

According to the 20th century philosopher Mordecai Kaplan, Judaism is not just a religion, it is a religious civilization, shaped by its land, its law and culture, its music and food and literature and art and dance and most of all, its language. Language conveys all of the inside information about a culture. You can discern the most important values from examining and analyzing the language.

Judaism has had several regional Jewish languages throughout the centuries -- Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, and Yiddish are the most well-known. But the language at the heart of Judaism from the days of the Bible up to today is *Ivrit*, Hebrew. Judaism without Hebrew is stripped bare of its essence. You can translate the Hebrew word *kosher* into English as 'fit,' but the word has a host of cultural implications, foods, flavors, holiday celebration, ethical implications, and memories that Google Translate cannot capture.

Hebrew is a lens through which Jews see the world. To understand Jewish humor, you need to know some Hebrew because language is really one giant inside joke. When you speak the language, you understand what that society, culture, or civilization finds funny. When you don't speak the language, you miss many of the nuances of its humor.

I'll give you some examples, starting with the very first Hebrew-based joke I ever learned. The joke is only funny if you know some Hebrew, but I want to tell the joke first for those who understand, and explain afterwards for those who miss the word play and the tension that makes it funny.

An Israeli moves to New York because he hears that he can start to build a fortune there. Unfortunately, his English is very limited. But a friend of his gets him a job as an elevator operator, telling him all he needs to know are two words: *Olim* in English is 'going up' and *yordim* in English is 'going down.' When the elevator doors open, you announce either *olim* or *yordim*. His first day on the job, he does well all morning, but after lunch it gets busy and he's tired. The door opens, and can't remember how to say 'going down.' In desperation he blurts out, *yordim!* The group getting on the elevator responds, *Lo, lo, hozrim!*

The joke is only funny if you know that *olim* means going up, but it also means immigrating to Israel. And *yordim* means going down, but it also means emigrating from Israel. And in the era of this joke, which is the era in which elevator operators existed, there was a bit of shame for an Israeli to leave Israel for good, as if they had betrayed their country, but there were also many, many, Israelis who came to this country because it was difficult to make a living and support a family in Israel. So a whole crowd of people getting on an elevator in New York speak Hebrew, that's kind of funny and unexpected, but when they thought they were being called *yordim*, they responded, *lo hozrim*, no we're returning! So it turns out that not only were they Hebrew speakers, they were all Israeli carrying around that sense of guilt for leaving Israel. And when they called themselves *hozrim*, they used a word which also carries with it a sense of the phrase *hozrim bitshuvah*, going back in repentance, repenting of one's bad behavior and going back to Jewish observance. So there is the tension of loving Israel, not wanting to leave and being a little ashamed, needing the money, but always wanting to repent and return, not emigrate for good.

You might also recognize the word *olim* in the form of *aliyah* -- meaning both immigration to Israel as in making *Aliyah*, and coming up to the Torah to recite the blessings over the reading.

Why is 'going up' the same as immigration and saying a blessing over the Torah? Because when you went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festivals in the Biblical world, you literally went up to Jerusalem, which is in the mountains, and when in Jerusalem you literally went up to the

Temple, at the top of one of the hills of Jerusalem. So you go up to Torah, you go up to Jerusalem, you go up to Zion, the name of that mountain and the symbolic name for the movement to return to the land, Zionism, so when you go to Israel, you are going to a place that Jewish text and tradition understand to be literally and spiritually elevated above other parts of the world.

Speaking of Israel, the term ‘West Bank’ has a different association and different implications than the Hebrew based term for the same region, ‘Judea and Samaria.’ Referring to that piece of land as the West Bank of the Jordan river is connected to the original United Nations partition of the area into a Jewish State and an Arab State. The Arab State, Jordan, held land on both on the East Bank and the West Bank of the Jordan river. In Hebrew, the area is more often called Judea or Yehudah, the area assigned to the Biblical tribe of Judah, and Samaria or Shomron, the capital of Northern Israel when the land split into two kingdoms following the death of King Solomon. So ‘West Bank’ is like a slave name, a name others gave to this piece of land, a remnant of their control over us, Judea and Samaria is our name, given to that region by our Biblical stories.

Staying Biblical, notice how Jewish Theology is baked into the essential structure of Hebrew. Adam, *Adam* was created from *adamah*. The color of *adamah* is *adom*, reddish-brown. The color of the substance flowing through the Adam’s veins and arteries, his dam or blood, in its dried form at least, is *adom*. *Adam* and *dam* and *adamah* are all all made up of the same substance, which is why Judaism prefers below ground burial after death. But seen through a wider lens, human beings, the earth, the sun, and the planets and the stars are all made up of the same fundamental atomic particles, we are all made up of little bits of the substance of stars and planets.

Moving on to another common word: the word *barukh* is linguistically related to the word knee - you bless or praise God by kneeling before God, a posture we take literally only in rare instances of prostration on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, acknowledging God as the source of all things. *Barukh* also evokes the image of a related word, *B’reikha*, a pool. *Barukh ata Adonai*, You are the source of blessing, Adonai, from which blessings flow like water from a bubbling spring.

Some words stalk Jewish life: *Kadosh* appears every time you say a berakha, in the *Kedusha*, in the *Beit Hamikdash*, in the *Kaddish*, which pops up multiple times in a service, in the *kiddush* after the service, and even follows you after you die, in the *Hevra Kadisha*. *Kadosh* is ‘holy,’ *Kedushah* is the section of our prayer where we proclaim God’s holiness, The *Beit Hamikdash* is the place of holiness, the Temple in Jerusalem; *kaddish* is the liturgical marker ending a service or a section of a service one of which is reserved for mourners; *kiddush* is the sanctification of wine which begins our Sabbath meals in the evening and Saturday afternoon, so it has taken on the secondary meaning of the food that accompanies the wine; and the group of people who do the holy task of washing and dressing bodies to prepare them for burial is the *Hevra Kadisha*.

Moving to another word – Hebrew doesn’t exactly recognize the separation of church and state, at least linguistically. We have the *keneset*, Israel’s parliament; the *Beit Hakeneset*, the synagogue, and the *k’nisiya*, the church. These are all places which we enter to congregate, the basic meaning of the common root that produces these three divergent words.

Limmud, the international conference celebrating Jewish learning, has a local Michigan presence in Detroit, where you can go next March 27 *lil’mod* and *l’lamed*, to learn or to teach, Talmud and *limudei yehadut*, Jewish studies. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a *lamdan*, a well

learned person, just a regular *melamed*, teacher, or just want to learn, Limmud has something for everyone.

The Hebrew word *olam*, denoting infinity in time and in space, understood the connection between the dimensions of time and space long before Einstein. And long before Buzz Lightyear, Jews have been saying *l'olam va'ed*, 'To Infinity and Beyond!'

To riff on Lennie Bruce, Worship is Christian. Tefillot is Jewish. The Bible is Christian. The Tanakh or Torah is Jewish. A Prayer Book is Christian, a Siddur is Jewish.

Hebrew is the sustaining force of Jewish life, the insiders' language, the secret password and handshake of the Jewish community. Hebrew, or its derivative Yiddish forms, for Ashkenazi Jews, gives us a stamp of authenticity by connecting us with the words of the Tanakh. My suggestion for you in the year 5783 is to devote some of your time to improving and expanding your Hebrew skills. Learn some simple Hebrew phrases and common vocabulary or learn some common words from the Siddur or Torah. It is an investment that will pay dividends in opening up the Siddur, the Bible, and the values of Jewish life. Whatever your Hebrew level, try to go up one notch. Download the Streetwise Hebrew podcast to learn contemporary Hebrew words. Use the Duolingo app to learn some conversational Hebrew, at any level. Work with Elisabeth Rosewall to improve your Siddur reading or Joe Korn to improve your contemporary Hebrew skills.

Dip your town into the *b'reikhat Ivrit*, the pool of Hebrew. A commitment to expand your Hebrew in 5783 will be a *brakha* for you, enriching your life and opening up your *neshama la'olam* to an infinite world of meaning and depth.