

Weekly Teaching

October 12, 2018

“Speech and Language” is a field that I have always found to be especially interesting.

As an elementary school student I struggled with pronouncing certain words, especially words containing the letter “s”.

I was fortunate to work with a school specialist over several years, and she helped me resolve my struggles, and bolstered my confidence to speak publicly without anxiety. (Little chance of my becoming a pulpit rabbi had I not found this success.)

Some of our children had language processing challenges, and I came to further understand as a parent that there is an important distinction between “speech” vs. “language”.

Speech challenges are specific to the “how-to”; how does one effectively coordinate their muscles and movements so as to produce speech?

Language challenges are how one effectively manages to find the right words to utilize, and/or organize these words to successfully communicate.

Common language disorders can often be categorized as:

- Receptive Language (difficulty understanding language)
- Expressive Language (difficulty using language)
- Pragmatic Language (difficulty with social communication)

Our spiritual ancestors certainly were unaware of the science of speech-language pathology. But they did understand that there exists the serious challenge of language.

In the book of Genesis, we read of the story of the Tower of Babel.

“All the earth had the same language and the same words.” (Genesis 11:1)

But, people gathered in the land of Shinar and said: “Come, let us build a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over all the earth.” (11:4)

God then becomes concerned about this building project and determines to interfere with the planning and execution of the Tower by “confusing” their language:

“Let’s go down there and confuse their speech so that no one understands what the other is saying...and so it came about that God scattered them over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.” (11:7-9)

What this ancient Biblical story further illustrates is the Power of Language.

Shared language enabled people to work effectively together; confused communication disrupted the effectiveness of the set intention.

The Bible notes that the intention of the Tower was to eliminate the boundary between earth and heaven; an act of challenging God’s authority over humanity.

Common rabbinic commentary on the story of the Tower of Babel notes that the builders were callous towards the value of life, yet greedy for the value of material possessions.

Rabbinic literature notes that the workers who sought to storm the heavens would ignore the death of tower builders who fell during construction, but they mourned greatly whenever a brick was dropped. When God “confuses” the common language of the Tower workers, they are being punished for their arrogance and greed.

For our spiritual ancestors, they imagined that God’s original intent was that all people should share a common language and live in harmony.

But instead profane impulses prompted people to try and organize to do immoral actions.

So God determined to divide humanity into their diverse groupings with different cultures, languages, etc.

The reality is this is still the state of human existence, but what is also clear is that God doesn’t necessarily intend to keep the “separation” in place.

When human beings take the time to learn and appreciate the “other’s” diversity, and seek common communication methods, they need not remain separate from one another.

What is needed for human beings is an embrace of moral language therapy to more effectively communicate, and live out our human pluralism that embodies the Divine reality that all human beings are created equally in God’s image.

Today we moderns can speak the same language, but fail to either listen and/or be heard.

We continue to build our Modern Towers of Babel.

Our way out of the abyss only begins with the concrete efforts by which we are willing to listen to one another.

We can bemoan the lack of listening skills of others, or we can decide to make a concerted effort by which we will work on our own listening skills because we can only control ourselves.

This simple step will most likely begin, at minimum, with the incremental improvements on how we begin to understand each other more effectively.

In Judaism, we often say that Hebrew is Lashon Kodesh, the Holy Language, because the Torah was written in Hebrew.

But the rabbis also teach that the Torah was written Lashon Adam, in the context of “human language”.

This means that the true “Holy Language” is whenever our own language and communication usage always embodies Divine/Moral parameters.

May God strengthen our resolve in this regard!

Shabbat Shalom,
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