak – Kimchi disagrees – NOT THE COURT – its just politeness when you're going to destroy to talk in this way. (Similar with when Pharoah -another King - seeks to deal shrewdly with the Jewish people – another plural moment).

Last week in Genesis we were introduced to Elohim – the singular God with the impressive plural ending. But this week's Tower story is written with Yud Hey Vav Hey. A modern-day bible teacher might say that we could read this as the Royal We. As the protagonist in The Windsor Knot might say, "We are not amused."

I will admit I am often sloppy in my grammar – sometimes colloquialisms and code-switching at the wrong moments. And- through the different ways we talk in different crowds, for different communities' language evolves. Sometimes this is a true devolution and nuance is lost. But sometimes as language changes, it adds opportunity for finer descriptions.

Looking at the Oxford English Dictionary's evolution, we find new definitions this year for "Essential Worker" – and "Social Distance" that take broken babel and make new meaning. In 2020, even as a follically challenged individual I was finally able to officially start "adulting" – paying bills, grocery shopping- not because I hadn't been doing all those things for many years – but because a word was re-defined and re-created by popular culture to be more descriptive.

The same is true for "They." Many of us grew up at a time when "they" was plural – but of course, as we go further and further from the Tower, the richness of diversity creates more opportunities for thick description, and "they" is now a great, more descriptive way, for some individuals who don't fit clearly into "him" or "her" to find an echo of the singular self.

Maimonides taught that we can never describe God. We can't say "God is Powerful" or "God lives" in the positive, because they confine God – they place God into a neat box of human understanding. Any attempt to fathom the unfathomable and confine God to language is doomed to possibly belittle and diminish the Unknowable One. God is a Man of War (Ex.15:3), yes. And God is the Rock that carried you in the womb and gave birth to you (Deut 32:18) and will comfort you – yes. And so much more besides.

Though some don't like the Singular "They" for God because it might seem like a plural understanding, while other Kinuyim – like the Unknowable One – contains the concept of One. I am starting to like it. Language has evolved here, and it bursts off the page, lacking controlled comprehension.

In that He and She are binary gender constructs inside a relatively limited range within my understanding, "They create Light and Darkness, make Peace and the everything" is potent in its lack of exactness. In its recognition of a spectrum with colours beyond the range of human sight.

Of Cacau as "mythical item 'x'" rather than the thing which makes chocolate.

While Marc Silk and others are calling for the wide adoption of They – "Ozi V'Zimrat Yah" They are my strength and my deliverance" – I have always been a fan of using names rather than pronouns – "God is my strength and my deliverance".. and I do think it is worth celebrating how language has evolved yet again to be able to let 'The Indescribable'- this time – remain indescribable.

Babel's blessing is in the diversity and beauty of language, and we are the inheritors of this gift. Now I know this next wish sounds like something I have said to kids, but it is true nonetheless, "And May it be a gift which we remember to take off the shelf to play with. To enjoy the full spectrum of expression. Oh, And don't forget to thank Them." Shabbat Shalom.

Benediction for Canadian Thanksgiving Weekend:

*How can I repay the Beneficent One for all of their gifts to me? I will raise up the Cup of Thanksgiving and invoke the Eternal One by name. (Psalm 116:12)*