

Torah From the Holy Land

A Weekly Torah and Tefillah Commentary by Sam Blustin

Torah: Lashon Hakodesh (the Holy Tongue)

יג וַיְבֹא הַפְּלִיט וַיִּגְדַּל לְאַבְרָם הָעֵבֶרִי וְהוּא שָׁכַן בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵי מִמְרָא הָאֱמֹרִי אָחִי אֲשֶׁלַל וְאָחִי עֵנֶר וְהֵם בְּעַלֵי בְרִית־אֲבָרָם
Then there came the fugitive and told Abram, the Ivri, who dwelt in the plains of Mamre...
(Bereshit 14:13)

At this point in our story, Abram's nephew, Lot, has just been kidnapped, along with Lot's family and possessions, by the Four Kings. A survivor of the attack runs to Abram to alert him to Lot's status, and Abram immediately mounts an army and rescues Lot. What's of interest here is the description used for Abram, *Ivri*. Radak comments that name means he was a descendant of Eber, who spoke *Ivrit*, Hebrew. Abram's descendants are called *Ivrim* because they are the only ones who spoke Hebrew, the rest of Eber's descendants speaking Aramaic.

The language of Hebrew has been vitally important to the Jewish people, and remains so today. Not only is it the language that connects us to our religious texts, but it's a language that remains alive and vibrant, living in the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the founder of modern Hebrew, knew this truth when he wrote in the late 1800s: "If we see today's youth leaving their ancient tongue it is because they consider it dead and worthless. All our labor to try and make them see its value will be for naught- for only a 'Hebrew' can feel for his tongue. Let us, therefore, revive the language and plant it in the mouths of our youths and they will never betray it - but we shall not be able to revive the Hebrew language except in the land where the Hebrews form a majority of the inhabitants." While Ben Yehuda's prophecy rings true with regard to creating the new Hebrew, I also believe it is the key to creating the new Jew. Without knowledge of Hebrew, a Jew remains an outsider in his/her own religion. They are forced to interact with text through the interpretation of someone else's translation, never learning how to challenge the text, or dig into the multiple interpretations of a text. Most of Jewish commentary lays beyond the reach of the non-Hebrew reader, inaccessible. And most problematic of all, much of the Hebrew taught in our schools is uninspiring to today's youth, who consider it "dead and worthless". Let us resolve to cultivate the mindset of *Avram ha-Ivri* in our communities, restoring Hebrew as an integral and necessary part of both youth and adult education. Let us speak Hebrew in our homes and in our shuls. And let us interact with our tradition as full Hebrews, fluent in the language of our past and our future.

Tefillah: The Shield of Avraham

After Abram defeats the Four Kings and redeems Lot and his family from captivity, Abram returns to a celebration thrown by the 5 Kings who were attacked. Despite his military might, Abram is worried. Rashi says that he fears punishment for the lives he took in battle against the

Kings, for his victory was a miracle, and he would perhaps be punished by way of retribution or revenge. HaShem comes to Abram in a vision, saying “fear not, Abram, I am a shield for you (*magen lecha*), and your reward will be very great” (Bereshit 15:1). This language is picked up in the chatima, the conclusion, of the first bracha of the Amidah: “*Baruch Ata HaShem, Magen Avraham*”, Blessed are You the Name, shield of Abraham. It recalls, three times a day, a time when Avraham, who is known for the trait of *chesed*, lovingkindness, is forced to go out of his comfort zone, venturing into g’vurah, strength. It’s precisely in that moment, when he is vulnerable and inexperienced, that HaShem appears to him and gives him strength and protection, a piece of mind allowing Abraham to continue on his journey in confidence. While we’re praying, we might use this bracha to pause momentarily and consider how we can step out of our comfort zones, and ask haShem for strength and protection in those moments of discomfort. May we continue to challenge ourselves so that we may reach our goals, whatever they may be.

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