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LEARNING AND SPEAKING HEBREW

Rabbi Michael Taubes

The Torah tells us that prior to the deeds perpetrated by the people of the Dor Haflagah who tried to build a giant tower in order to fight against Hashem, all the people on earth spoke one language (Bereishis 11:1). Rashi, in his commentary on this Posuk (s.v. *Safa*), indicates that this one language was Lashon HaKodesh, which we call Hebrew. This opinion is found as well in the Yerushalmi in Megillah (1:9) where this universally spoken language is also identified as Lashon HaKodesh and as the language spoken by Hashem Himself. This latter point is a reference to the fact that Hashem created the world by speaking in Hebrew, as noted by the Pnei Moshe (s.v. *v'acharina*) and mentioned as well by Rashi earlier in the Torah (Bereishis 2:23 s.v. *livos*), citing the Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah (Parsha 18 Siman 6). It also refers to the fact Hashem spoke to Bnai Yisrael in Hebrew when giving them the Torah, as noted by the Korban HaEidah (s.v. *bilashon*), and stated as well by the Midrash and by the Gemara in Berachos 13a and in Sanhedrin 21b. The Gemara in Chagigah 16a adds that Hebrew is the language spoken by the Malachei Hashareis, the ministering angels, in Heaven.

Given this unique significance and status of the Hebrew language, is there any Mitzvah to study and master or speak Hebrew? The Yerushalmi in Shabbos (1:3) lists among the attributes which describe one who is guaranteed to be worthy of Olam Habo the fact that he speaks Lashon HaKodesh; the Korban HaEidah (s.v. *Umidbar*) notes that speaking this language leads to spiritual purity. This does not, however, mean that there is a Mitzvah to speak Hebrew. It is also obvious that knowledge of Hebrew and its grammatical and linguistic rules is sometimes necessary for proper understanding of an expression in the Torah which has Halachic ramifications, as is made clear, for example, in the Gemara in Yevamos (13b. See Tosafos s.v. *keivan*) as well as in the Gemara in Rosh Hashana 3a, and as is elaborated upon by Rashi (s.v. *kidiReish Lakish*). This too, however, does not necessarily mean that there is a specific Mitzvah to speak Hebrew or that the study of Hebrew is

even considered to be a fulfillment of the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah.

It would appear, however, that according to at least some authorities, there is some kind of Mitzvah associated with speaking and learning Hebrew. The Sifrei in Parshas Eikev (Piska 10, Devarim Piska 46) states that when a child first begins to talk, his father should speak to him in Hebrew and teach him Torah, implying that this will guarantee the child a long life, and that failure to do so will unfortunately assure the opposite. The same idea is found in the Tosefta in Chagigah (1:3), though with a slight variation; this source states that when a child knows how to talk, his father should teach him Hebrew. It could be argued that according to the latter source, it is insufficient to simply speak to the child in Hebrew, thereby familiarizing him with the language in a general sense; rather, it is necessary to teach the child Hebrew so that he becomes fluent in it. In either case, it is clear that Chazal considered it important for children to be exposed to Hebrew at some level starting at a very young age; apparently, there is value in knowing the language and, presumably, in being able to use it as an adult.

The clearest formulation which identifies learning Hebrew as Mitzvah is found in the Peirush HaMishnayos of the Rambam, commenting on the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (2:1) which says that one must be as scrupulous regarding a “Mitzvah Kallah” – a minor Mitzvah – as one is with a “Mitzvah Chamurah” – a major Mitzvah. As an example of a Mitzvah Kallah, the Rambam cites studying – or teaching – Hebrew, along with rejoicing on Yom Tov (which is clearly a Mitzvah from the Torah), adding, as the Mishnah itself seems to suggest, that these “minor” Mitzvos are in fact more important than people tend to think. The Rambam here clearly considers studying Hebrew to be a Mitzvah, one which is perhaps more significant than one may think.

The difficulty is that although the Rambam’s view is clear in the Peirush HaMishnayos, he does not codify this Mitzvah to learn or teach Hebrew in his Mishneh Torah, nor does such a requirement appear in the Shulchan Aruch.

The Torah Temimah in Parshas Eikev (Devarim 11:19 os 52) refers to a separate essay which he wrote about the obligation and the importance of learning Hebrew, and questions why the Poskim omitted any reference to the requirement to learn Hebrew. Although he suggests a possible answer, he concludes that the difficulty remains. It is worth noting, however, that among others, the Chavos Yair (Siman 124) writes that it is important and indeed necessary to study Hebrew grammar, and the Vilna Gaon as well spoke of the need to be thoroughly familiar with grammar, as reported by his sons in their introduction to his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch (Hakdamas Bnai HaGra 1: Shulchan Aryah Orach Chaim). Moreover, Rav Moshe Feinstein (Shu't Igras Moshe, Even Haezer vol. 3 Siman 35) actually states clearly that there is a Mitzvah to speak in Hebrew, although he asserts that there is certainly and obviously no prohibition to speak in any other language.

The Pardes Yosef in Parshas Ki Sisa (Shemos 30:13) quotes an interesting suggestion as to the source of this Mitzvah to study and know Hebrew, linking it with the Mitzvah of 'Hakhel," a Mitzvah which obligated every Jew to assemble in Yerushalayim once every seven years (on the Sukkos following the Shemittah year) to hear the king publicly read certain sections of the Torah (see Devarim 31:10-13). The Mishnah in Sotah (32a) says clearly that these sections had to be read by the king in Hebrew, a ruling codified by the Rambam (Hilchos Chagiga 3:5). The Gemara in Chagigah (3a) implies that it was necessary for the people to understand what the king was reading; there may therefore be a Mitzvah to learn Hebrew in order to properly fulfill the Mitzvah of Hakhel. One could suggest by extension that since the Torah and most other major Jewish works are written in Hebrew, there may be a Mitzvah to learn Hebrew in order to more thoroughly master these works, especially in view of the fact that the Rambam in Parshas Ki Sisa writes that Hebrew is in fact called Lashon Hakodesh precisely because it is the language used in the Torah and other holy works.

It is interesting to note that in the Shulchan Aruch, the Ramo (Orach Chaim 307:16) rules that whereas it is inappropriate to read certain types of stories, books, and literature on Shabbos, if they are written in Hebrew, they may be read on Shabbos. The Magen Avraham (s.k. 24) explains that this is because the language itself has Kedushah and one can learn Divrei Torah simply by reading books and even letters written in Hebrew. The Taz (s.k. 13) disagrees with this last point, citing the fact that the Shulchan Aruch rules elsewhere (Orach Chaim 85:2) that one may speak in Hebrew about ordinary topics even in a place like a bathroom where Torah learning would be forbidden, but it should be noted that the Magen Avraham (s.k. 2) quotes from the Sefer Chassidim (Siman 994) that it is indeed a

sign of piety to avoid speaking Hebrew in such places. The above, of course, should not be understood as an all-encompassing permit to read on Shabbos any kind of literature which may happen to be written in Hebrew. Certain literature ought to be avoided, both on Shabbos and during the week, regardless of the language in which it is written, because the content is inappropriate, both for Shabbos and in general. Moreover, it must be stressed that there may be important distinctions which have to be drawn between modern, spoken Hebrew and the Lashon HaKodesh referred to by the above sources.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Midrash in VaYikra Rabbah (Parsha 32 Siman 5), among other places, states that one of the meritorious deeds of our ancestors in Mitzrayim was that they maintained their own language – Hebrew. Although this may not mean that they spoke exclusively in Hebrew, it is clear that they considered it important to know Hebrew fluently, and this was one of the things which made them worthy of redemption.

THE MESSAGE OF THE RAINBOW

Aryeh Klein

After the flood ends and Noach and his family have already left the ark, Hashem comes to Noach with proof to show that he will never again bring a flood of these dimensions upon the world. The proof that he gives Noach is the rainbow. The *pasuk* says "Vayomer Elokim zot oat habrit...Kashti nattati ba-anan." (Bereishis 9:12-13). The obvious question here is just what is this rainbow and why is it a proof of anything? Does a rainbow stand for something or is it just a collection of pretty colors in the sky? This question is furthered when one reads the Ramban and finds that this rainbow is not merely here, but it was even created at this moment by Hashem to serve as the proof of this *brit*. If you are going to create something new, why create a rainbow?

The Ramban quotes Chazal and writes that here, a sign was needed for the *midat hadin* of Hashem, and the rainbow became that sign. Right after the world was nearly destroyed, the people of the time needed a reassurance that everything is "fair" and that punishment and reward is meted out according to a strict judgment. The rainbow was then chosen to be the symbol for *midat hadin*. What is a rainbow? A rainbow is white light broken up into its various components causing many different colors to appear. As the sun's rays hit the air after a rainfall, water is still present in the air. The water acts as a prism, splits the white light up, and causes one to see all of the various components of the white light. Therefore in choosing to make a rainbow to represent *midat hadin*, Hashem was really explaining to the world how the judgment works.

When one does an act, either a *mitzva* or an *aveira*, many thoughts go into the action. Will this *mitzva* impress others? Will I look bad if I don't do it? Will this *aveira* cause me to look good in front of others? By the fact that the rainbow is used to symbolize man's judgment we learn that every act of ours is broken down into its various components (just like a rainbow is light broken down into its components) and only then are we given our due punishment or reward. The means matter; here the ends aren't everything. Why we do a *mitzva* factors in to our reward, not just the fact that we did it. From the rainbow we should all learn to do *mitzvot* for the right reasons and not just "get them done", as our motives and reasons also factor into the calculations of Hashem.

This idea also answers a second question regarding the rainbow. When we see a rainbow in the sky we make a blessing on it- the blessing of *zocher habitit*. Why are we making a blessing on the rainbow if it is a bad thing? The covenant that Hashem made with Noah was that he will not destroy the world with another flood, but rather, when he is angry at the Jewish people he will send them a rainbow to show that no matter what he will keep his word and not destroy the world despite the actions of the Jews. If the rainbow is a sign that the world is currently worthy of being destroyed if not for the promise of Hashem to Noah, why then do we say a *bracha* when we see one? The Gemara in Chagigah (16a) says that "It is better for someone to not be in this world if he degrades his Creator". The Gemara asks who this person is and how he is degrading his Creator? One opinion cited to answer this question says that this refers to a person who stares intently at a rainbow. I believe that the reason behind this is that by staring at the rainbow you are "staring" at the *midat hadin* of Hashem, which the rainbow represents, and questioning it and trying to divine how it works and how to get around it. By doing that, one is denying the power of Hashem as he is questioning a system that he put into place and commanded us to believe in- better for that person never to have been born into this world. This also answers the question of why we make a *bracha* on a rainbow even though at a quick look it appears to be a curse. The reason we make a *bracha* on a rainbow is that the rainbow represents not only the *midat hadin* of Hashem, but also our commitment and resolve to not question it, and to believe in it. We see the rainbow and remember that Hashem is not punishing us, and at the same time we square our shoulders and resolve to better serve Hashem without question. The rainbow is not only a covenant between God and us, but rather it is also a covenant between us and God where we promise to believe in him and his judgment.

INDIVIDUALS VS. COMMUNITY

Two terrible human calamities happened in this week's *parsha*; the flood and the destruction of *migdal Bavel*. One ended with total destruction of the world while the other ended with a punishment that seemed less harsh, for people did not die, they were merely separated. This is puzzling. Why should the punishments be so different? What did the *dor hamabul* do that was so much worse than the *dor haflaga*?

As it turns out, we know much more about those who died in the flood than those who participated in *migdal Bavel*. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 108a) tells us that the *dor hamabul* transgressed everything but only got punished because of thievery, which we know was done very treacherously. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Bava Metzia 4:2) explains that each person in the marketplace would steal one grape from the grape merchant so that by the time he got to his stand he would have no grapes but no one to take to court. Rashi furthers our understanding of these people by saying that they were guilty of both *avoda zara* and *gilui arayos*. Thus, we see that the *dor hamabul* was just about as wicked as they come. But what about the *dor haflaga*?

There is much debate about what the tower they built was for, and each opinion paints a different picture of that society. One view quoted by Rashi is that it was an attack on Hashem. Another is that they wanted a tower to hide in during the next flood. Rabeinu Bachya claims that it was an attempt to stay together, rather than spread apart and fulfill Hashem's command to fill up the Earth. The common denominator between all of these approaches is that the people were united. They worked together to fight, or to save themselves, or to stay together. This is illustrated by yet another *midrash* that says that people would not care if a man died in the construction of the tower but they would weep if a brick fell, showing that they cared more about the community than each individual. Rabbi Goldin points out that this is the exact opposite of what happened during the time of the flood. The people of that generation were divided, as they had no respect for each other and were extremely greedy. During the time of *migdal Bavel*, however, the people were so unified that they forgot their own responsibilities. This explains the difference in punishment for the two generations. The individuals of the *dor hamabul* were annihilated, while the community of the *dor haflaga* was decimated. Each one got a fitting punishment.

However, we still must wonder why the *dor hamabul* got an objectively worse punishment. The *dor*

haflaga rebelled against Hashem in the most blatant way, while the *dor hamabul* simply ignored Him and did what they wanted to, including theft and immorality. Furthermore, we must wonder why the theft was the final cause of their demise as opposed to their other sins. Drash Dovid explains this phenomenon based on the Mishna (Avos 1:2) that says that the world stands on three pillars: Torah, *avoda*, and *chesed*. Torah and *avoda* were long gone by the time of the *mabul*, so the atrocities that they committed in terms of *avoda zara* and *gilui arayos* did not bring destruction on the world, even if they were more grotesque than anything else the world has ever seen. What sealed their fate was the breaking of the third and final pillar upon which the world was resting. When they shifted from *chesed* to *chamas*, evil, there was nothing left for them, therefore they were destroyed. The *dor haflaga*, by contrast, left that final pillar standing, the pillar of *chesed*. They wanted to fight Hashem and evade punishment, but they were good to each other, so their world could be spared, just not their society. We also need to learn to create a society where we help each other, but our task is to help each other become better, not to work together for evil. If we do this we will be the opposite opposite of the *dor haflaga* and we should be *zoche* to have our own central building- the Beis Hamikdash which we hope will be rebuilt soon.

NOACH'S MISTAKE

Yisroel Ben-Porat

After a prolonged period of planetary destruction, Noah and his family finally returned to earth. Soon after, Noah planted a grapevine, drank its wine, and became inebriated. This mistake led to a humiliating encounter with his sons that had disastrous repercussions (Bereishis 9:20-25). Through this incident, the Torah shows us the consequences of excessive drinking.

The episode of Lot and his two daughters also serves as a warning. Lot knowingly allowed his younger daughter to ply him with wine, resulting in the conception of Ammon and Moav, two longtime national enemies of B'nai Yisrael (Bereishit 19:30-38).

The Torah similarly cautions us with its description of the Sotah process (Bamidbar 5:11-31), in which a Jewish woman is suspected of adultery. Chazal attribute the cause of adultery to be light-headedness that comes from drinking wine (Sotah 2a; Rashi). Immediately following, the Torah prescribes the Nazirite vow as a method for abstention from wine (Bamidbar 6:1-21). The Torah's view on excessive drinking is clear.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 70a) comments that after

Noach sinned, Hashem said to him, "Did you not learn from Adam HaRishon's mistake? His [downfall] was only caused by wine." This, of course, follows the opinion of R' Meir that the Eitz HaDa'as was a grapevine, "which brings more misery to the world than anything else". Thus, Noah is called "Ish HaAdamah" (Bereishit 9:20) because he followed in the way of Adam and made the same mistake (Rashi, *ibid*).

What caused Adam's (and Chava's) downfall? Chazal tell us, "Anyone who adds, detracts" (Sanhedrin 29a). Hashem only forbade Adam to eat from the Eitz HaDa'as, but when Adam transmitted the commandment to Chava, he added a *chumra* (stringency) not to touch it (Sifsei Chachamim). This, however, was the very way through which the Nachash was able to trick Chava - and ultimately Adam - into eating it (Rashi, Bereishis 3:4), resulting in eternal curses.

However, this is difficult to understand in light of another statement of Chazal, "Make a fence (*syag*) for the Torah" (Avos 1:1; see also Yevamos 21a). Chazal enacted countless *gzeiros* (decrees) in order to guard the Torah. Doing so emulates Hashem, who himself made *syagim* in the Torah for many mitzvos. One example (there are many) is the aforementioned Nazir, who is forbidden to consume not only wine, but also any derivative thereof (Bamidbar 6:3-4), so that he not come to drink the wine itself (Bamidbar Rabbah 10:22). Clearly, the *syag* is a positive preventative tool. So what was wrong with Adam's *chumra*?

Chasam Sofer suggests that had Adam forbidden touching the fruit, it would have been only one *gzeirah*, which is recommended. Adam erred, however, and forbade touching the entire tree. This constituted a *gzeirah* on top of a *gzeirah*, which is generally forbidden (Rashi, Beitzah 2b), because it will inevitably become impossible to keep the *gzeiros*, ultimately resulting in the violation of the original prohibition.

Perhaps we can suggest that Noah, rather than creating too many restrictions in an effort to safeguard the prohibition, chose to not make any *syagim* and resolved to keep the Sheva Mitzvos B'nei Noach punctiliously. That, too, was a mistake, the exact opposite of Adam's. Noah failed to see that excessive drinking of wine - which was not forbidden by the Sheva Mitzvos B'nei Noach - would likely result in sin.

Simply put, Adam was too stringent and Noah was too lenient. The lesson we can learn from this is that we must strive to achieve balance in our keeping of the mitzvos, and to utilize Hashem's creations only for good. May we merit to witness the coming of Mashiach speedily in our days. Have a good Shabbos!