

Now You're Speaking My Language:
Keeping our Jewish Community Together in the Midst of Crisis
Kol Nidrei 2024 - 5785

Diaspora Jews often speak two or more languages. I'm not just talking about verbal languages like Hebrew or English or Yiddish. I'm talking about the way we speak the cultural language of Judaism in addition to the cultural language of the land we're in.

American Jews know know about “corndogs” and “latkes.” We can call someone “cool” or “menschy.” We know that hands like this (*do priestly hands*) could reference the ancient priests of the Jerusalem temple or Dr. Spock. We know the words to popular American Christmas carols, many of which were written by Jews anyway. But we also know the difference between Matzah and Hametz, between a Sukkah and a Lulav. This ability to alternate between verbal or cultural languages is called “code-switching.” It's no coincidence that Superman's creators were American Jews. Like Superman, we can function in two different worlds.

Being multilingual in this way is an essential feature of diaspora Jewish life. Being culturally and literally multilingual builds our intelligence, multiplying our resources and references, expanding our worldview. It builds our compassion, as we can learn to see a part of ourselves in different kinds of people.

We are so at ease “code switching” between American and Jewish that we have come to speak various languages even amongst ourselves. American Jews have subcultures, tribes within the tribe. Lately, these tribes have become so distinct that they speak different “languages.”

Our differences are most pronounced when we speak about Israel. Progressive and conservative Jewish tribes have grown so far apart in their discussion that they use different words, or use the same words to mean the different things. Consider the distinctions in geographic terms. Some of us speak only of “Israel” while others refer to the region as “Israel/Palestine.” The area where Palestinians live is called Judea and Samaria by some, and the West Bank or the Occupied Territories by others. Some refer to non-Jews living in Israel as “Arab Israelis,” using a more general identity label. Others call non-Jewish citizens of Israel “Palestinian Israelis,” a term which seems like an oxymoron to others. And this is just the list of words referring to geographic regions and people.

Ultimately, many of us **have the same goals**. We want safety and security. We want peace and prosperity. We want Judaism to thrive. We just have very different ideas about how to get there. Those different ideas have generated different corresponding languages, and driven us into different camps. It might be possible for those camps to coexist, but right now we are shooting barbs at each other, in the form of misunderstood words.

This situation has fragmented our people, breaking us down like the workers at the tower of babel. Unable to communicate, we cannot collaborate, and our joint project fails, ensnared in misunderstanding.

Many of us are saddened by this division and frightened of its implications. But we can overcome it. **In this season of “return” let us return to our Jewish brethren with whom we disagree. Unity is not about convincing one another, but about listening, understanding, and treating each other with kindness and respect. We must agree to remain in community, in covenant with one another despite our disagreements. In this way we can**

return to the most important goal of all: maintaining an Am Yisrael Chai, a living Jewish people.

Throughout our long and storied history the Jewish people have always had internal diversity. In biblical times there were two kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. In the classical era there were Hellenistic Jews and the Hasmoneans. Diaspora subcultures formed different languages: Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo Arabic. Modern Jews take part in opposing political and religious movements. Amongst ourselves, we quip that two Jews have three opinions. As Golda Meir said to Richard Nixon, “You are the president of 150 million Americans; I am the prime minister of six million prime ministers.”

There have been sharp divides among Jews in all eras, and sometimes these breakdowns in understanding have broken us. The rabbinic houses of Hillel and Shamai issued such distinct rulings that they almost created irreconcilable communities. Hasmonean and Hellenistic Jews went to war with each other. Capitalist and Communist Jews ratted each other out to unfriendly authorities.

Misunderstanding turns us against one another, and sometimes our disunity is exploited by our enemies. In the talmud, the rabbis trace the destruction of the temple to a misunderstanding between Jews. The beginning of the end of the second temple came when one Jew snubbed another at a party. An invitation intended for Kamza was accidentally sent to someone named Bar Kamza, an enemy of the host. When Bar Kamza showed up, the host said, “What are *you* doing here? Get out!” Trying to save face, Bar Kamza said, “Since I am already here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.” The host refused. “Let me give you half the cost of the party,”

Bar Kamza offered. Still, the host refused. Bar Kamza offered to cover the cost of the whole party but still, the host threw him out.

Humiliated, Bar Kamtza turned his anger not only toward his host, but to the rabbis who watched from the sidelines. Bar Kamza decided to punish the rabbinic bystanders by telling the Roman government that they were disloyal. His incriminating statements fueled the Roman's ire and led them to destroy the temple and exile the Jews.

This story expresses wishful thinking; the rabbis wish they could return to the scene of the party and stop the host from rudely excluding Bar Kamza, thus preventing the destruction of the temple. It is a sobering thought, especially in light of our own tendency to sometimes make Jews with whom we disagree feel unwelcome in our community.

As with Jews who can speak “American” and “Jewish,” there are those among us who are multilingual when it comes to the Israeli and Palestinian conflict and its attendant political “tribes.” I count myself among them.

I grew up in the Conservative movement, attending a pluralistic Jewish Day school where we waved Israeli flags and wore blue and white on Yom Ha'atzmaut. I attended various Jewish summer camps where birkat hamazon was sung and the Israeli flag was raised each morning. My family belonged to a Conservative synagogue whose rabbi was a major player in the AIPAC world.

In this atmosphere I grew up a proud Zionist, traveling to Israel with my family to tour and visit our Israeli cousins, spending a summer in Israel including an extra week working on a kibbutz, and going on March of the Living. I speak Hebrew and “pro-Israel” fluently.

I also grew up to be interested in social justice, an interest that sprouted from my strong connection to my grandmother’s Holocaust survival. I believed that remembering the Holocaust meant saying “never again” to oppression for all people. Interested in Middle East peace, I chose to study Arabic in college. Through the language and its teachers I grew more familiar with the Arab perspective on Israel, not least during my semester abroad in Alexandria, Egypt. There I had a roommate who had lost family members and a home in the Sinai peninsula during the ‘67 war with Israel. When I revealed to her that I was Jewish, she insisted that she held no animosity toward Jews, only toward Israel. It was a perspective I struggled to make sense of, and still do.

I also had one of my most memorable experiences of Yom Kippur there, attending a local synagogue in Alexandria. Unlike shuls in Cairo, this synagogue was defunct, but every year Alexandrian Jews now living in Israel would return to their native city to observe Yom Kippur. These Jews spoke a fascinating amalgam of cultural and verbal languages. When the sun had set and the prayers were still going, the antsy congregation said, “Yalla! Le soleil se couche! *Bo nochal k’var!*” (That is, in Arabic, French and Hebrew, Let’s go! The sun has set! Let’s eat already!)

When my semester was over I went to visit my cousins in Israel. My cousins and other Israelis would engage with me in Hebrew, knowing that I spoke it, but I was embarrassed when, after 5 months of immersion in Egypt, Arabic

words would come out of my mouth instead of Hebrew. Later, I decided to use my Arabic skills to visit Palestinian territory. I took a bus to visit Bethlehem, terrified to utter a word of Hebrew and be identified as Jewish. Ultimately the visit was pleasant: Bethlehem was reminiscent of Jerusalem in many ways, with its limestone buildings and olive trees, and the people there were very kind and welcoming. But my deep fear of accidental “code-switching,” revealing myself to be sympathetic to the other side, left a lasting impression.

After college, I returned to Israel on a fellowship with an American non-profit working on justice in Israel. While living in Tel Aviv I met many American Jews and Israelis working in the social justice movement in Israel. Many of the young American Jews I met through that work had similar experiences: their Jewish community had taught them to love justice and peace and also to love Israel. But when they began to pursue justice and peace *in* Israel, they were rejected by their home communities. They asked to bring justice-seeking Israeli speakers to their shuls, or to post a map of Israel with the boundaries of Gaza and the West Bank on their camp walls, but they were told they could not. They were made to feel unwelcome because of their request. These young Jews then felt confused and adrift, unsure how to connect to their beloved Judaism.

Having been rejected by their childhood Jewish day schools and synagogues, many of the American Jews I knew there now affiliate with start up Jewish communities and movements for justice and peace rather than mainstream institutions. I obviously chose a different path, yet I still speak the language of these young Jewish activists. To you I say: I believe there is a place for us in the Jewish mainstream. The way forward is to add our voices to the collective, not to fragment into separate organizations. If this resonates with you, I hope we can find a way to incorporate your voice here at Beth El.

I know, too, that exclusion does not go only one way, politically. As the progressive view becomes more mainstream among young Jews, young conservative Jews can feel left out. In rabbinical schools, students with ardent conservative views have said that they feel sidelined and unwelcome in the school community. I have also seen how strident progressive Jews can be unwilling to listen to those with whom they disagree. In the alumni whatsapp group of a Yeshiva I attended, I was sad to see that several alumni simply left the chat when they found they disagreed with the rabbi's Israel politics.

Since October 7th, many progressive Zionist Jews have become uncomfortable on the left, too, as antisemitism has flourished there and Zionism has become an unwelcome belief. My own heart has broken as I sense Zionism becoming taboo in some interfaith spaces. Interfaith activism and Zionism are core to my belief system and I don't want to divorce them.

Knowing these different languages spoken within the Jewish community has been both helpful and heartbreaking to me as a rabbi. It is helpful to me because I am able to meet people wherever they are, in their own language. When congregants speak to me about their deep love of Israel, their care for their family there, their concern for Israel's security, their fear of terrorism, I get it. When others tell me that the signs saying "We Support Israel/ We Stand Against Terrorism" make them unsure if they belong here, I get it. I can meet you all where you are. In this way, my bilingual skills around Israel politics have been useful.

Yet I am heartbroken, too, when I see how others misunderstand one another, and judge one another harshly through those misunderstandings. Judgment

and misunderstanding have caused us to shun one another, or to keep away from particular spaces for fear of hearing something we do not agree with.

In the current war with Israel and Hamas, there are a lot of questions I find difficult, if not impossible to resolve. But one issue I feel totally sure about, the one in which I plant my moral compass, is my desire to prevent the Jewish people from breaking apart, from ostracizing one another, from hurling barbs at the other's camp. I know that our future depends upon our ability to remain united as a people, even as we express different political views.

It is difficult to remain in community with those whom we disagree. Yet tonight our liturgy reminds of our commitment to do just that. We introduced the Kol Nidrei prayer, a crucial moment in achieving God's forgiveness, by agreeing to pray "*im ha'avaryonim*" with the sinners. By standing before God as a collective, we realize that we might be linking ourselves to someone who has committed an even worse sin than we have. Yet no matter how bad another individual's sin, we know that we can make a stronger petition together rather than apart.

I told you about the story of division between Jews causing the downfall of the Jerusalem temple. But there is also the story of how overcoming differences was the foundation of the temple. Before King Solomon built the temple, the hill was home to two brothers who had jointly inherited their father's farm. One was single, and the other had a large family. They divided their land in half and farmed equally. But each lay awake at night, troubled about his portion. The single brother thought, "how can I take half of the wheat when my brother has so many more mouths to feed?" The married brother said, "how can I take half of the wheat when my brother has no one to

support him in his old age?” In the middle of the night, each brother secretly brought some of his own wheat to his brother’s shed, until one night the brothers ran into each other, realized what the other was doing, and embraced in love. This place of brotherly love was chosen as the holy home of the temple mount.

In the Bar Kamza story each party assumes the worst of the other, viewing their fellow as an enemy. In the temple story the brothers assume the best of each other, showing concern for the other’s needs. Both stories contain misunderstanding and division, but the difference is the reaction to that division.

Differences among Jews are inevitable, but mistreatment is not. We can choose to show care and concern for our fellow Jews despite our differences, rather than suspicion and enmity. Where suspicion can destroy us, care can save the Jewish people and build a temple of love.

When it came time to commemorate October 7th, the Harrisburg rabbis came together to discuss how we should memorialize the day in the community. Each of us represents communities with different focuses and views, and it was not easy to come to consensus. Yet we remained committed to commemorating the day together, and through this commitment we found common ground. Standing on the bima beside my colleagues on October 7th, and earlier on Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha’atzmaut, was a proud moment for us, and gave us hope. This is my vision for our community, davening together despite our differences, sitting *im ha’avaryonim*. I hope that it is one we can share.

Being able to speak multiple verbal or cultural languages is our Jewish diaspora superpower. Like Superman we can slip easily between worlds, a skill that I believe has contributed to diaspora Jews winning a disproportionate amount of Nobel prizes, mastering fields from physics to economics to literature and Peace. In this time of internal Jewish division, we must use our code-switching skills to understand one another. We must learn to speak one another's languages, so we can approach each other with compassion. We must ourselves after the brothers who united on the hill, rather than the host who excluded his guest.

As we stand tonight, praying "*im ha'avaryonim*," with "the sinners," I pray that in 5785 we will commit to standing and praying together with those whom we disagree, we will give each other the benefit of the doubt and remain in covenant. I encourage you to take the time to listen to your fellow Jews. If you sense that you disagree with someone in your community don't stay away from them, heaven forbid, and don't try to convince them of your opinion, either. Just listen.

Yehuda Amichai said in his famous poem, "From the place where we are right, flowers never grow in the spring." This year, let's try to be right a little less, and together a little more, so that flowers of peace may grow this spring.