



# Barriers to Belief: Language

Rabbi Chaim Metzger

[cmetzger@torontotorah.com](mailto:cmetzger@torontotorah.com)

Dedicated in memory of my Zaidie,  
Dr. M. Herbert Danzger z"l  
מרדכי צבי בן פנחס וחיה ז"ל  
and based on his book  
"Returning to Tradition"



- Language Barriers
- Based on Problems in Orthodox Beliefs (Returning to Tradition p [273-276, 128-131](#))
- What language barriers have we seen?
- What languages bother people?
- Do we need to pray in Hebrew?
- Do we need to understand rituals for the to be effective?

# What language barriers have we seen?

- Ritual
- Hebrew
  - Language of Prayers, Tanakh, most of Jewish Literature
- Aramaic –
  - Talmud, part of Tanakh, and early commentaries
- Yiddish
- Yeshivish
  - <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/politics-and-the-yeshivish-language>

**COMMUNITY**

# Politics and the Yeshivish Language

For the sake of Jewry, the Orthodox should give up their private dialect

BY COLE S. ARONSON

MARCH 05, 2021

Yeshivish

He's a groyse friend of Klal Yisroel, and his machatunim are frum!



English

He's a great friend of the Jews and his in-laws are observant!

# Differentiating between Barriers

- Inherent – halachically mandated
  - Reading Torah in Hebrew
  - Particulars of Jewish Rituals
  - Language of Prayer?
- Practical and Sociological
  - What language do we choose to speak
  - Language of Sermons
  - Use of translated texts for study
  - Development of Shnaym Mikra v'Echad Targum
  - Changing Lingua Franca
    - Hebrew → Aramaic → Arabic → French → German → Yiddish → English → Hebrew

# Davening in English

- Mishnah Sotah 32a

אלו נאמרין בכל לשון פְּרֻשָּׁת סוֹטָה וְיִדּוּי מַעֲשֵׂר קְרִית  
שָׁמַע וְתַפְלָה וְבִרְכַּת הַמָּזוֹן וְשְׁבוּעַת הָעֵדוּת וְשְׁבוּעַת  
הַפִּיקְדוֹן  
וְאלו נאמרין בלשון הקודש מקרא ביכורים וחליצה ברכות  
וקללות ברכת כהנים וברכת כהן גדול ופרשת המלך  
ופרשת עגלה ערופה ומשוח מלחמה בשעה שמדבר אל  
העם

- Mishnah. The following may be recited in any language: the section concerning the suspected woman, the confession made at the presentation of the tithe, the shema', the 'prayer', the grace after meals, the oath concerning testimony and the oath concerning a deposit. The following are recited in the holy tongue: the declaration made at the offering of the firstfruits, the formula of halizah, the blessings and curses, the priestly benediction, the benediction of the high priest, the section of the king, the section of the calf whose neck is broken, and the address to the people by the priest anointed

[to accompany the army] in battle.

- Sounds like you can daven in English? Why Don't we
- Tosafot – you can pray in different language if you understand it
- Chatam Sofer and Mishnah Brura prohibited anything besides Hebrew
- Rabbi Korobkin – was more of a reaction to Enlightenment
  - Ideal is to adjust towards full Hebrew with understanding but certainly a good idea to Daven Shemoneh Esrei in English if in the process of learning it.
  - [May I Daven in English?](#) By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff
- Big difference between changing individual's prayer and changing communal policy

# Hebrew in Prayer - Returning to Tradition 273-276

DISCLAIMER – below (published 1989) may not still apply for interdenominational opinions, especially in Canada.

- *Chapter 12 - Wrestling with Judaism: Practices and Belief*
- Reform Jews pray in the vernacular—Americans in English, German in German—reserving Hebrew for a few phrases or prayers.
- Conservative Jews pray in Hebrew with a substantial admixture of English.
- But Orthodox Jews pray in Hebrew, whether or not they understand the words they utter and even though with minor exceptions halakhah permits prayer in any language one understands and prayer, according to halakhah, is considered "a service of the heart" that implies sincerity, commitment, and understanding. This is a custom that is universally accepted among the Orthodox, whether Ashkenazic or Sephardic, chasidic or mitnaggedic.
- The practice seems totally dysfunctional, as it obstructs pouring out one's heart in worship and seems to turn worship into a wooden and meaningless ritual. But it also binds the Jewish community together, for no matter where one comes from or what language one speaks, when one steps into a synagogue for prayer, the words are the same. The inflections and pronunciation may be different, but the prayers remain familiar.
- For the Orthodox, then, particularly for young children first learning to pray, prayer is ritual that involves speaking words and phrases they do not understand. As they mature and their knowledge of Hebrew expands, the ritual takes on more meaning. This procedure is in line with the Jewish pattern of education of children and with the educational philosophy of Judaism. In fact, prayer is a lesson in that educational philosophy.
- Using only the traditional Hebrew limits what can be expressed in prayer. Using a vernacular opens prayer up not only to understanding but also to the possibility that worshippers may add their own thoughts and pleadings. Conservative and particularly Reform rabbis take advantage of the greater latitude provided by English to introduce new prayers, perhaps expressing current concerns of worshippers. Orthodoxy's prayers seem to leave no room for this

# Fulfilling Formulae

- The Hebrew words do not add pomp and ceremony to the worship service. No one is specially designated to utter them; all do so. Nor are the prayers sung or chanted in sonorous dignity; rather, each utters them on his or her own. This seems to offer neither the personal expression of the heart nor the dignified song of the religious community.
- But the Orthodox see the original Hebrew prayers as offering a mold into which one can pour one's own thoughts.
- The words teach supplicants about God's relation to man, expressing lofty ideas in phrases that cannot be surpassed. Does one compose new songs whenever one wants to sing, or does one sing the beautiful tunes that masters have composed?
- If one needs to express one's own feelings, then it is best to select a psalm and repeat it, using one's feelings as the guide in selecting the most expressive psalm. If this does not suffice, one may utter one's own words at designated moments in each prayer. There are prayers in Yiddish for women and children who are unfamiliar with the Hebrew prayers, but traditional prayers are offered in their traditional form.
- Orthodox Jews at times feel constrained by this pattern. But overwhelmingly they learn to use it, to appreciate it, to inject their own thoughts and feelings into the prayers, to use the Hebrew words to express their own thoughts, or if they don't understand the words fully, they allow the utterances of a religious language to comfort them, for at least the mechanics of prayer are not unfamiliar. They know the words and repeat them daily or weekly; they are familiar with the customs of prayer, knowing when to rise and when to sit, when to join in and when to be silent. But what of the ba'al t'shuva who knows nothing of this and for whom the mechanics can become an overwhelming problem?



# Prayer Problem

- In fact, prayer becomes one of the major problems faced by ba'alei t'shuva. While the Orthodox Jew who has been repeating the morning prayer since childhood may take twenty to forty minutes for shacharit prayers, the ba'al t'shuva may require an hour and a half or more for shacharit even after two or three months of practice. Afternoon prayers that require five to ten minutes for those who are practiced may require twenty minutes for the ba'al t'shuva, and similarly evening prayers, prayers after meals, on lying down to sleep, before eating, after washing, and so forth. These become matter-of-fact, almost unconscious rituals for the Orthodox from birth (to the dismay of the rabbis, who see in this a loss of sincere "service of the heart"). But for the ba'al teshuva, they are difficult and tedious rituals and can be a major obstacle.
- The difficulty of prayer is evident in part because Shabbat and kashrut are automatically cared for by the yeshiva, and family purity is an abstract concern for the unmarried. Prayer is one of the few areas the students must really confront, and it is the major daily encounter with Judaism. Prayer is also taken more seriously in yeshivot than it is in synagogues. While morning prayers in a synagogue may be hurried as congregants rush to get through and go to work, in the yeshiva they are recited slowly, with great emphasis on kavvanah (sincerity) and purity of thought.
- The rote and mechanics of prayer may be difficult for the ba'al t'shuva, and the yeshiva attempts to accommodate. New recruits are taught only the most central prayers so as to ease the burden, at least until they have mastered the language. To accommodate beginners the pace of prayer at the ba'al t'shuva yeshiva is even slower than at the standard yeshiva, which itself is slow relative to most synagogues. But at the yeshiva no other accommodations will be made. The page to be read is not announced; for that information, one must turn to one's nearest companion and quietly ask, or one has a friend who leads one along. Some modernistic Orthodox synagogues do announce the prayers, particularly at the High Holy days, when a new text, a machzor rather than a siddur, is used and when many congregants even in Orthodox synagogues are not familiar with the prayers. Yeshivot and more traditionalistic synagogues do not do this.

# Action or Understanding? RtT p128-130

- That religious acts rather than beliefs are the core of Judaism raises several questions. First, are these acts merely mechanically performed, or do they contribute to the formation of a meaning system and a set of beliefs? If the latter, how does this happen? Second, if acts are the core, why the emphasis on study? Finally, is the study of Gemara understand-able simply as a way of acquiring knowledge for the performance of religious acts?
- UNDERSTANDING THROUGH THE ACT
- In Judaism's philosophy of education, acts come first, and beliefs and commitment follow. This position is stated succinctly in Sefer Hachinukh (literally, *The Book of Education*), purportedly written by Rabbi Aharon Halevi of Toledo in the thirteenth century.
- 'Know that man is formed by his actions. His heart and all his thoughts follow after the actions he engages in, whether they be good or evil. Even if a person's heart is totally evil ... if his spirit is awakened and he puts his effort and his activities diligently in Torah and the mitzvot, even though he does not do it for the sake of heaven, he will immediately turn to the good, and from having acted with no concern for God he will come to act for His Name. And because of the power of his actions his evil inclination will die. *Because the heart is drawn after the deeds.*'
- 'And even if a person is totally righteous, and his heart is straight and innocent and desires Torah and Mitzvot, if he is involved constantly in foolish things . . he will turn, after a given time, from righteous heartedness to being totally evil. *For a person is formed by his actions.* (Sixteenth Commandment, [Korban Pesach] emphasis added)'
- This lesson is taught in many ways in all yeshivot. For the more advanced students the words of *the Sefer Hachinukh* may be used But even young children are taught that in observing the commandments one must first do and then understand. They are taught that just as Jews responded at Mount Sinai when accepting the Torah, saying, "We will do and we will listen" (Exod. 14:2.3), so in observing the commandments, the ritual actions are required first. Explanations may follow, and they may be accepted or rejected.

- This perspective was demonstrated at a t'shuva meeting in an Orthodox synagogue in Queens, New York in spring 1987. The featured speaker was Uri Zohar, a former Israeli television personality who had become Orthodox in 1977, had since been ordained as a rabbi, and for some years had been a leading speaker at meetings for return to Orthodoxy. In the lecture Zohar addressed the question of what is a Jew. He insisted that to be a Jew one had to *act* like a Jew, and that meant observing the commandments of the Torah as defined by the rabbis. In the question and answer period following the lecture, a member of the audience suggested that Zohar's position left no room for the importance of faith, for belief in God; all was simply action. Zohar insisted that concern with faith and belief was a Christian concept. Suppose, he said, one compares two people. One calculates that there is a 50 percent chance that God exists and has revealed His law to Israel at Sinai, and as a consequence—as "insurance" against the possibility that this might be true—he observes the commandments of the Torah. The other professes complete faith in the existence of God yet does not observe the commandments.

Which of the two is the good Jew? He insisted that without a doubt the rabbis and sages would choose the observant Jew, not the believer.

- In presenting this argument Zohar was articulating the perspective of many yeshivot for the newly Orthodox, in particular Yeshiva Aish Hatorah in Jerusalem. In this view, Orthodoxy can be a rational choice. Faith is not essential. But how then is commitment to Orthodoxy developed?
- Social-psychological studies cast light on this question. Role-playing, for example, has been shown to influence opinion change (Janis and King 1954). People who pretend to take a role advocating a point of view come to accept this view. Those who passively listen to or read about a point of view are far less likely to do so.

- Festinger (1962) and others (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) have demonstrated that actions involving expenditures or commitments are often rationalized after the action has been taken. The less the external pressures (such as coercion or remuneration) to justify behaviors or value choices, the more will the activity or value choice be seen as sufficient justification for the action. Furthermore, the more costly the action or value choice in terms of time, expenditure, or conflict with other values, the greater will be the weight attributed to the chosen values or actions. In this way the person reduces the "dissonance" of the choice. In other words, a person who makes a choice or by action demonstrates a commitment will then rationalize that choice or action to himself or others. The thought process of justification occurs after, not before, the choice or act of commitment.
- Zohar's description of his own experience with prayer is a paradigm of this response. "The first time I tried to pray I wrapped myself in a prayer shawl, I faced the wall so nothing would distract me and tried to speak words of prayer. But I couldn't. I felt I was talking to the wall. I felt foolish. I just stood there and wished for a long time that I could experience the feeling of prayer. And then it came to me and I could pray in sincerity and not feel foolish."
- In yeshivot, then, the object of the curriculum is not to learn about the rituals but to learn to perform the rituals. That the person first performs the action and only afterward speculates on its inner meaning may provide a psychological impetus to accept an explanation and allows the development of a range of explanations, as the act, not the explanation, is primary,
- STUDY AS AN ACT IN ITSELF
- If action is required and beliefs and meaning are only accidental characteristics, then ritual would seem wooden and empty. Yet Jews attribute meaning to rituals, and Jews have beliefs. How are the rituals given meaning? The answer is by study.

# Study and Commitment: Summing it up (133)

- Judaism's approach to religion is experiential. Act or religious practices constitute the core, and carrying out these acts—that is, playing the role of practicing Jew—leads one to become Jewish in soul or personality. In this framework study has two objectives.
- One is to learn the halakhah, the rules that should be followed. Simple observation of Judaism, although important, may be insufficient in new circumstances. Study, which teaches the principles behind the action, is therefore also important for action.
- Study is also a religious act. To study is not simply to learn and know but also to religionize. For this reason yeshivot—places where one practices Judaism as well as learns to practice it—spend so much time on study.
- Beyond this, study is an opportunity to develop a plausibility structure, a network that supports the common meaning in ritual and at the same time facilitates a search for additional interpretations and understandings of the meaning of rituals.

# Beauty of Hebrew

- [Why we need Hebrew](#) (Youtube)
- [Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi – Kuzari](#)
- [The Uniqueness of Hebrew](#)

# Lingua Complex

- Difficult to follow when unfamiliar rituals and language
- Can be magical at times
  - Story about Ger, Conservatives not wanting English for everything as they like mystery of not understanding
  - Ingrained traditionalism
- Significance to actions though tunes despite not actually corresponding
- Difference between sociological and Halachic language barriers
- Why is everything in Hebrew?
- Why some Aramaic?
- Can you daven in English?
- Importance to actions even if meaning and beliefs come later
- Significance of Hebrew ala R' Yehuda HaLevi's Kuzari and Rambam

Thank you!  
Please be in touch  
+972-58-627-5980  
chaimmetzger@gmail.com



# Barriers to Belief

with Rabbi Chaim Metzger

Wednesday Nights @8:15 pm

Jarvis Freedman Library

[tiny.cc/chaimmetzger](http://tiny.cc/chaimmetzger)

When Values Collide

July 6: Jews & Non-Jews

July 13: Men & Women

July 20: Language Barrier



BEIT MIDRASH ZICHRON DOV

DAY OF GIVING

JULY 13-14



36 HOUR CAMPAIGN

IN SUPPORT OF

EDUCATION • INSPIRATION

COMMUNITY

[CAUSEMATCH.COM/BMZD](http://CAUSEMATCH.COM/BMZD)



Dedicated in memory of my Zaidie,  
Dr. M. Herbert Danzger z"l  
and based on his book  
"Returning to Tradition"



תורת ה' תמימה  
A BEIT MIDRASH FOR  
TORAH



לך אתגנה ולזרעך  
A BEIT MIDRASH FOR  
ZIONISM



חנך לנער על פי דרכו  
A BEIT MIDRASH FOR  
STUDENTS



בנות מלכים ביקרותיך  
A BEIT MIDRASH FOR  
WOMEN



בכל מלאכת הקודש  
A BEIT MIDRASH FOR  
PROFESSIONALS