

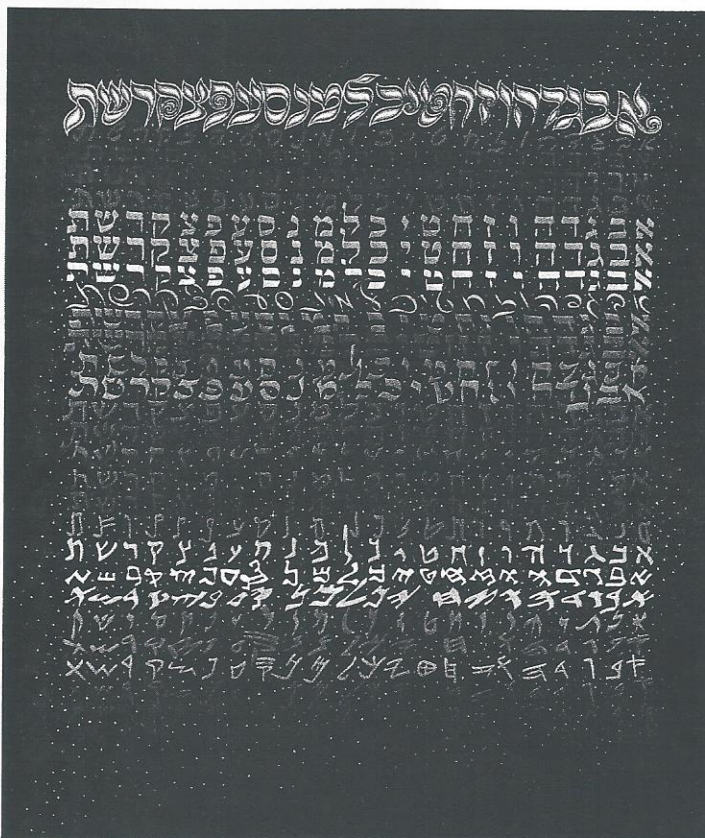
The soul of a people

WRITTEN BY
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After the American revolution there was a considerable number of patriots who wanted a complete separation from Britain, not only politically, but culturally as well. Some went so far as to suggest that the English language be abolished and that another tongue be adopted as the national language. The well known lexicographer, Noah Webster asserted that "as an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government."

Various members of the anti-British reform movement put forth their suggestions as to what the most appropriate choice might be. Some suggested German, which was already spoken by an appreciable portion of the populace. Others favored Greek, arguing that it was the language of those who had introduced democracy to the world. Then again, owing to the help received from the French in establishing the nation, some felt that their language was best suited for a people who also proclaimed the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality. And last, but not entirely least, some advocated Hebrew, the argument being that it was the world's first language, and should thus be duly adopted by the first constituted nation on the new continent. Besides, Hebrew was an Edenic tongue, and many of the revolutionaries harbored Utopian visions regarding the birth of a paradisiac nation, for whom none other than the language spoken in the Garden of Eden, would suffice.

In the end, practical considerations prevailed, and no language reform took place at all. I believe, however, that most of us would have no difficulty in recognizing that things would have been vastly different had Hebrew been adopted. What follows are musings on some of the less obvious



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changes that would have occurred had the Hebraists' proposal been approved by the Founding Fathers.

First, let's consider the economic and environmental impact — a large number of our forests would have been preserved due to the immense savings in paper which surely would have resulted from the great parsimony of the Hebrew language. As can be confirmed by even a random perusal of any book in which the English translation is printed alongside the original Hebrew, substantially fewer words are needed in Hebrew to express a given statement than in English. For example, in the Soncino Chumash, we read, "And for the precious things of the fruits of the sun. And for the precious things of the yield of the moons" a phrase which consists of 22 words. On the

other hand, its Hebrew counterpart consists of no more than six.

Furthermore, in Hebrew the vowels are not printed. For example, the Hebrew word for poor is "dal," and even though in printed form this appears as "dl" with consonants only, it is readily understood. This would prove impossible in English. Suppose you saw the letters "pr" in a newspaper. Even knowing the context in which they were written you would not necessarily guess that the word was meant to read "poor," as so many alternatives exist; pair, pare, peer, pore, pour, prey, and pro. Certain types of economy are found, however, in English, as in the case of the versatile short word "get" which, in combination with other words, has hundreds of uses, notably: get across-make convincing;

Before the Tower of Babel was built everyone on earth had the same language and the same words.

(Genesis 11:1)

The Holy One blessed is He created the world through the Torah, and His Presence permeates all of creation. Since G-d and His Torah are one, it follows that all the nations of the world derive their life from the Torah. Even though G-d confused the languages of the nations after they built the Tower of Babel, there remains in each language a vestige of the Holy Tongue—a few words that are cognate to words of the Torah. It is these few words that lend life to the

nations. The purpose of Israel's dispersion among the nations is to extricate the holy words and letters that were intermingled in their languages by speaking and dealing with these nations. Israel thereby brings these Hebrew words back to their root—the Torah—a task that will be completed only with the coming of Mashiach; as it is stated by the prophet, "For then I will make the people pure of speech, so that they all invoke the L-rd by name and serve Him with one accord" (Zephaniah 3:9).

**Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl
(Me'or Einayim, No'ach) 1730-1797**

get along-to manage; get by-make ends meet; get up-to rise; a get-up-a costume, and so on. Still, it is only in combination with some other word that these many meanings become possible. In contrast, in Hebrew, a single letter, Vav (the primary meaning of which is "and"), has 17 different applications alone.

It's also worth noting that English is a highly idiomatic language, whereas Hebrew contains few idioms, and these, unlike those found in its counterpart, which are often whimsical or altogether arbitrary, involve intricate scholarship in sacred literature. Consequently the speaker of the Holy tongue is bound to acquire a considerable knowledge of Jewish law and lore. Compare for instance the idiomatic expression used in either language for "nothing of the kind" or "an unlikely story." In English the well known expression is "a cock and bull story." Hebrew also has a four word phrase, which translates literally as "neither bears nor forest." Scholars are not absolutely sure of the origin of the English idiom, beyond the fact that it appears in Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the last line of which reads, "What is this story all about? - 'A cock and bull,' said Yorick- and one of the best kind I ever heard." However, no explanation is offered as to why these two animals in particular were chosen, or why two animals at all. The arbitrariness of the phrase is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the French have found it appropriate to label concocted tales as "coq a l'ane," cock to donkey. There is no evidence, whatsoever, to suggest that the substitution of bull for donkey results in greater authenticity.

On the other hand, there is not a shadow of a doubt about the origin of the choice of words in the Hebrew equivalent. In Kings II, it says that the prophet Elisha,

when jeered by some boys, "cursed them. And two she-bears came out of the forest and tore 42 of the boys." In the Talmud an opinion is cited, according to which, this event was seen to constitute a major miracle, since before its occurrence there existed "neither bears nor forest" at that particular location. Thus the origin of the phrase involves a certain level of ingenuity, and its appreciation a degree of scholarship.

Recently Hebrew newspapers offered a detailed account of the Presidential elections held in the United States. In reporting Clinton's overwhelming victory, one journalist wrote that the majority of those who had voted for him did so, "not out of love of Mordecai, rather out of hatred of Haman." The uninitiated reader, who until then might have taken great pride in his expertise in domestic affairs, might have found it exasperating to learn that so many Americans either love or hate the above named personages about whom he has no knowledge whatsoever.

But, of course, the reporter used a familiar Hebrew idiom to convey his belief that the winner benefited from a protest vote — not out of any great affection for Clinton, but an overwhelming desire to reject President Bush. The source of this idiom is the Midrash's comment on Harbona's contribution to Haman's downfall in which it points out that Harbona was not motivated by the desire to help Mordechai, rather by his anxiety to ruin Haman. Thus, where Hebrew is the language of the daily newspaper, people anxious to learn the results of the American elections are bound to also be reminded of the story of Esther and its Midrashic interpretation months before the actual festival of Purim, which we now approach.

In Genesis, when the people of Shinar organized a rebellion against G-d,

He said:

"Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them. Come let us go down, and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

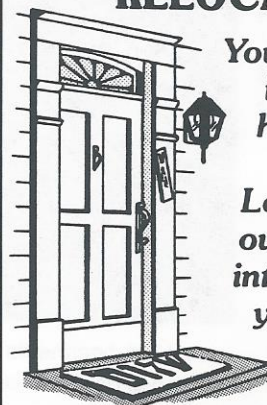
Commentators have since been wondering why they couldn't have carried on their rebellion using sign language, had they decided to. It has to be understood, however, that language reflects the culture, ideals and aspirations of its speakers. Or as expressed more eloquently by Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Every language is a temple, in which the souls of those who speak it, are enshrined." Thus the rebellion enacted by the builders of the Tower of Babel was initiated by a people united in spirit and soul. Once they become separate by speaking different tongues, their unity of purpose was broken.

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