

**LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY AND UNIVERSALISM:  
A JUDEO-PHILOSOPHICAL RE-EVALUATION OF THE SAPIR-  
WHORF HYPOTHESIS**

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OF THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

By

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## **Dedication**

To J.M.F

For salvaging a voice wrecked long ago  
And repairing it word by word, as if it were your own;  
For giving your ear to the incoherent  
To learn the clumsy dialects of broken hearts of stone.

Out of the depths you heard the voiceless call  
And spoke it back into existence.

If that still, small voice echoes today  
It's thanks to you.  
But now, given speech, "thanks" is limiting.

## **Abstract**

For decades Benjamin Lee Whorf's linguistic relativity principle, or the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – the idea that the language we speak influences our worldview – has been held in contempt, being at odds with Noam Chomsky's view that language is innate and that all languages are basically the same. In recent years, however, the linguistic relativity principle has been making somewhat of a comeback. This comeback has awakened such polarisation between the two views that their respective contributions have been eclipsed. This is unfortunate, as the discussion has much to contribute to linguistics and other disciplines as well, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, education, political science and media studies, among others.

This study re-evaluates the linguistic relativity principle in light of new evidence, and shows that the two sides can – and should – be mediated. For such purpose, the Judaic conception of language can serve as a framework, as it posits that language is a Divine (universal) endowment, on the one hand, and a creative (individual, human) force, on the other. This study aims to awaken the reader to the power of language and the inextricable link between language, thought and action, as well as between language, culture and identity.

The first part of the study presents a critical analysis of linguistic relativity and innateness, explaining why the two have become so polarised and how this dichotomisation should not be viewed in isolation from its academic and socio-political context. It also discusses the philosophical bedding of the two, using as a framework Taylor's (2016) view of language as designative (as gleaned from Hobbes, Locke and Condillac), or as constitutive (as gleaned from Hamann, Herder and Humboldt), as well as other philosophers in the latter half of the study (notably Benjamin, Scholem, Rosenzweig and Derrida).

The second part presents the Judaic conception of language, exploring the Divine roots of language in the Jewish tradition and the role of language in Judaism, from theory through practice in daily life and onto the odd revival of Hebrew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its implications for the modern State of Israel and its secular-religious divide. It is argued that a people that maintains its language is sourced with the Divine treats language – and specifically its own language – differently. Through intertextual reading of Jewish philosophical, halakhic and Kabbalistic texts, it is demonstrated that linguistic relativity, as well as Taylor's constitutive view of language, resonate with

the Judaic conception of language while extreme nativism, and the designative view of language, do not. It also explores how the Hebrew language is itself a paradigmatic example of many of Whorf's ideas, specifically oligosynthetic languages (languages that are built up by, and can be broken down into, elemental components) embodying a "chemistry of speech" as well as Lucy's (1997) discursive relativity as regards the Jewish people's symbiotic relationships with the Hebrew language.

The work concludes with a discussion of the relevance of relativity/particularism and innateness/universalism to our present-day reality, demonstrating that the comeback linguistic relativity is making is not arbitrary – and one might even say uncanny, from the Jewish perspective of the End of Days. It has much to inform us in its application to our globalised world of technologically enhanced multi-platform, multicultural communication, with its post-truth politics and the ever-increasing, media-induced cacophony of our divided digital democracy. It further shows that the linguistic relativity principle, although premised on a particularist mind-set, has universal implications and applications.

*Keywords: Benjamin Lee Whorf; linguistic relativity; Noam Chomsky; linguistic nativism; designative language; innateness; empiricism; constitutive language; universalism; particularism; truth; teleological suspension of belief; secularised messianism; radical individuation; time-binding; silence.*

## **Declaration**

I, Temima Fruchter, declare that the thesis that I herewith submit for the Doctoral Degree in Philosophy at the University of the Free State, is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.



*Temima Fruchter*

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## **Acknowledgements**

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The One by Whose word all things came to be. In lieu of words which would only fall short, I echo my Forefather Jacob: “I am unworthy of all the kindness and truth that You have shown me.”

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Gamliel, for teaching me that life's full of surprises, that the best things come in small packages, that all growth and development happens in stages, that the medical establishment is not infallible, and most importantly that every day is priceless.

And to any futures, from or in addition to the above: know that despite the intellectual detours from motherhood every now and then, my primary love and concern is you.

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## Notes

- I have used South African English spelling throughout this work, except when quoting authors who have used American English spelling.
- I have referenced the works cited using Word's automated citation function, set by default to Chicago, fifteenth edition. Where page numbers appear to be missing in the reference, this is because the reference is to a web page or online document that has no pagination.
- Chapter titles are in all-caps, section headings have initial caps, tertiary headings are in bold, level-four headings are in bold and italics, and level-five headings are in italics, indicated by their corresponding numbering (e.g., section heading "3.2.4.1.3. Knowledge of the self").
- I have used italics for emphasis, with the exception of quoted phrases where the author being quoted has used bold typeface for emphasis; and in cases where it was necessary to disambiguate between the transliterated Hebrew, which appears in italics and is followed by an explanation, and the elements I wished to emphasise therein.
- When referring to the creation of the world in Genesis, I capitalise the word Creation. Likewise, when referring to First Man (Adam), I capitalise Man.
- In classic Judaic texts, if the original year of publication is known, I have indicated this in square brackets following the publication year of the version I have consulted. In cases where there is no known or agreed-upon publication date (as in the case of manuscripts completed in a given year but appearing in print format years later, for example), I have referred solely to the edition consulted. Where a standard modern pagination is available I have referred to it; where lacking, or where there are several extant versions, I have referred to sections or chapters (e.g., Ramhal 2003 [1818], 2:1).
- When referring to chapters in this work, I have indicated so by "chapter" followed by a number. When referencing chapters in quoted material, I have resorted to "ch." followed by the chapter number. The symbol § is used to indicate a section of a Judaic reference work where the division is not by chapters but by some other system (e.g. paragraphs, essays numbers, etc.).
- Where an author has several publications from the same year, where the publication has been labelled (e.g., "Sapir 1929b,") I have left it as such.

Where no such indication was available, I have included the specific title followed by the publication year (e.g., “Sampson, Gladstone as Linguist 2014”), to differentiate it from work(s) published in the same year.

- The views presented herein are in line with Orthodox Judaism; I have not ventured into Reform or Conservative.
- Where reference has been made to a Name of God, the letter ׀ has been substituted for the ׀ (and in English, the *k* for the letter *h*), as is the common practice, to avoid writing (and potential desecration) of sacred Names (e.g., *tselem Elokim*, “in God’s image”). Where this would obfuscate the Name under discussion, such as where the specific letters of a Name are of significance, hyphens have been inserted instead, thus rendering the Name incomplete and therefore not sacred. Note, however, that the work contains significant Torah-based portions and should therefore be handled with care as befitting Torah content.
- Translations of Jewish texts are my own amalgamation, based on an incorporated review of extant classic translations, notably the ArtScroll Tanach, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s *The Living Torah*, and [www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org). Where I have not consulted translations, or where none was available, I have indicated that the translation is my own. Translations have been reviewed by a Talmudic scholar to assure they are authentic to Source.
- I have relied on secondary sources in cases 1) where the secondary source’s interpretation of the primary source was more germane to the discussion than the actual primary source (e.g., Sampson’s work on Chomsky; Gross’ comments on Chief Rabbi Kook’s writing); 2) where I have referred to Kabbalistic sources, since the primary ones are generally cryptic. As noted above, this work is in line with Orthodox Judaism, wherein are specific injunctions that Kabbalah be studied only by scrupulously righteous individuals who are also highly qualified Torah scholars. Since I am neither, and out of respect for leaving truth where it belongs rather than attempt to interpret it and thereby risk its distortion, I have relied on scholarly secondary sources which have rendered Kabbalah for laypeople.
- The generic “he” or (more rarely) the grammatically incorrect but commonly accepted third-person plural pronoun (“they”) has been used, except where quoting authors whose preference is “he or she” or just “she.” My reasons are

predominantly practical: this is to avoid any potential ambiguity or the cumbersomeness of “him or her,” “he and she” and “his or hers.” But this practicality is probably also somewhat ideologically motivated: though some feminists who would attribute all societal ills to a supposed patriarchy believe they are all solvable by mere external linguistic change, I believe that society, like language, like all gradual change, is far more complex than any Band-Aid solution would seem to imply.

## INTRODUCTION

### How this Project Was Born

At five years old, shortly after I learned the English alphabet and was just beginning to learn how to read, my family emigrated from the United States to Israel. I quickly realized that the only way to make friends was to learn Hebrew – that is, Modern Hebrew, which differed from the Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew to which I had been exposed growing up in a scholarly, rabbinic New York home. I learned Hebrew fairly quickly, with its admixture of Arabic slang and Yiddish expressions, along with the English, French and Spanish contributions, (and later Russian and Amharic). Ben-Gurion’s vision of Israel being “the melting pot” turned out to be an adventure in linguistic alchemy: everyone spoke Hebrew, but added their own personal touches.

In pursuit of cultural acclimation, English was pushed aside; yet, being an overly sensitive child and having had a hard time embracing Middle Eastern culture, I became something of a bilingual illiterate.

One particular incident stands out in my mind: my mother telling my aunt that she’d fired an employee. Not knowing what the word “fired” meant, and having grown accustomed to words being related to their “root,” as is the case with Hebrew words, I concluded that, much to my horror, my mother had burned her worker. I couldn’t reconcile how my loving, brilliant mother could do something so cruel and stupid, let alone get away with it. I was convinced the police would come knocking on our door any day and carry my mother away.

That was my first experience of how the *form* of a language – in this case, Hebrew’s root-based words – could affect how we think, even when speaking in another language. I remember that Hebrew seemed more structured and logical to me, and that I couldn’t understand why English didn’t employ the same convenient root system.

I finally mastered Hebrew. A short while after, my mother died of cancer. We moved back to the United States and I had to start the process all over again, in reverse. But this time it was much harder. Having “made *yerida*” (literally “going down,” a term used to describe Jews who have left Israel, with the connotations that this is a descending of sorts, an abandoning of the Promised Land), I was reluctant to learn the language and stubbornly refused to adapt to American life. For a while I

insisted on Hebrew, but my Jewish Studies teachers, who spoke only minimal Modern Hebrew (and unfortunately didn't know much Biblical or Mishnaic Hebrew, either), didn't understand me. In hindsight, perhaps my opting to study Spanish for three years in high school was my way of avoiding the bicultural Israeli-American conflict and the secular-religious divide.

Years later I landed up living in Johannesburg, South Africa, teaching Jewish Studies in local Jewish schools and translating Hebrew Jewish texts on the side. I delighted in the fact that here was a young democracy with eleven national languages. At the same time, thoughts about cultural cohesiveness and identity were inescapable. It isn't possible to teach Jewish Studies without knowledge of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew – and not just its content, but its form. In addition, I wondered why the young, reborn Israel, with immigrants from all over the globe speaking vastly different languages, had indeed become a “melting pot,” with everyone agreeing that Hebrew would be the unifying force, while in South Africa all nine indigenous languages were recognized in addition to Afrikaans and English. Was there something beyond language and culture uniting Israeli Jews and Jews around the world?

This prompted questions of identity and belonging, exile and rebirth, particularism and globalisation. I realized there was something strange about the connection the Jewish people had with their language, something that went beyond Ben-Gurion's vision for the modern State of Israel or Scholem's view of a political revival based on a shared homeland and revived mother tongue. The more I looked into it, the more inexplicable it seemed: Hebrew is the only language to have been so successfully revived. But was it ever really “dead”? And if it was never really dead, *how* did it survive? If it survived thanks to its religious basis, why did secular Israelis have such a hard time with religion, while at the same time took such pride in their language and its rebirth? Were they so ignorant of the language's origins?

Furthermore, if Hebrew's revival was such an odd exception, defying the laws of language decay and language death, why has this phenomenon always been mentioned casually, as an offhanded remark, relegated to the footnotes of linguistic textbooks?

The further I explored this, the more I came to realise that perhaps there *was* something different about the Jewish people and their language, and that perhaps this

difference, rather than being a fluke, was a wake-up call, a calling: if we speak the language in which the original Biblical code of ethical monotheism was given to the world, do we not have a responsibility to use it wisely? Could this explain its survival – and revival?

As God would have it (for I believe everything happens for a reason), having just finished a Master's degree in English and having commenced studies at the University of the Witwatersrand for Honours in Publishing Studies, I came across Carroll's *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Something in what I later learned was the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis – the idea that the language we speak will influence how we think and that there is a symbiotic relationship between language and culture – resonated with my Judaic conception of language. My work as a translator – and specifically when it comes to translation of Jewish texts – contributed its fair share to the formulation of my ideas. I thought, a shame Whorf didn't know Hebrew; later I was bemused – and not entirely surprised – to learn that he had indeed studied Hebrew and was heavily influenced by Fabre Olivet's *La Langue Hébraïque*. I was fascinated that someone else – a linguist, even if (according to some) an amateur at that – had developed a theory for what I had experienced as a bilingually illiterate child, and what I was contemplating as an adult vis-à-vis living in a multicultural society whilst remaining apart.

I began discussing Whorf's ideas with people – students, colleagues in the translation field, friends, teachers, Talmudic scholars, rabbis. For most, if not all, religious people, these conversations were “duh” moments: to them, it was clear that language influences how we think. Many didn't understand why I needed to investigate this any further, saying it was obvious. I added this to my list of questions: why do Whorf's ideas resonate so readily with religious or community-inclined individuals? Alternatively, why do secular people have such a hard time with them?

At the same time, I read some of Chomsky's anti-Israel, anti-American and anti-Jewish sentiments. I also read his views on language, notably his ideas that language is innate and that all humans possess a Language Acquisition Device, and that all languages are basically the same (which, having at one point spoken three languages – four, if we count my good-enough command of Yiddish – I concluded was simply not true). The more I read Whorf, the more I realized how “Jewish” his ideas sounded; the more I read Chomsky, in turn, the more I wondered why he had turned his back on his

own American culture and his Jewish people, preferring a self-negating Universalism and being outspoken against the very country that enabled him such freedom of speech to criticize it. I recalled a comment one of my teachers had made years before, that “no one is ever completely free of agendas,” no matter how intellectual or academic. By the same token, not all agendas are necessarily bad; they just *are*. By recognizing the political, social, cultural and academic milieu in which we operate – in short, acknowledging where we come from and how this has shaped our interests and biases – not only are we better informed and can better inform others, we can better understand where others come from and what ideas have influenced their interests.

### **The Purpose of this Project**

There is a Kabbalistic concept that nothing happens in a vacuum, that everything we encounter in this world parallels a much deeper, more powerful spiritual concept in a higher – and more real – world. To my Judaic view, the fact that we have seen the revival of Whorf’s linguistic relativity theory of late must indicate something – or many things. I hope this work helps to clarify those things, or at least elucidate the questions we should be asking ourselves about them.

Language is a big issue. It’s oftentimes so subtle, we’re not even aware of its impact on us and on our thinking. As a student once put it to me, it is like breathing: we do it all the time, generally unconsciously (with the exception of yoga enthusiasts), and don’t give it much thought – that is, until our breathing is compromised by disease or organ failure, and every breath gains significance and is infinitely precious. We’d be dead without this ability, but we don’t consciously think of it.

The same can be said about language: our awareness of it is grossly disproportionate to its effects, to what it does to us and with us. It comes to us so naturally, we don’t give it a second thought – that is, until some quirky feature of it springs up, we get stuck on a word in our native tongue and don’t know how to translate it, find ourselves overwhelmed with emotion and at a loss for words, or say something we instantly regret; or, when people unfortunately lose the capacity altogether, as in the case of aphasics; and on a larger, societal scale, when language is so overused that it loses its value. (Perhaps the yoga enthusiasts have what to teach us about mindfulness after all.)

We are now at a critical junction in history, and language plays a big role in it. A historian living two-hundred years from now might conclude that ours was the post-history era when language went completely out of control and, mirroring some economies, eventually lost its currency. Never before have we had so much information, so much text, so much *noise* being circulated via so many diverse media. There is such word proliferation, yet at the same time most of our current 6,500 languages are headed toward extinction over the next 100 years. We are becoming impoverished; worse still, we don't even know it. A part of our humanity is dying out as the minor players get swallowed up by the big-player *linguae francae* (and we can argue over what those might be).

I do not believe that we can understand our linguistic (and moral) bankruptcy without first understanding what language does to us. If there is any hope of salvaging what we are about to lose, we must first understand what is at stake.

That is the purpose of this work – to awaken us to the power of language. For this purpose, I have expounded upon the Judaic conception of language – language in general, and particularly the Hebrew language. I believe the message inherent in this view of language has relevance to Jews and non-Jews alike, and might aid us in developing a heightened sensitivity to language and what it does with us – on the basic, individual, every-day level, and how it shapes humanity at large, and what it means in the broader, metaphysical and meta-historical sense.

### **The Structure of this Work**

My milieu is a particularist, Torah-observant Jewish one, but with a universalist mindset. That is the view I aim to present in this paper vis-à-vis Whorf's and Chomsky's ideas. My argument in this work is a Judeo-philosophical one, not a scientific one. However, I do bring in scientific studies where warranted, specifically in demonstrating the validity of Whorf's linguistic relativity theory, and in debunking Chomsky's innateness hypothesis. Thus, I will make reference to studies done to prove that the language we speak will affect how we think (Whorf's linguistic relativity theory), as well as scientific discussion of Chomsky's proofs for his innateness hypothesis. But the overall framework for the discussion is a philosophical one, and a Judaic one at that.

This work is divided into three sections: the first, comprised of chapters 1-3, serves as a theoretical background to the discussion, giving an overview of the Whorfian/Chomskyan divide, or the relativity/universalism debate. This part covers Whorf's linguistic relativity theory, or what is commonly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (chapter 1), Chomsky's innateness and universalism (chapter 2), and the philosophical bedding for these ideas (chapter 3), where I trace relativity and innateness through differing schools of philosophy. As I hope to make clear, the ideas of relativity and universalism, empiricism and innateness, did not suddenly arrive on the scene in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; they are merely modern reincarnations of ancient ideas.

The second part, comprised of chapters 4-6, constitutes the "practical" application of the theoretical basis laid in the first part – or, one can think of it as a "case study." Here, I discuss the Judaic conception of language, from theory (chapter 4) through practice in daily life (chapter 5) and onto the odd revival of Hebrew and the modern State of Israel (chapter 6). As I aim to clarify in this section, Whorf's ideas on linguistic relativity resonate with the Judaic conception of language; Chomsky's do not. Furthermore, The Hebrew language in itself is a paradigmatic example of many of Whorf's ideas, specifically oligosynthetic languages (languages that are built up by, and can be broken down into, elemental components) and the "chemistry of speech." I also discuss Hebrew's symbiotic relationships with the Jewish people.

In the third and final section, comprised of chapter seven, I discuss the implications of relativity/particularism and innateness/universalism for us in our present-day reality, from a Judeo-philosophical perspective. When one hears about or discusses the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or Chomsky's Universal Grammar, one does not immediately make the connection between that and consumer media, post-truth politics, the political divide between Left and Right, wisdom of crowds and the dying out of digital "democracy." My goal in this seventh and final chapter is to show how key elements of the Whorfian-Chomskyan debate are very relevant, when understood in a broader context, and that the Judeo-philosophical view has what to contribute to the discussion.

Alford (1980, 1) lamented that "the worst failing of contemporary linguistics is that it is boring." Though he made that observation close to four decades ago (and in reference to something similar said by S.A. Nock as far back as 1943), the statement

is all the more relevant nowadays. The situation of contemporary linguistics is surprising and unfortunate: surprising, given what a central role language and communication play in our day-to-day lives; unfortunate, because the subject has so much to contribute to our understanding of ourselves and of humanity at large.

It is my hope that this small contribution to philosophy of language will not prove Alford and Nock right. I hope to put linguistic relativity back where it belongs – in the public arena, in the broader academe of social sciences and the humanities; to redeem it from the footnotes of academic obscurity or quackery and its exile by the mathematical pursuit of Chomsky and his followers; and to demonstrate that the universal is relevant to the particular, and the particular essential to the universal.

With fervent hope that my writing inspires others to join me in the belief that the more I know, the more I realise not only how little I know but how much more I want to know.

Temima Fruchter  
June 7, 2018  
Jerusalem

**PART I**  
**THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK**

## CHAPTER I: THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

### 1.1. Introduction

The linguistic relativity principle posits that the language one speaks will influence, or determine (depending on what version of the hypothesis we adopt), one's worldview. It is known commonly (though I argue, erroneously) by its alternative name, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – a term coined posthumously by Whorf's friend and colleague Harry Hoijer at a conference held in 1954 (Leavitt 2011, 169), and used ever since. In contrast, the “universalist” stance, or what is referred to as “linguistic nativism,” chiefly promoted by Chomsky and his proponents, maintains that there are basic, natural, universal linguistic commonalities to all peoples, regardless of the language(s) they speak; that “all human languages are at bottom the same language, constructed from the blueprint that is every human's genetic inheritance” (Cameron 1999, 155). In its extreme form, linguistic nativism holds not only that all languages have universal commonalities but that language has no significant relation to thought; that human beings employ a “meta-language” – what Pinker (1994) calls “Mentalese,” a language that precedes thought.

These two positions have each been posited in extreme form which has resulted in the two becoming polarized to such an extent that their respective contributions – especially those of linguistic relativity – to linguistics as well as to other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, education, political science and media studies, among others, have been compromised. The arguments for or against linguistic relativism and innateness are often more interesting than the ideas themselves, as is our apparent need to pursue the argument; we are not inclined to seek to resolve the debate and thus “the controversy that bears [Whorf's] name has stubbornly refused to die” (Cameron 1999, 153). Kodish (2003, 389) posits that “Neuro-linguistic relativity held non-absolutely has no inherent conflict with some degree of non-absolutist neuro-linguistic universalism, which may have some more or less direct biological basis.” As will be explained, it seems the two sides of the debate have been *artificially* polarized, with scholars attributing to Whorf ideas he never said, only to malign him.

It is easy to pit one against the other, especially if we regard the debate as one of linguistics. But it is a mistake to put the extreme forms of relativity and universalism at polar opposites and an even greater mistake to view the debate solely through the

lens of linguistics, when it encompasses other disciplines as well, with cultural, political and moral implications. It is not merely an intellectual debate; it is an ideological one.

At its root, the Whorfian-Chomskyan debate is an expression – albeit deftly shrouded in too-exclusively a linguistics-academic debate – of the dissonance between particularism and universalism; language (and linguistics) as a discipline within the humanities versus one within the sciences; a human spirit-centred subjectivity versus an analytic-mind objectivity (at the expense, some would argue, of human consciousness and creativity); culture – or nurture – versus nature; the metaphorical force of language versus its logical structure; East versus West; secularism versus religiosity; realism versus mysticism; (hyper)rationality versus intuitiveness; conservatism versus postmodernism. To get to the crux of the argument inherent in these opposites, we must view the debate and its historical unfolding through the lens of philosophy.

Thinking of the Whorfian-Chomskyan divide in broader and less extreme terms will liberate the discussion from the sole realm of linguistics to encompass far broader disciplines and better inform us. Relativism and universalism, in themselves, are not polar opposites. The debate boils down to the simple fact that in some ways we differ and in some ways we are similar. The two sides can – and should – be reconciled by being put in the proper perspective. For this purpose, the Judaic conception of language offers a suitable framework.

In this chapter I will give an overview of the linguistic relativity principle and its development, and discuss whether Whorf proposed a deterministic stance or a relativistic one (i.e., that the language we speak will determine our thoughts, or merely influence them), and whether his ideas have been misconstrued and why. I will then bring several studies which, despite their shortcomings, do in fact demonstrate the validity of the linguistic relativity principle. I will discuss the fall of linguistic relativity into disrepute in academic circles, as well as the socio-political rationale underlying the criticisms against Whorf. I will briefly discuss the ideological underpinnings for the resulting misinterpretation, or systematic rejection, of Whorf's ideas, as well the value in adopting a linguistic relativity model of communication.

## 1.2. Linguistic Relativity

Benjamin Lee Whorf [1897-1941] is credited – or discredited – with the linguistic relativity principle, though he was not the first to introduce the idea. The term “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,” as the linguistic relativity principle is commonly referred to, is *somewhat* more accurate, with Whorf having been inspired by, and having followed in the footsteps of, his teacher, Edward Sapir. However as stated at the outset this term is misleading as well, for the idea goes back even further than Whorf and Sapir, to Sapir’s teacher, Franz Boas, and even further back, to Wundt, Humboldt – who introduced the concept of *weltanschauung*, or “worldview” – and Herder (Fishman 1982). And not only does it go further back in time but it carries on beyond Whorf as well, as reinterpreted by later scholars such as Penny Lee and Roman Jakobson, among others. Thus, I shall use the term “linguistic relativity principle,” rather than attributing it solely to Whorf or jointly to Sapir and Whorf.

Furthermore, the term “hypothesis” in “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” is inaccurate as well, especially when attributed to Whorf: as Cameron (1999), Lee (1996) and others have noted, Whorf himself never called it a “hypothesis” but a *principle*.<sup>1</sup>

This semantic distinction is significant: Whorf did not propose a theory of linguistic relativity that was to be tested in an artificial, laboratory environment, rather as something axiomatic (Hill and Mannheim, 1992), to be viewed *in context*, in natural linguistic settings (which is exactly what Whorf practiced in his linguistic pursuits). In Kodish’s (2003, 384) words, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is an “academic abstraction which does not label anything that Sapir or Whorf ever put forward as a hypothesis on their own.” Kodish explains that they did put forward the linguistic relativity *principle*, which is open to several interpretations leading to different hypotheses.

### 1.2.1. The development of linguistic relativity

A graduate of MIT with a degree in chemical engineering, and a fire prevention specialist with the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, Whorf successfully combined his vocation and avocation. His pursuit of linguistics was not a hobby dabbled in on

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<sup>1</sup> Note Alford’s (1981, 14) definition: “The notion of principle, which is what Whorf called his statement of linguistic relativity, brings up a crucial point: ‘principle’ is not interchangeable with either ‘theory’ or ‘hypothesis’. Within scientific nomenclature there is a progression from a *conjecture* to a *hypothesis* to a *theory*; then there are *principles* and their *postulates*. A principle is like an axiom in geometry, the unprovable scientific equivalent of a philosophical statement.”

occasion; rather, his job and linguistic interests were complementary. This blending of practical and scholarly interests has been one of the key criticisms of the academic community against Whorf: he was not an academic in the strict sense, and his pursuits in linguistics were more on the social science side of things than the hard sciences. But this criticism presents an incomplete picture of Whorf. Whorf chose to remain in his professional position and pursue his linguistic interests on his own time – which his employers granted him, as they recognised the value of his work – because this allowed him the freedom to explore what interested him (Whorf 1956). It is indeed ironic that Whorf’s enshrining of his academic freedom is touted as evidencing his lack of academic discipline.

Whorf’s scientific expertise strongly influenced his linguistic pursuits. As Lee (1996: xvi) notes, his scientific training enabled him to approach linguistics in a way wholly different than his contemporaries, and his “understanding of the world and the human mind was also strongly influenced by his knowledge of chemistry and physics.” As Trager said of him in his obituary in *Language* (1942, in Lee 1996: 13-14), Whorf’s background in physics and chemistry enabled him “to see that linguistic analysis is a scientific discipline employing all the methods of mathematic-logical investigation, and what is more, that correct analysis of linguistic material is absolutely essential to the pursuit of any science.”<sup>2</sup>

Whorf maintained that just as in physics the concept of relativity explains how two people looking at the same thing see two different realities based on their relative positions, so too people speaking different languages will necessarily have differing views of the same thing. In possibly the most quoted passage by Whorf, he said,

We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.

(Whorf 1956, 214)

This echoes the words of Sapir (1929b, in Wardhaugh [1992, 218]):

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at

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<sup>2</sup>Trager concluded with the hope that Whorf’s ideas would be developed further posthumously. Unfortunately, they have been misconstrued, which has led to his ideas being discredited as unscientific.

the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.

While Sapir and his teacher, Franz Boas, spoke about the influence language has on thought, Whorf focused specifically on the *structure* of a language – namely, its grammar – as having an effect on thought (Lucy, in Gumperz and Levinson 1996). Whorf's theory was that the language one speaks will directly influence his worldview, with the grammar thereof serving as the framework within which, or lens through which, objects and events in the world are categorised and analysed in the speaker's mind. Thus, observers of the world have different perceptions because they speak languages with different grammars:

The formulations of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

(Whorf 1956, 212-213)

As we will see, Whorf's ideas stand in opposition to Chomsky's idea of Universal Grammar – fixed, universal rules hardwired into our infant brains that enable us to acquire any language – and in stark opposition to Pinker's idea that we are all speaking the same language, with linguistic variance being merely a difference in dialect. This is simply not true. In the words of Sapir (Sapir, *The Status of Linguistics as a Science* 1929b, 207),

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Or, as Gumperz and Levinson (1996, 2) put it, “language, thought, and culture are deeply interlocked, so that each language might be claimed to have associated with it a distinctive worldview.”

### 1.3. Putting Words into Whorf’s Mouth: Determinism or Relativism?

The idea of linguistic relativity is pretty straightforward. How, then, did the idea get so misinterpreted? I will touch briefly upon the “how,” and subsequently upon the “why”; the former can be described as circumstantial, the latter as ideological.

The circumstantial reasons amount to the fact that Whorf left much unfinished or unedited work. Though he lectured frequently, to linguists and laypeople alike, published numerous articles during his lifetime (see Lee 1996, pp. 12-13, for a comprehensive list), and at the time of his death he was known as the foremost authority on Hopi language,<sup>3</sup> Whorf died young and never got to write the books he planned to.<sup>4</sup> A number of his essays were reprinted posthumously by his friend John B. Carroll, who edited and wrote the introduction to Whorf’s essays in 1956 in *Language, Thought, and Reality*. One wonders where Whorf’s ideas would be today had he had the opportunity to properly formulate his thoughts and revisit conclusions reached earlier. Quite possibly they would not have been so misinterpreted.

Two versions of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis have been presented over the years:

1. The strong, deterministic stance, which maintains that our thoughts are determined – and therefore constrained – by the language we speak.
2. The weaker, relativistic stance, which maintains that the language we speak will *influence*, not determine, our thoughts, and consequently influence our worldview.

According to both versions, people who speak different languages differ not only linguistically but in their worldview as well; the difference between the two versions, then, is one of degree (and, essentially, reasonability): the former is untenable, the latter not only possible but probable – and in fact, evident. (We will see this below, in several studies done which demonstrate the linguistic relativity principle.)

Those who truly understand and recognise the importance of linguistic relativity attribute the weaker hypothesis to Whorf, while those who wish to discredit him claim

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<sup>3</sup> Later Whorf’s ideas on Hopi time would be proven wrong; see Malotki (1983).

<sup>4</sup> Lee (1996) notes that Whorf had sketched out in his mind a textbook and book for the layperson, but this never panned out.

he posited a deterministic stance. Cameron (1999) and Kodish (2003) refer to a “straw Whorf,” conceived of only to be refuted. But as Hill and Mannheim (1992, 383) state, “Boas, Sapir and Whorf were not relativists in the extreme sense often suggested by modern critics, but assumed instead a more limited position, recognizing that linguistic and cultural particulars intersect with universals.” They all “recognized that kinds of cognitive organization quite general to human beings might underlie the capacity for language” (ibid.)

Regarding Sapir and Whorf, this is plainly evident in the passages quoted above, where Sapir states that people are “*very much* at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society” – i.e., not entirely – and, as Wardhaugh (1992) notes, Whorf uses the word “largely” *twice* in the aforementioned passage. (Sapir, too, qualified his statement with the word “largely” in the passage quoted earlier on page 21).

As for Boas, Dan Slobin (in Gumperz and Levinson 1996, 72) points out that he, too, did not maintain a deterministic view, as evidenced by his discussion of a “complete concept” which exists in the mind, regardless of linguistic representation or creation (might this be the precursor to Pinker’s *Mentalese*?). In other words, there *is* a universal “mental image” which people might have, but how they choose which aspects of this mental image to elaborate upon when they speak is contingent on the language they employ. “In each language only part of the complete concept that we have in mind is expressed” (Boas 1911, in Hill and Mannheim [1992, 383]). Put succinctly, “there is a domain of conceptual organization that pre-exists language” (Hill and Mannheim, 383).

Whorf, too, proposed that there is a mode of mental organisation that is pre-linguistic, “a universal...way of linking experiences which shows up in laboratory experiments and appears to be independent of language – basically alike for all persons” (1942, in Hill and Mannheim 1992, 383). He did *not* imply, in any way, that language and thought are one and the same, as Pinker (1994, 57) claims he did.

Alford (1980) notes that

[P]re-Humboldtian relativists, Humboldt himself, Boas, Sapir, and even Whorf were more than passingly intrigued with universal speculations; strict universalists like Chomsky, however, seem to find the notion of linguistic-cognitive relativity, however necessary, both distasteful and counterproductive.

It seems, then, that the burden of proof is incumbent solely upon those who maintain the unorthodox view, in contrast to those who maintain the prevailing one.

In the quest to discredit Whorf, his ambiguity – or rather, open-endedness – which would enable the inclusion of universality, has been ignored. Whorf (and Sapir, Boas, and other proponents of the hypothesis) believed exactly what they said – that language is *largely* a formative factor, and people are *very much* under the influence of the language they speak, but things are *not absolute*. Understanding relativists' position regarding a universal mental image, and that their ambiguity was deliberate – that they did not mean it as a non-committal statement but as a statement of *possibility* rather than an absolute – is the first step toward reconciling between “non-absolutist neuro-linguistic relativity” and “non-absolutist neuro-linguistic universalism,” to use Kodish's (2003) terms.

Decades ago Fishman (1970, 91) noted that “languages throughout the world share a far larger number of structural universals than has heretofore been recognized.” Later, Gumperz and Levinson (1996, 7) stated that “in the light of the much greater knowledge that we now have about both language and mental processing, it would be pointless to attempt to revive ideas about linguistic relativity in their original form.”<sup>5</sup> For those who wish to keep the debate raging on, the convenience of claiming that Whorf (and/or others) proposed the untenable notion of determinism certainly serves as a great strawman to knock down. But it would be a lot more productive and intellectually honest to adopt the relativistic stance, rather than hammering away at a ludicrous linguistic determinism – not only because the latter is untenable but because Whorf never claimed it in the first place.

#### **1.4. Can Linguistic Relativity Be Proven?**

Linguistic universals notwithstanding, in recent decades research on linguistic relativity has proliferated. There is now much evidence demonstrating that language does in fact influence thought and even non-linguistic processes and cognitive abilities such as visuospatial perception, the perception of time, and even spending

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<sup>5</sup> From the words of Gumperz and Levinson, it seems they are implying that Whorf proposed a deterministic stance, and that now, given what we know, we must take a weaker stance of “linguistic influence” rather than “linguistic determinism.” However, I am not convinced that linguistic relativity as Whorf put it in its “original form” meant determinism in the first place. There are sufficient reasons to believe that Whorf's ideas have been misinterpreted either purposely to serve another agenda or unintentionally, simply because of the ambiguity of his work as well as the unfinished ideas he left behind due to his untimely death.

and savings patterns. My argument throughout is a theoretical one, not a scientific/instrumentalist one, as will be further clarified in chapter 3 where I discuss the philosophical traditions from which the linguistic relativity and innateness hypothesis stem. However, there is merit in discussing some experiments that demonstrate the validity of the linguistic relativity principle, each bringing out a different aspect in which language impacts on thought (and behaviour) and all indicating that linguistic relativity is indeed testable – and evident.

#### **1.4.1. Studies in colour terminology**

Kay and Kempton's study (1984) tested the correlation between linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive variables in a given language, as evidenced in differences in colour perception. But we must view this study in light of an earlier one, done by Berlin and Kay (same one) in 1969, who found that there are universals in our division of the colour spectrum. Not only did the study find universals as regards the division of colours into discrete categories (red, yellow, green, etc.), it found that the selection of the paradigmatic examples of given colours (i.e., selecting a shade of red as the archetypal "red" from among many different shades of red) is universal as well.

Furthermore, in that study Berlin and Kay found that diverse languages name their colours in a similar hierarchical pattern, with black and white always being the first-tier categories, followed by red, then either yellow or green, and then blue.<sup>6</sup>

This original study tipped the scales in favour of nature over nurture. It seemed to prove the innateness of colour perception and linguistic universalism. The second study, by Kay and Kempton (1984), however, turned the first study on its head. For this study in colour terminology and how it demonstrates that structural differences in language parallel non-linguistic cognitive differences, Kay and Kempton chose to contrast speakers of English and Tarahumara, an Uto-Aztecan language spoken in northern Mexico. The linguistic difference (the variable) between the two languages was that whereas English differentiates between blue and green, Tarahumara has one

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<sup>6</sup> In other words, if a language has only two colour words, these will be black and white; if three, red will follow; if four, yellow or green; etc. Berlin and Kay later added five more colours, totalling eleven, but this was subsequently refuted once the study was expanded to more languages than the original twenty. The similarities in a large majority of languages in the naming order of the first six colours indicates something, certainly; but bear in mind that fifty languages might represent the most common languages in the world, not necessarily the over 6000 languages presently in existence. See Sampson's *Gladstone as Linguist*, 2014, and Deutscher's *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*, 2010, for more on colour terminology.

word, *siyóname*, which is the equivalent of the English “blue or green” (Burgess, Kempton, and MacLaury 1983, in Kay and Kempton 1984, 68). The cognitive variable was the subjective differentiation of colours – a judgment call as to how similar or dissimilar colours are on the blue–green border.

In the experiment, English speakers and Tarahumara speakers were given triads of colour chips and subjects had to define the distance between the colours – i.e., which two chips were most similar and which chip was the odd one out. The result: the English speakers’ choices differed from the Tarahumara speakers’, because the English speakers have the lexical differentiation between blue and green while the Tarahumara speakers do not. The Tarahumara speakers separated colour based on wavelengths (i.e. they were more accurate), whereas the English speakers separated colours based on lexical distinctions (even though these were, colour spectrum-wise, less accurate).

Kay and Kempton explain this discrepancy by what they call the “naming strategy”: the English speakers resorted to lexical definitions – something to the effect of “this is bluer, those two are greener, so this chip must be the odd one out” – when faced with the task of selecting which of the chips differed most, because on the colour spectrum the chip colours were not easily distinguishable. Interestingly, once the “naming strategy” was explained to the English speakers, and they were told not to employ it, their colour selections were similar to that of the Tarahumara speakers.

In order to eliminate the naming strategy, Kay and Kempton devised a second experiment: rather than show all three chips at the same time, the chips were placed in a box with a sliding cover such that only two chips were visible at any time (A and B or B and C, but not all together). Subjects were permitted to move the slide back and forth as many times as they wanted and were asked to name which is the greater distance—the distance between A and B or B and C. In this experiment, the colour differentiation of the English speakers was much more accurate in terms of wavelength on the colour spectrum; their answers were similar to the Tarahumara speakers’ in the first experiment.

#### **1.4.2. “Thinking for speaking”**

Another study, by Slobin (1994, in Gumperz and Levinson 1996), aimed to test how languages which differ in aspect, rhetorical style, temporal description, and spatial description will yield a differing interpretation and verbal representation of the same

pictures. The study consisted of a picture book without words, which was shown to subjects ranging from young children to adults, speakers of English, Spanish, Hebrew and German,<sup>7</sup> who were asked to describe what was happening in the story book. Slobin found that “categories that are not grammaticized in the native language are generally ignored, whereas those that **are** grammaticized are all expressed by children as young as three” (ibid., 83).

The study demonstrates that there is a distinction between regular thinking and “thinking for speaking,” a term Slobin coined which encapsulates the idea that we should rather focus on “the kinds of mental processes that occur during the act of formulating an utterance” (71). When we speak, our speech requires us to “think” in the way our language is programmed. “‘Thinking for speaking’ involves picking those characteristics of objects and events that (a) fit some conceptualization of the event, and (b) are readily encodable in the language” (76). It “directs us to **attend** – while speaking – to the dimensions of experience that are enshrined in grammatical categories” (71). “The mental image is given prelinguistically, and language acquisition consists of learning which features to attend to” (72).

Reminiscent of Whorf’s idea that “we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages,” and that “the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds,” Slobin concluded that

The world does not present “events” and “situations” to be encoded in language. Rather, experiences are filtered through language into verbalized events. A “verbalized event” is constructed on-line, in the process of speaking.

(75)

Slobin proposed that “the ways one learns a language as a child constrain one’s sensitivity to what Sapir called ‘the possible contents of experience as experienced in linguistic terms’” (87), meaning that children will have as their model, or mould, their first-language learned grammatical constructs, which is why they will have difficulty learning a second language in their later years and might superimpose their first-language grammatical frames on the new language, and why they have a hard time

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<sup>7</sup> In an endnote, Slobin states that the study was expanded to include more languages: Finnish, Japanese, Russian, Mandarin, Turkish, and Icelandic, in addition to English, Spanish, Hebrew and German.

learning the new language's grammatical frames. We commonly find bilingual children who code-switch wanting to apply the grammatical rules of one language onto another.<sup>8</sup>

### **1.4.3. Spatial-temporal perception in Kuuk Thaayorre**

Unlike the studies of Kay and Kempton, and Slobin, where the link between language and thought was well established (the “naming strategy” in the former, “thinking for speaking” in the latter), Lera Boroditsky's (2009) study sought to test whether our language affects cognitive faculties that are *independent* of language. For this purpose, she studied the aboriginal Kuuk Thaayorre of Australia, who differ radically in how they speak about space.

Whereas in English we employ egocentric directions (right, left, front, behind), which change based on the individual's position, the Kuuk Thaayorre use cardinal directions (north, south, east and west). In English we might instruct someone to “move the vase a bit to the right.” These instructions might change depending on where the person we are instructing is standing relative to the vase. In Kuuk Thaayorre the instructions would be the equivalent of “move the vase a bit to the east” (or west, north, or south, depending on the vase's location). These instructions would remain the same, regardless of the position of the person hearing the instructions.

Boroditsky and her team found that the Kuuk Thaayorre have a far more developed sense of direction. Even in an unknown location, the Kuuk Thaayorre are able to orient themselves immediately. This makes sense: if, from baby age, speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre need to know their north from their south and their east from their west just to communicate with peers or parents, it is only natural that their sense of direction be more acutely developed. As Boroditsky (2009) notes, in Kuuk Thaayorre the typical greeting is something like “where are you headed?” and the respondent would indicate in which direction he was going. Without an acute sense of direction, one wouldn't even be able to get past the basic civilities of saying hello.

Boroditsky and her team wanted to test whether the Kuuk Thaayorre's sense of space – so radically different than ours – would have an effect on other aspects of cognition – say, time. To test this, they gave participants sets of pictures of progressive actions and participants had to put the pictures in the correct order of the

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<sup>8</sup> As an example, my English-speaking five-year-old recently asked “how come Hebrew doesn't have an ‘it’?” (All nouns in Hebrew are gendered.)

events happening (e.g., pictures of a man at different stages of life, where participants had to put the pictures in order from youth through middle-age to old age). Amazingly, the Kuuk Thaayorre, who were each tested in two different locations, each time facing a different direction, organised the sequence pictures from east to west.

It is strange for us to imagine thinking of time not on a horizontal axis from left to right (or right to left, for Hebrew-speakers), but there are indeed other ways to conceive of time. In Mandarin, for example, time is a function of a vertical axis. In the case of the Kuuk Thaayorre, a different spatial perception – fostered by the language they employ to describe location – makes them think of time on an east-west axis, regardless of egocentric position. Thinking of time on an east-west axis, as well as the Kuuk Thaayorre's highly developed sense of direction, are non-linguistic cognitive abilities honed by language.

#### **1.4.4. Futureless languages and savings patterns**

Similar to Boroditsky's study which demonstrated that language influences other cognitive, non-linguistic faculties – namely, space and time – a more recent study by behavioural economist Keith Chen (2012; 2013) also demonstrates that language affects how we conceive of time – and how this difference in perception influences even something as seemingly non-linguistic as savings patterns. (Interestingly, apropos Whorf, the influence is grammar-dependent).

As a behavioural economist, Chen's interest is in why people (and countries at large) have different savings patterns. A child of Chinese parents who grew up in the United States, from a young age Chen was aware of differences between his two mother tongues. Notably, Chinese does not conjugate verbs into past and future, whereas English does. His hypothesis was that if the grammar of our language forces us to think of the future in different terms than those used to describe the present, then we might regard the future as something remote, whereas if our language does not differentiate between the future and the present, we might regard it as very much in the here-and-now – and act differently as a result. In terms of savings patterns, if we regard the future as something separate from the present, went his hypothesis, we will be less likely to save and if we regard the future as part of the present-continuum, we will be more likely to think about it – and save accordingly.

To test his hypothesis, Chen examined data from OECD countries and found that countries where languages with a weak future-time references are spoken (i.e., the future is not regarded as separate grammatically) tend to save more – an average of 5% of their GDP. But, one might argue, there are so many variables that can influence savings patterns. Indeed, Chen then examined data at a much finer resolution, isolating all other variables such as demographics, age, gender, level of income, education, marital status, religion, birth-rate, political views, and so forth. To do so, he identified nine countries in the world where in all other respects (demographics, income, education, etc.) the local population is the same, with the one exception being the language they speak: part of the population speaks a language with weak future-time reference and part speaks a language with a strong future-time reference. Chen found that the former were 30% more likely to report having saved that year, and they retire with 25% more savings, holding income constant. Evidently, time is money.

Interestingly, his study revealed not only a difference in savings patterns but in overall regard for the future. People who spoke a language with a weak future-time reference were less likely to smoke and also less likely to be obese at retirement. This is only logical: looking after one's health amounts to "saving" for the future, if we think of it in terms of forgoing something in the present (say, a cigarette) or investment (say, exercise) for a long-term reward (health). Without the grammatical and conceptual confines that make the future some abstract and remote concept, when the future is regarded as being here-and-now, we tend to care more about it.

#### **1.4.5. What these studies teach us**

The overall conclusion from these experiments is that our language and linguistic mechanisms do in fact influence our thought; at the same time, they also indicate (particularly the studies of Kay and Kempton, and Slobin), that "we are not hopelessly at the mercy of our language" (Kay and Kempton 1984, 75) and that our thought processes (taking place as we talk) are "not a Whorfian straightjacket" (Gumperz and Levinson 1996, 86). Or, in Deutscher's (2010, 90) words, our "culture enjoys freedom within constraints."

Regarding Kay and Kempton's experiment, some will argue – and rightfully so – that it focuses on such a small area of language; the relevance of one small lexical item to the rest of the language is arguable, and thus using it to prove relativity is inherently limited. Furthermore, it does not, to use the words of Gumperz and

Levinson (1996, 38), expand “the scope of inquiry to include questions about underlying mechanisms and cultural significance.” Nevertheless, the study still has value in demonstrating that language influences thought, even if the subject matter concerns just a small area of said language. Colour terminology is just one area, but it might have further implications that have yet to be explored (for example, how speakers of different languages relate to the natural world and the colours found therein<sup>9</sup>).

The study also indicates a weaker interpretation of the hypothesis by showing that although language *influences* thought, it does not *determine* it, as evidenced by the fact that when the English speakers were told to suppress the naming strategy, they were able to overcome the limitations imposed on them by their language and their subsequent answers were the same as those of the Tarahumara speakers. In other words, our language will certainly colour (no pun intended) our perceptions, and yet we can overcome these linguistic constraints.

Bear in mind, though, that cultural exposure plays a role in colour terminology, not only language. Children learning about colour in the West, for example, have high-saturation colourful objects (bright wooden blocks, plastic stacking cups, dyed-to-match cotton socks). They’re not learning their colours from the sea or from bamboo shoots, where colour distinctions are much more fluid. So it is only natural that different cultures will talk about colour differently. As Sampson (Gladstone as Linguist 2014, 9) notes,

An experienced painter has a more refined ability to recognise and identify shades of colour than many non-artists, but this is not because there is anything special about the anatomy the painter’s eye: it is uncontroversially the result of “education”, or training.... A painter may have acquired the ability to recognize and identify various precise shades, say gamboge or citrine, which the average layman might lump together simply as “yellow”, but this does not imply that the painter’s eyesight is physically acuter than the layman’s.

This goes hand in hand with the weaker, non-deterministic interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

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<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, a language like Hanunó’o spoken in the Philippines, where colour can be categorised as “wet” or “dry,” as well as based on its saturation or “light” vs. “dark.”

Another point that emerges from this study is that there is indeed a “mental concept” that is pre-linguistic, though universals and linguistic phenomena of a particular language are not mutually exclusive. The fact that the Tarahumara speakers do not have separate words distinguishing blue and green does not mean that these colour distinctions do not *exist* in their minds; obviously, the Tarahumara speakers’ eyesight and colour perception is biologically no different than ours. This is evidenced by the fact that even in languages where there is no blue/green distinction but instead a “grue” (green–blue) word, they still differentiate between the two by use of similes – “grue like the sky/grue like the leaves” (Gumpers and Levinson 1996, 71). Even if a language lacks words for some things, speakers of that language can still talk about them by circumlocution or linguistic creativity.

Slobin’s experiment is limited as well in that, like the colour experiment, it does not prove that any cultural significance is derived from linguistic differences. However, it does demonstrate that already at the young age of three or four, children are attuned to the grammar of their language. This study, then, sheds light on our understanding of the difficulties people face when learning a second language, particularly in terms of its grammar.

Another point emerging from this study is that while it is true that the language we speak directs us to pay attention to certain aspects which in other languages (and thus, cultures) might not be deemed significant (at least for “thinking for speaking”), the distinction of “thinking for speaking” demonstrates that there is a thinking that is purely “thinking for thinking” – in other words, non-linguistic in nature. It would seem, then, that according to Slobin, “thinking for thinking” is universal, while “thinking for speaking” is relative. Or, in the words of Lee (1996, 91),

At one level, the level of *nonlinguistic* organization of experience, all humans share the same experiential world. It is upon these foundations that different conceptual worlds are elaborated according to different constellations of cognitive processing which are the concomitants of different ways of talking.

This, too, goes hand in hand with the weaker, non-deterministic view of the hypothesis.

As to Boroditsky’s study, it is more significant than the previous two mentioned in that it shows a much deeper connection between language and thought by demonstrating language’s effects on *non-linguistic* cognitive abilities. One might

argue, though, that there is no way to isolate the language factor from other possible cultural influences – i.e. it is possible that cultural aspects are influencing language, not the other way around. But this, too, aligns with a weaker version of the hypothesis, namely, that not only will language influence how we think but that there is a symbiotic relationship between language, thought and culture.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, Chen’s study goes even further than Boroditsky’s in demonstrating an even greater connection between language and thought and language’s effect on non-linguistic faculties. The profundity of Chen’s study is threefold. First, by isolating the language factor from other variables that might influence savings patterns (religion, education, etc.), as he did in the nine “pockets” he isolated around the world, he demonstrated a far stronger correlation between language and thought (and consequent action or non-action) than initially speculated. Second, his study has implications not only in anthropological-exploratory terms of how people live in the present, but how we can plan better for the future. Third, and related to the previous point, it demonstrates that the study of language isn’t simply about the unheard of, isolated “exotic” languages in some remote part of the world, but has universal implications, more readily observable as personally relevant than those implied by the other studies mentioned.

Each of these studies, with several years between them, expand on the linguistic relativity theory – from minor lexical areas to broader grammatical categories, through profound influences that affect non-linguistic cognitive abilities and onto things so seemingly unrelated to language – and universal in their application and significance – such as economics. The upshot is that the study of language – and language differences – is far more weighty than we tend to think and can potentially inform a great variety of fields.

### **1.5. Criticism of Whorf and the Linguistic Relativity Principle**

Although linguistic relativity enjoyed some degree of popularity in academic circles in the decade following Whorf’s death and with the posthumous publication of his papers by John B. Carroll in the 1950s, Lee (1996, 23) notes that

With the rise of Chomsky, commitment to the search for universals precluded many investigators from taking Whorf seriously although...

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<sup>10</sup> See the discussion of  $W_3$  in the conclusion to this chapter.

his overall scheme includes a place for universals within the more predominantly relativistic framework.

Fishman's (1982, 3) assertion three decades ago that those who defend Whorf "have been dubbed mystics, romantics, dogmatists, and anecdotalists" still rings true today, with "'Whorfianism' [having] largely become an intellectual tax haven for mystical philosophers, fantasists, and post-modern charlatans" (Deutscher 2010, 131).

Curiously, Whorf's detractors hardly make reference to studies done to prove linguistic relativity. This is clever on the part of those espousing innateness and universalism: avoidance of any reference to dissenting views obviates the need to deal with them. When they do make reference to these studies, instead of engaging with them and attempting to refute them, they downplay the evidence as being of little value – either because it doesn't prove determinism (but note, these studies never set out to prove a deterministic view in the first place, only a relativistic one; this is the "strawman" at its most functional: claim Whorf said an idea which cannot be tested), or because it is insignificant in the larger scheme of cognition or culture.

Given what is now known about linguistic relativity and the continually accumulating evidence in its favour, it is indeed surprising that it is still considered "an idea in disgrace" and that "any mention of linguistic relativity will make most linguists shift uneasily in their chairs" (Deutscher 2010, 131). The question is, why? Is the idea of linguistic relativity simply beneath (or beyond) linguists and innateness proponents? Or is there a universalist ideology at play here, underpropping a fear of linguistic relativity's implications?

It would be simplistic to claim that Whorf's ideas have been misinterpreted simply because he left many thoughts unfinished, or because he lacked academic rigour. The misinterpretation of Whorf, or the attribution to him of ideas he never said, is not as innocent. Cameron (1999, 153) makes the keen observation that if the experts in a particular field (in this case, linguistics) will stop at nothing in order to refute a particular individual's views, then most likely that individual's views must be "extraordinarily threatening, and in consequence highly revealing." What is it about linguistic relativity that the academic community finds so distasteful or scary?

First, let it be noted that

[H]istory has demonstrated repeatedly that in times of rationalist domination of thought in higher education, the mental-spiritual half of the original holistic art "goes underground," as it were, to be kept alive

by unorthodox thinkers both inside and (mostly) outside of the academic disciplines.

(D. Alford 1980, 3)

In other words, even if Whorf's ideas were entirely bogus (which they are not, as evident by numerous studies), they would be embraced wholeheartedly by the academic community if they were in vogue. The fact that they are not is an indication more of the power of prevailing views than of the merit of the idea in question.

With that in mind, we can divide the criticisms against Whorf into two main categories, the scientific/academically motivated and the socio-politically motivated. In a sense, the former motivation is an attempt at cementing, or whitewashing, the rationale underlying the latter.

### **1.5.1. Academic rationale for rejecting Whorf**

Whorf has been criticised for being a linguistic amateur, though Lavery (1995) describes Whorf (in a positive vein) as a Jack-of-all-trades, with interests not only in linguistics but in evolutionary biology, botany, theology, and physics. He notes, further, that we should not view Whorf's promotion of linguistic relativity as separate from his other pursuits. Whorf's methodology is indeed problematic. Unlike scholars after him who tried to prove what he said, Whorf did not devise artificial modes for testing his "hypothesis." Although his ideas have generated much "lab work" and studies decades after he first introduced them, Whorf himself never resorted to this mode of investigation. He functioned as an explorer on an adventure to discover new things, always on the lookout for "inner meanings" (Whorf 1956, 9). Lee (1996, 1) notes that "Whorf seems to have regarded linguistic investigation as a code breaking activity with the power to reveal aspects of the character of human thought." He analysed linguistic phenomena – chiefly in American Indian languages – to see how they relate to that culture's particular habitual behaviour and thought patterning. He read a lot about American Indian languages at various libraries, visiting whatever library he could whenever he travelled for business (Whorf 1956). He travelled to Mexico to study Mayan hieroglyphs, lived on a Hopi reservation in Arizona for a short period (which no doubt contributed to his grammar and dictionary of Hopi, though never published), and learned from a Hopi speaker, whom he met in New York.

Whorf can be forgiven for not being the serious academic, of which he is accused, for the simple reason that he never claimed to be. Deutscher (2010) does not mince words in his criticism of Whorf for using the term “relativity” with such unabashed reference to Einstein’s theory of relativity. But this reference is not arrogant, irrelevant or ignorant, and, given Whorf’s knowledge of physics and chemistry, cannot be interpreted as hyperbolic or pseudoscientific. Whorf was “uninterested in positivistic proof, preferring simply to follow an idea where it led” (Cameron 1999, 154). It is also no secret that, as some argue, in some cases his data was wrong.<sup>11</sup> One must, however, bear in mind two things: 1. Unlike Chomsky, who revises his ideas every decade or so, Whorf had no such luxury, with his untimely death at the age of forty-four after battling cancer, and 2. Though his methodology was not scientific, the present studies being conducted based on his ideas do meet scientific standards. Might Whorf have conducted such research had he lived longer? Perhaps, perhaps not. But the current research indicates that he was certainly correct in his theory and on the right track, even if some of his ideas were not well formulated, or initially flawed.

It seems Whorf’s ideas have been discredited because they are unpopular; the accusation that he lacked academic rigor is as good an excuse as any. The real underlying objection to Whorf and the reason the academic community finds him and his ideas so offensive or scary that they must be refuted no matter what, is that his ideas could potentially be ethnocentric and would, by association, label proponents of linguistic relativity as such. The upshot of this is that one cannot divorce the Whorfian-Chomskyan divide from the social climate in which the debate has taken place.

### **1.5.2. The socio-political rationale for rejecting Whorf**

It is indeed ironic that Whorf has been labelled ethnocentric, considering that

The doctrine of radical linguistic relativity is to be understood historically as a reaction to the denigrating attitude toward unwritten languages that was fostered by the evolutionary view prevalent in anthropology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

(Kay and Kempton 1984, 65)

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<sup>11</sup> See Malotki’s (1983) debunking of Whorf’s work on the Hopi sense of time. But see, in turn, Lee (1991), Lucy (1992b) and (1996, in Gumperz and Levinson [1996]), and Dinwoodie’s (2006), which show Whorf’s writings on Hopi time have been misinterpreted.

The concern over ethnocentrism is understandable. The effect of this claim is that such an outlook necessarily puts our own language (in this case, English) as the standard against which all other languages are assessed. Consider languages such as Pirahã, which do not have cardinal numbers but only “few” and “many”; Berik, where the verb is inflected differently depending on what time of day the action took place; languages like Mandarin, where relatives are given different titles depending on whether they are maternal or paternal relatives, and whether they are related by blood or by marriage; or aboriginal languages with nouns gendered not only male or female or neutral but in sixteen different categories – for canines, weapons, and even a category for “women, fire, and dangerous things” – the title of linguist George Lakoff’s book. These languages seem “strange” or “exotic” to us; it is easy to see how one might conclude that beyond the linguistic divide there is a vast cultural one as well.

Whorf’s opponents, such as Pinker (1994) and, a bit less vehemently so, Deutscher (2010), decry our enthusiasm with the “exotic,” saying that just because people speak a different language does not mean they inhabit a different world. Pinker (1994) and Pullum (1991) go so far as to put words into Whorf’s mouth, blaming him for the “Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax” – the perpetuation of the myth that Eskimos have hundreds of different words for snow when, in truth, Whorf never even said that (B. I. Kodish 2003, 390). What he did say was that

Languages classify items of experience differently. The class corresponding to one word and one thought in language A may be regarded by language B as two or more classes corresponding to two or more words and thoughts.

(Whorf 1956, 210)

Whorf did not believe that there was such a thing as a primitive language. In fact, he did not use English or any other language which he termed “Standard Average European” (SAE) as the standard against which other “primitive” or “exotic” languages were compared, but regarded them both equally, “play[ing] them off against each other” (Lucy, in Gumperz and Levinson 1996, 43). Indeed, Lucy (*ibid.*) notes that the experiments done to prove linguistic relativity have largely focused on just one language, or taken one language (usually an SAE language) and used it as the base language against which another (or more) languages are compared.

Whorf viewed every language as inherently valuable, irrespective of how it “compared” to another language. He

thought that this kind of multi-language investigation of cognition is also capable of illuminating the nature of reality in a way inquiry conducted from within the conceptual parameters of a single language cannot. This is because reality understood through the frameworks of many languages is revealed as conceptually and experientially more complex and many faceted than the lens of a single language can show.

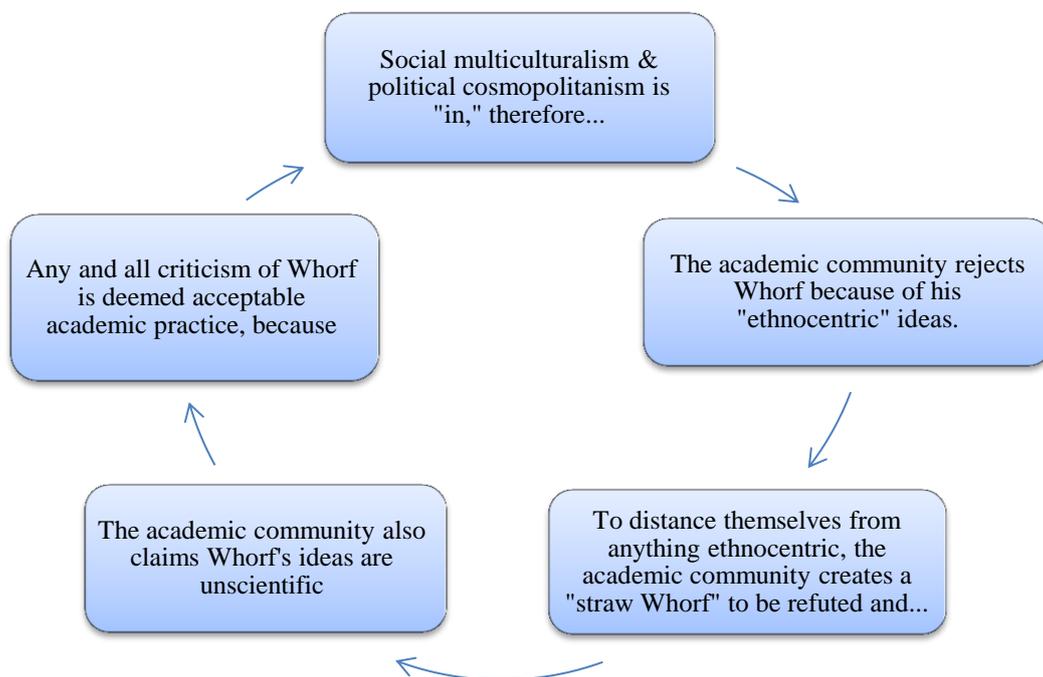
(Lee 1996, 33)

This multicultural linguistic pluralism Whorf gleaned from Sapir, who said

Both simple and complex types of language of an indefinite number of varieties may be found spoken at any desired level of cultural advance. When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian Swineherd, Confucius with the headhunting savage of Assam.

(1921, 234)

To sum up, we can map out the criticism against Whorf schematically, as follows:



The flipside of the criticism that Whorf, or his ideas, are ethnocentric (which, as stated, is the real underlying basis for the academic rationale for rejecting Whorf), is the desire to uphold Chomskyan universalism. In other words, even if Whorf’s research methodologies were not on par scientifically, and though he erred in some of the things he wrote (or, on the more benevolent view, didn’t have time to revise

properly), his mistakes have been magnified to such an extent that “If Whorf had not existed it would have been necessary to invent him,<sup>12</sup> and some would say we have done precisely that” (Cameron 1999, 154). This is because the debate is not merely scientific or linguistic but ideological.

There is a difference between recognizing linguistic and cultural differences and ethnocentrism. The former enables an appreciation of the diversity of language and the fact that different cultures have different worldviews and are therefore valuable because meaning that is conveyed in one language might not be the same as that meaning conveyed in another language (Lucy 1997); the latter posits that our worldview is the standard against which others should be measured, or from which others deviate.

But in today’s world of multiculturalism and political cosmopolitanism, anything that highlights cultural difference gets the whistle blown for being “ethnocentric.” The idea that “differences between languages may in some cases correlate with difference in societies’ perceptions of the world they inhabit,” are rejected “not because it is examined and found wanting, but because it is not entertained as a candidate for acceptance” (G. Sampson, Gladstone as Linguist 2014, 1). The irony is that the extreme universalist agenda which seeks to solve the world’s problems by blurring – or erasing entirely – the lines of distinction between cultures and nationalities, has not succeeded in promoting more tolerance. In fact, the very concept of tolerance is moot in the face of such universality.

Much energy is exerted to educate toward tolerance, on the grounds that we’re all the same. But if we are all the same, then tolerance is irrelevant. If we’re all the same, then – assuming we like ourselves, and most people do – there is nothing to tolerate. Tolerance is only relevant where I *disagree* with the other or am so completely *different* than the other, but am nevertheless willing to work with the other for the sake of our common interests and shared goals. In other words, tolerance is only relevant where there is *an acknowledgement of difference*. (In truth, most times tolerance is simply a nice cloak for “live and let live” – allowing other people to lead their lives the way they want to, simply so that they will let us lead ours the way we want to.) It is easier to like that which is similar, that much harder to like (or tolerate)

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<sup>12</sup> If for no other reason than to distance ourselves from his “extreme ethnocentrism.”

that which is foreign. Genuine tolerance is relevant and exercised only when premised on an acknowledgment of our differences, not a blurring of them.

Ultimately, linguistic relativity and universalism are not mutually exclusive. We are similar in some ways, different in others. “Any research which shows the possibility of some cross-cultural, biological basis for some of the terms we use does not actually challenge the notion of linguistic relativity” (B. I. Kodish 2003, 389) – provided we take linguistic relativity as a *relativity* principle, not a deterministic one.

## 1.6. Conclusion

This chapter explored the linguistic relativity principle, its development, and its later misinterpretation. A number of studies done to prove linguistic relativity were brought, followed by a discussion of the implications of these studies vis-à-vis how language affects thought. We also touched upon the underlying rationales for misinterpreting Whorf, demonstrating that the issue at hand isn't merely linguistic or academic but is in fact agenda driven.

We can sum up the discussion in this chapter as follows:

1. Whorf did not posit a deterministic stance concerning linguistic relativity, but a relativistic one: the language we speak will *influence* our worldview, not *determine* it.
2. Whorf termed it a *principle*, i.e. something axiomatic to be viewed in context, and not something to be tested in an artificial environment.<sup>13</sup> (Though as we have seen, this point is now somewhat moot given that Whorf's ideas have in fact been demonstrated in “artificial” experiments, the first three of the four studies discussed above being but few examples thereof. It goes without saying that these studies demonstrate a relativistic, not deterministic, stance.)
3. When assessing why Whorf's ideas have fallen into disrepute, we cannot ignore the fact that his claims have been misinterpreted or downright falsified, nor the political climate and trends in academia in the context of which his ideas were quashed, which were touched upon briefly and will be expanded upon in the coming chapter.

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<sup>13</sup> How this compares with the way Chomsky's ideas of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), the Poverty or the Stimulus hypothesis and Universal Grammar being axiomatic, despite the lack of evidence, will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 1.6.1. Moving Beyond W<sub>1</sub> and W<sub>2</sub>

Fishman (1982) notes that so much of the discussion regarding linguistic relativity revolves around whether one should espouse the relativistic stance or the stronger, deterministic one – what Fishman calls W<sub>1</sub> and W<sub>2</sub>, respectively – that a third hypothesis, W<sub>3</sub>, the one “that champions ethnolinguistic diversity for the benefit of pan-human creativity, problem solving, and mutual cross-cultural acceptance” (1) has been eclipsed. Put differently, the debate over W<sub>1</sub> vs. W<sub>2</sub> is deemed far more significant than the potential value of W<sub>3</sub>. Likely this has resulted from linguistics having been relegated to the sciences (as well as from the adoption of an extreme universalist ideal; as has become evident – most notably, in the case of Chomsky – the two often go hand in hand).<sup>14</sup> Keeping the discussions strictly in the realm of the sciences has made it easy to refute Whorf’s ideas (be they classified as W<sub>1</sub> or W<sub>2</sub>), and thereby avoid having to deal with the broader implications inherent in W<sub>3</sub>. This would explain why the debate as to whether Whorf posited W<sub>1</sub> or W<sub>2</sub>, or the nixing of the two entirely, hasn’t abated.

But now, with new studies proving the linguistic relativity theory, it can no longer be claimed that Whorf’s ideas are unscientific. With the W<sub>1</sub>-vs.-W<sub>2</sub> issue rendered moot, we can safely move on to W<sub>3</sub> – and we should.

To my view, the role of linguistic relativity in the *social* sciences and the humanities is of far greater importance than its place (or displacement) in the hard sciences. In this I echo Fishman’s (1982, 11) words that

This past quarter century’s experience with W<sub>1</sub> and W<sub>2</sub>, and the coming quarter century’s experience with W<sub>3</sub> can serve to remind linguistics-as-a-science that linguistics is also very significantly a humanities field and an applied field as well.

The applications of W<sub>3</sub> are broad, with “valuable humanizing and sensitizing effect on the language-related disciplines” (1). An excellent example of W<sub>3</sub>’s manifestation are the twin fields of second language acquisition and bilingual education.

#### 1.6.1.1. *Second language acquisition and bilingual education*

Braine (1994, quoted in Wolfe-Quintero [1996, 338]) asserts that

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the espousal of W<sub>3</sub> would be more aligned with a genuine universalist ideal.

[T]here is no serious theory of language acquisition that does not acknowledge that the human brain comes equipped with some means for organizing the language experiences that are presented to humans in the course of their developments.

While this innateness proposition is true, it is equally true that it is insufficient to master a second language (or maintain bilingualism) without the culture and the correlating sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic elements that go along with it. Second-language acquisition necessitates a degree of innateness as well as empiricism/relativity or, to use Wolfe-Quintero's terms, the converging ("interactionism") of "nativism" and "environmentalism." As Fishman (*Sociolinguistic Foundations of Bilingual Education* 1982, 1) notes,

All speech communities, whether nominally monolingual or multilingual, reveal variation in the way their members speak (and write); i.e., their members speak differently (write differently) depending on whom they are speaking to, where, when, and why. Language behavior, like all other social behaviour, is varied purposely; that is, it is varied in order to facilitate purposeful ends and it can be facilitative in this connection only if such variation is socially patterned and normatively (but not necessarily consciously) recognized as appropriate.

In other words, even if we wanted to believe in some sort of Universal Grammar as Chomsky proposes all people possess,<sup>15</sup> how societies and cultures *use* language differs from culture to culture. As Fishman (*ibid.*) notes,

Normal socialization into a speech community results in the acquisition of familiarity (consciously or unconsciously) with at least the major congruencies between grossly discerned varieties and grossly recognized situational domains.

This would account for part of the difficulties encountered by people trying to learn a second language to mother-tongue fluency. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1997, in Eslami-Rasekh [2005, 199]), note that research demonstrates that grammatical development does not guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic development. The language being acquired cannot be neatly separated from the culture that speaks it. It is not merely a question of learning a new vocabulary,

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<sup>15</sup>See Wolfe-Quintero (1996) for a discussion on the contrary.

grammar and syntax, but learning to see the world through a differently calibrated lens. It is a question of learning to pay attention to different particulars and peculiarities that make the language unique (for example, learning a language where nouns are gendered, where evidentiality is marked with different verb forms, or where pronouns are unmarked for gender) – in effect, learning not just to *speak* the new language but to actually *think* it.<sup>16</sup>

If languages were simply systems for encoding, or, as the nativists claim, were all basically the same, mastering a second language wouldn't be challenging. Mastering a language will necessarily require acclimation, at least to some degree, with the host culture speaking that language. Though one may have decent technical or scholarly knowledge of the language, in order to communicate fully with others in the new language one would need to know the language's particular slang, euphemisms, expressions, registers, stylistics and other culturally linked linguistic phenomena.

This view underscores the advantages of being bilingual or multilingual. For if, as we have stated, each language (and its correlating culture) represents a unique worldview, then those who speak multiple languages have a multifaceted worldview. This concept might be difficult for monolinguals to understand, but it seems attitudes (at least in the USA) are changing, with people beginning to recognise the value of speaking more than one language (Ramírez-Esparza and García-Sierra 2014).

Furthermore, cultural identity is one of the characteristics of bilingualism (*ibid.*).<sup>17</sup> Ramírez-Esparza & García-Sierra note that “Many simultaneous bilinguals learn two languages while also learning about the cultures associated with the languages,” and “these two cultures may be internalized as part of their identity” (36). Referring to the

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<sup>16</sup> Consider the case of work accidents among Finnish- and Swedish-speakers. Studies point to the fact that “Swedes, who speak an Indo-European language, form mental models that concentrate on continuous movement in a 3-dimensional space, whereas Finns, who speak a Ural-Altai language, form mental models that concentrate on the relations of entities that are more static [...] If this is also the case of the mental models of workers in real life, then there is a possibility that Finnish-speaking people think of possible dangers in advance less often than Swedish-speaking people. Another possibility is that they fail to observe dangers inherent in dynamic situations as they concentrate on static relations (Salminen and Johansson 2000, 294, 304). This difference is reflected in a 20% lower rate of work-related accidents among Swedish-speakers living in Finland than their Finnish counterparts, and a 31% lower rate of work-related accidents in Sweden than in Finland (Matthiasen et al. 1993, in Salminen & Johansson [2000, 304]).

Noteworthy, too, is the fact that Finnish-speaking workers in Swedish-speaking work environments also showed less work-related accidents, perhaps indicating that they were influenced by their Swedish-speaking co-workers. Similarly to the colour study with the Tarahumara speakers mentioned above, language constraints can be overcome.

<sup>17</sup> The other two discussed by Ramírez-Esparza & García-Sierra are age of acquisition (simultaneous bilingualism if from birth, or second language learners), and competence (bilinguals who can read/write in both languages).

work of Benet-Martínez & Haritatos (2005), they note, further, that those whose cultural identities are “compatible” are “more likely to use the languages of their two cultures in their everyday lives.” But those whose dual cultural identities are viewed as opposites “are less likely to maintain the languages of both cultures.” (Fishman [1982], too, discusses such conflict.) Ramírez-Esparza & García-Sierra term this “biculturalism,” as distinct from being bilingual; the two do not necessarily go hand in hand (a case in point, mentioned in Ramírez-Esparza & García-Sierra, is that of Europeans becoming proficient in English while not considering themselves “American”). In short, authentic language acquisition goes hand in hand with culture.

Fishman delineates three types of bilingual education, noting that each “reflects local social goals and social realities” and are thus “best understood in terms of a sociology of bilingual education” (1977c, in Fishman [Sociolinguistic Foundations of Bilingual Education 1982, 23]). In other words, we cannot understand bilingual education as divorced from its coexisting respective cultures.

There is the transitional-compensatory bilingual education, in which the primary language is used as the medium for teaching, with the goal of helping students acquire the new language. Although in theory it seems a more compassionate way of mainstreaming children into the host language/culture rather than monolingual instruction in the target language, Fishman notes that it hasn’t been very successful and is in fact conflict-ridden. We can understand why, given the cultural elements inherent in bilingual education: the fact that it isn’t merely a language being supplanted but an entire culture that goes along with it, and that the transitioning language is often deemed the inferior one for economic or social-status reasons, is cause for conflict – and concern.

Then there is bilingual education that is oriented toward language maintenance. Fishman notes that although this type of bilingual education is very rare in America, it accounts for one-third of bilingual education around the world, and is

expressly oriented toward fostering a language not (or not yet) recognized for public education functions, as well as toward fostering it expressly for pupils whose mother tongue or communal language it is (or once was).

(Sociolinguistic Foundations of Bilingual Education 1982, 24)

In maintenance bilingualism, the goal isn't to make obsolete the marked language functioning as the medium of instruction, rather to uphold it – for the entire duration of studies. Fishman notes, however, that the marked language is employed for “the most ethnically encumbered subjects (marked history, literature, customs, religion, etc.),” while the unmarked one is used for “instruction of the less ethnically encumbered subjects: mathematics, natural science, unmarked literature, etc.” (ibid.). He notes, further, that “when (and if) the marked language becomes the medium for ethnically less encumbered subjects it is frequently a sign that yet another state has been reached in equalizing the intergroup balance of power along economic and political lines” (ibid.).

Aside from the success of language maintenance bilingual education – Fishman notes that academic achievement of such institutions is comparable to similar monolingual institutions – it also supports students' self-concept, underscoring yet again the cultural connection with language.

Their pupils' self-identification as marked-group members is strongly reinforced, more so perhaps than their command of the marked language. The élan and esprit de corps generated by such schools is frequently demonstrated by substantial involvement in marked community processes.

(25)

The third type of bilingual education Fishman discusses is enrichment bilingual education, which can be described as being on the opposite of transition-compensatory bilingual education: the latter is generally given to underprivileged populations in an attempt to “change” their social or economic standing, while the former is given to upper-class, affluent students intent on upholding their status. For these students, bilingual instruction is “positively reinforced by the social contexts in which they function” (26).

What emerges from Fishman's discussion of each of the three types of bilingual education is that “Bilingual education recurringly involves the link between language and ethnicity, either in order to counteract that link (transitional), to foster it (maintenance), or to transcend it without destroying it (enrichment)” (28). To disregard  $W_3$  in bilingual education and second language acquisition is to short-change all students, regardless of background. The link between language and culture is inseparable.

### 1.6.1.2. Translation

Another area where it is impossible to ignore  $W_3$  (and, in fact,  $W_1$ ), is the field of translation. As any good translator will attest, every language has its quirks, idiosyncrasies, and grammatical issues that work fine in the source language but get thorny if the target language differs in this aspect,<sup>18</sup> not to mention “linguistic voids” – words or concepts that have no equivalent in another language<sup>19</sup> – all of which underscore the fact that translation is an *art*, not just a science.

Pedro (1999, 556) makes the striking observation that “The notion of untranslatability has been unpopular in the twentieth century mainly due to ideological reasons.” However the very fact that translators the world over do what they do day in and day out goes to show that there is, in fact, an “untranslatable” element; if languages were that transparent, (human) translation wouldn’t be necessary. “[I]t is assumed that the perfect translation, i.e. one which does not entail any losses from the original is unattainable, especially when dealing with literary translation” (ibid.). In other words, the very act of translation presupposes a degree of untranslatability; otherwise, it would render itself moot.

While some translation theorists (for example, Hyde 1993) claim Whorfianism has “muddled” translation, my experience in the translation industry over the last decade and from personal interviews with fellow translators working in a variety of language pairs and in vastly different fields (among them medicine and public health, political science, history, literature, poetry, and even the more technical-seeming fields of law and engineering), has shown that Whorfianism is actually the more aligned view with the rigours – and highpoints – of the profession. Schlegel expressed this idea, in a letter he wrote to Von Humboldt in 1796:

All translation seems to me simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible.

(Wilss 1982, 35)

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<sup>18</sup> Consider Turkish where one uses different verbs when recounting an event, depending on whether one saw it personally or just heard about it.

<sup>19</sup> Consider the Yiddish (and now Hebrew) *fargin* or the Portuguese *saudade*.

Whorf's view follows the same line of thought. To say that every culture has its unique way of viewing the world and expressing that view is not to say that its particular concepts cannot be explained in another language; on the contrary: that is *precisely* the job of the translator – to render the reality constructed, or reflected, in one language, into another.

[T]he acceptance of differences between linguistic communities does not necessarily presuppose the establishment of a hierarchical classification. Each community perceives the world and expresses its experience of it in a different way, according to its needs. Considering what is different as inferior is, certainly, a reactionary stand. *Yet there is no direct or necessary relation between the concepts of difference, on the one hand, and inferiority or superiority, on the other.*

(Pedro, 1999, 555-556, italics mine)

Furthermore, as Hyde (1993, 7) himself notes,

You do not have to be a Chomskyan to see that all languages have built into them devices for circumventing their own limitations. On one view, literature<sup>20</sup> itself is made up of a massive body of these devices, designed to institutionalize just these processes of circumvention.

Whorf certainly would agree, and that is precisely the job of the translator – to find the least cumbersome – and, in the case of literature or poetry, one hopes, the most beautiful – means of circumventing the problem. The question remains *how* – and *how well*; translation isn't just a science but an art. As Lewis-Kraus (2015) put it,

Translation is possible, and yet we are still bedeviled by conflict... The most succinct expression of this suspicion is “*traduttore, traditore*,” a common Italian saying that's really an argument masked as a proverb. It means, literally, “translator, traitor,” [meaning, all translations “betray” the original meaning to some degree] but even though that is semantically on target, it doesn't match the syllabic harmoniousness of the original, and thus proves the impossibility it asserts.

Any good translation presupposes the text's untranslatability. The job of the translator is in fact paradoxical, as Hyde notes, but this is not as negative as he makes it out to be: the translator brings the original to the world – in other words, without the

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<sup>20</sup> I would expand “literature” here to language in general.

translator there would be no original; the translation gives the original its legitimacy, (as Derrida would have it), but it also proves, by its existence, the text's lack of linguistic transparency – in other words, its untranslatability.

Were all languages merely “dialects of a single language,” as Sampson (Gladstone as Linguist 2014) says speakers of only one language find it more convenient to believe, it would be sufficient to rely solely on machine translation and translators would be out of a job. Even if we wanted to say there is a universal grammar, “even if common structures underlie all human languages, their surface counterparts are so different in each of those languages that translation may become an impossible task” (Pedro 1999, 550).

Chomsky, like computer scientists and programmers developing CAT (Computer Assisted Translation) tools, would like us to believe that all languages are at base the same language, that language is a science, merely a mathematical problem to be solved using ever more sophisticated algorithms. And that is precisely how Google Translate operates. Lewis-Kraus (2015) brings the word “bank” as an enlighteningly simple example: plug the word “bank” into Google Translate and it will undoubtedly render it as meaning a financial institution (particularly if the word “money” is collocated). However if “bank” is plugged in along with the word “river” (as in “on the bank of the river”), Google Translate will know to translate it as such, based on algorithms it has developed for such purposes. But, notes Lewis-Kraus, “This doesn't work in every instance... a machine might still have a hard time with the relatively simple sentence ‘A Parisian has to have a lot of money to live on the Left Bank.’”

Tellingly, Lewis-Kraus describes how one of the presenters at a conference of computer programmers developing translation software, said: “[I]t's surprising how little it helps to know another language. When you're working with so many languages, it's actually not helpful to know [another language].”<sup>21</sup> To translators, however, who deal with the human aspect of language and consequently value the differences, subtleties and nuances thereof, it is just the opposite: the more languages one speaks, the richer, deeper and broader the worldview and the more heightened the sensitivity to differences in language – and the culture reflected in that language.

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<sup>21</sup> This aligns with Sampson's observation that speakers of one language find the idea that we all speak dialects of one language believable. The more languages one speaks, however, the more one comes to realise how different they are.

Warren Weaver, pioneer of Machine Translation, said in 1955 that “No reasonable person thinks that a machine translation can ever achieve elegance and style. Pushkin need not shudder.” Indeed, if machine translation were making translators obsolete, the translation industry wouldn’t be worth the \$33 billion it was estimated to be in 2012 (Kelly and Zetzsche, 2012),<sup>22</sup> the UN would not be staffed by over 130 full-time interpreters operating in 23 different language pairs, and the marketing and PR industries wouldn’t be investing the billions they do annually in localisation efforts. The human component in translation is necessary and is not going out of fashion any time soon. As the myriad Google Translate bloopers joyfully circulated by howling translators attest, no matter how sophisticated machine translation technologies get – and they’re getting more sophisticated all the time – they will never supersede human translation.

The translatability of text is [...] guaranteed by the existence of universal categories in syntax, semantic, and the (natural) logic of experience. Should a translation nevertheless fail to measure up to the original in terms of quality, the reason will (normally) be not an insufficiency of syntactic and lexical inventories in that particular TL<sup>23</sup>, but rather the limited ability of the translator in regard to text analysis.

(Wilss 1982, 49)

Hyde (1993, 4) notes that one of the problems with translations is their place within the institutional systems of literature, where

They are again caught up in an intense levelling process which inevitably regards the translator as not quite a real writer, and treats his work as inferior and subsidiary to ‘original’ work. And these general notions are both reinforced and reflected in the literary market-place: translators in our times are very badly paid, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, because their “value-added” activity is seen as purely ancillary. Translation impinges on the “original” only at the “point of sale”, and is therefore part of a process of commodification far removed from creativity.

The lamentable fact that translators are underappreciated is not a reflection of the profession; there are many positions where people are overworked and incredibly

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<sup>22</sup> At a recent conference of the Israel Translators Association, translator and author Jost Zetzsche told me figures are now well over \$40 billion.

<sup>23</sup> Target language.

underpaid and undervalued.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it is a reflection of a society's ignorance of what is entailed in the translation process. An understanding for what  $W_3$  has to offer in this regard would help foster a greater appreciation for the art – and challenge – of translation.

### **1.6.1.3. *Talk therapy***

There is one more manifestation of  $W_3$ , which warrants mentioning here because of its impact on our personal wellbeing, and that is the field of psychotherapy. Beyond the classic “talking cure” of Freudian psychoanalysis, in recent decades we have witnessed the proliferation of therapeutic approaches premised on linguistic change which, though still regarded in some circles as verging on quackery (consider the criticism against Neuro-Linguistic Programming), have gained considerable attention and popularity, and are employed (granted, at times as a technique among many rather than as a psychotherapeutic system in itself) in treating all sorts of psychological, social and behavioural problems.

Consider, by way of example, narrative therapy – a form of psychotherapy developed in the 70s and 80s by Michael White and David Epston, which aims to help people rescript their lives with more conducive narratives in order to replace the negative or destructive ones by which they have lived. In this form of therapy, the narratives we have developed which shape our sense of self can be rewritten to better suit us and where we would like to be. This can take the form of the spoken word (talk therapy), or even the written word, as when patients and therapists formulate documents reflective of an alternative narrative.<sup>25</sup> In addition, a key element in narrative therapy is naming a problem and thereby externalising it, enabling the patient to take an objective stance toward it.<sup>26</sup> This equips the patient to better analyse how the problem has affected his life and life decisions, and whether it has some redeemable value or not as well as how to cope with it (work with it or learn to ignore

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<sup>24</sup> Motherhood comes to mind. Or consider Heller's (2003) example of the unacknowledged social worker rehabilitating prison inmates so that they won't repeat the same crimes once they go free. The social worker is grossly underpaid relative to the judge who put the inmates into prison in the first place, who holds a position of prestige and earns a commensurate salary.

<sup>25</sup> Consider the following example related by an academic struggling with her parents' constant criticism of her decision to leave her career and become a stay-at-home mother. As part of her therapeutic process, she wrote herself a letter, from her children's perspective, commending her for everything she does for them on a daily basis to ensure their optimal upbringing.

<sup>26</sup> For example, “I have an autoimmune condition, but the condition doesn't have to own me,” or even something as basic as “I *did* something stupid” re-scripting the statement “I *am* stupid.”

it, just as two examples). This is linguistic relativity at its most therapeutic: changing our words can change our world.

As stated above, Fishman said that  $W_3$  has “valuable humanizing and sensitizing effect on the language-related disciplines” (1982, 1). But as we have seen (Chen’s study discussed above being a case in point<sup>27</sup>), the implications are even further reaching, touching upon many other fields, including even non-directly-language-related fields, or semi-language-related fields as well: post-colonialism, identity politics, regionalisation and globalisation<sup>28</sup> and, on the language side, language planning and policy; gender studies and feminism<sup>29</sup>; law,<sup>30</sup> public health, technology and human rights<sup>31</sup>; theology<sup>32</sup>; the media and the shaping of public discourse<sup>33</sup>; and many more – each topic of which, in its own right, is sufficient to comprise a companion study to this one.

Although Whorf’s ideas have fallen into disrepute in our era of innateness-dominated academia, “So much of Whorf’s research turns out to have value when re-examined that the possibility that he was on to something, even if different from what he imagined, cannot be totally excluded” (Lee 1996, 3). Now, given new evidence for linguistic relativity, not only can the possibility that Whorf was on to something not be excluded, it should – given our problematic academic, cultural and socio-political climate – be upheld and explored. A re-evaluation of linguistic relativity is in order – in its own right and as a counterargument to the (ultimately) nihilistic nature of innateness and universalism. The scientific evidence gives it legitimacy; the present human condition, its motivation.

It is tragic that in the quest to quell ethnocentricity, many linguists have, essentially, denied our ethnoplurality; in effort to create a pan-human, universal brotherhood united by a language which is (the claim goes) basically the same, we actually deny our individual uniqueness and humanity. Boroditsky (2009) put it best when she said, “Language is a uniquely human gift, central to our experience of being

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<sup>27</sup> Some will argue that this is in fact a demonstration of  $W_1$ . Even if it is, however, it is also undoubtedly evidence supporting  $W_3$  as well.

<sup>28</sup> See Fishman (1998-1999).

<sup>29</sup> See for example Khosroshahi (Penguins Don't Care, But Women Do: A Social Identity Analysis of a Whorfian Problem 1989); Cameron (1992); Tannen (1986) and (1994); Troemel-Ploetz (1998); and Uchida (1992).

<sup>30</sup> See Blitz (2015).

<sup>31</sup> See Kelly & Zetzsche (2012).

<sup>32</sup> See Williams (2014).

<sup>33</sup> See Fairclough (1992) and Tannen (1998).

human. Appreciating its role in constructing our mental lives brings us one step closer to understanding the very nature of humanity.”

And as Robbins’ (2009, 547) has pointed out, “In demanding an ever-increasing inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism is held to produce the illusory spectacle of ‘the-world-as-a-whole.’” Understanding that our world is *not* whole is more conducive to our attempts to make it so than claiming it is when it isn’t. To quote Fishman (Fishman 1982, 6) on Herder’s contribution to the debate surrounding the merits of ethnolinguistic diversity,

The entire world needs a diversity of ethnolinguistic entities for its own salvation, for its greater creativity, for the more certain solution of human problems, for the constant rehumanization of humanity in the face of materialism, for fostering greater aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional capacities for humanity as a whole, indeed, for arriving at a higher stage of human functioning. It is precisely in order to arrive at this higher stage and in order to participate more fully in it that less powerful ethnolinguistic collectivities must be protected, respected, and assisted, because it is they who have the most vital contribution to make to these desirable goals.

Given what seems to be a positive, optimistic and authentic view of humanity demonstrated by linguistic relativity (and we can now safely say has been scientifically authenticated as well), it behoves us to examine the claims of proponents of innateness and universalism and critics of Whorfianism, chiefly Chomsky as well as Pinker, and the linguistic, socio-political and ideological bases of his rise to academic power and the canonisation of his position. These will be explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER II: LINGUISTIC NATIVISM AND UNIVERSALISM

### 2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter explored the linguistic relativity theory. Now, let us look at its contrasting theory – linguistic nativism.

This chapter explores how the theory of linguistic nativism developed, and its relation to universalist ideals; proofs brought in defence of nativism and problems therein; and how and why it has been so readily accepted in the academic community. Following that, the chapter will discuss the intellectual, socio-political and moral issues at hand in espousing linguistic nativism and universalism and their implications within the broader, non-linguistic context. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the (somewhat artificial) dichotomisation of innateness and empiricism, universalism and relativity – in linguistics and in general – as reflective of our current intellectual and cultural climate, and introduce a potential Judaic response to balancing the dichotomy. This will be expanded upon in chapters 4,5, and 6, culminating with the Judaic approach’s universal relevance, in chapter 7.

### 2.2. Linguistic Nativism

Linguistic nativism, or the innateness hypothesis, chiefly associated with and promoted by Noam Chomsky, “is the hypothesis that the human brain is ‘programmed’ at birth in some quite *specific* and *structured* aspects of human natural language” (Putnam 1967, 12). It is “the view (putatively reminiscent of Cartesian rationalism and opposed to empiricism) that human infants have at least some linguistically specific innate knowledge” (Pullum and Scholz 2002, 10). Chomsky holds that language is so structured and specific, it necessarily has to be biologically determined, “that is to say, as constituting part of what we call ‘human nature’ and being genetically transmitted from parents to their children” (Lyons 1978, 11). As such, according to Sampson (2005, 27), the theory holds that

the development of language in an individual’s mind is akin to the growth of a bodily organ, rather than being a matter of responding to environmental stimulation by ‘learning’ a system to which the individual is not in detail predisposed.

Chomsky’s idea that language is innate can be seen as a debunking of, or backlash against, behaviourist theories of language acquisition, which maintained that children

learn by reinforcement. The behaviourist B.F. Skinner, whose ideas Chomsky vehemently opposed, argued that knowing a language was simply a matter of “acquiring [a] set of dispositions” (Cowie 2010, 5), that through conditioning of the speaker’s environment and reinforcement (either via positive or negative means), a child learns what to say, how, and when.

Chomsky rightly debunked Skinner’s oversimplified take on language acquisition. Children do not simply repeat what they hear, as evidenced by the enormous amount of original linguistic and grammatical constructs that children produce, as well as the constructs they do *not* produce despite having heard them, even repeatedly.

As an example of the former, consider the statement “I want to wear short-sleeved pants,” said by a three-year-old who didn’t know the proper word for “shorts.” As an example of the latter, consider the many cases of hyper-corrected grammar such as “I goed” instead of “I went,” or “foots” instead of “feet.” Without even being aware of it or knowing what to call it, the child has learned that to conjugate a verb into past tense one generally adds “-ed” and that to pluralise a noun one generally adds an “s” (and eventually will learn the proper past participle and the plural, respectively). If the child were merely repeating what he has heard, he would say “I went” and “feet.” Clearly, what is taking place in the child’s mind is much more sophisticated than mere auditory processing and spit-back.

### **2.2.1. Exchanging one inadequate theory for another**

In debunking the behaviourist model of language acquisition, Chomsky needed to explain how it is that children acquire language with such relative ease, despite, as Chomsky claims, the limited Primary Linguistic Data (PLD) they receive, as well as the fact that they are able to master the grammar rules of their native tongue and apply them to other language contexts where they clearly have not heard the grammar rules expressed in speech – and are therefore not working on repetition and mimicry alone (and clearly are not operating based on understanding technical explanations for that matter, either). The alternative explanation Chomsky offered for this was that people are born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), that language is encoded in our genes and is an evolutionary, biological function.

Lyons (1978, 140) sees Chomsky’s rejection of Behaviourism as stemming from a view of the human being as more than just a trainable animal:

[T]he gap between human language and systems of animal communication is such that it cannot be bridged by any obvious extension of current psychological theories of “learning” based on laboratory experiments with animals.

Chomsky recognises that language requires and exhibits far too much creativity to be considered a function of “habit,” or action that is “stimulus-response” driven and produced by “conditioning” and “reinforcement”; he maintained these are not suitably empirical to the linguistic context. As Lyons (1978, 108) notes,

One of the most striking facts about language is its ‘creativity’ – the fact that by the age of five or six children are able to produce and understand an indefinitely large number of utterances that they have not previously encountered – and the behaviourist’s ‘learning theory’, however successful it might be in accounting for the way in which certain networks of ‘habits’ and ‘associations’ are built up in the ‘behaviour-patterns’ of animals and human beings, is totally incapable of explaining ‘creativity’ – an aspect of human ‘behaviour’ manifest most clearly (though perhaps not exclusively) in language.

The behaviourist understanding of language acquisition did indeed fall short of explaining how children, with such limited primary linguistic data,<sup>1</sup> can produce so much *original* speech. But Chomsky’s main issue with behaviourism – that it did not account for human creativity – seems strange when we consider that Chomsky himself is concerned strictly with *competence*, not *performance* – namely with what language *is* rather than what it *does*. Whereas Chomsky rejected behaviourism because it did not account for human creativity, his rationalist and mathematicised account of language acquisition puts a cap on human creativity as well. In attempting to elevate human language acquisition above the merely animalistic/behaviourist, Chomsky has reduced humans to pre-programmed – and universally identical – machines (albeit very intelligent ones), locked into fixed grammatical constraints within which they can operate. As Sampson (2015, 3) notes,

For Chomsky, language is... a... clear case of a more general thesis, that human cognition is largely determined by innate structuring, which controls and limits the range of ideas, theories, or even artistic styles

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<sup>1</sup> Though as will be demonstrated below in the discussion of the poverty of the stimulus argument, the stimulus is not all that poor.

which Mankind can create, just as genetics uncontroversially controls our anatomical development.

Pinker (1994) further entrenched this idea, in claiming that we are all of the same mind. This is a caricature of the human being; man is so much more than an animal or machine, however sophisticated. Yet Chomsky conceives of language as nothing more than a mathematical process<sup>2</sup>: rather than a cultural institution, language is a set system of grammatical rules whereby just as 2+2 irrefutably equals 4, an adjective + noun + verb + whatever grammatically correct construct is formed equals a perfectly good sentence in any language – and can be reformulated to cohere in any language (even in, say, languages where adjectives, nouns and verbs function very differently than they do in ours).

### **2.2.2. The bedfellows innateness and universality**

Hand in hand with innateness comes linguistic universalism, namely, the idea that “the general principles which determine the form of grammatical rules in particular languages, such as English, Turkish or Chinese, are to some considerable degree common to all human languages” (Lyons 1978, 11). It was only natural that innateness gave rise to Chomsky’s later claims regarding a Universal Grammar: if language is simply a biological fluke, something encoded in our genes, then (in theory, at least) all languages should be more or less the same. Chomsky claims they are (with minor and insignificant differences here and there), and that there must be a Universal Grammar with fixed rules hardwired into our brains, which enables all children, everywhere, to acquire language.

Universal Grammar, in turn, gave rise to Chomsky’s Generative Grammar, whereby with our hardwired Universal Grammar rules in place we are then able to produce endless combinations of grammatically correct sentences. I.e., the elements of speech are not building blocks with which we can create language, but specified pre-fab structures constraining our language production. Thus, in stating that language is innate and pre-programmed and that a Universal Grammar underlies our language, Chomsky put a cap not only on individual creativity but on *panhuman* creativity as

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<sup>2</sup> This is similar to how programmers of Google Translate or other Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) tools operate, as discussed in the previous chapter.

well, and as we saw in Fishman (1982) in the previous chapter, the value of panhuman creativity should not be underestimated.<sup>3</sup>

Space does not permit to go into depth about Chomsky's convoluted mathematical formulations posited to prove innateness and Universal Grammar. My purpose here is, rather, to discuss the philosophical underpinnings and implications of Chomsky's position as contra to linguistic relativity (and further on relate these ideas to the Judaic conception of language). It is within this context that I discuss here proofs brought for innateness, and problems therein.

### **2.3. Proofs and Problems**

Sampson (2005) discusses the nativist position at length, the proofs brought in its defence, and the problems therein. Readers interested in gleaning a more comprehensive picture of these issues are referred to that work, as well as Behme's (2014), where Chomsky's innateness is systematically refuted, with sufficient evidence for Behme's conclusion that "Chomsky's intellectual leadership is no longer justified" (17).

Here, I bring but a few of the proofs and problems therein, by way of demonstrating the problematic nature of the evidence brought in favour of nativism; this, in turn, magnifies the question of how it has become so acclaimed in academia, to be discussed in greater detail in the latter part of this chapter. Aside from this objective, I discuss these proofs and their shortcomings under the overarching themes of human uniqueness as manifest in speech and the *social* aspects of language – both of which, as will become clear, are ignored in any discussion of proofs for innateness. For this purpose, I discuss the ease of acquisition proof, the critical period proof, the poverty of the stimulus proof, and the language universals proof.

#### **2.3.1. Ease of acquisition**

One of the key proofs brought in defence of the innateness hypothesis is the ease with which children acquire their first language: it is acquired merely by exposure, as opposed to other forms of knowledge – such as, to use the example Sampson (2005) brings from Chomsky's comparisons, physics – which necessitate much learning

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<sup>3</sup> It is ironic how the same criticism nativists hold against Whorf's relativity – namely, that it is deterministic – is exactly what they themselves claim: that language is all predetermined. The Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin, 70b) states, one who disqualifies another for a particular flaw indicates that he himself has that flaw.

before mastery can be achieved. Simplified, this proof amounts to: since language is easy to pick up but physics isn't – all people talk, but not everyone understands physics – it must be that language is innate. Pinker (1994) has a slightly different take on it, contrasting it not with scientific acumen but with social products. He notes,

Language is not a cultural artefact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of biological makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual,<sup>4</sup> and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently.

(4-5)

The problem with this assertion is that it presupposes that language is a discrete mental faculty, like knowledge of physics or music, and can be separated from overall intelligence – which, at its core, really is an undermining of human uniqueness. While there are other forms of intelligence, certainly, one would have no way to express concepts therein without language. (Not to be prosaic, but you couldn't talk about “triangles,” “ratios” or a “symphony in b-minor” if you didn't have words for them.)

Moreover, as Behme (2014, 18) points out, if language is a specific part of the brain, “then the brain should be the main object of linguistic study. However, Chomsky's own research has not contributed directly to locating language in the human brain.” What seems so scintillatingly innate and uniquely linguistic to nativists might very well be just the plain (and miraculous) development of human intellect. Indeed, that is how language has traditionally been viewed by philosophers until recently (Cowie 2010). As Putnam (1967, 17) observed,

Is it really surprising, does it really point to anything more interesting than *general intelligence*, that these operations which break the bounds of phrase-structure grammar appear in every natural language?

Language acquisition (however it happens) does not necessarily mean that there is a specific language mechanism built in, rather it is indicative of an unfolding general

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<sup>4</sup> I beg to differ. It is obvious that some people have far better oratory skills than others, and some have an ear for languages; and of course, there are those who unfortunately have language disabilities, from mild to severe. It's simply incorrect to say that language is “qualitatively the same in every individual.”

intelligence.<sup>5</sup> “What can equally well be accounted for by learning theory should not be cited as evidence for the I.H. [innateness hypothesis]” (19).

Along with the claim that children’s language acquisition is effortless, achieved by mere exposure, is the claim that language acquisition is so rapid and that therefore language learning must be innate. The problem is that Chomsky doesn’t state what would be a reasonable amount of time to acquire language at a non-rapid pace, for comparison’s sake. At what age would we say language learning has been completed?<sup>6</sup> Nine or ten years, as Putnam (20) notes, is “enough time to become pretty darn good at *anything*.” Sampson (2005, 37) posits the question thus:

How long would human beings have to take to acquire language before Chomsky would no longer see the speed-of-acquisition argument as applicable? Ten years? Fifty years? Unless some particular figure for predicted acquisition-time without innate knowledge can be specified... the speed-of-acquisition argument is wholly vacuous.

Sampson (ibid.) renders the question moot by pointing out Chomsky’s claims that “the data available to a language learner are so poor that accurate language learning would be impossible without innate knowledge – that is, *no* amount of time would suffice.” In the words of Putnam (1967, 21), “Invoking ‘Innateness’ only postpones the problem of learning; it does not solve it.” In short, one cannot claim rapidity of

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, this is alluded to in Pinker’s own words, when he compares between spiders spinning webs and humans acquiring language. He writes, “It [the term ‘instinct’] conveys the idea that people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs. Web-spinning was not invented by some unsung spider genius and does not depend on having had the right education or on having an aptitude for architecture or the construction trades. Rather, spiders spin spider webs because they have spider brains, which give them the urge to spin and the competence to succeed” (1994, 5). Notwithstanding that the analogy is problematic (people aren’t spiders, and as Pinker himself says, “there are differences between webs and words”), if this is the case, again, does this not amount simply to general intelligence?

Further problematic with Pinker’s comparison is that it makes it seem like language requires *no* input – “without conscious effort or formal instruction.” First, this is true – and only partially so – solely of first-language acquisition, not second-language acquisition. Second, it implies that children left to their own devices (say, abandoned) would learn to talk, and that is simply not the case. In contrast to animals, whose instincts are apparent without them being taught, humans will not become language-capable beings without social interaction.

<sup>6</sup> Equally, when does language learning begin? Behme (2014, 20) notes that there are many cognitive skills children need to master before they can acquire language – for example, the ability to produce the sounds of their native tongue. (See Choi, et al., [2017] for a fascinating study of Korean babies adopted early on by Dutch families, who as adults showed they had retained perception-production memory of their mother tongue, demonstrating that babies acquire knowledge of their mother-tongue phonemes as young as at six months of age.) Furthermore, studies of new-born infants show that they prefer the sound of “Motherese” and can recognize their own mother’s voice, indicating that the process already begins in utero and transcends (or rather, precedes) linguistic knowledge. See Mehler, et al., (1978), DeCasper et al. (1994), Kisilevsky (2003), Winkler et al. (2003), and the more recent Skwarecki (2013).

language acquisition as proof of innateness if there is no baseline against which the speed of acquisition can be gauged.

### 2.3.2. The critical period

Another claim posited by Chomsky, based on Lenneberg's (1967) work, is that given that there is a critical period during which children acquire their first language (assumed to be till around puberty), after which it becomes that much more difficult, if not impossible, it must be that language is biologically determined, like the growth of a body part.

This theory is problematic on two accounts. First, similarly to the ease-of-acquisition proof, it holds true only for first-language acquisition, not adult second-language acquisition which happens rather differently. Nativists do note that first-language acquisition is far easier than adult language learning, but while this is certainly true, the difficulty in learning a second language is not a question of which language is being learned, first or second, rather a question of *age* (G. Sampson 2005) – and *that* is a function of *learning*, not a function of language or any supposed language instinct. A young child can learn several languages, even simultaneously, as can be seen in families where each parent speaks a different language with the child (and even more so when the child attends a school where a third language is spoken). An adult can learn a second language, even to near mother-tongue-level proficiency, given the right motivation to learn it, among other factors.<sup>7</sup>

The second reason this theory is problematic is, to revert to the previous proof, that the age-dependence claim presupposes that language is separate from general intellect, while “fail[ing] to distinguish language learning from any other case of learning” (G. Sampson 2005, 41). As stated earlier, language cannot be neatly separated from overall intellectual development. Sampson notes that Lenneberg's evidence “seems to be perfectly compatible with the view that *learning as a general process* is for biological reasons far more rapid before puberty than later” (ibid.)

Both these issues are underpinned by a third one: the nativist take on the critical age factor disregards the role that social interaction plays. As proof of the critical age factor, nativists bring cases of “wild children” – children who were “raised” in tragic circumstances or unspeakable conditions and had minimal or no

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<sup>7</sup> For other factors, see Larson-Freeman & Long's (2014 [1991]) Explanations for Differential Success among Second Language Learners, from *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*, 153-219.

human contact – and therefore no linguistic input – during the critical stages of development. These children never acquired proper speech thereafter, even once they were discovered or rescued and fully immersed in language and had normal human contact. However, the unfortunate fate of these children does not indicate that language is innate and that its acquisition is biologically determined; if anything these cases are more indicative of the fact that humans need human interaction and intellectual stimulation in order to develop normally (linguistically and otherwise). As Sampson (2005, 41) notes,

If ‘wild children’ are not merely very slow at language acquisition but actually fail to acquire normal mastery even after far longer exposure than normal children need, then that could surely be explained as a symptom of a general learning disability stemming from the great emotional damage caused by deprivation of normal social stimulation.

If one is going to bring these tragic cases as proof of innateness by way of a critical period, then we need to look at *all* contributing factors: to ignore the fact that these children were socially and intellectually deprived is to give an incomplete picture. Specifically on the oft-referred-to case of the wild-child Genie, Sampson notes that one cannot argue that it was simply because she was deprived of *language*; the horrific conditions in which she was confined deprived her of any social contact and intellectual stimulation, the result of which was that not only was her language retarded but so was her overall intelligence, with studies indicating that her left hemisphere (granted, the side usually associated with language, but not exclusively with language) had totally atrophied.

### **2.3.3. The poverty of the stimulus argument**

A third proof brought in favour of nativism, and Chomsky’s main claim to generative grammar, is the poverty of the stimulus argument. The argument posits that

[T]he knowledge acquired in language acquisition far outstrips the information that is available in the environment (i.e., the “primary linguistic data”); or as philosophers sometimes put it, the output of the language acquisition process is radically underdetermined by the input.

(Laurence and Margolis 2001, 221)

There are several problems with the poverty-of-the-stimulus argument. Chomsky assumes that since children have such limited reinforcement with correct speech, it

must be that language learning is innate. However Putnam (1967) questions whether children even need reinforcement in order to master language, noting that although most average people need to practice speaking, “probably anyone *could* learn to speak... with sufficiently prolonged observation” (20). This is evidenced by some rather clever children who are late talkers (not late talkers who have some sort of learning disability), yet who speak perfectly when they do begin talking.

The second problem with the poverty-of-the-stimulus argument is that it presupposes that language acquisition is simply a matter of auditory processing and spit-back, that what is received is what is – and what should be – produced. Not only does Chomsky conceive of language as nothing more than a type of mathematics, he seems to conceive of humans and their cognitive ability as nothing more than a computational device: what is put in is what comes out, in one form or another.

However children do not produce language by spit-back rote, nor do they learn language by repetitive reinforcement; rather, they learn it by interaction, or, to be more precise, the reinforcement (in the positive sense) *is* the interaction: babies (and young children) desire – indeed, *need* – human interaction. They get this interaction by engaging in actions that will ensure human contact (babbling, crying, or just being naturally cute and cuddly); these lead to interaction with those around them, in verbal form (talking, singing, etc.) or in physical form (facial expressions, clapping hands, being picked up, rocked, etc.) Humans are interactive, social beings; it is simply incorrect to reduce them to recording devices that spit back information verbatim, or mechanical beings that produce language based on innate grammatical algorithms. In other words, even if the stimulus were poor, language is so much more sophisticated than just spitting back what has been heard. As Sampson (2005, 44) notes,

Provided one agrees that a human language is a system comprising infinitely many potential well-formed utterances [and here the nativists and empiricists agree – T.F.] then it is trivially true that any finite sample of utterances is small relative to the totality of possibilities. But the set of utterances encountered by a child in the language-learning years can hardly be called ‘small’ in any absolute sense.<sup>8</sup>

The third problem, which in a sense obviates the previous two, is that the stimulus isn’t all that poor. Firstly, all the elements of interaction mentioned above, with which

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<sup>8</sup>To use Chomsky’s own term, grammar is, well, “*generative*.”

babies interact with their environment and vice versa, are elements of communication, of which *verbal* communication is but one form.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, even on a linguistic level the stimulus isn't all that poor. As Putnam (1967) notes, babies and children do in fact get reinforcement from adults – for example, “the constant repetition of simple one-word sentences (‘cup,’ ‘doggie’).”

Sampson (2005, 43) notes that

Chomsky originally made statements about the child's data being qualitatively poor years before anyone had done serious research on the nature of the speech addressed to children (“Motherese”, as it is often called). It subsequently emerged that the quality of such speech is far better than Chomsky supposed. Some writers have even suggested that adults provide children with something like an ideal graded series of language lessons.<sup>10</sup>

Sampson goes on to discuss on what scientific basis nativists rely in claiming that the input is impoverished (see pp. 43-49). One telling example is from nativist Virginia Valian, who brings as proof of the poverty of the stimulus arguments the fact that children hear non-grammatical sentences along with grammatical ones. The gut reaction to this observation is, well, *duh*; that's true. When was the last time we heard someone say to a child, “to whom are you going?” as he's running out the door to catch up to his neighbour-friend? We don't. We say, “Who are you going to?” Or consider the monosyllabic (and surprisingly more effective) way of giving instructions to a teenager: “Feet – on the table – Not. In. This. House.” No verb, ungrammatical, but said teen knows exactly what the parent means. (Incidentally, that sentence, too, was ungrammatical. Did you have an issue with it?) Or, in the example Sampson (44) brings,

For a small child learning to speak English, one of the things to be learned is that it is allowable and normal to begin an informal spoken sentence with its main verb; in the language he is learning, ‘Want your lunch now?’ is *grammatical*. The child is learning to speak English, not (at this stage) learning to write for *The Times*.

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<sup>9</sup> Consider the obvious example of deaf children who may never learn to speak a word but certainly can and do learn to communicate using sign language, or writing, and are capable of generating more than the input. It would be ridiculous to say they don't know how to communicate when they do so very well, just differently.

<sup>10</sup> Note Putnam's previous comment regarding one-word sentences; gradually, these are built up.

There is now much evidence showing that children get a lot of input from their surroundings. Space does not permit a thorough discussion of those examples here; for such purpose, the reader is referred to Sampson's (2005) discussion of this at length in his third chapter, titled "How People Really Speak." I will conclude, then, with Sampson's (47) observation that

Since Chomsky has never backed up his arguments from poverty of the child's data with detailed empirical studies, we are entitled to reject them on the grounds that the data available to a child are far richer than Chomsky supposes.

But I wish to point out something else, and that is that here, once again, we see how human uniqueness and the social element of language acquisition is completely disregarded by nativist proponents.

As to the uniqueness of human intellect made manifest in speech, the poverty of the stimulus is only surprising if we conceive of humans as computers intended to produce exactly what is inserted into them. If viewed as wholly more sophisticated than that, the fact that children produce infinite combinations from a finite set of linguistic building blocks should come as no surprise – and would therefore obviate the need for an innateness hypothesis. (Humble wonderment might be more appropriate.) However Chomsky, rather than recognize that human intelligence (the "mind") is so much more than its mechanics (the "brain") claims that there has got to be *something* to account for language acquisition. And so he posits innateness, and that we've all got a Language Acquisition Device (whose location in the brain, incidentally – or very existence, actually – no one has ever found). Even Pinker notes, concerning Wernicke's and Broca's areas of the brain – both of which clearly have *something* to do with the language, as we find with aphasics whose language abilities are compromised – that "No one really knows what either... is for" (1994, 311).

As to the social component of language, by claiming the poverty of the stimulus, nativists effectively eliminate the social aspect of language acquisition, making it seem as though the environment is – indeed, necessarily *has* to be, given the limited input – entirely irrelevant to the process.

It is dangerous to disregard human uniqueness and the social component of language (to be discussed below). As we have seen in this section, it is also unscientific to espouse the nativist view that would do so.

### 2.3.4. Language universals

Probably the most powerful argument put forth by Chomsky and others in favour of nativism is language universals. The claim posits that all languages are structured the same way, and so language must be innate. Sampson (2005) notes that “Chomsky believes that the universals constrain the diversity of human languages very tightly,” noting that in his later writings Chomsky “suggests that there are probably only *finitely many* different biologically possible grammars.

Naturally, given that he is more concerned with competence than performance,<sup>11</sup> Chomsky’s emphasis is on the *structure* (namely, grammar) of language.<sup>12</sup> But structure is merely one aspect thereof; there are so many more aspects to language which, when examined, indicate very different languages indeed. As Boroditsky (2010) notes, “Not a single proposed universal has withstood scrutiny. Instead, as linguists probed deeper into the world’s languages (7,000 or so, only a fraction of them analyzed), innumerable unpredictable differences emerged.” For Chomsky to claim that all languages are the same, when he speaks but two languages (English and French, though I presume he might get by in Hebrew and possibly Yiddish given his background), both of which belong to the same Indo-European family (either Germanic or Romance, depending how we classify English), which is but one of some thirty-two language families comprising the world’s 6000-plus languages, is puzzling: Presumably one would have to speak many languages to know with certainty what Chomsky claims is so obvious.<sup>13</sup>

However Chomsky is correct in what is the main thrust of the language universals claim, namely, that all human languages have a hierarchical structure, that is, they are built up of units comprised of smaller units, which in turn are comprised of smaller units, branching out (or down) into their most elemental building blocks. Sentences

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<sup>11</sup> Note the irony of Lyons’ (1978, 139) assertion that “Even if it were decided eventually that none of Chomsky’s work on generative grammar was of any direct relevance to the description of natural languages, it would still be judged valuable by logicians and mathematicians, who are concerned with the construction and study of formal systems independently of their empirical application.”

<sup>12</sup> There are some claims as to universality at the semantic level (see Sampson 1978; see also Pinker’s [1994] discussion of Jerry Fodor’s ideas on innateness which are semantics-focused), but in general the argument has focused on grammar.

<sup>13</sup> Note Robbins (2009, 548) observation on Chomsky’s rhetorical style as well: “He [Chomsky] seems to compose as if expecting at any minute to be stopped in order to be translated and as if any stylistic embellishment on his part could only be expected to get in the way of that process... Chomsky’s prose... is remarkably efficient at crossing borders... By offering a minimum of resistance to translation, his prose makes a visible effort to approach as closely as possible to extraterrestrial universality, to be as little marked as possible by the accidents of his birth in a particular nation and his being raised in a particular language.”

can be mapped out in tree diagrams, with grouping of noun phrases, verb phrases etc., with each clause branching out into its subordinate clauses, and those in turn branching out into their subordinate clauses, etc. This aspect of language universals is indeed true – and why the claim is so convincing at first glance (and therefore misleading).

But we can ask the question differently, which will shed light on the matter: is the issue that, given the world's such vastly different cultures, we would *expect* languages to differ radically and yet they don't? If that is the issue, we can come up with a better explanation for universals.<sup>14</sup>

I am not refuting the fact that all human languages are structured hierarchically, merely the leap from that fact to the innateness conclusion. As Sampson (1978, 1979 and 2005) notes, the fact that languages are hierarchical does not in itself point to innateness; rather, it points to something far more empiricist. Furthermore, he notes that “a universal trait cannot constitute evidence for nativism if some independent explanation, more plausible *a priori* than nativism, is available for the universality of the trait” (1978, 184). Using Herbert Simon's (1969) work on hierarchicality (which he applied to evolution, but which Sampson (1978, 1979 and 2005) notes works just as well for linguistic universals, if not more), Sampson provides a reasonable explanation for language universals that obviates the need to resort to innateness.

Simon's hierarchicality amounts to this:

[P]rocesses in which complex organisms are produced from simple beginnings via long sequences of small unplanned modifications each of which is selected or rejected for survival in terms of some property of relative 'fitness'.... such processes favour organisms which are hierarchical in the sense that they can be divided into parts each of which can in turn be divided into parts each of which...(and so on for numerous 'levels'), such that the parts at each level below that of the whole organism are themselves organisms with a high degree of fitness, or at least descend from such organisms.

(G. Sampson 1979, 100)

Sampson (2005) brings Simon's analogy of two watchmakers, both of whom produce watches through a process involving 1000 steps. The difference is that the

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<sup>14</sup> If this is the question innateness seeks to answer, then it is also an admission of sorts that cultural differences are far more evident than cultural similarities.

one has grouped each 100 steps into one self-containing unit, totalling ten units, while the other has 100 individual, ungrouped steps. Meaning, if the former messes up one step, only that unit of steps is hampered; he need not start from scratch; whereas the latter would have to start the process from scratch, even if he were at step number 999, for argument's sake. Simon calculated that in the amount of time the latter produced one watch, the former could produce 4000.

This is not to say that the quality of one is necessarily better than the other; they both produce fine watches. It is also not to say that the one way is "better" than the other (for argument's sake, perhaps the watch made by individual steps is exquisitely crafted). What it does mean, to my understanding, is that if we were to walk into a store wishing to purchase a watch, chances are we would see many more of the stepwise-constructed watches than the watches constructed by single steps, simply because that many more of them are produced in the same amount of time. As Sampson (1979, 101) put it,

[If]...either of two hypothetical organisms of comparable complexity could fill some environmental niche, but one is highly hierarchical in structure while the other cannot be analysed into parts descending from simpler survival-worthy organisms, then it is a statistical certainty that the former organism will emerge and fill the niche long before the other organism ever has its chance, even though the latter might have been just as fit for survival if it had been tried out.

The analogy to the universality of language hierarchicality should be clearer now. What Simon is saying (and Sampson applying to linguistics) is not that non-hierarchical languages cannot exist but that "we never use such languages only because the opportunity to do so never arises" (102). They might conceivably exist somewhere among our 6500+ not-yet-analysed languages, as well as past or not-yet-invented languages), just that typically languages will be hierarchical, because that is the empiricist mode of functioning:

[I]f we think of a language as a species with sentences as its individuals, and if we suppose that contemporary languages have evolved from primitive "languages" whose utterances were single words, through a process in which longer linguistic forms were gradually created by stringing established forms together more or less at random, with those patterns of combination that proved "fit" – i.e., in this context, useful to

humans – being retained as standard constructions in the language, then Simon’s thesis predicts that all contemporary languages will have hierarchical syntactic properties that match Chomsky’s linguistic universals very well.

(101)

This discussion inevitably leads us back to Putnam’s (1967) questioning whether linguistic nativism is really just general intellect. Might tree-structuring not simply be a sign of general intellect rather than something uniquely linguistic? As Broadbent (1973, quoted in Sampson [1978; 183-184]) said, “the brain is remarkable in its ability to adjust to different experiences, rather than being remarkable by having an inherent structure through which it is able to handle the world.” And it is *precisely* by hierarchical, tree-diagram thinking that human intelligence operates, and what *that* amounts to is, essentially, free will.

All exercising of intelligence in the form of decision making necessitates the ability of discernment – between the different options, between what might be the consequences of different options, and in turn the consequences of those options (whether or not we are aware of these, and whether or not we literally map out our options in tree-diagram fashion); as the Talmud (Tractate Tamid, 32a) states, “Who is wise, he who sees the results of his actions.” In other words, being intelligent enables us and requires of us to transcend time and space, to see more than what immediately meets the eye, and to make those connections between results and their root causes.

Our language and our logic are not inborn but are learned wholly by experience. We can know as much as we do know not because “in a sense we already knew it” (Chomsky, 1976:7), but because we are creative beings with the ability to formulate fallible but genuinely original hypotheses in response to genuinely unforeseen experiences. The common features of our languages, and of our other complex intellectual constructs, reflect the uncertain, step-by-step process by which each of us has built up his structure of belief on a foundation of blank ignorance.

(G. Sampson 1978, 204)

What this amounts to is that intelligent beings put two and two together, and then gradually build up from there, knocking out whatever didn’t work and preserving what did. It is innate only to the degree that human intellect is; in reality, it’s purely

empirical. In a wise observation, Sampson notes that knowledge has traditionally been associated with a tree, beginning with the biblical narration of the story of Eve.<sup>15</sup> In Jewish thought, the Tree of Knowledge was not merely about acquiring knowledge but about knowing between good and bad – *and being able to choose*. Whereas prior to their eating from the tree evil was external to them (and therefore easier to deal with objectively, rationally), once they ate from the tree, and evil became incorporated into their being, not only did they gain knowledge as we understand it, they gained a heightened sense of free will. What this amounts to, from a Judeo-philosophical perspective, is that of course language is hierarchical, because language is unique to humans; and humans alone are gifted with intellect, speech, and free will (I will return to this point in chapter four). Free will underpins any tree-structured thinking and decision-making.

In this vein, the universality of linguistic hierarchicality need not necessitate resorting to evolutionary theory (which would, of course, be at odds with the Judaic view of a complete world having been created *ex nihilo* 5778 [at the time of writing] years ago). In the Judaic view, then, languages are structured hierarchically not because that's how evolution is supposed to work but because that is how *intelligent beings* – humans – function. The nature of intellect is a branching out of choice, of choosing what best suits the present situation and in anticipation of its outcome. In other words, tree-diagram processing is a function of human intelligence, not (only) of evolution, biology or language.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>The embodiment of wisdom in a tree is not arbitrary; for argument's sake, wisdom could have been embodied in the four rivers in Eden, from which Adam and Eve could have drunk.

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the Hebrew word for tree, עץ, *ets*, shares its bi-letter root with the tri-letter roots of צ/ר/ע, *'ii(v)/ts*, “to force up” and “to concentrate effort to develop,” “to advise,” and “develop plans” (Clark 1999, 182), and this root's gradational variants of ה/צ/ע, *'ts/h*, which means “to concentrate energy to a goal,” a “narrowing” (190), as well as צ/ע/י, *y'/ts* which means to “deliberate, advise,” “deciding after taking counsel,” “scheming” (107). (Note that the letter צ, *tsadi*, /ts/ (or more formally /s/) has a different form when written at the end of a word: ץ. Pronunciation is the same as צ. I.e., ץע does indeed share the same root as the roots listed, even though the צ form differs.). The connection between trees and a narrowing of options (i.e., choosing) is clear: a concentration of energies toward a goal, in order to develop.

Consider, further, the Hebrew word בִּינָה, *bina*, wisdom, whose root (*b/n/h*) means “to form” or “to build,” and generally by a process of one thing being built from another. For example, this root is used in Genesis 2:22 when God fashioned Eve out of Adam's side. (Note that although צֶלַע, *tsela*, is usually translated as “rib,” it actually means “side”; see Bereishit Rabbah 8:1.) The Talmud (Tractate Niddah, 45b) brings the above verse as the proof-text for the assertion that God endowed woman with *bina yeteira*, additional wisdom (most would understand *bina yeteira* as intuition, or *the ability to deduce one thing from another*). The verse uses the word וַיִּבֶן, *vayiven*, “and He built” or “fashioned,” which shares the same root as “wisdom.” Hence it is the root for son (בֵּן, *ben*) and daughter (בַּת, *baat*), as well as having children (See Genesis 16:2.) – building one thing from another. It is also the root for a structure (מִבְּנֵיהֶם, *mivneh*) and an image (תַּבְּנִית, *tavnit*) (28). This connection is further underscored by the

## 2.4. Nativism's Acclaimed Status

Putnam (1967) said that one of the arguments for the innateness hypothesis was that there doesn't seem to be anything else that could account for language learning. The argument still seems to hold sway fifty years later, despite the advances made in the fields of computational linguistics and a whole lot more evidence, from linguists, cognitive scientists and anthropologists, informing us of how people actually speak and acquire language. In light of the evidence, nativism's proponents would be wise to revisit their ideas. It would seem more productive and intellectually honest to adopt a stance of: "we still know little about the brain-mechanisms that allow children to acquire language" (Behme 2014, 25). Innateness is not the *only* plausible answer; it might not even amount to any definitive answer, but mere constitute a theory.

How, then, has the innateness hypothesis become so accepted?

Linguistic nativism has become very popular over the last five decades. Though initially viewed with scepticism, many academics and laypeople were soon persuaded to believe it and it quickly came to be hailed as "one of the most significant postwar<sup>17</sup> contributions to the advancement of knowledge" (G. Sampson 2005, 189).

More interesting than the actual claims of linguistic nativism is the fact that these claims have been so readily accepted. If the evidence supporting linguistic nativism is weak, as I have shown in the previous section, how is it that (in Sampson's words) this linguistic manifestation of "the emperor's new clothes" (189) or "intellectual charlatanry" (Sampson and Barbarczy 2014, v)<sup>18</sup> has become so popular?

There are several reasons for this, which can be roughly divided into a) the underlying rationale and b) the external contributing factors, or the "why" and the "how," respectively. The overarching operational framework to bear in mind here is that any idea – however bright or dim – should be viewed within the context of the

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root's gradational variants  $\gamma/\nu$ ,  $b/n/n$  and  $\gamma'/\nu$ ,  $b/y/n$ , meaning "to understand" (ibid.). What we can conclude from this is that, in the Judaic view, wisdom is built up in stages, like stories in a building. Hence the word for building is  $\text{בִּינָה}$ , *binyan*.

Evidently, long before Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the Hebrew language recognised the connection between plotting a course of action (via tree structuring) and intelligence, and that all intellect is built up stage by stage. (In the Judaic view, "God looked into the Torah and created the world" [Bereishit Rabbah, 1:1; see also Zohar 2:161a], meaning the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet preceded Creation. I will return to this point in chapter 4.)

<sup>17</sup> Vietnam

<sup>18</sup> Said in reference to mathematical formulations that make Chomsky's ideas look highly sophisticated and therefore plausible.

time and place in which it takes hold.<sup>19</sup> As Sampson (Gladstone as Linguist 2014, 26) keenly observes, “intellectual advance requires not only individuals who produce good ideas but also an audience ready to receive them.”<sup>20</sup> Put differently, the success of a given idea (note: *not* its validity) cannot be viewed in isolation from the receiving end of those ideas. How readily an idea is accepted does not necessarily reflect its merit; it may indicate the orientation of those receptive to it. In prosaic terms, people hear what they want to hear.

#### **2.4.1. The underlying rationale: promoting cultural sameness (or, the fuzzy lines between politics and linguistics)**

Linguistics at the beginning of the twentieth century was concerned with cultural differences<sup>21</sup> (Sampson and Barbarczy 2014), whereas now it is concerned with cultural sameness. Some of this cultural sameness is the natural result of the ever shrinking gaps between people in the global village; if we’re not that far from each other – physically or, as it were, technologically – the reasoning goes, we must be not all that different from each other. “[T]he World Wide Web [has] brought about a sudden foreshortening of people’s mental time horizons” (ibid., 298-299); not only do people think contemporaneous cultures are not that different, they don’t perceive the differences between past cultures and present ones, as if we haven’t evolved at all over time, or are so horrendously \_\_\_\_\_ (insert the criticism of choice: sexist, racist, xenophobic, swinishly capitalistic, etc.) that we are worse off now than other cultures, present or past (all the more so, the logic goes, because we should be more enlightened).

However cultural sameness cannot be viewed solely as a result of technology’s flattening of the world; the idea of cultural sameness also *serves* the political agenda from which it purportedly stems. It wasn’t merely that Chomsky’s political views were espoused and therefore so was his position in linguistics; rather, *what those very ideas in linguistics represented* is what made them so appealing, and what served the

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<sup>19</sup> Note that this does not mean to excuse dim ideas – an idea’s dimness isn’t made “redeemable” by judging when it was said, it merely gives it context to better understand how it developed and/or took hold. On the positive side, however, prescient ideas can be all the more appreciated when we consider the times and prevailing conditions in which they were said.

<sup>20</sup> Sampson makes this observation in discussing how W.E. Gladstone’s ideas on colour terminology in Homeric works have been largely ignored – and misrepresented when they finally were paid attention to by Guy Deutscher in *Through the Language Glass* (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Recall that “The doctrine of radical linguistic relativity is to be understood historically as a reaction to the denigrating attitude toward unwritten languages that was fostered by the evolutionary view prevalent in anthropology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Kay and Kempton 1984, 65).

agenda of multiculturalism, moral relativism and universalism. Sampson and Barbarczy (2014, 6) put it bluntly:

No-one could conceivably attain [the status of “world’s most influential living intellectual”] merely via analysis of grammatical structure, no matter how original. In Chomsky’s case, of course, his status derives in large part from his interventions in concrete political affairs, which are arguably a rather separate matter from his theoretical positions.

Chomsky’s ideas were well received given their timing during America’s engagement in Vietnam and the anti-war climate on university campuses. Sampson (2005) asserts that nativism gained a lot of publicity because Chomsky was the most outspoken intellectual against America’s involvement in the war; his view of America as the evil empire and its intervention in Vietnam as a colonial flexing of muscles cohered with his nativist position that all languages were, essentially, the same, and that all cultures and peoples the same (and consequently, that war is never justified, no matter what values – such as democracy and liberty – were trying to be maintained).<sup>22</sup>

Later, Pinker’s ideas, too, were well received, with the wish to avoid the under-the-surface (or overt) cultural clashes and full-blown war having never abated. The ideas that differences between languages are “superficial” and that “we all have the same minds,” (Pinker 1994, 448) have been a lot more palatable than the idea that we are in fact very different from one another.<sup>23</sup>

Warm and fuzzy feelings are always nicer than facing a looming threat (say, communism) or embracing responsibility (say, to stop the threat of said communism) which, at least some political leaders thought at the time, was incumbent upon the world’s then superpower. Such responsibility would necessarily entail a view of the United States’ democratic form of government and market economy as preferable to that of communist regimes – an idea anathema to those who would want to believe in the sameness of all peoples (and certainly those espousing Chomsky’s anarcho-syndicalism).

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<sup>22</sup> Which is not to say that the Vietnam War was not without serious faults and flaws.

<sup>23</sup> By the same token, it’s not that people necessarily have an issue with Whorf’s ideas (which can be proven or just as well refuted – and indeed have been in cases where he was wrong; rather the *idea* of his ideas makes people uncomfortable.

This view of all nations as being essentially the same explains, in part, the emphasis nativists place on grammar, despite it being a rather boring aspect of language. Sampson and Barbarczy (2014, 300) note that nativists' exclusive focus on grammar is a bit strange, grammar being "like plumbing in our houses." They note, "it needs to be there, but most people really are not interested in thinking about the details...the humanly significant things that happen in houses are...not in the pipes behind the walls" (ibid.). Yet Chomsky and other nativists focus on grammar almost exclusively because it is an aspect of language that is most easily reduced to mathematical formulae, which are presumed to be identical across cultures.

For Pinker, and for Chomsky, language structure is interesting because it is seen as a specially clear kind of evidence about human cognition in a far broader sense. The fact that grammar is a rather exact field makes it relatively easy to formalize and test theories about grammatical universals. Other aspects of culture which may have greater human significance often have a somewhat woolly quality that makes it harder to pin them down mathematically or scientifically

(ibid., 300-301)

Cameron (1999) notes that the Chomskyan position of universalism is not merely an intellectual one but an ideological stance as well: it seeks to eradicate racism and ethnocentrism by claiming that at root we are all speaking the same language (literally and figuratively). Accordingly, any miscommunication is attributed to "differences in content" (Lucy, in Gumperz and Levinson 1996: 41).

This idea, in its extreme form, is untenable: if all the people of the world "spoke the same language" literally and figuratively, we wouldn't have the political crises, wars or nuclear threats that we do. Yet this idea is put into action in the popular trend of political-correctness-at-all-costs. With the rise of political correctness (and the resultant notion that anything deemed not politically correct – or not politically correct enough – is nixed off the bat), Chomsky's ideas of a universal grammar and that we are, at base, all speaking the same language, became frightfully popular; it is *überPC*. And those who expressed distaste for these ideas were deemed ethnocentric or racist, closing off any chance of frank discussion on the issue. In the words of Sampson (2005, 192), "The 'postmodernist' ethos openly elevates modishness above rationality."

The above would explain how Chomsky's ideas sensationalised a generation of students. But what about academics who espoused nativism? Surely they would prefer intellectual honesty to palatable populism, no? Evidently, no. Quite simply, they needed to maintain their academic status. Sampson (2005) explains that concurrent with Chomsky's introduction of his ideas on nativism, more and more people joined the ranks of university lecturers and, as was par for the course, wished to maintain their positions. Indeed, this is not uncommon – everywhere, at every time: the new professors on the block need to prove themselves and this is achieved by espousing and defending the dominant positions of the institution as a whole at all costs (or at least not disagreeing with them, or at the very least not publicly), even if one wholly disagrees with them. Lecturers became locked into position, literally and figuratively. With the politicisation of education, intellectual honesty was sacrificed for job security.

#### **2.4.2. Other contributing factors**

Sampson (2005) notes two other factors contributing to the rise of Chomskyism. The first is that in the 1960s and 1970s, linguistic departments, which were previously small, grew to include many foreign teachers of English as a Second Language. Nativism's focus on universals rather than unique structures and facets, charmed them. Furthermore, "nativist textbooks discussed mainly English-language examples; and the nativist emphasis on the facts of language acquisition was grist to the mill of professional language teachers" (ibid., 190).

The second contributing factor to bear in mind was that at the same time that ESL programs were flourishing, students with knowledge of other languages were diminishing in number. Sampson (2005) notes that, as secondary education patterns changed, undergraduate students had little or no knowledge of other languages, classical or modern. Understandably, without knowledge of other languages and language systems in the world, students naturally found it easier to believe that all languages are, at base, merely "dialects of a single language."

Is there a chance things will change? Certainly. As Sampson (192) notes hopefully, "one can only trust that these attitudes are an unrepresentative passing phase, and that the world does remain open to reasoned argument." The question is, should we let the phase pass or actively try to break the "nativist hegemony"? To answer this, let us consider the ramifications of espousing the innateness position.

## **2.5. Potential Pitfalls of the Innateness Position**

Chomsky's innateness seems benign enough, being demonstrated in intricate mathematical formulae and being grounded in a longstanding philosophical tradition (which I will expound upon in the next chapter). However his nativist claims have far-reaching implications, not limited to linguistics alone. As Samet (2009, 18) notes,

[C]ontemporary research in cognitive development, genetics, evolutionary psychology, and other fields has extended Chomsky's Nativist thinking to the very concepts and principles that were at the heart of the historical debate (god, morality, personhood/mind, causality, mathematics, basic ontology, etc.).

Above I have touched upon some of the proofs nativists bring for their position and the problems therein. Here, I touch upon some of the intellectual, socio-cultural and moral implications of innateness and universalism. Seuren (2004 [1998]) states that Chomsky's actions have caused a lot of damage in linguistics, causing it to lose its prestige and appeal. More broadly, Lockard (2002) does not mince words, either: "[I]t's hard to think of another man who so robustly represents the failure of progressive thought in the United States as Noam Chomsky" (249). Let us examine some of the issues at hand, to better understand these concerns.

### **2.5.1. Intellectual concerns**

Chomsky has claimed Cartesian philosophy as the grounds for innateness. Behme (2014) demonstrates at length why this is a gross misattribution and is in fact a manipulation of Cartesian thought. She notes that Descartes' ideas "are equally compatible with the theories of contemporary nativists and empiricists" (14), and that "Chomsky has little interest in the facts of history, but intends to use the suitably re-interpreted Cartesians as figurants or ventriloquist puppets on the Chomskyan-Linguistics stage" (207).

Obviously, any proposed idea, in any field, should be contextualized within some sort of framework – and we can (and should) ground our ideas in the history of ideas and bodies of literature preceding it. Furthermore, different people will select different bits from said history of ideas and the bodies of literature at our disposal, being of greater or lesser importance and relevance to the particular idea being stated. The difference between misattribution and contextualisation, however, is a question of

degrees: backing up a theory or finding common ground for it within a thread – even a seemingly minor one – from an older idea, and presenting the theory as an obvious extension, or branching out, of a particular school of thought, is one thing<sup>24</sup>; presenting the theory as the older idea’s inevitable and only logical culmination, is another. Chomsky does the latter with Cartesian linguistics. To give him the benefit of the doubt, if Chomsky is not intellectually dishonest in claiming that his ideas are traceable to Cartesian thought, he is at the very least inaccurate and over-inclusive.

This has ramifications for the study of linguistics, and the history of ideas in general, and is a particularly critical issue given Chomsky’s stature: when a layperson comes up with a zany idea, there is no harm done<sup>25</sup>; when a respected intellectual posits a zany idea, and with impressive-looking philosophical backing and mathematical formulae, it’s very dangerous. As the Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:11) states, “Scholars, be cautious with your words, for you may incur the penalty of exile and be banished to a place of evil waters. The disciples who follow you there may drink and die...”<sup>26</sup>

And it is doubly troublesome when ideas are shrouded in what would appear to be “hard science.” Lyons (1978, 11) notes that “Chomsky’s system of transformational grammar was developed... in order to give a mathematically precise description of some of the most striking features of language.” However Chomsky’s use of sophisticated mathematical formulae further perpetuates his imprecision in “Cartesian” linguistics. This is of particular concern for those laypeople who have access to the new idea (nativism), but no grounding in the older ideas to which it is linked.<sup>27</sup> Samet (2009, 17) said it thus: “It [nativism] can also be too easily abused as

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<sup>24</sup> As an example, recall Sampson’s application of Simon’s hierarchicality to linguistic universals.

<sup>25</sup> However see Chapter 7, specifically the sections on post-truth politics and multiplicity and oneness, for how this becomes all the more problematic with the proliferation of social media, which present any amateur with all the means to disseminate his “facts” and opinions, to millions, and artificially win crowds over.

<sup>26</sup> Talmudic commentators contrast the analogy of “evil waters” with “living waters” – namely, wellsprings of insight that always have something fresh to offer. Stagnant waters grow sick – and make sick those who drink them. Scholars especially are enjoined to be careful with their words, lest they lure their students into stagnation.

<sup>27</sup> That is precisely what happened within Chomsky’s own work as well, not just the linking of innateness with Descartes. Chomsky first introduced his ideas in *Syntactic Structures*, in 1957. This short, nebulous work made references to a not yet published manuscript titled *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, which only a very few people had read. Thus, those who hadn’t read it assumed that would they have had access to what Chomsky was really saying, they’d see his truth for themselves. Rather than being a warning sign, Chomsky intellectual aloofness engendered blind faith. When *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* was eventually published, not many people studied it.

a tool of intellectual authoritarianism, because those who are not up to the task of uncovering these rarified innate truths must take their lead from those who are.”

Were Chomsky’s ideas to remain solely in linguistics, all would not be well but well enough. The problem is magnified, however, by extrapolation of his ideas about innateness and rationalism in language to other fields (e.g., philosophy, political philosophy too). Sampson (*Economic Growth and Linguistic Theory* 2014) discusses the implications of Chomsky’s theories for other fields – for example, endogenous growth theory in economics – and says that “Although some linguists discuss th[e] concept of constraints on cognition purely in connection with language structure, many others explicitly see language as providing evidence for a much more general picture of the nature of human cognition” (4). Lyons (1978, 12) readily admits not only to the “usefulness” of Chomsky’s ideas in other fields in the social sciences and humanities, but to their serving as a benchmark, noting that “Chomsky’s formalization of grammatical theory serves as a model and a standard.” Mathematicising “innateness” might be an *idea* or an exercise, but it most certainly should not be regarded as a standard; for by adopting a Chomskyan approach to learning – an approach wherein everything is predetermined – intellectual growth is stymied.

Chomsky...uses linguistic universals to attack the view (traditional, at least in the English-speaking world) of mind as relatively plastic or adaptable; Chomsky urges us instead to assimilate our account of individuals’ mental development to our account of individual physiological development, as a process in which heredity plays a role as large as or larger than that played by environment.

(G. Sampson 1979, 99)

People genuinely concerned with intellectual growth (in contrast with assumed intellectual superiority) should espouse a view that presents the human mind as elastic and adaptable. The Chomskyan, limited view of our own intellect can also lead to a devaluing of what others have to contribute to our learning process and knowledge base. Indeed, if our intellectual makeup is pretty much the same as another’s, there’s no need to value another’s particular wisdom, life experience, or point of view. Specifically when it comes to learning a foreign language, employing a Chomskyan perspective would render our *own* mathematicised language as the baseline against which all other languages are learned and measured. (Which, then, is the more ethnocentric view – the empiricists’ or the nativists’?) As Sampson and Barbarczy

(2014, 296) note, “People might think that cultures are basically similar, simply because they don’t know enough about other cultures to differentiate. The problem is, generative linguistics is creating reasons for saying that [this] is the correct outlook.”

Lyons (1978, 15) asserts that “Chomsky’s work suggests that the conventional boundary that exists between ‘arts’ and ‘science’ can, and should, be abolished.” In light of what we have seen, it should not be. When science becomes “artistic,” with fuzzy facts and fuzzy logic – and in turn when the arts and humanities are reduced to mathematics – we lose our sense of proportion, our sensitivity to linguistics aesthetics, and our objectivity.

It [generative linguistics] has begun to create a climate of intellectual opinion that makes it possible for people openly to say in so many words, “Yes, we are basing decisions on intuition rather than on evidence, and we are right to do so. Empirical argument is outdated 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinking – we are progressing beyond that.”

(Sampson and Barbarczy 2014, 317)

In other words, we’re so progressive, we’ve moved beyond facts. To paraphrase the quip attributed to Arthur Hays Sulzberger, we seem to be so open-minded that our brains have fallen out.

### **2.5.2. Socio-political concerns**

Aside from the issues of intellectual honesty and the need for evidence-based conclusions, innateness has socio-political implications as well. The first is that such a view inevitably leads to Anglocentrism. The second is that it provides the groundwork for assuming cultural sameness, and consequently the erasure of identity. These issues are magnified by the “the abstract formal quality of mathematical writing” of nativists such as Chomsky and Pinker, which makes people “imagine that linguistics is as ethically neutral as maths” (Sampson and Barbarczy 2014, 296). It isn’t.

#### **2.5.2.1. Anglocentrism**

When we speak of other languages/cultures, we are necessarily outsiders as we have to employ our own language to do so. No one stands at such a remove from language/culture so as to be able to comment on it with total objectivity, for the simple reason that we need a language – generally *our* language – to communicate about said culture. Though Chomsky plays the “extra-terrestrial” (see Robbins 2009),

most humans prefer what is familiar to them (G. Sampson 2008), and so, ultimately, “someone who believes in cognitive universals, in a situation where none exist, is almost bound to end up mistaking the accidental features of his own culture, or of the dominant culture in his world, for cultural universals” (Sampson and Barbarczy 2014, 303).<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, if English is the paradigm, we can never really know whether (and how) *other* languages differ from *each other*. Even if, theoretically, we can stand outside our own language and culture, we can never be embedded enough in a culture to be able to know it so thoroughly and yet at the same time be removed from it enough to be objective about it.

The crux of the issue is this:

What generative linguistics is doing here is describing the diverse languages of the world as if they were all variations on a pattern defined by the dominant language or language-group – but at the same time pretending that this does not amount to Anglocentrism or Eurocentrism, because the fixed common pattern is defined not by a particular language or language-family, but by a hypothetical innate cognitive structure shared by all human beings.

(Sampson and Barbarczy 2014, 305)

Those on the empiricist end can be Anglocentric, too, no doubt – in fact, they’re more likely to regard their culture as their preferred one, given that they view diverse cultures and languages as such and that most people, if honest, tend to prefer that which is familiar to them; the difference, however, is that they readily admit this – and have a reasonable explanation as to why (or what about) their own culture is favoured.

The danger in innateness’ inherent Anglocentrism is that in assuming that certain things are innate (language; cultural norms),

it creates a rationale for powerful groups to transform the ways of life of powerless groups while pretending that they are imposing no real changes – they are merely freeing the affected groups to realise the same innate cultural possibilities which are as natural to them as they are to

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<sup>28</sup> Consider the tragedy of the West trying to impose democracy on previously dictatorial Arab nations. Freedom (and democracy) is not “innate”; it is taught, learned, earned, cultivated and, unfortunately, sometimes has to be fought for to protect. What the West took for granted would work in non-Western countries, proved disastrous.

everyone else, because we human beings all inherit the same biologically-fixed cultural foundations[...] Intellectuals such as Chomsky and Pinker are creating a philosophical climate within which the new imperialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century becomes justifiable

(306, 313).

In a similar vein, Robbins (2009, 547) describes Chomsky's political cosmopolitanism:

In demanding an ever-increasing inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism is held to produce the illusory spectacle of the-world-as-a-whole. This spectacle was and is a product of imperialist violence, so the argument goes, and that violence is repeated in the everyday act of comparison. Comparison presupposes common norms; common norms, which by definition impose sameness on difference, presuppose a view from outside or above; the view from outside or above presupposes that the viewer is a holder of power. Thus both comparison and cosmopolitanism can be assimilated to capitalist globalization, which is understood to rule by reducing difference to homogeneity.

Chomsky claims the moral high ground, as though he is so much an outsider – the extra-terrestrial – that he can comment freely on everything and with complete objectivity. But no one is ever completely at a remove from his culture so as to be completely neutral – even if he despises said culture. As Robbins (2009, 553) aptly put it, concerning Chomsky's criticism of America, "Negative narcissism is still narcissism."

#### **2.5.2.2. *Loss of identity backfiring***

In addition to the latent superiority complex of Anglocentrism which can potentially lead to "cultural makeovers" where the host culture is the gauge, the Chomskyan view lays the groundwork for wiping out identity entirely. Let us see how – and why this is problematic.

Ideas function like a pendulum or spiral through time (see chapter seven for more on this), with ideas swinging away from previous notions, in reaction to them. Relativity and universalism, like other academic disciplines (or social trends for that

matter), work in a spiral through time, going to one extreme and then bouncing back to the other, in effort to restore some equilibrium.<sup>29</sup>

As we have noted in the previous section, Chomsky's ideas took off during the 60s and 70s – a mere generation or so from Whorf's untimely death, and a short while after his ideas were published posthumously. In the wake of the horrors of World War II, and with the memory of Nazi ideology not yet faded, it was only natural for people to want to blur the lines of distinction between cultures and to believe that all people are the same (and consequently that languages are, at root, all the same).

This postmodernist erasure of distinctions between everything – nationality, religion, ethnicity, even basic biological distinctions such as gender – is, at best, a copout: rather than acknowledge the differences *and deal with them*, we are running away from them. In such a climate, the superpower that has a strong sense of identity is deemed wrong or evil for it, the underdog is heralded as the hero, and anyone wishing to question this is deemed non-PC; the victim is always right, regardless of whether his being a victim is the result of a self-perpetuating victimhood mentality or external forces. The new universalistic order at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was not so much grounded in genuine commonalities but was an artificial construction born out of fear. If we are all the same, the logic goes, no one can, or will, claim superiority or carry out atrocious acts in its name.<sup>30</sup>

The danger in Chomsky's *über*-universalism is its potential for post-nationalist backfiring. Sameness is not synonymous with equality, and being “the same” actually detracts from *everyone's* specialness. Inevitably, with a lack of a sense of specialness, various “identities” will compete for that specialness. We are already seeing how this notion of non-identity is backfiring, with European countries now experiencing the “utter failure of multiculturalism,” to use the words of Germany's Vice Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

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<sup>29</sup> Consider the back-and-forth spiralling through time of liberalism and conservatism, for example, reincarnated though they might be as neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, or the surge in fervent fundamentalism as the counterculture to the new-age apathetic atheism.

<sup>30</sup> But evidently people get tired of not having an identity (see previous footnote regarding radical fundamentalism filling a void left by an apathetic, secular age). So it comes as no surprise that linguistic relativity is making a “comeback” and is “among the Big Ideas of the twentieth century” (D. Cameron 1999, 154). This “comeback,” I believe, isn't merely because of new evidence emerging (though it is certainly bolstered by such); rather, our current academic, social and global-political climate, and its attendant disenchantment, welcomes it. As Bernard Poignant, Mayor of Quimper, Brittany – itself an interesting example of a region and its people intent on maintaining cultural distinctiveness and upholding their language (Breton) – said in *The Washington Post*, “Man is a fragile animal and he needs his close attachments. The more open the world becomes, the more ties there will be to one's roots and one's land” (Trueheart 1998).

While Chomsky is intent on wiping out cultural difference (see Robbins 2009), a nation's identity – be it a homeland, a language, a religion, or ethnicity) – is what keeps it together, and no people or nation will carry on indefinitely without some form of identity. Sooner or later, the void will be filled with a different form of identity.<sup>31</sup> Initially this may be simply an identity of “non-identity” – namely, belonging to the not-belonging; eventually, however, it will lead to an *über*-identity, and likely not one that will benefit us, individually, nationally or globally. In the absence of nation-binding apparatuses, nations will disappear as they get taken over – either from the outside through war, or by a natural take-over process (even by democratic means – and that is truly scary, because it happens so subtly and gradually) from within, demographics, assimilation or social nihilism permitting. The void left by an identity-less society is fertile ground for the awakening of extreme versions of identity (such as we are seeing now with the rise of radical right-wing factions in several European countries, in parallel with the decline of national identity).<sup>32</sup>

Cosy feelings of we're-all-the-same aren't helpful – particularly in contending with cultures openly hostile to us – and so we'd be wise to take note of the differences between us. When it comes to survival (as individuals and as a nationality or culture on the whole), personal and national identity comes before political cosmopolitanism and social multiculturalism in the name of a new universalistic moral order.

### **2.5.3. Moral concerns**

From a Judaic perspective, the moral issue at hand in espousing a worldview wherein everything we are and everything we learn is not really by choice but is encoded in our genes and predetermined is that it absolves us of responsibility and accountability. Without accountability, there can be no ultimate good in the form of just reward – the ultimate purpose for our existence. Furthermore, accountability has to start with the self; as the Mishna (Ethics of the Fathers, 1: 14) states, “If I am not for myself [i.e., if I don't act on my behalf], who will be for me?” And so, whether something is in the genes or not, is irrelevant; man is endowed with free will and is obligated to exercise

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<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, apropos Simon's theory of hierarchicality, given that hierarchical systems have a better chance of filling an environmental niche than do unstructured systems, one could see how the hierarchical structure found in religious fundamentalism (the family, the patriarchy, religious leaders, prophets, sacred texts handed down by said prophets, going all the way up – or back, as it were – to an indisputable deity) is taking the place of anarchistic, egalitarian secularism.

<sup>32</sup> And not just the decline of identity but the decline of the very nation itself, an aspect of which is the negative birth rate. See Goldman (2011) *How Civilizations Die*.

it. Claiming that it's all predetermined undermines the basic tenet that man is a *ba'al behira*, master of his free will and able to freely choose; even if he has a greater propensity toward something – even a genetic predisposition<sup>33</sup> – he still has free will.<sup>34</sup> Chomsky's and Pinker's labelling of language as an “instinct” essentially puts humans on the same footing as animals: a human baby and a kitten differ in the fact that the former has an LAD, but essentially we're all operating on instinct with no expectation to rise above it.

To say that language is an “innate and unlearned structure,” as Chomsky would like us to believe, that it is pure “instinct,” or “fluke” of our biology as Pinker would like us to believe, that its nuances don't really matter, as machine-translation techies would like us to believe, or that it *shouldn't* really matter, as certain world-as-a-whole activists would like us to believe, is to deny our uniquely human gifts. More scarily, it absolves us of responsibility toward language and its use. In the words of Kodish (2003, 387), “Neuro-linguistic factors, i.e., *words with the associated neuro-evaluative processes in each of us*, can play a harmful, sometimes quite toxic role in our lives – especially if we remain unconscious of their implications.” And in the words of Lamb (2000, in Kodish 2003: 388), “Those who doubt that language can influence thinking are unlikely to be vigilant for the effects of language on their own thinking.” Put differently, being liberated from the “prison-house of language” (Deutscher 2010, 149) doesn't make language use a free-for-all.

Prager (2015) keenly observes that one of the key differences between the Left and the Right is that the Left is concerned with what *feels* good (and I would add, “even myopically”), while the Right is concerned with what *does* good (and here I would add, “long term, even if in the short run it creates difficulty or appears counterintuitive”). Whereas the Right is generally concerned with self-improvement on an individual, communal or national level, the Left is preoccupied with the problems supposedly caused by others – be it the government, the patriarchy, the

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<sup>33</sup> Even if it were all in the genes, one would have to consider the degree of *penetrance*, namely, how and to what extent a gene actually manifests in the physical body (for example, though someone may have a mutation on the BRCA gene, she might not necessarily develop breast cancer). In a different vein, consider the case of ADHD kids of ADHD parents. It's easy to attribute it all to genes (and there certainly is evidence in support of this, as ADHD does run in families). However one cannot ignore the obvious fact that a child growing up with ADHD parents will learn ADHD behaviours from them (be it hyperactivity or reacting impulsively). How much can be (and more importantly, how much *should* be) attributed solely to genetics remains a serious question.

<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the Judaic view is that it is specifically those areas of greatest challenge – those genes we didn't ask for – that have the greatest potential for personal growth.

economy, etc. – or external factors such as life circumstances, or, as it were, our biology. Chomsky’s universalism is a classic example of this: it *feels* good to believe we’re all the same; but it *does not do us good*. It is also present-focused, not future oriented – the very opposite of the time-binding capacity (see chapter 7) which makes us human.

The current extreme nativist position is nihilistic: whatever is, is, sans purpose; there is no point in striving for anything because it’s all biologically fixed anyhow. Moreover, since we are all the same, people have no inherent value.

Nativism stands against the ethos of individual initiative... the empiricist does not see our understanding as in any way given to us as a gift. It is the product of our individual labor. God has given all of us the general ability to reason, and this includes the ability to acquire knowledge from experience; it is our job to exercise that ability. We fully own our knowledge: we collect the raw materials and add our mental labor to create it.

(Samet 2009, 17)

Sampson and Barbarczy (2014, 303) note that it is only logical for “those who believe in biologically-fixed ideas to place a low value on the possibilities of cultural diversity and innovation.” This is true not just on a cultural-societal level but on an individual level as well.

If only all that were at stake in believing in biologically fixed ideas was that it “placed a low value on the possibility of cultural diversity.” The problem is, as Sampson and Barbarczy note, such a position necessarily halts *innovation* as well. If we assume that cultures are all the same – not just synchronically but diachronically – then we haven’t really evolved over time nor have we come to appreciate how our cultural diversity can engender innovation. If we’re all the same, there can be no innovation. Are we to remain stagnant, perpetually constrained by our biology?

This point is a moral one, but has implications for intellectual as well as socio-political progress. If one looks hard enough, commonalities can be found anywhere. But if we want to advance and not remain static (or regress), we would be better off not espousing the view that we’re all the same or that all cultures – contemporaneous and throughout time – have been more or less the same. In the words of Sampson and Barbarczy, (2014, 299; 319),

We do not meet many people who find life at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so wonderful in all respects that improvement is inconceivable. But how can we hope to chart positive ways forward into the future, if we have no sense that there is a wide range of alternatives to our current reality?

We owe it to ourselves, to our descendants, and perhaps above all to our Third-World neighbours to reject any ideology that claims to set boundaries to this process of ever-new blossoming of the human spirit. Just as our lives have risen above the limitations which constrained our ancestors, so we must leave those who come after us free to rise above the limitations which restrict us.

As stated previously, people hear what they want to hear. Sampson (Gladstone as Linguist 2014, 2) notes, “[T]he tendency to reinterpret claims about cultural differences in ways that turn them into something easier to digest, or even trivialize them, is perennial.” This would explain why innateness and empiricism have been so passionately dichotomised. But as is often the case, the difficulty we have with an idea’s inherent criticism of us is directly proportional to how much we need to hear it.

## **2.6. The Dichotomization of Innateness and Empiricism and a Tentative Judaic Resolution**

To borrow Chomsky’s theoretical scenario about a Martian visiting Earth, who Chomsky claims would conclude that we’re all speaking merely *dialects* of the same language, if a Martian were to visit Earth he would think that the issues of innateness and empiricism were of great importance and complexity, given the vehemence with which proponents of both sides attack each other. This is not good. As Fishman (1982, 3) notes, “[T]here is an obvious danger for methodologically different traditions to be ideologically disinclined to read each other.” Furthermore, the matter is actually rather simple. Behme (2014, 13) succinctly sums it up:

Broadly speaking, there are two philosophical positions regarding language acquisition. Either all our linguistic knowledge comes directly (perception) or indirectly (inference, induction) from sense experience (empiricism), or at least some of our linguistic knowledge is innate (rationalism). Similarly, in psychology, empiricism (sometimes called

the ‘blank slate’ or *tabula rasa* view) holds that virtually everything is learned through interaction with the environment, and nativism is the view that certain skills or abilities are hard wired into the brain at birth.

But, as Behme notes at the conclusion of this segment quoted above, “Currently no one holds either the pure empiricist or pure rationalist view.” Or, in Sampson’s (2005, 28) words,

The issue between nativism and empiricism certainly is a more/less rather than a yes/no issue: everyone agrees that human beings bring some innate faculties to the task of learning, and everyone agrees that the mature human’s cognitive world depends in some respects on his experience.

This is common sense:

It’s widely assumed that there has to be *something* different about humans and, as it might be, rocks, that accounts for the fact that human (but not rocks) learn to speak natural language, do arithmetic, recognize faces, etc. Any sensible account of the mind has to respect such platitudes and, consequently, is committed to some innate structure. The substantive question concerns the character of the innate structure, not whether there is any.<sup>35</sup>

(Laurence and Margolis 2001, 219)

Where do nativism and empiricism differ, then? They differ in “the quantity and richness of the innate structure that they endorse” (ibid.). In other words, nativism and empiricism are not mutually exclusive (much as the argument between them would seem to indicate they are<sup>36</sup>). If so, why is it that innateness and empiricism seem to have become so dichotomised on the platform of linguistics and academe in general? Why all the hype? More interesting than the positions espoused by either side (which, upon consideration of the less absolute, more nuanced variations thereof, are

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<sup>35</sup> I would phrase the question differently, however: the question is not about the “character of the innate structure,” rather about a) whether this innate structure of language is a separate entity from the innate intellectual structure in general, and b) whether the study of this innate structure really is of the innate structure or of the *learning process* with which said innate structure functions.

<sup>36</sup> Consider Jerry Fodor’s idea of “fifty-thousand innate concepts” and his “hatred” of relativism “more than anything else” (Pinker 1994, 420).

compatible in their respective non-extreme forms<sup>37</sup>) is the ongoing nature of the debate, and the great lengths academics will go to to justify their position and to discredit the opposing view.

If Steven Pinker is any indication, it appears the nativists are far more fearful of the implications of empiricism and relativity than vice versa. Pinker (2007, 126-148) brings ten (!) supposed variations of the Whorfian hypothesis, and then proceeds to debunk them one by one.<sup>38</sup> Pinker states that his reason for having gone through the prominent new Whorfian claims is “not as an exercise in debunking,” rather “to reinforce...that language is a window into human nature, exposing deep and universal features of our thoughts and feelings” (148). However his enumerated “versions” of the hypothesis are easily refuted strawmen (and some of them are so similar they need not have been grouped separately, which makes one wonder if they were grouped thus for the purpose of magnifying their supposed ridiculousness). Although, as Pinker notes, “Much can be gained by contrasting a theory with its alternatives, even ones that look too extreme to be true” (91), this is hardly the case when there is an underlying agenda to misrepresent a theory in a way that makes it so outrageous, in order to assert the validity of its more “benign” version, or – in our case – to render the opposite theory the only plausible one. As Pinker himself has stated (2007, 89), constructing a strawman is “perhaps one of the best known” tactics employed in intellectual debate. One such type of strawman is the “sacrificial” one, “useful when one worries about being on the fringe of respectable opinion: set up a fanatical version of one’s theory, then distance oneself from it as proof of one’s moderation.”<sup>39</sup>

Pinker’s obsession with debunking the Whorfian hypothesis (though he claims not to specifically wish to do so) is ironic, considering a tip he gives in *The Sense of Style*, on good writing. He writes:

Be aware of false dichotomies. Though it’s fun to reduce a complex issue to a war between two slogans, two camps, or two schools of

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<sup>37</sup>Recall Kodish’s (2003) assertion, mentioned in chapter 1: “Neuro-linguistic relativity held non-absolutely has no inherent conflict with some degree of non-absolutist neuro-linguistic universalism, which may have some more or less direct biological basis.”

<sup>38</sup> The contrast to Pinker’s bemusedly reverent look at Jerry Fodor’s extreme nativism and theory of fifty-thousand innate concepts is striking. Pinker readily admits to Fodor’s evidence being “extraordinarily thin,” but asserts that even ideas that seem bizarre warrant examination – a fair enough assumption, if only it were equally applied to opposing views; Pinker, however, does not apply the same intellectual generosity to the idea of linguistic relativity.

<sup>39</sup> Ironic that he says this by way of introduction to a “real” (his word) strawman – Jerry Fodor, the extreme innatist (though in semantics, not grammar).

thought, it is rarely a path to understanding. Few good ideas can be insightfully captured in a single word ending with *-ism*, and most of our ideas are so crude that we can make more progress by analyzing and refining them than by pitting them against each other in a winner-takes-all contest

(2014, 303)

So what really is at stake in considering the idea that the language we speak will affect how we think – and, conversely, that language is inborn? Put simply, what are we so afraid of?

### **2.6.1. The underlying premises of nativism and empiricism**

Pinker (2007, 92) rightly notes that the ideas of linguistic nativism and determinism “are proxy battles in much larger conflicts of ideas.”<sup>40</sup> I will discuss these ideas in more detail in the next chapter, where I trace their history in the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac school of thought, and the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt school of thought, respectively. Here, I mention them briefly by way of introduction to the next chapter, and by way of introducing a tentative Judaic response to the dichotomy, which in turn will be expanded upon in chapters four, five and six.

The innateness-vs.-empiricism argument is not limited to linguistics. To understand the issue more fully, it is worthwhile to go back to the argument’s philosophical roots in Plato and Aristotle.<sup>41</sup>

Samet (2009, 1) notes,

[T]he question [of innateness vs. empiricism] loomed large in philosophy not only because of its inherent interest, but primarily because of what followed – or was thought to follow – from the competing positions. The innateness question was taken as a lynchpin in settling questions in morality, religion, epistemology, metaphysics, and so on.

Innateness in its classical form – Plato’s anamnesis – held that “all learning is recollection, that everything we will ever learn is already in us before we are taught... perception and inquiry *remind* us of what is innate in us” (4). The implication of this

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<sup>40</sup> Note that Pinker states this regarding *three* theories of language acquisition – extreme nativism, radical pragmatics, and linguistic determinism – but for our purposes these can be subsumed under innateness and empiricism.

<sup>41</sup> It actually goes further back, to Empedocles and Anaxagoras. See Samet (2009, 2-3) for a brief summary.

is that people do in fact have a metaphysical/immortal aspect that endows them with a priori knowledge. And not just that: “Though the innateness doctrine is, strictly speaking, an hypothesis about cognitive development, it is attractive to Plato because of its deeper metaphysical and methodological consequences” (5).

Acknowledging the existence of something beyond our empiricist/sensory experience of reality necessarily raises the issue of there being a metaphysical aspect to existence, an objective “outsider” outside of us and our egocentric/sensory experience of the world; a “world” (or God) out there, unknown to us but which, when encountered, is recognisable as having always been there. Classical nativism, then, has implications as regards the soul, immortality, reincarnation and our unique Divine endowment as human beings.

Aristotle disagreed with Plato’s nativism,<sup>42</sup> maintaining that our understanding of the nature of things is derived from our sensory perception of them. Later, Aristotelianism formed the groundwork for the empiricism that emerged with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Platonism, in turn, formed the basis for Descartes argument that our abstract, non-sensory a priori knowledge enables us to make sense of the physical objects in the world and dimensions thereof, as well as Leibniz’ rationalist account of knowledge.

It is indeed curious how the present incarnation of innateness is at a far remove from all things metaphysically inclined. Nativism in its present form has developed along rationalist lines, and is more likely to be espoused by the secular-minded (see chapter 6 for more on this point). Equally, empiricism (as a reaction against early nativism), which in its earlier form was, generally speaking, strictly scientific (see Samet [2009] for the exception of Locke<sup>43</sup>), and not concerned at all with religion or the metaphysical, is now actually more on the spiritual/metaphysical side of the debate. To reconcile this we can think of it this way: current nativism is shrouded in

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<sup>42</sup> However note that Samet (Samet 2009, 6) says Aristotle should not be placed on the opposite end of Plato on the innateness–empiricism scale, for doing so would “obscure too many differences – especially in their view of perception and reason.”

<sup>43</sup>Samet (2009, 18) rightly opines that Locke “would have been horrified at what his empiricism has wrought. The underlying Rationalist picture...is a picture that Locke would, with some small reservations, have accepted...he believed in an afterlife, and he saw our god-given faculty of Reason as capable of discovering the most important truths about our world and our lives – i.e., the existence of God and the nature of our moral duties” (Samet 2009, 18).

would-be empiricism, while empiricism is in fact grounded in a nativist understanding of the Self as Divine and therefore divinely obligated.<sup>44</sup>

[T]he underlying picture of human nature that emerges from the Nativist side of the historical debate is something like this. We human beings, distinct from all other created things, are not fully of this material world. We are guided in our thought and action by a special gift from our creator, who has seen fit to implant in our souls the deeper truth of the nature of the world, and special guidance about how we are to act in it. We must discover this inner truth, and adhere to it in the face of the often-distracting course of our experience

(17)

Samet (2009) views Chomsky's work in linguistics as the turning point in the revival of nativist thinking. It is a significant turning point in that it has seen a revival of innateness which has fed a *secular*, universalist agenda: Whereas innateness in the past implied an inherent element of the Divine, the present view reduces humanity to the same godless genetic soup: we are the same not because we are all Divine; we are the same because we just *are*.

### **2.6.2. What's really at stake?**

Perhaps the reason we are seeing a resurgence of interest in linguistic relativity, and its clash with innateness, is because the argument is a reflection of the radical secularisation of our times, on the one hand, and the radical fundamentalism emerging in counter reaction to it, on the other. The idea that we are inherently different from one another is anathema to the postmodern, would-be borderless and identity-less secular-minded; to the fundamentalist, who wishes to extend his definitive, absolutist boundaries to encompass more of the world and to impose his identity on others, such a view is paramount, leaving no space for the Other. We can thus understand why academics in today's cultural environment wherein "nothing matters" and "labels are arbitrary" – yet where a fundamentalist mind-set is becoming ever more popular and all the more scary – more readily espouse a theory that maintains that we are all,

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<sup>44</sup>Consider that perhaps innateness is just another word for the "soul," and that in absence (or defiance) of a religious basis or orientation, the scientific has come to serve as a secular alternative to the spiritual. In other words, if by "innateness" we mean that we have something of the Divine within us (be it knowledge, linguistic capacity, a soul, a sense of ethics, etc.), then this definition need not preclude an empirical approach to learning (language or otherwise) – on the contrary, it enhances it.

essentially, the same, hard wired with the same universal language and just speaking a different dialect. And we can also understand why, with the decline of any external moral standard (in the form of God or organised religion), people are more concerned with what language *is* rather than what it can or ought to *do*.

The obvious way to reconcile linguistic nativism and empiricism is to take the non-extreme form of each. Though this is less exciting (there's always less passion when no extremes are involved), it would seem to be not only the more logical way but the more practical one as well. The Judaic view offers a framework for such reconciliation. In broader terms (to be discussed further in chapter 7), The Judaic view holds a counteroffer to the radical secularisation (reflected in innateness) and the radical fundamentalism (reflected in determinism) presently taking hold.

### **2.6.3. Innateness and empiricism as metaphor: a quest for the Divine**

Employing a metaphoric view of the debate over whether language is innate or empirical specifically, or the nature-vs.-nurture debate generally, would frame the debate as a quest for the Divine (or, put differently, for the locus of truth): do we find the Divine within us (i.e., we are inherently Divine) or do we find it in the world around us, outside of us (i.e. the Divine surrounds us, and is what we make of it)?<sup>45</sup>

It is within the context of this metaphor that I present a tentative Judaic response to the supposed dichotomy, to be explored in greater detail in chapters 4,5, and 6.

It seems Judaism espouses a more holistic view of innateness *and* empiricism, neither as contradictory nor as discrete ideas, but rather as necessarily functioning in partnership. We have a Divine element within us, which enables us to see the Divine all around us; like is attracted to like. Having said that, however, it seems Judaic sources favour the empiricist/relativist view somewhat, insofar as it motivates toward self-improvement (which innateness in its present, crude form, does not), and insofar as it embraces diversity, on an individual and national level. Judaism does not deny innateness, but asserts that it only goes so far (and is, in some significant respects, irrelevant).

The Talmud (Tractate Niddah 16b) says that some things are inborn and predetermined (even prior to conception): whether a person will be physically strong or weak, clever or not, and whether he will be rich or poor. However, this passage in the Talmud concludes with the statement that whether a person will be righteous or

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<sup>45</sup> Whereas nativists of old intuited the Self as Divine, innateness in its present form does not.

wicked – and this is the purpose of life in Judaism, to choose the good – is *not* predetermined. In other words, we are given certain innate abilities and predetermined life circumstances but are not completely bound by them. The cards we are dealt are the cards we are dealt; how we play them is entirely up to us.

Judaism also parts ways with innateness in that it asserts our individual differences. The Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 48b) states that “Just as their faces differ so do their thoughts”; we are not “of the same mind,” as Pinker would like us to believe. This is true on a global scale as well, with each nationality having a distinct role and purpose within the universal moral code.<sup>46</sup> The fact that most of our genetic material is similar is irrelevant. Genes and their expression (“gene penetrance”) only go so far, and any similarity found therein detracts neither from man’s greatness nor from his accountability and obligation to exercise his individuality.

Luzzatto (1978 [1740], ch. 1) writes that “a person’s task is to know what his job is in his world.” Note the possessive – “his” world – is used, not “the” world. This connotes an understanding of one’s *personal* world, one’s environment and circumstances – and with those specifically is one obligated to work toward self-improvement. Hence innateness is somewhat irrelevant, because reward and punishment in Judaism is only for deeds carried out in the realm of *free will*; things which are not within the realm of decision making and personal effort are not given to reward or retribution. Thus, two people with the same innate capacities can be vastly different people, depending on what they do with these capacities (and consequently their reward will differ); victimhood plays no role in accountability, and inborn genius is pure circumstance.

Moreover, in this regard the behaviourist approach which Chomsky sought to debunk, is more aligned with the Judaic view that a person is influenced by his actions (Halevi 1978 [1257?] , 119), the upshot of which is that even if a person does not feel or think a certain way, *acting* that way will develop those thoughts and feelings. Every person is born within a certain constellation of circumstances and with certain

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<sup>46</sup> Judaism regards the “seventy nations” as each having a unique role and purpose to fill. The number 70 is derived from a count of the seventy nations listed in the tenth chapter of Genesis. (Nowadays the distinction of each nation is not apparent, since Sennacherib, the Assyrian ruler, [705 BCE–681 BCE] mixed up all the nations during his conquests.) In his commentary on Exodus (24:1), Nachmanides discusses the significance of the number seventy, noting that it represents the “encompassing of all abilities and wisdom” (for example, Seventy Elders the Jewish people had in the desert; 70 family members descended with Jacob to Egypt; seventy languages spoken by Pharaoh, and Joseph held in high regard for speaking them all, as well as Hebrew [Tractate Sotah 36a]). In our context, then, the idea of seventy nations represents the coming together of all human abilities and wisdom.

innate abilities. But every person can rise above these circumstances, or limitations, by redemptive positive action. While there will be certain things that are innate and immovable, they are vastly outnumbered by those things which are entirely up to man's free will. Furthermore, *those innate features are there specifically for man to achieve his personal mission*, without which he wouldn't be able to do so. They are not obstacles but tools.

There is a deeper meaning to the Talmud's statement quoted above that "Just as their faces differ so do their thoughts." The Talmud is not just stating that we think differently just as we look differently. Rather, it is stating that the same way that when we look at people's externality we delight in difference and the ability to identify people (we would indeed find it disconcerting if everyone looked the same – and worse, looked just like us), so too with differences in thought: just as it is to our benefit that people look different, so too is it to our benefit that people think differently. Every person has unique limitations and talents. To deny these differences is to deny what make us human. It also absolves us of responsibility on some level, because if everyone is the same, no one individual has what to teach or contribute to others. In other words, our contributions to humanity are predicated on acknowledging that there is indeed a lack of *something*, an imperfect world. Ultimately, the Judaic view makes for a kinder view of the self and of humanity at large, as it holds us to the same – yet individualised – standard: be who you can – and not anyone else – given who you are.<sup>47</sup>

#### **2.6.4. Extending the metaphor of innateness and empiricism: body and soul**

The Judaic premise that people are born essentially *tabula rasa*, but with a Divine element made manifest in the ability to speak (more on this in chapter 4), is not just a question of intellect but a question of "mind," or spirit, as it were. Since man's innate abilities and constraints are part of his unique individual mission, perhaps what is meant by innateness is simply a "not-yet-actualized soul": inherent potential, actualised through interaction with the environment and impacting upon that which is innate.

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<sup>47</sup> This is illustrated by a well-known Hassidic tale about Zusha of Hanipol, who cried on his deathbed in fear of Judgement Day. His students asked him why he was afraid, as he had led a righteous life. He responded that he was not concerned that he would be asked why he wasn't like Moses or Joshua or other righteous individuals. He was concerned that he would be asked, "Zusha, why weren't you Zusha"?

This view runs contrary to the doctrine of original sin, and maintains that every person is born with infinite potential<sup>48</sup> – and with equal chance to turn toward good or bad<sup>49</sup> – and therefore every life is precious, given its potential for good.<sup>50</sup> (If the purpose were just to *avoid* the bad, it would have been more efficient for God to leave man uncreated.) Furthermore, just as God “constricted” Himself at Creation by uttering the world into existence, transforming it from the realm of the theoretical-potential to the concrete-actualised (more on this in chapter four), so too man “constricts” his thoughts by giving them a constrained verbal expression – constrained because words can never fully capture all the potential inherent in thought; however they are necessary because without actualisation thought has no concrete manifestation and therefore no meaning.

This infinite potential is illustrated in the Talmud’s (Tractate Niddah 30b) description of what a foetus looks like in utero. The foetus is described as a “folded scroll,” his hands at his temples and his legs curled in the foetal position, his heels at his buttocks, his head between his legs, and with a candle burning above its head. He is taught the entire Torah, and can see “from one end of the world to the other.”

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<sup>48</sup> This innate potential (i.e., infinity) is itself an expression of the Divine, Who is infinite. Incidentally, the infinity of the Divine is expressed in the Divine Name  $\text{י-ד-ש}$ , (commonly pronounced “Shakkai” in English, with the *k* substituted for the *d* sound, so as not to write an Ineffable Name). The Name *Shakkai* is a portmanteau word comprised of  $\text{ש-א-מ-ר}$  לעולם די, “He who told the world ‘stop’ [when He created it] (Tractate Hagigah 12a; Pirkei d’Rabi Eliezer, ch. 3); the world was unfolding infinitely, till God constricted Himself and told the world to stop, to allow for human existence and free will which is made possible only by His hiddenness (we will return to this point in chapters 4 and 7).

Not coincidentally, the numerical value of the Name *Shakkai* is 314 – the integers of pi, a number that goes on to infinity. “The Torah uses base 10 numbering but does not use the decimal fraction. Therefore, a number such as 3.14 can only be suggested by its integer counterpart, 314” (Ginsburgh 2014). (The special connection of a circle and the End of Days will be discussed further in Chapter 7).

<sup>49</sup> Good and evil have to be equally weighted; otherwise there would be no point to moral choosing. (See chapter 4 for more on this point.) Though in the Judaic view man is born ethically neutral, evil is a necessary component because only by recognition of evil’s existence does man’s goodness have significance and meaning *in that he chose to pursue it*. Without recognising the potential for evil, man can exercise no free will in choosing the good. (In broader cosmological terms, this is, essentially, one of the reasons we don’t have answers as to why bad things happen to good people: if we knew all the cosmic calculations of “good” and “evil,” of “retribution” and “reward,” we would be glibly insensitive to the needs and feelings of those suffering.)

<sup>50</sup> Even where physical life is compromised, as in the case of a disabled child, a senile elderly person or someone in a coma, life is regarded as precious and Judaism mandates that we do everything we can to save a life, given its potential for good. (There are complicated halakhic considerations here, too lengthy and not relevant to the present work. My point here is merely to point out the general principle of the value of life as having inherent potential and therefore infinite value.)

This necessitates understanding three key concepts: a) that there is a realm of existence higher than the mere physical world and b) that the ultimate goodness is not in this world but in the next one, and c) that the potential for good in this world does not mean solely what the (in our case, compromised) individual can do (even a perfectly healthy baby doesn’t “do” much for others; it is entirely selfish). Rather, the pursuit of goodness sometimes may amount to the goodness the compromised individual brings out in others.

The picture conveyed is obviously not literal (clearly, there are no candles burning in utero). Rather, it represents man's task in this world: he is taught the entire Torah and sees the whole world. He is likened to a scroll, but it is a not yet unfolded one; it's up to man to open it and inscribe it. The candle above his head symbolises the soul that illumines his path: "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord" (Proverbs 20:27). The foetus' ability to see "from one end of the world to the other" represents its *helek Eloka mima'al* – the Divine element, which enables it to inhabit any time and every space (we will return to this idea, in the discussion of time-binding in chapter 7). Unlike the physical body which is immovable, the soul, being an element of the Divine, is not bound by time or space. The foetus thus embodies infinite knowledge and super-consciousness.

But infinite knowledge and super-consciousness are not sufficient: just as thought needs concretisation in words, the soul needs actualisation in the body. The soul, the Divine element, is the innate component; the body, which actualises it, the outside force containing it and impacting upon it. A body without a soul is lifeless, a soul without a body has no means of *being*, however "innate" the soul is. The soul is flung into its body against its will (Midrash Tanhuma, Pikudei, §3), but is then given the opportunity to actualise itself – via speech. Just as the body and soul are mutually needy, so too innateness and empiricism.

In polarizing innateness and empiricism, we eclipse the contribution of each to what makes us human. Neither is sufficient on its own to explain who we are and how we came to be that way – and certainly not where we're headed.

If we were to rely solely on empiricism and what we know from experience (sensory or otherwise), the results would be disastrous. Our experience may dictate one thing, while our innately known truths can guide us in an entirely different, nobler direction. (If survival of the fittest were the only mode of human functioning, we would all be pretty nasty creatures.) There must be an inner truth, a Higher Power that stands outside of us but which is bequeathed to us, which is the gauge or standard against which all things are measured because experience alone will not be sufficient to teach us good and bad; evil can, in fact, be quite rational from experience, and altruism irrational, highlighting the necessity of an inner (by which we mean objective, outside) truth.

Equally, relying solely on innateness – that we are who we are because that’s just how we are – runs the risk of excusing our inaction and remaining static.<sup>51</sup> It is only through empirical knowledge – and the very *idea* that there is knowledge out there to be gained – that we come to self-growth.

Obviously, empiricism, too, falls short in that it can foster man’s giving too *much* credit to himself, and becoming arrogant in thinking that all things are learnable and achievable independent of the Divine. If we had to choose one, however, it would be the empiricist approach, for it aligns with the Judaic view mentioned earlier, that “a person is influenced in accordance with his actions” (Sefer HaHinnuch 1978 [1257?], 119) and that good actions – even if done for ulterior motives – will lead eventually to good actions done altruistically. “God has given all of us the general ability to reason, and this includes the ability to acquire knowledge from experience; it is our job to exercise that ability” (Samet 2009, 17).

In this context, it is interesting to note that many linguists (e.g., Cowie, 2010), philosophers (e.g. Taylor, 2016) and academics in general, while considering human beings as clearly unique, describe them as different from “other animals” – the implication being that humans, too, are animals, just a different type; an “articulate mammal,” to borrow the title of Jean Aitchison’s book. We do share much of our DNA with the animal kingdom.<sup>52</sup> However the Judaism views human beings as completely distinct from the animal kingdom and infinitely more valuable. Moreover, in Jewish philosophy it is specifically the speech faculty which marks man’s superiority over the animal kingdom, and what makes man Divine. Language is our unique Divine spark – a *ruah memalelah*, a “living soul” (more on this in chapter 4) that God breathed into Man at Creation. But it is only by acting upon it that we liberate it. Even if we concede that there is such a thing as an LAD somewhere in the brain, we know that nothing will come of it unless it is acted upon.

A conception of language as being sourced with the Divine allows space for innateness *and* empiricism, though neither in extreme form. In simpler terms, the debate between nature and nurture is moot: though we may be who we are because of our inborn nature or how we were nurtured, and we may act as we do because of said

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<sup>51</sup>This is doubly dangerous when it is shrouded in religious claims that Divine Will underpins our particular dis/abilities, and inaction is an exercise in accepting Divine Will. In essence, this amounts to throwing our failings back on God and not taking ownership of our circumstances.

<sup>52</sup> For an interesting example concerning language specifically, see Cowie (2010) regarding a gene common to singing birds and humans.

inborn nature and nurture, neither innateness nor empiricism takes into account the greatness of man's potential. *That*, more than anything (language, cognitive ability, etc.) is what differentiates Man from the animal kingdom – the ability *to choose*.

### **2.6.5. So what is innate?**

In line with the Judaic view of humans as being fundamentally different than animals and being sourced with the Divine, we can now better appreciate a certain innate human phenomenon that teaches us much about the nature of humans as “linguaging beings,”<sup>53</sup> and that is the innate ability to cry.

In the Judaic view, humans are created as social beings; as the verse (Genesis 2:18) states, “God said, ‘It is not good that man be alone.’” (The “universal grammar” is essentially “the universal capacity to language,” language being the means for communication. This is what Taylor [2016, 334] refers to as “interpersonal embodiment.”) Crying, the most primary mode of communication, is a universal, innate ability, the “rudimentary vocabulary that precedes a baby's first words” (Walter 2006). Babies have been shown to exhibit crying even in utero, as early as 28 weeks (Woznicki 2005).<sup>54</sup> Though animals do exhibit distress in the form of wails and whimpers, crying – and specifically the production of tears, and the connection between that and emotional release, be it happy or sad – is unique to humans.<sup>55</sup> We experience this at times when we are overwhelmed with emotion and are left speechless, similar to our pre-linguistic primary existence. In the words of Walter (ibid.), tears “help us express overwhelming emotions that well up from the primal side of us and linger beyond the reach of words.... Tears take us where syntax and syllables cannot. Without them, we would not be human.”

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<sup>53</sup> Lee (1996, xv) uses the term “language” as a verb, as in “we have the capacity to language and are linguaging beings, or beings who language.” Lee bases this on Whorf's coining of the term “languageable” (1940i, in Lee 1996: xv). I have used this term similarly throughout this work.

<sup>54</sup>For the study referred to in the article, see Gringas, J. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, September 2005, vol. 90: F415-F418.

<sup>55</sup>This can be seen in a fascinating study conducted by Randolph C. Cornelius, psychology professor at Vassar College. Professor Cornelius collected images and videos of people visibly crying, from various media outlets all over the world. He then duplicated the images, but removed all traces of the tears. Participants were then shown the images, some with tears and some without, but never the identical photo in both scenarios, and were asked to describe what the person in the image was feeling. Cornelius and his students have found that images with visible tears are easily interpreted as “sad” whereas those same images with no tears were not thus interpreted. His conclusion is that tears add a key element to human crying and communicative interaction. See <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129329054>.

Crying is a baby's primal way of getting the attention of his caregivers, and as such it is the earliest form of communication; without it a baby's survival would be severely compromised. In crying, a baby learns that it can affect its environment and get his needs met.<sup>56</sup>

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned Pinker's (2007) discussion of Jerry Fodor's theory that there are fifty-thousand innate concepts in the mind. Though Fodor's idea is quite a leap of faith (even for a nativist like Pinker), conceiving of these ideas as being innate in a very abstract form makes them a little less zany, and somewhat more plausible. Pinker zooms in on three of these "innate concepts," one of which is "cause-and-effect." One could argue that a baby's ability to cry is a manifestation of Fodor's idea of cause-and-effect being innate. In a broad sense, crying is the baby's exercising of the cause-and-effect principle: his crying elicits a response from his caregivers. It is the precursor to language as a medium of human interaction.

The more intricate a relationship, the more intricate will be the interaction between its participants. In infancy, the baby-caregiver relationship is straightforward, and also pretty much one-way: the baby is 100% selfish, and the caregiver 100% altruistic (we hope) in caring for the baby. The baby's medium of interaction is authentic. If he is in pain, uncomfortable, or hungry, he cries – and his needs are subsequently met. But once the baby matures a bit, he learns to harness crying in inauthentic ways, too, tears (or lack thereof) being the dead give-away of manipulative toddlers and kids. As Walter (2006) puts it,

Tears give mothers an extra tool for detecting if a toddler is crying wolf. Every parent has experienced the tearless crying (a.k.a. whining) of a child who is unhappy and wants attention but is not really in trouble. Parents quickly learn to look for real tears if a child cries, a sure sign that their toddler truly needs help.

Crying is strong evidence of an innate human predisposition for communication. As with crying, so eventually with language: the child's initial use and understanding of language is not very sophisticated, is straightforward and authentic: "drink"; "biscuit"; "Mummy"; sans pretence. As the child matures, he masters the art of directing language to serve an ulterior purpose and manipulate the environment.

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<sup>56</sup> The tragic fate of babies and children neglected in Romanian orphanages in the 1980 and 1990s bears sad testimony to this.

The Talmudic passage describing a foetus in utero, mentioned above, concludes by stating that just before birth an angel slaps the baby on his mouth and he's made to forget everything. Why? And if he is made to forget everything, then why was he taught it in the first place? And finally, if the goal is to make him forget, why slap the new-born infant on the *mouth*? What has that got to do with memory?

The mouth, being the organ of speech, enables man to connect his internality with the outside.<sup>57</sup> Speech brings the abstract into the concrete, limiting the potential of thought and feeling but at the same time making it practicable. Everything the baby was taught in utero, everything it was as a “soul” – above time and space, all-knowing – is impracticable in this world. Such an existence would be incompatible with what his soul has set out to achieve. And so, he is made to forget everything, in order to enable him to start from scratch: *tabula rasa*.

This reflects a basic Jewish principle, namely that “man is born for toil” (Job 5:7). Regarding this verse, the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 99b) asks whether man was created for the “toil of the mouth” or “toil of labour” and concludes that he was created for toil of the mouth – meaning, his actualisation as a soul-within-a-body would manifest in speech. What is there innately is pure potential, and from the moment he is born it is up to him to determine what is done with that potential. Innate potential is insufficient; in a positive light, God rewards effort, not inborn genius.

As to the question of why the baby is taught everything in the first place if he is destined to forget, it is so that the experience of learning would not be entirely new but more like discovering a truth once known and since forgotten, so that man could experience the joy of finding a long-lost object. (Recall Plato's postulation that all learning is recollection). Our empiricism directly informs our nativism, and without our innate Divine wisdom our empiricism would have no purpose.

Thus, at that moment of coming into the world, the infant is slapped specifically on the mouth, as if to say, “Your purpose is to live for a higher purpose.” This purpose is represented by – and actualised in – the ability to speak; to function as a limitless soul within a finite body; to connect the internal with the external; to limit the abstract thoughts and feelings in words and in so doing make them practicable. At

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<sup>57</sup> Contrast this with other sensory organs – eyes, ears – whose primary function is to *perceive* from the outside world and interpret. (Though eyes can convey to the outside – sadness, joy – their primary function is to take in/perceive the world.). Not coincidentally, the Hebrew word for “lip” is *safa*, which also means a “boundary” or an “edge” (e.g., *sefat hayam* – the seashore). The lips are the gateway between the internal and the external.

that moment of transitioning from being above time and space into being bound by time and space, the infant is reminded, as it were, of his speech potential.

## 2.7. Conclusion

We have seen what the innateness hypothesis posits, proofs brought in its defence, and shortcomings thereof, why these ideas have become so popular, and their potential pitfalls. We have briefly explored what is really at stake in the debate between innateness and empiricism, and offered a tentative Judaic approach to resolving the dichotomy which, as we have seen, is somewhat of a false dichotomy.<sup>58</sup> They are put at opposites even though they're dealing with different fields because inherent in the issue is the question of whether we want to be similar or unique. These are not contradictory: we can be similar in some ways, different and unique in others.

Anyone who wishes to find similarities or dissimilarities between languages (or people or cultures) will find them. However it seems that where we *differ* is more interesting and far more enlightening if we are to get along with each other and contribute toward our mutual progress.<sup>59</sup> Our sameness leaves us static, whereas our differences motivate us to disseminate what we know – and learn what we don't. The more interesting question, then, is *why* people wish to find similarities, and what they achieve thereby. No academic trend operates in a vacuum: we must ask ourselves not only what cultural, political or intellectual climate enabled the trend to take hold (as we did earlier in the chapter), but what the trend offers us in turn.

Chomsky's quest for universals is not as innocent as some would like to believe, and certainly not as innocent as Whorf's agenda-less exploration of ideas and preference to "follow an idea where it led" (Cameron 1999, 154). Whorf can be faulted for not being academic enough, and for mistakes he made, but one would be hard-pressed to fault him for having an agenda or for not appreciating the cultures whose diversity intrigued him so much. It was this pure exploration, with no preconceived notions, which led Whorf to discover dissimilarities of languages.

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<sup>58</sup>As a fellow translator recently put it to me succinctly, "Chomsky deals with how languages are similar, Whorf deals with how they differ. Why would you treat them as opposites?"

<sup>59</sup>It should be stated that sometimes this benefit amounts to a) valuing one's own culture over another, or b) (sometimes the result of a, though not necessarily), the recognition of what one's culture has to contribute to another. What is deemed "racist" might, in some cases, simply be "cultural preference": can anyone fault a person for choosing to belong to a culture that outlaws child labour or FGM? A case in point would be the Left's deafening silence on the treatment of women in Islamic countries, in the name of "cultural relativism" or the ridiculous claim that women all over the world are oppressed.

Perhaps this is why individuals steeped in a core ideology of inalienable self-hood – on an individual level, being a Divine being of infinite potential and value, as well as on a national, communal or religious level, as having a purpose in fulfilling some panhuman mission – espouse linguistic relativity with greater ease. As Sampson (2005, 193) put it,

All of us, surely, would rather be what most of us have supposed we are: creatures capable of coming to terms with whatever life throws at us because of our ability to create novel ideas in response to novel challenges – able to take the best ideas and ways of life of our predecessors and build on them, generation after generation. Who would not prefer this picture to that which portrays biology as allotting to the human mind a range of available settings, like a fully featured washing machine or video recorder, and allows us to select the optimum intellectual setting to suit prevailing conditions? The former concept of Man is far nobler. The evidence suggests that it is also more accurate.

Sampson's words echo the Judaic view that each life is precious as man was put on earth to use his God-given tools to better himself and the world. As the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) states, "Man was first created as one person, to teach you that he who destroys a life is considered by Scripture as if he has destroyed an entire world, and he who saves a life it is as if he has saved an entire world."

To say that we are all "of the same mind" is to reduce us to being merely quantitatively significant. One should hope that we are *qualitatively* special, and when we consider ourselves that way, we consider others that way, too. Such a valuing of others and how they differ will necessarily heighten awareness of the unique tools we've each been given in order to carry out our life mission.

This is a radical departure from the present climate wherein personal attributes or Divine gifts – be it wealth, intellect, talents – and, more relevant to our discussion, our linguistic capacity and respective unique cultural endowments, are either of no great significance or are arbitrary ends in and of themselves, not means.<sup>60</sup> This "innate sameness" engenders a culture of "nothing matters" – not religion, ethnicity, nationality, not personal Divine or cultural endowments, not personal identity, not

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<sup>60</sup> In some cases, these endowments are even regarded as evil, such as individual wealth in a socialist worldview. But by equalising all people in terms of wealth via "redistribution," we are denying the wealthy the opportunity to do good with the poor, and the chance for the poor to be lifted – or lift themselves – out of poverty.

even gender. But when nothing matters, nothing has *value*. Without personal valuation there is no appreciation of the Other, just a fear of actually having to *deal* with the Other. There are many ways of erasing the Other; denying differences is one of them, and it is all the more noxious because it is shrouded in nobleness.

Pinker (1994, 448) would have us all be the same, backing up his claim with biology, stating (the truth, which is) that:

Eighty-five percent of human genetic variation consists of the differences between one person and another within the same ethnic group, tribe, or nation. Another eight percent is between ethnic groups, and a mere seven percent is between “race.” In other words, the genetic difference between, say, two randomly picked Swedes is about twelve times as large as the genetic difference between the average of Swedes and the average of Apaches or Warlpiris....Race is, quite literally, skin-deep, but to the extent that perceivers generalize from external to internal differences, nature has duped them into thinking that race is important. The X-ray vision of the molecular geneticist reveals the unity of our species.<sup>61</sup>

Pinker goes on to claim that cognitive scientists and psycholinguists are endowed with that same X-ray vision; that although “Not speaking the same language” is a virtual synonym for incommensurability...to a psycholinguist, it is a superficial difference” (ibid.).<sup>62</sup>

The danger in employing scientific proof (in this case, genetics) is one of collocation: no one will argue against the irrefutable fact that we all have similar or even nearly identical genes. But to collocate that with the assertion that we are all “of the same mind” is to mislead about what “mind” indicates.<sup>63</sup> The Judaic conception of “mind” vis-a-vis language in particular and man’s divinity in general – and his consequent obligation as well as his ability to rise above his circumstances –

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<sup>61</sup> One wonders how pinker could write this so nonchalantly, given the bloody history of the twentieth century, which clearly indicates that we are not all of one mind. One can give him the benefit of the doubt in that he penned these words in 1994. However he repeated this theme full force in 2011 with *The Better Angels of our Nature*, where he claims that humanity is far less violent now than it has ever been.

<sup>62</sup> Note Tomasello's (2000) comment that there are hardly biologists who are nativists because classifying something as innate contributes nothing toward understanding how it operates.

<sup>63</sup> It is curious how, in promoting innateness, Pinker refers to “mind” rather than “brain.” But paradoxically, perhaps this underscores the problem with nativist evidence: the brain can actually be studied, and hence the claim is to having the same “mind.”

constitutes one way forward (or upward) from the rock-bottom position of “nothing matters” and the hopeless rigidity of innateness.

Gross (2012) notes that people want to connect with the transcendent. Language is one such means – building infinitely from finite blocks. It is not coincidental, then, that the *gematria*,<sup>64</sup> the numerical value, of צלם אלקים, *tselem Elokim*, “the Divine image” in which man was created, is the same as that of מדבר, *medaber*, “the speaker” – namely, languaging human beings (as opposed to animals).<sup>65</sup> Speech is what makes us not only uniquely human but uniquely Divine. Our ability to speak represents not only our Godly endowment but our Godly *innate element*. When we isolate the linguistic ability from overall intelligence, we minimise it. We make it seem like something that could, technically, be “transplanted” into an animal, which would enable it to speak (see Behme, 2014, 14).

Recognising the role of language in our humanity is one step in the direction of returning to a state where things *do* matter, where differences are not ignored but celebrated, and where human beings are regarded as dynamic and ever-evolving. The Judaic conception of language offers a possible framework for those willing to consider the teleological groundwork necessary for such. This will be further explored in chapters 4-7; but first, let us consider the philosophical bedding of innateness and relativity, to better contextualise the issue.

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<sup>64</sup> *Gematria* is a system wherein each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical equivalent, which together comprise the numerical value of the word they spell. In the basic system of *gematria* (there are several), the first ten letters of the alphabet correspond to the numbers 1-10; the second set, from the 11<sup>th</sup> letter through the 18<sup>th</sup>, correspond to the numbers 20-90; and the last four correspond to the numbers 100-400, respectively. The numerical value of a word can thus be calculated by adding up the numerical values of all the letters comprising it. Traditionally words that have the same numerical value are conceptually linked.

<sup>65</sup> 200=א, 2=ב, 4=ג, 40=ד, totalling 246; 40=ה, 10=ו, 5=ז, 30=ח, 1=ט 40=י, 30=יא, 90=יב, totalling 246.

## **CHAPTER III: THE PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING OF INNATENESS AND UNIVERSALISM**

The previous two chapters gave an overview of the linguistic relativity and innateness hypotheses. In this chapter, I aim to trace their history in divergent philosophical schools of thought. To do so, I have used Taylor's *The Language Animal* (2016) as a framework, specifically his discussion of language being either "designative" or "constitutive." As I hope will be made clear, Chomsky's innateness and Whorf's linguistic relativity are present-day incarnations, or reformulations, of a far older ontological debate. I also aim to show that, in the Judaic view, the view of language as designative is not incorrect but wholly insufficient on its own as a theory of language.

I will first give an overview of the designative and constitutive views of language and an overview of the philosophical lines along which these views developed. Next, I will discuss four points of departure between the designative and constitutive views. I will also discuss the contributions of the designative view, despite its insufficiency as a theory of language. Finally, I will discuss where the designative and constitutive views intersect and part ways with the Judaic conception of language.

### **3.1. Language: Designative or Constitutive?**

The question of what constitutes the linguistic capacity has been at the heart of philosophical debate from philosophy's earliest days. Linguistics is but one aspect of a much broader epistemological debate that can be traced back to Plato's anamnesis – the idea that everything we learn is not impressed upon a blank slate but is somehow already known to us on some level, and learning is merely a question of rediscovering something innately known that has been lost; and the Aristotelian rejection of nativism on the grounds that things are what they are, and are not reflections of a transcendent form.

Later, the debate gave rise to rationalism and empiricism which, while manifesting in varying schools of thought, can be roughly summed up, as Lyons (1978, 125) succinctly does, as follows:

[T]he rationalist claims that the mind (or 'reason' – hence the term 'rationalism') is the sole source of human knowledge, the empiricist that

all knowledge derives from experience ('empiricism' comes from the Greek word for 'experience').<sup>1</sup>

Taylor (2016) notes that while long ago the issue of what comprises language was not as prominent in philosophy,<sup>2</sup> it became more prominent in the seventeenth century with Hobbes and Locke, and even more so in the twentieth century, when the discourse became, to use Taylor's term, "obsessional."

Taylor (2016) encapsulates the two sides of the designative–constitutive debate with the terms "enframing" theory, or "designative-instrumental" theory, and the "constitutive-expressive" theory. He traces these on two distinct lines of philosophical tradition – the former running through Hobbes to Locke to Condillac (HLC), and the latter through Herder to Hamann to Humboldt (HHH), respectively.

The HLC and HHH views, and the differences between them, are not just questions of how to define language but "what needs to be explained under the heading of language" (ibid., 49) – namely, they impact upon how we relate to other forms of expression as well, such as art, literature, music, etc. As Taylor (ibid.) put the question, "can a line be drawn between these and language in a narrower and more conventional sense? Or is our explicandum rather indissociably the full range of what Cassirer<sup>3</sup> called the 'symbolic forms'?" The HLC and HHH shed light on how we understand humans as languaging beings – and what constitutes that "languaging."

### **3.1.1. The designative-instrumental (HLC) view of language**

Enframing theory views language as standing outside of everything mental, being only one aspect thereof. It

attempts to understand language within the framework of a picture of human life, behaviour, purposes, or mental functioning, which is itself described and defined without reference to language. Language is seen as arising in this framework, which can be variously conceived as we

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<sup>1</sup>Lyons (ibid.) notes, though, that "there are of course less extreme formulations of the difference; and in the long history of western philosophy the debate between representatives of the two camps has taken a variety of forms."

<sup>2</sup> Possibly because, as Cowie (2010, 1) notes, "To the extent that philosophers before the 20<sup>th</sup> century dealt with language acquisition at all, they tended to see it as a product of our general ability to reason – an ability that makes us special, and that sets us apart from other animals, but that is not tailored for language learning in particular." This point is important to bear in mind in this chapter, specifically concerning whether we can demarcate between language and overall intelligence, and the human distinction from animals.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Cassirer [1874-1945], Neo-Kantian philosopher.

shall see, and fulfilling some function within it, but the framework itself precedes, or at least can be characterized independently of, language.

(3)

According to the designative-instrumental view of language, the ability to language is merely an extension of the primal, involuntary signing, as in the example brought in Taylor (5) regarding crying used as a way of conveying fear. The designative view sees language as having arisen “when people learned to use the connection already established by the natural sign, between, say, the cry and what caused the distress, in a controlled way” (27). Whereas a cry of fear is primal, exhibited by animals, language gives humans the ability to go beyond that primal instinct – to explain the cause of the fear, or the potential results of the actions of the agent inducing the fear (and hence why said danger should be avoided). Humans can also manipulate cry, as we saw in the previous chapter.

According to Condillac, language is merely “an instrument, a set of connections which we can use to construct or control things” and gain “dominion over our imagination” [*empire sur notre imagination*] (12).<sup>4</sup> In other words, by defining concepts we “limit” them to within the confines of what the words mean. There is a pre-linguistic mental image (Pinker’s Mentalese?) setting the boundary of things, and into this framework new concepts/ideas/signs/words are slotted in, by categorisation or association. The “control” of the imagination of which Condillac speaks is thus just the simple (and simplified) ability to put things where they belong. There is minimal originality: “language is a collection of independently introduced words” (ibid.). Accordingly, language should (in theory) “work” across contexts.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the process of stringing together these discrete items of language, “The elements are the

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<sup>4</sup> One can see the connection between this line of thought and Skinner’s behaviourism. Ironically, Chomsky’s innateness which arose out of disagreement with Skinner, has its roots in the HLC, too. This highlights the complexity of the interconnection of differing schools of thought. For the purpose of our present thesis, however, Skinner and Chomsky both belong in the HLC camp since, as I hope to clarify, in the Judaic conception the distinction between the HLC and HHH hinges not on the designative/constitutive divide but on the humans-as-independent-agents-as-manifest-in-language divide, and on whether we place humans at the highest rung of “animal” or on the bottom rung of “divine.” To map this out conceptually, picture two such ladders, “animal” and “divine.” The HLC would have humans on the “animal” ladder, albeit at the top; the Judaic view would have humans on the “divine” ladder, with people having full capability of ascending or descending. The HHH figures in the liminal space between the two ladders: in other words, Divine potential, or man as potentially Divine.

<sup>5</sup> But, in fact, it doesn’t. Individual words (let alone sentences) can have vastly different meanings depending on context. As Taylor (2016, 18-19) put it, “Language is not something which could be built up one word at a time.”

same, combination continues, only the direction changes.... Language is robbed of its mysterious character and is related to elements that seem unproblematic” (ibid., 5-6).<sup>6</sup>

The HLC model, then, is a rather reduced – one could say impoverished – view of language. It sees humans as, essentially, animals + language, language being just a tool for “registering our thoughts and communicating them” (117), to use Hobbesian terms.

Hobbes and Locke viewed language as “marks” or “notes” for our thoughts, and as the means to communicate those thoughts to others (84). Language, then, is purely functional, not creative. Language, in the HLC view, becomes “pure” to the point of being cold, stripped bare, strictly on the rationalist/hard sciences side whereas the HHH is the more fluid, more on the social sciences/humanities side. As Taylor (39) notes,

The major proponents of the HLC were all rationalists in some sense; one of their central goals was to establish reason on a sound basis, and their scrutiny of language has largely this end in view. The proto-Romantic move to dethrone reason, and to locate the specifically human capacities in feeling, naturally led to a richer concept of expression than was allowed for in Condillac’s natural cries, which were quite inert modes of utterance.

Indeed, “Both Hobbes and Locke make clear the utility of such disciplined language use for scientific progress” (130). That is where the HLC derives its force from: the paradigm status of science in our culture, which involves description and explanation in terms that have been purged of purpose, and in general of “human meanings” (84).

Given the scientific orientation of the HLC, not surprisingly its proponents proposed norms for its legitimate use, requiring that

- (1) each term of our language...be carefully introduced by a clear definition, and we must stick to this definition in all subsequent uses of the term (unless we explicitly revise it); and
- (2) we must stay away from metaphors and tropes in general in our reasoning with the terms so introduced.

(129)

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<sup>6</sup> Contrast this with Taylor’s (2016, 341) own constitutive view, that “language remains in many ways *a mysterious thing*” (italics mine).

It is this utility of language that necessitates its arbitrariness:

The word can only be introduced to designate an idea which has arisen in the mind. Its entire meaning is given in this designation. There cannot be some excess meaning contained in the name itself.

(106)

Taylor links this with Saussure's position: "The allocation of a particular signifier to a given 'signified' is quite arbitrary, or as this is frequently expressed, 'unmotivated'" (ibid.). The inevitable consequence of this is an atomised view of language which does not account for human significances.<sup>7</sup> (There are other ramifications to the HLC view, in addition to the atomisation of language, which shall be explained shortly.)

### 3.1.2. The constitutive–expressive (HHH) view of language

Whereas the HLC seeks to understand, through language, what *is*, the HHH wishes "to understand how language opens up new ways of articulating our grasp of reality" (174) – in other words, not only what *is*, as randomly designated in language, but *what can be* and what language *can do*.

On the HHH view, language is not just another "aspect" of the mind or of being human but *the* defining aspect of "mind" and humanness. In contrast to the designative view which sees language as an extension of the primal, involuntary signing and as merely an instrument – comprised of arbitrary signifiers – for the purpose of making connections or controlling the imagination, the constitutive view of language "gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behaviour, new meanings, and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language" (4).

We can't explain language by the function it plays within a pre- or extralinguistically conceived framework of human life, because language through constituting the semantic dimension transforms any such framework, giving us new feelings, new desires, new goals, new relationships....

(33)

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<sup>7</sup> This atomisation of language – breaking it down into its bare (and rather boring) elements is evident in Chomsky's mathematicisation of language, where he essentially took the life force out of language, reducing it to its elemental, non-creative form.

In this view, language does not merely designate, or describe, what is; it actually enables it. “Th[e] word doesn’t come after the change; it helps to bring about the change” (283).<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the designative view sees language as “atomised,” the constitutive view, as Taylor understands Herder, is more “holistic.” Accordingly, “a word only has meaning within a lexicon and a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life” (17). For Herder, who “cannot accept that the transition from prelanguage to language consists simply in a taking control of a pre-existing process,” (27), language is neither just an extension of the primal instinct nor only about “control,” but about *creativity*. The constitutive view sees language not as operating in monolithic isolation but as exhibiting an infinite and ever-expanding multiplicity.

It should be noted that the designative and constitutive views of language are not mutually exclusive; rather, the constitutive view is an expansion, albeit in a different direction, filling in where the designative view falls short.<sup>9</sup> It might be useful to think of the HLC and HHH as two roads diverging in an asymmetrical Y shape, with the stem of the Y representing language, and the HLC and HHH views its branches; the HLC route stops short on one branch of the Y, while the HHH route carries on (and takes us further with it).

My rationale for saying that we shouldn’t view the two views as standing in opposition is because to do so is to view the designative view as sufficiently valid on its own, just a different path. This is detrimental, considering the ramifications of such a view as regards our view of language and human nature as well as culture. As I hope to make clear, the HHH is the more reasonable one, and ultimately the one that will serve us better in our moral development as inherently Divine beings.

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<sup>8</sup> See Taylor (2016, 280-285) for more on linguistically motivated change.

<sup>9</sup> One might be tempted to mark the line of distinction between the two as “non-creative” (HLC) vs. “creative” (HHH); indeed, the HLC is static, whereas the HHH is dynamic, with a view that “possessing a language is to be continuously involved in trying to extend its powers of articulation” (Taylor 2016, 177, paraphrasing Humboldt). Perhaps what makes such a demarcation attractive is that while the HLC and HHH in and of themselves are not in total opposition, they lay the groundwork for later schools of thought premised thereupon – notably the pitting of analytic philosophy against holistic creativity and projective linguistics – which are more obviously opposite. (Tangentially, this would seem to be more a reflection of our argumentative culture and our tendency to present differing ideas as total opposites than of any inherent or assumed opposition of the original views themselves.) However such a distinction would be a very crude one. The HHH is certainly the more “creative” of the two, but that does not mean to say that the HLC is entirely non-creative. Even if we take solely the HLC view, it is still way ahead of animals’ communication and in this sense we cannot deny that it requires some degree of creativity (or, at least, intellect that is capable of going beyond the instinctual).

## 3.2. Where the Designative and Constitutive Views Part Ways

There are four main areas where the HLC and HHH part ways, the first being more in a language respect and the second, third and fourth in a human/linguistic-interaction respect: (1) the atomism/holism of language, (2) the nature of humans as languaging beings, (3) language as representative of humans functioning in social space, and (4) free will (or *besonnenheit* – self-awareness – to use the Herderian term).<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2.1. Atomism/holism

For the purpose of the present discussion of the HLC's atomistic view of language vs. the HHH's holistic view, I divide here between holism of the word and holism of the self and self-within-the-world – i.e., the holism of the languaging being within the world.<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.2.1.1. Holism of the word

According to the HLC, our understanding of reality is comprised from its broken-down elements and their functioning in combination. “This epistemology stressed that our knowledge of the world was built from particulate ‘ideas’, or inner representations of outer reality. We combine them to produce our view of the world” (104). The HLC, then, sees language as a sophisticated tool to help us reason – reason referring to the combining of discrete elements. Accordingly, terms must not only be unambiguous in and of themselves, they must have uniform meaning across contexts. When the terms are not clear, or when their meanings change in other contexts, confusion is inevitable. The confusion becomes dangerous when the mistaken terms are then taken as accurate and perpetuated further: as Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*,<sup>12</sup> “Words are wise men’s counters, but they are the money of fools, that value them by the authority of an Aristotle, a Cicero, or a Thomas.”

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<sup>10</sup> There is of course some overlapping between these areas – for example, the fact that humans are not animals (2) goes hand in hand with their being endowed with free will (4); holism-in-the-word (1) goes hand in hand with man’s functioning as a social being (3). But for our purposes here, we can categorise these areas under the four aforementioned headings.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously, there is a bit of overlap between the two, since the HLC posits that “[L]anguage exists primarily in individual minds” (Taylor 2016, 59) and, on Locke’s view, “a word only means something because it is associated with an idea of that thing. And this association occurs in individuals” (ibid.) Thus, according to the HLC, “languages are ultimately individual: ‘Each man hath so inviolable a liberty to make words mean what he pleases’” (ibid.) But for the sake of clarity, a distinction is made here between the two.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Taylor (2016, 105).

On this view, Taylor notes, misunderstandings occur not because of a misunderstanding of the discrete ideas themselves (since they are in their most elemental form and therefore not likely to be misinterpreted – T.F.); rather confusion occurs in how we link these concepts in the mind.

In contrast to the designative view, which sees language as rather atomised, isolated from context and context-specific meaning, the HHH view sees the meaning of language as holistic and is concerned not with building up discrete parts but with viewing the whole picture.<sup>13</sup> “[I]ndividual words can only be words within the context of an articulated language. Language is not something which could be built up one word at a time” (18-19).

This idea finds representation in Herder’s comparison of language to an ocean flooding the soul, where the human being is capable of focusing on one wave at a time, separate from all the others yet clearly connected to it. It is also reflected in Humboldt’s comparison of language to an enormous web, where every concept is interconnected with others. We can view isolated points in the web, but also their connection with other points. Even though we focus on the one particular point, the connecting points are all still there, bearing on the point under focus. In other words, we may think of a concept in its own right, but it is never to be viewed in isolation from its context (the whole “ocean” or “web”) – the concept in and of itself, namely, its inherent meaning in all contexts, and the concept in relation to its present context.

Even if we wanted to say any given word is arbitrary, we would be hard pressed to combine it with other words without context. Their *very connection* creates context, which is not arbitrary, and therefore the words in themselves cannot be. We could call this a nexus of sorts, or, because it is ever-changing, perhaps Whorf’s term “kaleidoscopic flux” is apt, along with Herder’s ocean and Humboldt’s web. This is what Herder referred to as *Besonnenheit*, reflection, which Taylor explains is

a kind of focus on the object named. But this means that the word we use comes out of a sense that this is the right word. This implies ... [that] the right word figures as such among many possible words, actual

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<sup>13</sup>Note that, from a Judaic perspective, the HHH’s interest in viewing the world as a whole is valid but insufficient to explain the world as a whole. Specifically, note Tatz’s (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 98) observation (concerning Buddhism’s approach to integration, but valid in our context as well): “If Buddhism teaches the harmonious interconnectedness and integration of all manifest reality, that is valid from a Jewish perspective, but it is not enough in terms of our personal historical task. Our contribution is designed to reach further, it is the work of demonstrating the Source and the Reason that lies behind the world’s unity; not simply its fact, but its explanation.”

or to be invented; so language as a whole has to pre-exist. And second, the object named stands out from a context, a background; so there has to be a sense of the whole situation, geographic, social, cosmic.

(94)

In other words, you could only know the “right” word for what something *is* in contrast to what something is *not*, which makes context crucial.

A word only makes sense within a whole language; just as our sense of what we can say is always bounded by our recurrent experience of what cannot (yet) be said; and our grasp on particular things and situations exists on a background of the larger whole of which these things and situations are segments.

(87)

This essentially requires a speaker to be a *bar da'at*, a “being in possession of knowledge,” for “If there is no *da'at* [reason, wisdom, intelligence], there can be no discernment” (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 5:2).

### ***3.2.1.2. Holism of the self and self within the world***

In addition to the atomism/holism distinction’s application to the words themselves, holism applies to the macro-level function of language, namely, “to the fact that human beings as linguistic animals also live in a bigger world, which goes beyond the episodic present” (Taylor 2016, 21-22). This is manifest in two cases of what I will call embeddedness: embeddedness of language within the whole self and embeddedness of language/the self within the world.

As to language within the whole self, objectivist semanticists as well as literalist theorists – clearly of the HLC view – view the mind as the sole mechanism of speech, merely reacting to, or computing, what is out there in the world. But, as Taylor (2016, 162) puts the question, “Why do they think of our computation as going on in the brain, rather than the whole organism, or even the organism-interacting-with-the-environment?”

Taylor (ibid.) offers an illuminating explanation:

The reason seems to be the power of the original Cartesian notion that thought is “inner”, situated “in” the mind....When this construction is put through the materialistic transposition, the role of the “mind” is taken over by the “brain”, which is equally an “inner” organ.

By divorcing mind from the rest of the self – from the soul/spirit, not to mention even the most basic experience of embodiment within the body – the reduction of mind to the merely physical-anatomical “brain” is inevitable. Such a view, according to the HHH, does not make language “pure” but in fact bankrupts it.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, our experience of a word’s meaning “is accompanied invariably by the sense that it was preceded by a personal and social history; that it will be followed by a future; and that what happens in [humans’] immediate predicament takes place in a broader context of space” (22)<sup>15</sup> – in other words, meaning is gleaned from viewing the self-within-the-world.

This is what Heidegger described as “House of Being.” The linguistic capacity functions as if within a house, whereby languages (and those who speak them) have different “constellations of distinctions.” Heidegger’s view was also influenced by the Romantic view that our linguistic capacity is supported and augmented by a broader social and historical milieu.<sup>16</sup> Any given “thing,” represented by its word, “is the locus of the full corona of liminal meanings, which it presents and invites us as language beings to explore” (95). In Herder’s words (Herder 1803, quoted in Taylor [2016, 31])

A people have no idea for which they do not have a word: the liveliest imagination remains an obscure feeling, till the mind finds a character for it. And by means of a word incorporates it with the memory, the recollection, the understanding, and lastly the understanding of mankind, tradition: a pure understanding, without language, on Earth, is an utopian land.

Each language (and the culture of its speakers) has its own structures and classifications, which change over time – sometimes completely changing a word’s earlier meaning, sometimes incorporating new nuances, sometimes necessitating the

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<sup>14</sup> We can see how the HHH links with the Romantics and how the HLC links with German idealism and the favouring of rationality above materiality. For an enlightening discussion of idealism’s self-destruction, see the conclusion of Mack’s (2003) work, especially his discussion of Elias Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé* – a spoof of Kant in which Peter Kien, the character parodying Kant, quits teaching so as not to “defile the purity of his intellect,” (172) locks himself in his library and boards up the windows so that not even sunlight can enter; “the autonomy of the intellectual must not allow for any contingent influence, not even that of sunlight. The Enlightenment, so it seems, only survives in the radical separation from the outside world, light included” (ibid., 172-173) Kien eventually sets his library on fire (with him in it), in pursuit of a purity of mind untainted by corporeality and the material world.

<sup>15</sup> I will return to this point in the discussion of “time-binding” in chapter 7.

<sup>16</sup> “[W]e are in some way fed, strengthened, nourished by this wider context. This connection is realized by articulating all the meanings that the ‘thing’ has for us; meanings which are inextricably linked to the wider context. Indeed, Heidegger sees this articulation of liminal meanings as a charge laid on us by language; it is part of our telos as language beings...” (Taylor 2016, 95).

creation of new words altogether.<sup>17</sup> “To learn a language of society is to take on some imaginary of how society works and acts, of its history through time; of its relation to what is outside: nature, or the cosmos, or the divine” (22). Words’ meanings will change over time, and new ones will necessarily have to be coined to meet newly arising linguistic needs – be they medical, technological, philosophical or political – or, as it were, cultural.

Thus, a word cannot possibly have definite and limited meaning because any word not only functions within other contexts (in the present and over time), but also operates differently for different people: Give any two people a concept for which they must sketch out a mind map and they will come up with vastly different connections and associations with a given word. Multiply the number of words by the people who use them and their meanings across cultures, and then multiply those over time, and the infinity of language is staggering.

No word can function as an artificial stand-alone, because the same word can convey completely different meanings. Take a most basic, would-be unequivocal word like “no.” A hesitant “nnn...no” said to a child asking to have a slumber party on a weeknight can convey a “sorry sweetheart, that’s not going to work, but maybe another time.” Or, said more emphatically, can convey, “No way! Not with the way you’ve been behaving.” It differs, too, from the “Noooooooo!” screamed when said child accidentally spills Coke® over your keyboard, and is not the same as a staccato “no!” shrieked when we see a toddler get hold of a knife from the knife block on the counter. It’s certainly not the same as a “no” said in disbelief, which really means “yes indeed,” or said with a rolling of the eyes, signifying “you gotta be kidding me.”

This is but one of countless examples underscoring the necessity of the human component as well as the social interaction component of language (and why communication can get so downright whacky,<sup>18</sup> and we haven’t even touched upon cases of irony or parody, what Taylor [61] refers to as the Bakhtinian concept of “ventriloquation”).

In summary, in order to master language, even simple language, necessitates “seeing it in the context of meaningful enactment” (288). While bare-bones languages

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<sup>17</sup> The historical-social facet here links with our third point of departure between the HLC and HHH, namely, that of man as a social being.

<sup>18</sup> Consider how many emails get misinterpreted. In a companion to this study, I hope to show how communication breakdown is inversely proportional to its automation. When the human elements are removed from the discourse – with nary a gesture, just an Emoji, and not even a recognisable handwriting, just a “preferred font” – we lose a fundamental aspect of communication.

(e.g., computer programming languages) have their place, they “cannot provide the model for human speech in general” (ibid.). “[T]he country of language includes other provinces beyond the description of independent objects which the HLC focuses on” (98), and “The ‘regimented’, scientific zone can only be a suburb of the vast, sprawling city of language, and could never be the metropolis itself” (263).

### **3.2.2. Being more than just an animal + language**

The second point where the designative and constitutive views differ is in how they relate to what distinguishes between the human linguistic capacity and that of the animals (assuming they have one comparable to humans that we can even make such a distinction<sup>19</sup>). According to proponents of the HLC, the difference is that humans have “the ability to describe things, to characterize states of affairs... [what we may] call... ‘depictive’ power” (117-118). This depictive ability enables us to accrue knowledge of ourselves and of the world around us, in the form of science and “formally constituted bodies of established knowledge.” It also enables us to consider what actions we should take, given these bodies of established knowledge: “We can depict the state of affairs we want to realize, and then use our depictions of causal relations to determine how we can bring this about.” Lastly, with these two capacities of knowledge and deliberation, we can expand our personal functioning to within the group: “language enables us to... communicate and expand knowledge and deliberate together” (ibid.).

As sophisticated as language might appear given the above criteria of the HLC, these criteria do not account for creativity<sup>20</sup> or free will. (I will return to free will specifically, below, but for our purposes here let it be noted that free will and creativity are necessarily linked.) Furthermore, upon reflection, the capacities outlined above don’t *really* distinguish between us and animals, except in terms of gradation: animals could perform the above functions, albeit obviously in a very basic, limited way. They make the connection between a name and a thing, a very low-grade version of “depiction” above (e.g. food items, members of the pack, keys on a keyboard to get said food [some studies even show a combination of keys can be mastered]; as ape studies demonstrate, if trained long and hard enough, they master some degree of

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor refers to human beings as a *language animal*, as though humans are merely a “step ahead” of animals and not a distinctly different being. (He’s not unique in this; philosophers as well as academics in other disciplines speak of it similarly, as I mentioned in the previous chapter.) This is in stark opposition to the Judaic conception – of humans and of language. I will expand on this point further on.

<sup>20</sup> I mean “creativity” not just in the sense of “creative” but in the sense “to create.”

labelling). Based on this primitive assigning of words, animals can discern what they should do, again in a very basic way, essentially by instinct (eat from red bowl=good food, avoid blue bowl=yucky food). As to communication and group-functioning, animals can communicate to other animals – say, in the case of impending danger or bees’ waggle dance signalling nectar to other bees.

But this is precisely the point: if language is purely *functional*, then indeed humans can be like animals, operating on instinct. If language inhabits a higher realm, if it enables humans to tap into a higher Self, then the distinction of their linguistic capacity is precisely in the creative aspect – and the free will inherent in this) – which enables humans to draw conclusions from what has been depicted, to other, non-depicted things. They are also capable of choosing what they will do, not just based on the depictions but even *despite* those depictions – meaning, even though we know what “should” be chosen, we might decide, for whatever reason, *not* to choose it. As to communication and group-functioning, it is so much broader than what animals can do; just factor in socio-cultural difference within time and space to see to what extent.

The difference between animal and human communication, then, hinges on what Taylor refers to as possessing knowledge of “intrinsic rightness” vs. “task rightness.” To explain the difference, I refer here to Taylor’s example of a rat that “knows” to rush through the door marked with a triangle behind which is the cheese. The rat knows what’s “right” only insofar as the present context makes it so: there’s nothing inherently right about the association of cheese with a triangle on a door; in a different context the triangle would be irrelevant (or plain wrong).

Without a sense of what makes it the right word, there is no sense of a word as right... getting it right for a signal is just responding appropriately. Getting it right for a word requires more, a kind of recognition: we are in the linguistic dimension.

(19, 20)

We could say that this “something more” required for getting it right for a word is a sense of *context*. A “kind of recognition” requires that we know things other than the immediate association to each other of the things we presently know. There is no intrinsic knowledge or rightness here: the rat doesn’t know what a triangle is or what a door is, other than how these relate to itself and its obtaining of the cheese by whatever means. The rat functions context-less, with no consciousness of past or future meanings (only past experience, in the Pavlovian sense). “‘Rightness’ for an

animal is [always – T.F.] task rightness, whereas in the case of human languages it involves something more, expressive rightness, or else descriptive rightness” (62).<sup>21</sup>

To illustrate the human capacity to go beyond task rightness of the episodic present, I would like to bring an example slightly more sophisticated than Taylor’s, which will demonstrate where the HHH differs from the HLC in this regard.

Suppose we were to train a rat to recognize the symbol signifying “biohazard.” Firstly, the rat would not know what the word “biohazard” – represented by the biohazard symbol – actually means. The most we could do is train it to intuit what biohazard “means” in relation to itself – for example, for argument’s sake, that the container which bears the biohazard sign contains food which is disgusting (assuming rats can distinguish that much).

Now suppose we were to make the task more challenging by making the food in the container marked with the biohazard sign have an adverse effect on the rat – say, food poisoning, despite it looking and smelling perfectly fine. (Such an experiment would have ethical issues, certainly, as this is not a case of rat-testing for pharmaceutical drug development. But I am speaking here in theory.) For argument’s sake, assume the food poisoning would take several hours to manifest. It is unlikely that the rat will learn to associate the biohazard sign with the spoiled food, since it won’t exhibit signs of food poisoning till a while later. The associations required here are too many, even for an “intelligent” rat: to know to associate feeling sick with the food it ate, and that this food was “labelled” with a biohazard sign, and that therefore “biohazard sign” → feeling ill. There is an element of immediacy in the rat’s understanding of a sign, without which the rat can’t make the connection between the symbol and its referent.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, for all intents and purposes we could choose any other symbol – even, for argument’s sake, a picture of a type of food the rat normally eats (for example, cheese), or a symbol that has *no* contextual meaning, or even the opposite intention (for example, a Smiley; the irony would be lost on the rat).

Even if we were able to develop the association between “biohazard” and “food that’ll make you sick” in the rat’s “mind,” the rat’s “understanding” of the symbol

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<sup>21</sup> Which is why a “no” can mean a “yes” and vice versa, why language is the ultimate symbolism, and why we appreciate art, theatre, music and other representations; the sense of “recognition,” of seeing the meta-object in the symbol, is exhilarating.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor would seem to agree with this, in his discussion of “holism of meaning” and that humans inhabit a much larger existence beyond the “episodic present.” Because their present is connected with the past and with the future, they are able to make connections with broader ramifications, somethings animals cannot. I will return to this point in chapter 7, in discussing humans as being time-binders.

would still be extremely limited. It would not know the intrinsic meaning of “biohazard,” only that it is associated with something that makes it sick. The ramifications of this limited understanding is that it might come to avoid *everything* that bears the biohazard sign, even things not related to food. As stated previously, “If there is no *da’at* [reason, wisdom, intelligence], there can be no discernment” (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 5:2). Or, in Taylor’s words, “a term gets its meaning only in the field of its contrasts” (20).

Now, contrast the above scenario with the case of a human being who learns the sign for biohazard. The human being, assuming he is of normal intelligence, knows when and where it should appear (for example, lab specimens, the disposal bucket for used needles at a nurse’s station, etc.). He would know where the sign should not (normally) appear – in our case, it should not appear on food. If I were to find a food container labelled with the biohazard symbol – say, a Tupperware functioning as a petri dish in my father-in-law’s home refrigerator (he’s a doctor who develops diagnostics tools and frequently conducts such experiments) – I might rightly deduce that a science experiment is being conducted. In short, a human being knows what the meaning of a word or symbol representing it is, independent of context or translocated to other contexts. A human being can understand symbols in a much broader view (in our case, the biohazard befitting the Tupperware-cum-petri-dish).

But here is the interesting point: a human being of average intelligence would know not only the meaning of the word or symbol representing it independent of context, but also its *context-specific* meaning, even in contexts where it clearly would seem wrong or irrelevant. That is the nature of humour, a major facet of human communication which is not accounted for in the HLC: something that seems out of place and yet, somehow, makes sense.<sup>23</sup> To relate this to our biohazard example, only a human being is capable of appreciating the humour of a bin, intended for a teenager’s laundry, bearing the biohazard sign. A rat seeing this wouldn’t deduce that teenage boys’ socks reek, it would just forage for food (if it didn’t yet master the connection between the biohazard symbol and food poisoning manifesting several hours later) and be surprised to find none, or leave the bin alone (in the event that it did somehow learn to make the connection between biohazard and food poisoning). One thing is certain: it wouldn’t grasp the humour here. Animals, while they may

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<sup>23</sup> See the discussion further on regarding Ryle’s “category mistake.”

have concepts such as “play” or “playfulness,” do not have the concept of humour. This is because they haven’t got the concept of “wrong” (or “right” or how “wrong” can actually be “right”). Animals sense only what *is*, sans value judgement; humans can know what is as well as *what should be and isn’t and what shouldn’t be and is*.

This is a clear example of how language, in the case of humans, is not merely about representation (as it might be by animals) but about inferences.

Studies of apes learning to use a keyboard to get bananas are delightful, only because they are so *unusual*; animals “talking” is not the norm and so these studies are hardly reflective of a linguistic capacity comparable to the human one. If anything, these studies highlight the distinction between the two, which hinges on the fact that, as Donald put it,<sup>24</sup> animals make use of these symbols for “a pragmatic personal agenda.” There is nothing sophisticated or manipulative, reasoned or well-designed about it. “They are incapable of symbolic invention; and therefore have no natural language of their own” (ibid.). Their linguistic capacity, whatever it amounts to, is purely functional.

That is pretty much how the HLC views language for humans:

[L]anguage doesn’t alter the basic purposes of the creatures possessing it, but provides other means to encompassing the same ends...To the extent that th[e] continuist perspective [i.e., human language being an extension of animal pragmatism] seems correct... the development of language may not seem such a big deal. Human intelligence may appear simply as a supreme degree of instrumental ingenuity. Our technology will seem a more significant achievement of the same basic capacity that the chimpanzee shows when it knocks the banana down with the stick. And the advance of humans over these primates will likely be seen to reside in our expanded abilities to code and manipulate information.

(84-85)

On the HHH view, however, “language is not just a tool, offering more effective means to pre-existing goals” or “an advance of technique, furthering the continuing ends of survival and prosperity by more effective means”; rather, “language is rather fundamental to all our technologies” (86). The animals’ use of language is solely for self-preservation and serves the function of pursuing all that is necessary to maintain

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Taylor (2016, 11 fn. 10.)

that (food, shelter, protection from predators, etc.). We, too, share the drive for self-preservation.<sup>25</sup> But we aspire to more on Maslow's hierarchy of needs; self-preservation is not enough for us and so language necessarily fills more than just a functional role: "[I]ssues like defining the meaning of life, or living up to the demands of love, touch us alone" (91).

In short, there isn't much distinction between the HLC view of language for humans and animal communication: both fill a purely pragmatic purpose. The HHH, in contrast, maintains that humans communicate for pragmatic purposes, certainly, but also communicate *for the sake of communicating*. Which brings us to our next point, namely, that humans function as social beings.

### **3.2.3. Man as a social being**

Another point of distinction between the HLC and the HHH is the monological vs. dialogical nature of language. Taylor (50) notes the HLC's being "thoroughly monological" whereas "the thinkers of the HHH all saw that the primary locus of language was conversation." Language is not developed in atomised, isolated fashion within the individual and then simply transmitted to others. Rather, "it evolves always in the interspace of joint attention, or communion." This is true on an individual level, as demonstrated in how babies acquire language, and on a societal level as well, as evident in how language evolves across space and time.

#### ***3.2.3.1. Language arising in social interaction***

We see language arising in social interaction in the (only) way children pick up language – through interaction with other speakers (as well as through imitation – of each other and of adults. Mimesis plays a huge role in learning, and this is evident way before language even emerges, such as babies making signs, toddlers diapering a doll, etc. Children pick up language from their surroundings – family, caregivers and peers, who interact with each other and with the children. Without this interaction, language would never develop.

A baby doesn't wake up one day speaking a language, and doesn't merely string together the single words he has learned, in order to form longer constructions. And he also wouldn't pick it up just by hearing it without interaction. "The basic thesis is a

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<sup>25</sup> Though our moronic behaviour would occasionally seem to indicate that we have an equally powerful drive to self-destruct, individually and societally. .

genetic one, that we could never have the silent, monological, inner language if we hadn't first acquired the language capacity in its expressed-enacted form" (34).

For ethical reasons, we could never test out this experiment<sup>26</sup> but imagine we would raise a baby in a room where he was free to romp around, with strategically placed speakers via which he could hear people talking or even see them on a large screen, without ever actually encountering or touching (or being touched by) real humans; or in a room filled with toys (but again, no people), where every toy or object the baby picked up or came near was wired to say what it is ("ball," "doll," "wooden block," "fuzzy stuffed animal," etc.). It would be ludicrous to assume the baby would thus acquire speech. Likely he would grow up severely lacking in social skills, verbal skills and probably overall intelligence. A baby must first learn to function within "social space," to use Taylor's term. He needs to learn that he has the means of getting the attention he needs, and once that is established, via human connection, language can be mastered. "Language cannot be generated from within; it can only come to the child from her milieu – although once it is mastered, innovation becomes possible" (55).

Long before any linguistic capacity is exhibited, the baby must first learn that we are *linguaging beings*. By *linguaging beings* we don't mean simply capable of speech as an extension of the primal cry of animals. Rather, a baby learns the prelanguage basics of being a linguaging being – namely human interaction. They *first* pick up interaction – human love, understanding, comfort – and *then* language. The fact that we are *social* beings undergirds our being *linguaging* beings.

In the first year... before language acquisition starts, child and parent have already been bonding, largely through rituals of [repeated moments of common focus], what some writers have called "protoconversations"; where parent and child smile at each other, gurgle together, the parent

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<sup>26</sup> Though there is sufficient evidence from "wild children" mentioned in the previous chapter who were abandoned or "raised" ("kept" would be more apt) in horrifying conditions, as well as babies from Romanian orphanages where, due to understaffing and overcrowding, babies were ignored and subsequently did not develop normally, attesting to the fact that language does not develop normally without human interaction. These tragic cases demonstrate that it isn't merely the linguistic capacity that is severely compromised, but overall intelligence and normalcy, not the least of which is emotional wellbeing. (One could thus make the argument that language is not distinguishable from overall intelligence, as the HHH sees language as "not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language" [Taylor 2016, 4]). As noted in the discussion of the critical period argument in the previous chapter, "If 'wild children' are not merely very slow at language acquisition but actually fail to acquire normal mastery even after far longer exposure than normal children need, then that could surely be explained as a symptom of a general learning disability stemming from the great emotional damage caused by deprivation of normal social stimulation" (G. Sampson 2005, 41).

playfully pretending to bite hands or feet, soothing the child's pain, rocking and singing her to sleep, and so on.

(53)

Taylor sees the parent's response to the child's cries/needs as "helping her identify her wants, and how they can be fulfilled," a means through which the child "learns a gestural language of love, of desiring-without-having, and then recovering" which "conditions her further development" (ibid.). But it is more than understanding her wants and wish-fulfilment that a child achieves with such interaction. The baby learns that her needs are met *through* interaction – that he needs other people in order to have his needs met and that he can (we hope) rely on other people for such purpose.<sup>27</sup>

In the previous chapter, we saw how crying is innate. To expand on that point, the goal of communication is not just the alleviation of whatever caused the cry but the long-term development of interaction with another. The baby's cry won't stay at the primitive level, something in and of itself; rather it is the impetus for the larger scale interaction taking place. Caretakers "help... to identify our goals and aversions... giv[ing] an emotional shape to our experience, without which we might flounder in unfocused rage, or else depression" (184). By "containing" the child and his emotions (tantrums, crying spells, responding to laughter, etc.) the child eventually learns to give clearly defined terms to things, feelings or events. Once a child has a sense of things and their relation to himself, he can expand to include others in his world.<sup>28</sup>

### ***3.2.3.2. Language developing in social space***

Not only does language arise initially through social interaction as we saw above with babies, its very functioning requires a consciousness of being in "social space," where language includes so much more than just words: gestures, body language, humour, the illocutionary force of utterances and more. "[R]eal-life performance can't be accounted for by what is generally understood as linguistic competence. Speech acts involve more than emitting the appropriate words" (98). Communication necessarily include another agent in the interaction. As Taylor (90) notes,

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<sup>27</sup> It is not coincidental that human babies are dependent on others' care for a good few years before they can stand on their own, whereas most animals' young are up and running with the herd within a few hours after birth. Humans are designed to need others.

<sup>28</sup> Contrast this with the case with the rat example mentioned above (Taylor's, or mine with "biohazard"), where the rat has no understanding of what symbols mean outside of relating them to itself.

The human capacity for this more intense and conscious mode of being together is a condition for the development of language...and it is also regularly renewed and sustained in linguistic exchange...To possess language is to be, and to be aware that one is, in social space.

Consider the retort, “Don’t look at me with that tone of voice!” This demonstrates not only the human capacity for humour, but the underlying interface of the humour, namely, that “tone of voice” is more than just sound; it can be a physical “look,” too. The blending of sound and appearance is funny to us, because we know that that cannot be and yet it is; that’s humour. Humour indicates another aspect of human communication, and that is that for humans, “much of the point of most conversations is not the information exchanged, but precisely the sharing” (56). (If communication were solely about getting the message across, the objective would be to be as clear as possible and humour would have no place in human conversation.)

Consider, too, the evolution of meanings in time and space, which necessarily link individuals to their cultural milieu and time period:

Children are inducted into a culture, are taught the meanings which constitute it, partly through inculcating the appropriate habitus.<sup>29</sup> We learn how to hold ourselves, how to defer to others, how to be a presence for others, all largely through taking on different styles of bodily comportment. Through these modes of deference and presentation, the subtlest nuances of social position, of the sources of prestige, and hence of what is valuable and good, are encoded.

(42)

As sophisticated as animal communication may be, it lacks the time-space social element. There are, of course, social bonding experiences, such as animals grooming each other for lice, but generally, when animals do communicate, the purpose is immediate message-transmission for biological/survival function (food here, danger there), not communication for the sake of communion, ulterior motives or societal development. Furthermore, the cry or the call doesn’t change over time, whereas human meanings do and are subsequently passed on to future generations.

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<sup>29</sup> Taylor (42), following Pierre Bourdieu, explains “habitus” to mean a “system of durable and transposable dispositions.”

### 3.2.3.3. *Language functioning in cultural space*

One final illustration of humans-as-social-beings-as-manifest-in-language is that, as Taylor notes, we are more likely to know a specific animal rather than its group taxonomy (e.g., “deer” vs. “antelope,” “lobster” vs. “crustacean”), and that taxonomical hierarchies are similar across cultures. “[T]hese basic-level objects and actions or events are easy to recognize... because of the kinds of interactions we have with them... and the functions they fill or purposes they serve in our lives...” (2016, 151).

We “know” what we “know” because of what we experience. As babies, or young children, we don’t experience mammals or other abstract categories (e.g., “cutlery” vs. “fork”; “pharmaceuticals” vs. “soap” or “medicine”). These taxonomies are unfamiliar to young children not because they’re difficult concepts to grasp but because children don’t have contact with them. In order to make contact in the abstract sense, we must first develop contact in the most concrete, physical sense: “we acquire language in exchange” (61). Humans start out totally physical, with physical needs needing to be met – food, comfort, warmth. Only then can we begin to make sense of the world, with language.

Thus, we can understand why the part/whole categorisations are similar across cultures. All cultures go from the *prat* (the particulate) to the *klal* (the general, abstract) because first we “know” (or rather, sense) what we *experience*, through human-human interaction as well as human-object interaction, and only then can we learn to know something beyond what is experienced bodily. Language is proof of man as a social being not just in the sense of his interaction with other human beings, animals and objects in the world around him, but in his eventual ownership of a plane – call it metaphysics – that is higher than the merely embodied.

Having said that, we can also see how such taxonomies might differ across cultures – and for precisely the same reasons. A child growing up in deeply religious or mystical societies will have different conceptualisations of abstract concepts (sometimes to the point of these being very concrete and in the here-and-now – for example, belief in shamans or the Afterlife affecting behavioural choices). The HHH allows for these cultural similarities as well as differences, underscoring man’s sociocultural existence as manifest in language, while the HLC model does not account for all these things that fall under “cultural milieu” and which relate to

language – “rites, social relations, collective actions, hierarchical relations, modes of purity and impurity” and many other things which are “essential to grasp the expressions which pertain to these ranges” (128).

### 3.2.4 Free will and self-awareness

The fourth and final respect in which the HLC and HHH part ways is the link between language and free will. What I mean by “free will” is the capability not only of discernment but of acting upon such discernment, to carry out actions even when they seem counterintuitive (or *not* carry them out, despite being instinctive) for the sake of a higher goal). The HHH more readily recognises that humans, in contrast to animals, are capable of determining how they will react to an external stimulus.

For a nonlinguistic animal A, being aware of X consists of X’s counting in shaping A’s response. A characteristically responds to X in a certain way: if X is food, and A is hungry, A goes for it, unless deterred; if X is a predator, A flees; if X is an obstacle, A goes around it, and so on. By contrast, linguistic awareness of X can’t be reduced to or equated with its triggering a particular response, or range of responses, in certain circumstances. We could think of this as an awareness which is independent from, or can sit alongside of, response triggering. But it would be better to say that awareness involves a new kind of response, linguistic recognition, which cannot be reduced to or equated with any behavioral response.

(9)

Language is far more than a primal response to a signal. In the example of the rat rushing through a door marked with a triangle to get to the cheese, the rat is passively “activated” by an external stimulus. It is operating on pure instinct and there is no significance to the symbol(s). The triangle can just as well be a different sign; the door, a window or hoop through which the rat is meant to jump; the reward, too, might be peanut butter for that matter. The triangle-door-cheese connection the rat has made, is arbitrary: given a new set of neural connections (say, “jumping through a rectangular window leads to peanut butter”), the rat will override the previous sign and its interpretation vis-à-vis itself.

This is in stark opposition to the brilliance of the human psyche. First, humans are active, not activated, capable of going beyond the instinctual stimulus-response. They

can choose *not* to go through the door marked with a sign signifying that they'll be rewarded for their efforts, if higher reasoning provides sufficient evidence or logical deduction that this would be the correct thing to do. Second, humans can recognise the signs and their significance or arbitrariness (and arbitrariness itself might have significance), and know how to apply it in other contexts. Which leads to the third point, namely, that memory is cumulative and what gives language its sign-meaning, without which language would be moot.<sup>30</sup> Free will underpins the ability to be active, and is actualised by the ability of discernment: just because there's a red triangle on the door doesn't mean we have to enter through it on autopilot. By exercising free will, man emulates the Divine in demonstrating his independence: he is not preconditioned to respond in a given way to an external stimulus.<sup>31</sup>

This awareness of choice is what Herder termed *Besonnenheit*, or "reflection." Reflection has several aspects. I address three of them here.

### **3.2.4.1. Reflection**

#### *3.2.4.1.1. Focus on individual parts within a whole*

Firstly, reflection is the ability to focus on a particular aspect among many things invading our consciousness at any given moment. (This is quite a necessary function, considering memory's cumulateness; otherwise we'd really lose our minds in Herder's "ocean" of thought or Humboldt's "web.") As Herder put it,

The human being demonstrates reflection when the force of his soul operates so freely that in the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses it can, so to speak, separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and be conscious of its own attentiveness.

The human being demonstrates reflection when, out of the whole hovering dream of images which proceed before his senses, he can

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<sup>30</sup> In chapter 7 I expand on the idea of language constituting thought by virtue of cumulative memory.

<sup>31</sup> To extend this to contemporary matters, this has implications for free speech issues on university campuses. By having "speech codes" and "trigger warnings," we are training students to blame their unhappiness on everything but themselves, on what is being said rather than their reaction to it. By training students to cry "xenophobia!" or "macroaggression!" in reaction to something as benign as being asked what religion one is associated with or where one comes from because the conversation partner can't place an accent, we are effectively reducing students to automated, instinct-driven humans incapable of reflection. This phenomenon is doubly pernicious because it is couched as promoting "respect" and "tolerance" by purportedly having a zero-tolerance approach to said xenophobia or microaggression, when what has actually been done is to legitimise a view of humans as being incapable of thinking before responding. Language should move us, certainly; but that should not negate the control we have over our reaction to it.

collect himself into a moment of alertness, freely dwell on a single image, pay it clear, more leisurely heed, and separate off characteristic marks for the fact that this is that object and no other.

(Taylor 2016, 9-10 fn. 9)

To relate this to the example of the rat, only when we know *what* a triangle really *is* – or the value of cheese or the price we’ll pay for eating it, if there is one – can we make a conscious decision one way or the other (to go through the door and get to the cheese or forgo it). Reflection is not just recognising the single wave in the ocean but *linking* it to other waves – making new neural connections – within the ocean, and to the ocean itself, the overall gestalt. Note, also, Herder’s linking of reflection with free will: “when the force of his soul operates so freely.” There is a higher, nobler dimension of Being here.

#### 3.2.4.1.2. *Operating with and within complexity*

Second, reflection means developing a more complex view of things, seeing many shades of grey rather than simply black and white. “To be reflective... means acting out of sensitivity to issues of intrinsic rightness” (11). For animals, things are black and white, “desirable or repugnant.” Only people can discern *why* (and pursue or avoid something despite its being desirable or repugnant, respectively).

[O]nly language beings can identify things as *worthy* of desire or aversion. For such identifications raise issues of intrinsic rightness. They involve a characterization of things which is not reducible simply to the ways we treat them as objects of desire or aversion. They involve a recognition beyond that, that they *ought* to be treated in one or another way.

(28)

An animal, operating on instinct, will pursue that which is pleasurable and avoid that which is painful. Its mental plane is entirely sensory, whereas a human being, by virtue of language, can identify far more sensations than simply “pleasurable” or “painful.” We might do something despite its being repulsive; we might avoid something despite its being desirable. This is because we “can be sensitive to distinctions which are lost on prelinguistic animals. Important among these are distinctions involving moral or other values” (ibid.) There might be an emotional

reaction (pain, anger, sadness, despondency) to external stimuli. However our system of gradations goes well beyond the run-after-it/avoid-it distinction.

#### 3.2.4.1.3 Knowledge of the self

The third aspect of reflection, arising out of the second, is that it enables us to better know ourselves. In knowing another/communicating to another, we come to understand ourselves better – which is why we appreciate a rich vocabulary, a well written novel, or finding *the* word that expresses *exactly* how we feel or what we’re trying to say. “[P]ossessing language enables us to relate to things in new ways, for example as loci of features, and to have new emotions, goals, relationships, as well as being responsive to issues of strong value” (37).<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, because human beings are time-binding (more on this in chapter 7), they have the ability to *avoid* something even though it may be pleasurable in the short-term (as an extreme example, getting high on drugs), and may decide to pursue something even though it is painful in the present, because in the long run it will prove worthwhile (for example, exercising).<sup>33</sup> Language gives man the ability to transcend time and space. He might be “stuck” in particular circumstances, but his mind – with language – is somewhere else entirely. He thinks, with language, of other places, other times, other possible realities. In difficult times, this could give him hope for a brighter future. It is his vehicle for inhabiting a state of *super*-consciousness.

In summary, reflective awareness opens us up to new possibilities for discernment, for shades of meaning (and resultant action) and for self-awareness, comprising a complexity unique to humans. Therein lays the beauty: language gives us the ability to find the “right” word we’re looking for, or even coin a new word if we haven’t got one, and give dimension to our feelings. In so doing, we get the sense of discovering a truth we’ve known all along. As Taylor put it, “Discovery and invention are two sides of the same coin.” (178).

Animals view everything as good/bad and hence need/don’t need. People can see good and bad, even simultaneously, and can feel a need/not-need simultaneously and

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<sup>32</sup> Even when we are at a loss for words, we are cognizant of *why* we are at a loss for words: we know that the feeling (anger, sadness, joy) is so large so as to be *beyond* the words we have for it, not prior to it. Recall that “The sense of being unable to say wouldn’t be there without the surrounding sayable” (Taylor 2016, 32).

<sup>33</sup> Note, here, that with the ability to choose good comes the equally possible option to choose bad. We typically don’t find animals addicted to drugs or mindless video games. The higher the being’s mind, the greater are its challenges.

be able to put into words the conflict felt, for the simple reason that humans possess another term entirely: wanting. The move from the objective, rational “need” to the subjective, emotional “want” underscores the complexity. The HLC does not account for such complexity – indeed, it rejects it, because to embrace it is to acknowledge the fact that language can be manipulated and, consequently, people can be manipulative.

As we saw in the previous chapter, an infant’s cry is, for the most part, straightforward (hungry, tired, wet, in pain, bored); knowing *how* to manipulate the cry – that requires creativity and linguistic development. As the saying attributed to Nabokov goes, “Literature was not born the day when a boy crying ‘wolf, wolf’ came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big grey wolf at his heels; literature was born on the day when a boy came crying ‘wolf, wolf’ and there was no wolf behind him.”

### **3.3. The Merits of the HLC, Despite its Shortfall**

As stated earlier, the HLC and HHH are like the divergent branches of an asymmetric Y, in the sense that they are not two distinct lines that never meet, rather they are linked in formation, but with the HHH going beyond the narrowly construed view of the HLC, filling the void where the latter falls short. Nevertheless, there is merit to the HLC, in its idealist theory if not its practicable actualisation. It’s important to understand this merit, as it serves to inform the HHH view, in particular what should be our approach to metaphor.

Taylor (2016) says the idea of the HLC accommodates the need for “control.” As languaging beings, we seek to make sense of things; “[w]e need language to build a believable picture of the world” (107). The problem the HLC view seeks to address is that “we get carried away by our instrument.” There is therefore a

...need...for clarity, perspicuity, to have always in mind the grounding of the word in thought. Hence definitions are crucial. There is a certain ideal of the transparency of language, its unobtrusiveness; it should just let thought be properly overviewed.

(ibid.)

Thus the HLC, which proposes to “build a believable picture of the world” through atomising words can be seen in a positive light as an attempt to minimise misinterpretation. This view would have us revert to a pre-sin, paradisiacal Adamic language, where meaning is perfectly pure and misinterpretation cannot occur;

wherein Signifier and Signified were unambiguous. “A truly objectivist semantics...would anchor our language to the natural world as revealed by natural science, answering the centuries-old dream of a scientific language which really mapped the world as it truly is” (162).<sup>34</sup>

One can see, then, how the HLC disapproves of metaphor, while the HHH would embrace its expansion of world-consciousness. At best, the HLC views metaphor as unnecessary embellishment; at worst, obfuscation:

[T]ropes either confuse things, or if they add something clear it is not information about the world; rather their function is to evoke certain subjective feelings or reactions. So metaphors in rhetoric can be seen as ornamental; they please us, and thus dispose us favorably to what they apply to; or else they portray the object in a dark light, and make us disapprove of it.

(140)

To understand how this happens, let us look at how metaphor functions. Taylor notes that metaphor “involves attributing to A some property or feature of B which is inappropriate to A. The term is ‘borrowed’. It doesn’t really ‘belong’. But it brings out by ‘figuring’ an aspect or feature of A that we couldn’t articulate before” (138). In Ricoeur’s (in Taylor, 167) terms, “Symbols are the indispensable way of access to what they are about.” Metaphor achieves the goal of articulation precisely by such bifocality and figurations that merge concepts or even whole domains.

One can understand, then, the HLC’s wariness of metaphor. Ideally, in the HLC view, we should “translate what we say with the figurations into ‘literal’ speech, that is, speech which is purged of bifocality, which no longer involves reading one reality through another” (160). Metaphors can enrich and broaden our view, but can also falsify things. As Taylor (163) notes,

... captivity in distorting pictures is of relevance not only in (bad) philosophy; it also has social and political importance. Certain structuring metaphors have acquired ascendancy in our civilization,

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<sup>34</sup>Even if this were, somehow, possible – if we could invent a language where each thing meant one thing and one thing only – this wouldn’t hold once we came to translate from this ideal language into ours. The moment we translate, we admit that there is more than one way of saying something, more than one way of *seeing* something. Translation – and the fact that there are so many and such different languages – turns the HLC trope-less hope on its head.

which if taken alone will blind us to what is inhuman and destructive in our behavior.

Reifying concepts is a double-edged sword: it has the advantage of granting us access to the concept of which we have a very limited view, but at the same time it can detract from the very concept it wishes to bring to light, since any reification cannot adequately capture all facets of a concept. Furthermore, it can muddle things: metaphor adds in elements that are not related, forcing the reader to sift out what doesn't belong.<sup>35</sup>

We don't have to go very far to see the inherent danger in words: consider any news outlet's selection of terms to describe the perpetrators of a terrorist attack. Are they "terrorists," "militants" or perhaps noble "freedom fighters" or (somehow) pardonable "disgruntled immigrants"? If a lie can be a "divergence from terminological exactitude" (I just made that up), is the lie any less of a lie? It's actually greater, because it comes across as though it isn't. More dangerous than a thing which isn't what it should be is a thing which claims to be what it isn't. As Wittgenstein (1997, 1.115) said, *Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen*, "A picture held us captive."

Down-to-earth, scientific language has its place. But in its attempts to solve the shortcomings of language's polysemy, the HLC ignores – or wishes to ignore (but ultimately can't) – the creative force of language and its corollary, human fallibility.<sup>36</sup> It is precisely the HLC's merit that constitutes its shortfall, namely, its inability to accommodate the need for metaphor and symbolic representation, or refusal to recognise the value thereof.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, of the two views, the HHH is the more realistic one: it acknowledges the benefit of metaphor and tropes, but by virtue of this acknowledgement it highlights their potential pitfalls.

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<sup>35</sup>It gets even stickier when we factor in intent – that of the writer/speaker as well as the reader/listener (as the old saying goes, those who wish to sing will find a song). For an enlightening discussion and examples, see Norman Fairclough's matrices for discourse analysis in *Language and Power* (New York: Longman, 1992), ch. 5, specifically his discussion of metaphor.

<sup>36</sup>Moreover, were the HLC view tenable, it would render free will moot. As we have seen, the fact that man has free will goes hand in hand with his being a languaging being. Inherent in the creative ability of language comes the ability to be manipulative, for if everything is exactly as it appears, if truth is staring one in the face, there is no domain over which one can exercise free will; clarity of purpose obviates the exercising of choice. This was the fall of Adam and Eve: once they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, things became unclear. Things no longer embodied what they represented, and so the door was opened to sin.

<sup>37</sup>One could say that this is a total undermining of language entirely, apropos Benjamin's (1997) assertion that language is the ultimate symbolism.

To state the obvious, metaphors enrich our world and world disclosure. The adage that “a picture is worth a thousand words” (to contrast with Wittgenstein’s *Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen*) tells us that something about a picture – and by “picture” I do not mean just the visual, but the mental/metaphoric as well – captures far more than the mind could ever grasp from elemental words; alternatively, that it takes a thousand words to build up a picture in the mind, which cannot possibly be conceived or conveyed in any one word.

We can see how the HLC links with German Idealism’s pursuit of absolutes and boiling things down to their elemental, pure forms in the hope of rising above them. In contrast, the HHH links with Romanticism’s building up of symbols. “[T]he romantic spirit could never be satisfied. Like all organic things it had to grow; like all artistic endeavors it had to continue to try creating. It was never to cease” (Bloom, et al. 1960). Taylor credits the Romantics with enabling “the infinite” to come “to appearance,” and specifically in poetry. Quoting Schlegel (in translation), he says, “Poetry...is nothing other than a perpetual symbolizing: either we seek an outer shell for something spiritual, or else we relate something external to an invisible inner reality” (168). Without symbolic representations, not only would we have no poetry, art, music, literature, dance, theatre or other representation, the human exchange of ideas would be reduced to lifeless interface between automatons.

Having no metaphor and therefore no potential misinterpretation would simplify things, certainly. So would a diet of just hay, and which requires no cooking. But a richer life – indeed, a human life – comes with an inevitable amount of pain. The idealist HLC would do away with the burden of language; the HHH embraces it with its eyes and mind open.

The conclusion should not be that we need to remove metaphor and embrace the HLC. Rather, that the danger of metaphor can be mitigated provided (a) we are conscious of it and (b) we ensure the metaphor remains in metaphoric status. This is easier said than done: “The process of normalization of a striking image, as it begins to be applied routinely to the target domain, gradually robs it of its salience and pushes it down toward the invisibility of ordinary descriptive speech” (144). When

metaphor becomes literal, when the lines between the allegory and what it's meant to represent become blurred, trouble ensues.<sup>38</sup>

### **3.4. Where the Judaic View Parts Ways with the HLC and Intersects with the HHH**

The Judaic conception of language offers an amalgam of sorts of the HLC's valid concerns and the HHH's aesthetic appeal. This view appreciates metaphor and at the same time is cognisant of its inherent dangers and seeks to mitigate them. This theme will be developed over the next few chapters, culminating in the final chapter's discussion of the Judaic vision of the collapsing of time and space – and therefore, meaning – into one focal point of truth at the End of Days. As I hope will become clear, the HHH view, which supports a more holistic, Divine view of human beings and language, is the one more aligned with the Judaic view.

On this view, the problem with the HLC view – and its later metamorphosis into the hyper-mathematised Chomskyan view – is that it does not value human uniqueness,<sup>39</sup> which means, ultimately, not valuing human life. This may seem an extreme assertion, but I will explain in what sense I mean this.

In contrast to Nietzsche's view that to live well we need "to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words – in the whole Olympus of appearance!" the Judaic view holds that language is proof that we are obligated to go beyond self and surface – to uncover what its symbolism represents. Whereas Nietzsche thought that "Those Greeks were superficial – out of profundity!" the Judaic view sees superficiality as wanting the easy, dead sort of life instead of the meaningful *living* one, and which ultimately leads to emptiness. People, as time-binders, can inhabit the past (and regurgitate its miseries) and dread the future (which hasn't yet happened, and might actually turn out not so bad, or even good). Animals are not miserable, but they're also not capable of happiness and self-fulfilment the way humans are. That is the price to pay for being languaging beings. Those who think it's too high a price, who would reduce language to the arbitrary and

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<sup>38</sup> It is ironic to consider the danger of metaphor, when we consider the danger that inhered in German Idealism. For more on this, see Michael Mack's, *German Idealism and the Jew: the Inner anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See also the quotes from Ann Michaels in Chapter 6, which capture what happens to humanity when the distinction between metaphor and what it's supposed to represent becomes blurred.

<sup>39</sup>As we have seen, this is evident in Chomsky's claim that all languages are basically the same, as well as in Pinker's view that human language is "instinctual."

the shallow, actually devalue life and its purpose. The “bravery” Nietzsche supposed is in fact a cop-out, a chickening out of life. The HLC’s superficial take on language limits not only the linguistic capacity but the human one; the two are inseparable. When we reduce humans to the HLC view, to sophisticated animals, the human spirit is effectively rendered dead and the linguistic capacity meaningless.

The obligation to go beyond self and surface reflects man’s divinity. For precisely by harnessing the body for language – not just in the physical-anatomical sense of producing speech, but in the sense that “many of the most basic metaphors are rooted in sensorimotor schemata” (161) – man demonstrates that he is more than mere body, that the body serves a higher purpose of mind (and hopefully not the other way around). There is something beyond the literal here-and-now, beyond a more sophisticated version of a banana-procuring ape; something beyond Self. All representation – be it forms of art, literature, architecture, music, poetry, and language itself – represent a cosmic truth, though they be not the “real thing.” They symbolise a higher, not-yet-accessible realm, with speech being the most tangible (if we can call it that) expression of a transcendent form.

The Judaic view parts ways with the HLC in all of the four areas mentioned above in regard to where the HLC parts ways with the HHH. To recap: the HLC is a narrowly construed view which (1) reduces humans to a more sophisticated animal, and (2) reduces human experience to the atomised, finite word. (3) It denies our functioning as a social beings – a core element of humanness, and (4) it denies inherent free will, or intelligent reflection. (2) and (4) seem to be the most significant to the Judaic view, and so I have grouped those together, deviating from the order in which I discussed the four points of departure between the HLC and HHH above.

#### **3.4.1. *Lashon HaKodesh* and irreducible, non-arbitrary designativism**

The HLC cannot align with the Judaic conception of language, for the simple reason that, in the HLC, “[N]othing in th[e] sign calls for it to have this rather than that meaning. All linguistic signs are ‘instituted’ (Condillac’s expression) at some point. They are human creations and can be altered by humans” (Taylor 2016, 110). *Lashon HaKodesh* (lit. “the tongue of the holy” – the original Hebrew) is, in the Judaic view, a Divine language that is a *safa mahutit*, an essential language, and not a *safa heskemit*, a human language developed through agreement (R. J. Halevi 1972, 2 §68; 4 §25).

The designative view sees language as just that – arbitrary, and meaningful only in the sense that it is agreed upon. For argument’s sake, if we all agreed to call a table some nonsensical word – say, “wapta,” or a logical word if we so choose, such as “eatfrom” or “sitnear” or “workat,” it wouldn’t change the essence of the table; there was nothing “table-y” or even “table-ish” about it to begin with. We could even, upon agreement, swap its name with something else – say, “chair” – and it wouldn’t change the “table.”<sup>40</sup>

The argument could be made for words like “triangle” or “bicycle,” whose morphemes, we might say, have intrinsic meaning. But this intrinsic meaning only goes so far. If we break down “triangle” into “tri” and “angle,” we understand what this means – an object with three angles. But “tri” and “angle” cannot be broken down any further: why does  $t+r+i=3$ ?<sup>41</sup> In other words, we will eventually hit a point where letters strung together (and whose order could be changed, if we agreed to it) are so in apparently random order.

This is not the case with words and letters in *Lashon HaKodesh*, the Adamic language according to the Judaic view, where every word is exactly what it means and nothing is arbitrary; where words can be broken down into their tri-letter roots, then bi-letter roots, then individual letters, and then individual letters comprising the letters (e.g., a ה being comprised of the letter ט and the letter ם in its bottom left corner) with their composite properties, not to mention the letters’ numerical value, position in the alphabet, corresponding letters in various systems of letter permutations,<sup>42</sup> as well as cognate meanings, phonetic cognates, gradational variants and derivational variants,<sup>43</sup> none of which is arbitrarily so. There could be no way to apply an atomistic view of language to *Lashon HaKodesh*. The irreducible designativism of language simply

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<sup>40</sup> “Table” is a relatively easy example. The point would be better explained, perhaps, with a word like “cookie,” which up until two decades ago (we all agreed) was a food item and now (we all agree, assuming we have minimal technological knowledge) is a tool websites use to collect information on users’ browsing habits in order to provide for better user experience (or so the claim goes by advertisers wanting browsers’ click-through dollars).

<sup>41</sup> Contrast this with the number 3 in *Lashon HaKodesh*, whose root is שלש, *shalosh*, meaning “to measure by three” (Clark 1999, 264). Note some interesting points about this root: the numerical values of the letters are multiples of three – the ש=300, the ל=30, and again ש=300. Depending on its diacritical signs, the root can mean to divide by three; to multiply by three; three days ago, as in the word שלשום, *shilshom*; a three-stringed instrument; third generation (i.e., grandchildren); third in command; and threefold. That is at the root level; time permitting, we could break it down further into the individual letters comprising the root and their respective properties.

<sup>42</sup> See chapter 4, on Hebrew’s oligosynthesis.

<sup>43</sup> For more on this, see Matityahu Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language Based on the Commentary of Samson Raphael Hirsch*. (New York: Feldheim, 1999).

does not work given the inherent complexity and broad applicability of every root. Each word functions within a “web” of all its meanings and its related roots.<sup>44</sup>

This contradiction of the HLC with the Judaic conception of language applies specifically to the Jewish language, Hebrew. Now, let us see where else the Judaic conception of language parts ways with the HLC, as evident in its relation to the general capacity to language.

The HLC views language as limiting, and thus limits it, whereas the HHH sees language as expansive, upholding its infinite potential and broadening its reach; it is inclusive of gestures, art, music, etc. The Judaic view sees language as unlimited, and this is necessarily so: since language is a Divine endowment through which we actually emulate the Divine – by exercising free will and by enacting language’s creative force (more on this in the next chapter) – language *cannot* be limited, just as the Divine cannot be limited. Language is an expression of the Divine, in being able to create infinitely from a finite set of words (or letters). We must put constraints on language – namely, we do have to function within a framework of rules, and some things just do not fly grammatically or syntactically – just as the Divine constricts Himself in the world to enable free will. But language itself – the creative force – is essentially limitless.

### **3.4.2. Human beings as inherently Divine and masters of free will**

The second area where we see the HLC being at odds with the Judaic view is in the area of free will. It is striking that philosophers seem to regard the human being as a “human animal” – an animal that just “happens” to possess a linguistic capacity. Note Taylor’s comment: “the emergence of language seems to have introduced much greater flexibility, a capacity to change, even to transform ourselves, which has no parallel among *other animals*” (339, italics mine). Aristotle’s conceiving the human being as *Zwon echon logon* – an “animal possessing language,” as Taylor has it, too, is antithetical to the Judaic conception of language as being *precisely* that which makes us human and inherently Divine.

What seems astonishing to Taylor (among others) and perhaps invokes a sense of awe and wonder, in the Judaic view is a self-evident illustration of man’s divinity –

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<sup>44</sup> I recommend the reader explore the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on the Pentateuch (based upon which Clark wrote his *Etymological Dictionary of Hebrew*, referred to in the previous note), which systematically explains each root as it appears in the verses, as well as its gradational variants, derivational variants, cognate meanings and phonetic cognates, supplying rich and varied examples from Scripture.

and a profound sense of duty. (But at least there is the sense of awe and wonder, something not found by proponents of innateness theories who explain away the linguistic capacity as mere “instinct”). Inherent in this duty is the concept of free will, which in turn gives rise to the idea of human elevation and self-redemption. What Taylor seems to find so fascinating – “flexibility, a capacity to change, even to transform ourselves, which has no parallel among other animals” – is, to the Jewish way of thinking, intrinsic: *we are not animals*. This is most evident in the linguistic capacity, and in the fact that we are masters of free will which by definition distinguishes us from the animal kingdom wherein creatures operate on instinct.

On the Judaic view, man has been endowed with a decision-making capacity, and is capable of operating on this decision-making ability beyond primal instinct. If we are “animalistic” in virtue of other characteristics (and flaws), we have been given the tools to rise above them, language being one of the most profound ones.

Taylor (333) makes the observation that language

straddles the boundary between ‘mind’ and body; also that between dialogical and monological [meaning that it requires *another* with whom linguistic interaction can take place – T.F.]. There is also a third distinction which is often invoked, that between signs which are arbitrary or ‘unmotivated’ and those which are iconic or ‘motivated’

This finds expression in the fact that the Hebrew word for language, שפה *safa*, has a double meaning, the one being language, or lip, and the other being edge or boundary, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Language is the edge, or boundary, of abstract thought and expression; of mind-consciousness and body-execution; of self-containment and other-oriented-ness (as Taylor [108] put Locke’s picture of the mind, “Thoughts occur inward. Communication is a matter of translating them into an outer medium”); and random utterance and significant intent. These four distinctions serve as the basis for a fifth, overarching boundary straddled by man as a languaging being: that between human and Divine.<sup>45</sup>

Taylor (rightly) concludes that the human linguistic capacity consists of more than just encoding information and passing it on. While not directly stating that that demonstrates man’s higher calling, he does acknowledge that “The step to language

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<sup>45</sup> The Judaic view, then, would render the title of Taylor’s book not *The Language Animal* but *The Language Being*.

involves far more than providing more effective means to the perennial ends of survival, prosperity, effective combination, avoidance of mutual destruction” (117).<sup>46</sup>

It is one thing to draw parallels between humans and animals when it comes to non-linguistic behaviour (e.g. childrearing, mating, need for intimacy, survival of the fittest, hierarchical group structures, etc. – and even in those areas Judaism would take serious issue with the comparison). But when it comes to the *linguistic* capacity, this is far more problematic from a Judaic perspective, since on this view the linguistic capacity is *precisely* what makes humans human – and inherently Divine.

Beyond the scientific demerits of claims that humans are just a talking animal, or bearing a “language instinct,” is the moral one. We’ve created a moral equivalency between man and animal: animals spin webs or climb trees to get bananas, humans talk to get what they want. The HLC and latter-day nativists would have man completely devoid of the Divine, of any time-binding existence, and of free will.

Thus, the constitutive view of language is the one more aligned with the Judaic conception of language, according to which language is a creative force bequeathed to man as a tool with which to emulate the Divine in creation. This is evident in the Biblical narration of Creation where, right after Adam is brought to life and given speech,<sup>47</sup> he is told to name the animals. In so doing, not only did he exercise his linguistic dominion over them and demonstrate his naming ability, he demonstrated that he is nothing like them. The animals have no intrinsic name other than their species’ description; they have no consciousness of name.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The topic of academics and philosophers’ persistent fear of ascribing to humans anything that would imply they are morally bound by (and to) some higher power – and the prevalent belief that philosophy and academia has always been religiously kept secularised when in reality this is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of philosophy – is a fascinating topic in itself, and subject for another book. My point here is merely to show that the HHH aligns with the Judaic view, and that the upshot of this alignment is a view of language (and man) as possessing a Divine element.

<sup>47</sup> The *ruah memalelah*, or “living soul” which God breathed into Man, which manifested in speech. I will expand on this point in the next chapter.

<sup>48</sup> Tangentially, Darwinism is at odds with Judaism not only in its conception of world-time, Divine creation and evolution, but in the moral and sociological ramification of such a position: if humans are descended from apes, then indeed there is nothing unique to man, neither individually nor collectively – certainly not if we take into account (by evolutionists’ count) the millions of years it took to get to this random stage of development. It puts human development outside the realm of personal freedom to choose between good and evil, between advancing and being benighted.

Furthermore, belief in evolution lays the groundwork for society pitting the younger generation against the older: if we are descended from apes, then every step of evolution is progress. It is only logical, then, that the younger generation deem itself superior than the older one since it is more evolved. The older generation is regarded as obsolete, other than its function in propagating the next generation. (Is it any wonder, then, that there is such a lack of respect for the elderly, and a ubiquitous pursuit of youth, be it in cosmetics or fashion or more drastic measures such as plastic surgery?). Lastly, this justifies the pitting of the strong against the weak. If a society is to develop self-respect, in

### 3.4.3. The Judaic view and social being

Earlier I mentioned the HHH's view of the primary locus of language as being in conversation, and that language is not developed in atomised, isolated fashion within the individual and then simply transmitted to others, rather, "it evolves always in the interspace of joint attention, or communion" (50) – something the HLC does not account for and would do away with in pursuit of "pure" meaning that does not change across time and space. The HHH view accords with the Judaic view of Man having been created as a *social being*. This is demonstrated right at Creation, where the Bible states that "It is not good for Man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). In the very act of naming the animals Adam realised that he himself has no partner, and only then does the narrative proceed with the creation of Eve – "I shall make a helpmate comparable to him" (ibid.)

The conventional understanding is that in naming the animals, which Adam did only once he understood their true essence (see chapter 4)), he realised he could never find a partner among them. But there is something more profound that happened there: inherent in the act of naming was the realisation not only that he has no comparable mate in the animal kingdom or that he is capable of naming and therefore superior to the animals, but *a consciousness of the existential loneliness that having the capacity to language would invoke if there were no partner with whom to share it.*

### 3.4.4. Protoplay: the microcosmic experience of endpoint pleasure

There is one other aspect of human uniqueness – and which at first glance appears to be a point of similarity between humans and animals – warranting discussion in the present context, and that is the realm and function of play. I refer here to Taylor's (2016) discussion of play by Robert Bellah and Johan Huizinga, where Taylor opines that "we can think of [animal play] as an evolutionary step or platform, on which later

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addition to its time-binding capacity and sense of history it must have a sense of pride in where it came from, not only where it is headed. A society that hasn't got a sense of history and sees no value in such sense of history and passing it on is on a one-way path toward a future that is always just out of reach.

In Judaic lore, this idea of being anchored in the past, having a sense of history along with the ability to look and work toward the future, is represented by the two kosher signs of an animal – chewing the cud and having split hooves. Although these are technical-zoological signs for Jewish dietary laws, in a deeper sense they symbolise characteristics that a Jew is meant to incorporate into himself, and what is necessary for a society to maintain its integrity. The animal's ability to ruminate symbolizes a past-orientation, literally "bringing up the past," while split hooves represent stepping toward the future, "putting our best foot forward," so to speak. With no past, a society can't know where it's going. And a society that has lost its purpose and has no *raison d'être* to bequeath to the next generation – or worse, doesn't see the value of even *having* a next generation to whom to bequeath its values – will find it difficult to maintain not only its values but its very existence.

developments build: a kind of protoplay” (335). Taylor emphasizes a particular point in Bellah’s and Huizinga’s discussion, and that is that play embodies

behaviors which are not simply and directly related to survival: to self-preservation, acquiring the means of life, reproduction. There is something gratuitous here. Of course, play can increase survivability. Mock fights prepare for real fights, mock captures for real seizures of prey....The gratuitous: that which is not directly required for biological survival, that which is pursued for its own sake.

(336)

I would like to now give a Judaic approach to understanding the nature of play, as it relates directly to the point mentioned above regarding the linguistic contrast between humans and animals, as well as to the discussion that follows.

To understand this, we must first understand two concepts: the first is the Jewish Kabbalistic concept that this world is reflective of a higher world which is the “real” world. Everything we encounter in this world parallels, and microcosmically represents, a metaphysical concept in the greater cosmology.<sup>49</sup> Thus, what we see as “reality” in this world is actually just a reflection of the real thing<sup>50</sup> (similar to Plato’s parable of the cave). The second point to bear in mind is that in the Judaic cosmology, this world is an antechamber to the next (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:16), with this world being intended for action and the next one for our due reward (Tractate Eiruvim 22a).

What, then, is the role of play? What concept does a game represent?

In chapter 7 I will discuss the idea of world history functioning like a spiral through time, leading toward an endpoint (and the microcosmic representation of this – namely, the six-day week culminating in the Sabbath, paralleling the 6000 years of history by the Jewish count, leading toward the seventh millennium). The whole purpose of action in this world is to get to that endpoint in the next one. This forms a paradoxical loop: the journey in this world is enjoyable because it anticipates a pleasurable endpoint destination, and the endpoint destination in the next world is pleasurable only to the degree that effort was exerted in the journey toward it in this

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<sup>49</sup> “The word *Kabbalah* comes from the root *kuf-bet-lamed* (in Hebrew, ק/ב/ל), which means “to receive” and refers to the ability to receive wisdom from above. But *Kabbalah* also shares a root with the word *makbil* (מקביל), “parallel,” hinting at its understanding of the parallels between the physical and spiritual worlds” (Kosman 2014, 11, fn. 8).

<sup>50</sup> For example, in the Judaic view marriage parallels the relationship between us and God. As another related example, how we relate to our parents – even as infants, what Taylor (54) has described as “desiring-without-having, and then recovering” – parallels how we relate to God.

world. Whereas this world is a world of *doing*, we eventually reach a state of *being*, where there is no longer any movement; we have finally “arrived.” That endpoint pleasure is precisely what a game, or play, represents: having arrived; something that exists only in and of itself, not functioning as a means in motion toward an end goal.

This idea of endpoint pleasure as manifest in play is represented by the Hebrew word for an object of play, which is שְׁעִשׂוּעַ, *sha'ashu'a* – a doubled root stemming from the base root /ע/שׁ, which in turn comes from the root ה/ע/שׁ. which means “to turn toward,” as in to accept an offer being made.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the word *sha'ashu'a* – a double /ע/שׁ, *sha'-sha'* – literally means “turning toward the turning toward” – in other words, turning toward the thing in itself, with no other endpoint goal for which the thing would serve as a means; there is no goal, one has already arrived.

Games we play have no purpose. They might make kids smarter, but that's not why they are played – in fact, a “good” game is that which is rated as *fun* (while possibly developing intelligence or strategic thinking in the process with players unaware). A game represents the metaphysical concept of being in existence solely for the purpose of being in existence, not working toward any other purpose. It is not directed toward self-preservation or any other endpoint. To reiterate Taylor's (2016, 336) words, it is “that which is pursued for its own sake.”

In the Judaic view, then, play does not represent a stage in human evolution but the idea that there is an endpoint which serves as a motivation; a point to strive toward, a higher goal of Being, beyond Doing, “beyond the demands of personal and social survival and flourishing, even in some cases taking precedence over these perennial goals” (340). Play, in effect, represents the idea that life has meaning beyond mere survival and has more to it than just present-focused sustainability; it is about attaining a goal which retroactively proves the journey toward it was worthwhile.

What emerges, then, is that all play (in this world) is protoplay, in preparation for the real thing yet to come.

Inherent in this acknowledgement of a higher purpose to life is the idea that humans possess free will, which we discussed above. Inherent in that, in turn, is the recognition that people can pursue evil just as they pursue good. This is the Kabbalistic concept of *zeh le'umat zeh*, that every (good) force in the world

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<sup>51</sup> See Genesis 4:5 for an example, where God “turned toward” – שָׁאַחַ, *sha'ah*, i.e., accepted – Abel's offering.

necessarily entails its equal and opposite evil force, to enable man to choose freely. This is echoed in Taylor's (342) observation that

One of Herder's basic theses was that humans were freed from the domination of instinct which was the rule among other animals, which imposes on them the task of finding ways of dealing with the challenges of existence.

If people have free will to choose good, they necessarily have equally balanced free will to turn toward evil. Moreover, Taylor notes, there is "a joy in destruction, a sense of heroic greatness in tearing down what the ethic of universal benevolence has tried to build." This applies on an individual level as well as on a societal level: we can't presuppose a universal ethic without acknowledging the equally powerful desire to destroy that ethic.

Which brings us full circle with an earlier point, namely, that the constitutive theory of language serves as groundwork for understanding cultural differences, and ultimately for "a kind of transcendence" which

...would require an instinct of belonging, of solidarity, without the obligatory contrast case of the other, the outsider. A transformation of belonging and friendship, therefore, which transcends the need for the enemy.

(340)

The enemy reminds us of who we are, if only by reminding us of who we are *not*. A society that has a clear sense of identity – belonging, solidarity – doesn't need external reminders. The HHH, as the Judaic view, is the one favourable to such an existence.

In summary, the Judaic view aligns with the expansiveness of language in the HHH view, and departs from the HLC's definitive, limited view. As I hope will become clear in Part II of this work, the Judaic conception of language stands in full cognisance of the HLC's problematic theory (and merit) and the HHH's optimistic view of language (despite its potential problematic practice).

On a micro level, the Judaic conception of language recognises the creative force of words, and hence the many halakhic implications therefrom (to be discussed in chapter 5): anything that has the power to create has the power to destroy; to use a dead metaphor without a trace of irony, it's dynamite: what has (literally) paved many roads has also served some very destructive purposes.

On a macro, historical level, the Judaic conception of language allows for a polysemic view of words and holistic view of meaning – metaphor in the extreme – but which we have not yet attained. An ideal Adamic language wherein signifier and signified are one *does* exist, but we are not yet fully in possession of it. The world in its present state is imperfect, with signifier and signified not always (or ever?) being in harmony. Multiply this by the number of signifiers and signified in any given language, and then multiply that by the number of languages we currently have (approximately 6,500, according to McWhorter [2014]), and we can begin to appreciate the magnitude of our existential-linguistic problem. The only way to solve this polysemic problem is to collapse all meaning – which necessitates collapsing all time and space, since meanings change over time and across space, with old words taking on new meanings and new words for new concepts or connections between concepts being coined – into one focal point of truth. This focal point of truth is not a truth to the exclusion of all others but an inclusive consolidation of everything.

The Judaic view of the world as imperfect yet moving toward a state of endpoint pleasurable perfection all the time – and by virtue of individual action – allows space for the idea that even with a thousand or a million words we still don't have the full picture. It enables wonder, experienced in humility, while bearing in mind that there is indeed an HLC-ideal language we don't yet see, which will become aligned with an HHH view.

One final point, on a seemingly unrelated topic but one which will shed light on the present discussion: we could divide the HLC and HHH views along “masculine” and “feminine” lines, the masculine being the rational, hard-sciences side of things interested in the facts – designating what things are – and the feminine being the more fluid, holistic, emotive force more interested in the *relationship* between the facts than the facts themselves. The masculine is concerned with what is; the feminine, with what can be.

The Judaic view recognises the necessity of both. Moreover, it is the feminine aspect that will ultimately prevail at the End of Days – not to the exclusion of the masculine but in inclusiveness.<sup>52</sup> With the collapsing of time and space to one focal

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<sup>52</sup> For an enlightening discussion of the male-female paradigm and its evolution over time, its manifestation in Eastern vs. Western values and the Judaic view thereof toward the End of Days, see Miriam Kosman, *Circle, Arrow, Spiral: Exploring Gender in Judaism*. (Jerusalem: Nefesh Yehudi, 2014).

point of truth, the HHH will encompass the HLC. Metaphor will coexist with an all-encompassing, unified and objective truth.

The constitutive view of language, and how it relates to the Judaic view, can be summed up in one sentence from Taylor's book, quoted above: "Language remains in many ways a mysterious thing" (341). It has to be so, since language is a Divine, creative force. Given that language is what makes man uniquely human and inherently Divine, and that with the minimal "building blocks" and input man can generate not only infinite combinations and associations but new ideas as well, there will necessarily always be an element of the Unknown to it. Language, as God, is Unknowable. To know it would be to *be* it. The fact that man operates with, and within, symbols is itself symbolic of the greatest symbolism on earth: man as an earthly reflection of the heavenly Divine.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

By now it should be clear how the HLC/designative view of language functions as a precursor to, and thus forms the groundwork for, Chomsky's innateness and how the HHH/constitutive theory functions in the same capacity for the linguistic relativity theory, or the (so-called) Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. That is step one.

With the philosophical basis for innateness and relativity in place, we can now move on to step two which is, to my view (and Taylor would seem to agree), that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is of value in our understanding of our differences – and ultimately our respect for those differences. Thus, by retrospective extension, the HHH/constitutive theory of language is the more conducive one, if we are looking to drive humanity forward and be truly *progressive* and not *regressive* (ironically oftentimes in name of would-be progressiveness). As Taylor (328) put it,

The only road to mutual understanding, and perhaps ultimately agreement on moral and political principles, lies through patient mutual study and equal exchange, leading perhaps to the "fusion of horizons" of which Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke, something which is at heart an exercise in hermeneutics.

Societies, even those we would say are similar (using whatever common ground as a basis, such as making use of technology, the value given to education, aspirations for a high standard of well-being, emancipation of women, etc.), are still different

enough (and vastly so) so as to render the linguistic relativity principle and the HHH as relevant – perhaps even more so nowadays than ever.

...[T]o understand ourselves we have to grasp how we got to where we are, and this must include a grasp of where we came from. And this need to understand the other doesn't just relate to past social and metaphysical forms. We are faced today with great differences in contemporary cultures, in the skeins of meaning that they elaborate, in the forms of society that they can sustain....

(327)

Consider the disputable definitions of any of the issues of major local and global concern (and this quandary is all the more applicable to abstract concepts such as virtue, evil, truth, purpose, fate, etc. Take two examples, one seemingly in the private realm but with drastic effects on society as a whole, the other seemingly in the public sphere but with drastic effects on the private realm. For the former, abortion: is it a “matter of choice”? A “termination of pregnancy”? “Murder”? And even within these definitions we would still grapple: if it is a matter of choice – whose choice? If it is the mother's, does her right to choose supersede the foetus's right to life? At what stage does the foetus' right to life supersede the mother's right to choice? When does life begin? If it is a “termination of pregnancy,” is it equivalent to any other necessary medical procedure, such as the excision of a tumour? If it is murder, is it equivalent to the murder of a fully grown individual? Is it worse because the preborn child is the most vulnerable? Is it equivalent to murdering someone in a coma who might awake from it? Is sentience the determining factor? If so, why? What would be the implications of sentience-as-the-standard for the elderly, demented or disabled?

For the latter, consider democracy: is it the only system of government that has proved viable long term (and do we gauge its rightness based on its success)? Is it two wolves and a lamb voting on what's for dinner? Is it the lesser of all available governmental evils? In the case where democracy has been imposed on prior dictatorships, is it a case of Western imperialism?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For an enlightening (and humorous – if weren't sad) discussion of the mutability of words, the reader is referred to Orwell's (1946) “Politics and the English Language.” Note that Orwell, too, makes mention of democracy's hollowness (see p. 132 of his essay).

Clearly, a lot hinges on definitions.<sup>54</sup>

To reduce the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to colour terminology, conceptualisations of time, grammatical quirks or any other elements brought out by interpretations of the hypotheses (as well as studies done to prove it) is to miss Sapir's and Whorf's (and their proponents') point entirely. Taylor (328) notes that, unlike in the examples mentioned above (colour terminology, conception of time, etc.), where people are observing the same reality,

...[W]hen we are looking at divergent ethical or religious ways of life, or distinct political structures and social imaginaries, we are dealing with different human realities. We have, for instance, lives informed by different ethical ideals, and societies structured around different footings and social imaginaries. To treat these like differences in color vocabularies is not only aberrant but dangerous, since it reflects the unconscious projection of modern Western categories on the whole of humanity.<sup>55</sup>

To complement this view, which sees the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis as being of value in our understanding of “great differences in contemporary cultures” (327) and having discussed the philosophical underpinning of the development of linguistic relativity and innateness, let us now proceed to Part II of this study: the Judaic conception of language, its interplay with the constitutive view of language and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the role that language in general has played in the Judaic cultural and religious ethos, and in particular the role of the Hebrew language in the State of Israel's modern-day rebirth. In the concluding chapter I aim to relate the upshot of linguistic relativity to present-day existential-linguistic issues. It is hoped that, with the Judaic conception of language being firmly ensconced in the view of man as inherently Divine and distinct from all animals, the link with the constitutive view of language and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will become clearer, as will be the contribution of the Judaic conception of language to broader audiences.

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<sup>54</sup> Not coincidentally, the Hebrew word for “definition,” הַגְדָרָה, *hagdara*, shares the root .ג.ד.ר, *g/d/r*, with the Hebrew word for fence, גֶּדֶר. A definition sets the boundary, fencing in the terms to the exclusion of other terms.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor notes the ironic fact, which I have noted in chapter 1 as well, that this is precisely what Sapir and Whorf wished to counter with the linguistic relativity principle – the notion that the Standard Average European (SAE) languages (and their corresponding cultures) were the benchmark against which the value of all other languages (and cultures) are to be assessed.

**PART II**  
**APPLICATION OF THE LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY PRINCIPLE**  
**WITHIN THE JUDEO-PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT:**  
**THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THE HEBREW LANGUAGE AS A**  
**CASE STUDY**

## **CHAPTER IV: THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THEIR LANGUAGE**

### **4.1. Introduction**

Part I presented the theoretical basis for linguistic relativity and innateness, tracing the history of their development from classical innateness and empiricism, their application, and why (to my view) the linguistic relativity position – and, in turn Taylor’s constitutive view of language – is the correct one. In Part II, comprised of chapters 4, 5 and 6, I hope to demonstrate this theoretical framework in action in the Jewish people and their language – a “case study” of sorts – and in particular in the Hebrew language.

I touched upon some aspects of the Judaic conception of language in previous chapters in the context of those chapters, presenting a tentative approach to resolving the innateness-empirical dichotomy (end of chapter 2); and discussing where the Judaic view parts ways with the HLC and is more aligned with the HHH, as well as protoplay as the microcosmic experience of endpoint pleasure and its place in Judaic cosmology (end of chapter 3). This chapter aims to explore the link between the constitutive view of language and the Judaic view more in depth, and to cover more systematically the theoretical basis of the Judaic conception of language in and of itself. Chapter 5 expounds upon the ramifications of the Judaic conception of language, as manifest in daily Jewish practice.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 6 discusses how the view of language as sourced with the Divine, as a creative force and marker of identity, plays out in the cultural ethos of the Jew – even the secular Jew – in the modern State of Israel, and the unprecedented case of the revival of the Hebrew language.

### **4.2. Judaism and Linguistic Relativity**

The case of the Jewish people and the inextricable link between the Hebrew language and their role in world history is probably the most poignant example of what Lucy (1997, 292) refers to as “discursive relativity” – namely, the idea that the linguistic relativity hypothesis not only relates to grammar and semantics but to the way a culture uses and relates to the use of language at large. Accordingly, a society that

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the view presented herein is a Torah-observant (Orthodox) Judaic view, likely not espoused by many readers (including some Jews themselves, particularly secular ones). My point here is not to convince the reader of Judaic belief – in God, metaphysics or otherwise; such proof and/or convincing is immaterial to the discussion (and actually in contravention of Judaic law which discourages missionizing). Rather, my point is to clarify the link between the Jewish people and their language, and to demonstrate that for the Jewish people who understand this connection, language plays a very different – and far greater – role than is typically assumed.

places so much emphasis on language and linguistic decorum is a society that takes language – and, to borrow Lee’s (1996) term, “*linguaging*”<sup>2</sup> – very seriously. This idea is similar to that expressed by Hymes (1966, in Fishman 1970), who states that the *function* of language in society is relative to each society.

The Judaic ethos and particularist mind-set, from antiquity to contemporary times, provide fertile ground for linguistic relativity, as evident in the writings of medieval Jewish philosophers, earlier Jewish commentators and dating back to the Talmud and the Bible. The Jewish people, their history and role therein, and their language, are so bound up with each other that one cannot divorce the phenomenon of the Jewish people’s survival from the survival of its language. From the creation of the world which, according to Jewish tradition, was carried out specifically via God’s power of speech, through the Jewish people’s diglossic existence throughout a 2000-year exile in the Diaspora, through modern-day Nazi manipulation of linguistics to serve the Final Solution,<sup>3</sup> and on to the revival of the Hebrew language, predicted by the Gaon of Vilna to take place toward the End of Days (Kramer 2013 [1890]), language – and the Jewish people’s connection to it – has proved essential.

The two points I wish to make in this and the following two chapters:

1. A people that maintains that its language is sourced with the Divine, and that the ability “to language” is a Godly endowment, will necessarily regard language – and not just its own language but any language, and the human ability to language – very differently.
2. In such a culture, language will play a far greater role in daily life, history, and collective national consciousness.

By now hopefully even the sceptic reader for whom linguistic relativity seemed a fanciful leap at the outset has reconsidered its evidence, applicability and merit. Here, the discussion of linguistic relativity shifts specifically to the Jewish people and their inextricable link with language – on a discursive as well as metaphysical level. It is hoped, further, that in the case of the Hebrew language specifically, linguistic relativity’s merit will be evident on an even more basic level – grammatically, lexically and down to the most broken-down elements, the Hebrew alphabet.

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<sup>2</sup>As noted earlier, Lee uses the term “language” as a verb, as in “we have the capacity to language and are *linguaging* beings, or beings who *language*” (1996: xv). Lee bases this on Whorf’s coining of the term “*languageable*” (1940i, in Lee 1996: xv).

<sup>3</sup>I will touch upon this more in chapter 6.

Some readers might argue that I have merely played Connect-the-Dots between Whorf, linguistic relativity, Hebrew and the Jewish people. However I believe that making these connections is necessary in order for a fuller picture to emerge, to understand the role that language and the Hebrew language have played in the history of the Jewish people, particularly and universally, and the implications thereof for society at large.<sup>4</sup> Just as Judaism's particularity is a necessary basis for its universalism, so too with linguistic particularity: it must serve as the basis of universalism – and in fact, precede it – if we are to appreciate what makes us uniquely human.

#### **4.2.1. Why does linguistic relativity ring Jewish?**

Interestingly, when I discuss the concept of linguistic relativity with religious individuals, they understand it immediately. In fact, they question why it warrants research and discussion; to them, it is obvious that language influences thought, that language is a creative force, and that language, thought and the reality we create are interconnected. The more religious the individual's orientation, it seems, the clearer is the connection between language, thought and reality, and the less resistance is exhibited to the idea that speakers of different languages view the world differently.

With secular individuals, however (and this is evident in the literature as well), there is far greater scepticism concerning linguistic relativity. Largely, they maintain that language, thought and reality are discrete concepts; the one need not necessarily have any bearing on the other. And they are far less inclined to accept the idea that speakers of different languages view the world differently. In a sense, for them the latter is far more problematic a claim than the former.<sup>5</sup>

I believe there are two reasons for these discrepancies between the secular and the religious as regards linguistic relativity: the first, more technical, from without; and the second, more intrinsic (or, one can argue, metaphysical), from within.

From without, secular people are naturally more heavily influenced by the times and what is popular in mainstream culture and academia. In today's postmodern climate, Chomsky, as devoid of any particularist sentiments, is a paragon. Religious people – and in the Jewish context, Orthodox Jews and especially the ultra-Orthodox

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<sup>4</sup> To take the analogy further, it is hoped that the image emerging from these connected dots comprises a more coherent picture than what the individual dots represent in isolation. This in no way implies that the picture is complete; whatever coherent picture does emerge, the reader is free to give the image his own particular colour and shade.

<sup>5</sup>The odd exception is the secular Israeli Jew. See Chapter 6 for more on this.

– are not as exposed to or influenced by universalist agendas (in linguistics or otherwise).<sup>6</sup> Many of them have never even heard of Chomsky, and even if they have they are not familiar with his claims or those of Pinker and others from the Chomskyan school of thought.

But one can argue, not unreasonably, that this lack of familiarity with the popular, anti-particularist<sup>7</sup> worldview is a technicality, and that given the (arguably) right education the religious would espouse universalist views. The more salient reason, then, for the secular–religious divide comes from within: for religious individuals, there is the overarching framework of a God-centred morality which mandates an awareness of the language-thought-reality connection; and as for the claim that people who speak different languages view the world differently, the particularist worldview that is part and parcel of the religious mind-set and Judaeo-Christian God-centred ethos precludes a Chomskyan, universalist worldview.

#### **4.2.1.1. *The moral basis of linguistic relativity***

For religious individuals, there is a moral imperative to bear responsibility for our words, as for our actions, which is part and parcel of a God-centred ethos. For those who have been brought up within a culture whereby one’s obligation – to oneself, to one’s fellow human beings, the world at large, and, most importantly, to God – is more central than one’s rights, the claim that language, thought and reality are discrete concepts with any one having no bearing on the others whatsoever, is not only irreverent but morally untenable, for it excuses us from personal responsibility toward our speech and the reality we create with it.

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<sup>6</sup>This is also true of conservative/traditional Jews, as well as those on the centre-right/right-leaning end of the political spectrum. The political connection and connotations of this will be explored further on in chapter 6, but briefly, people on the political or religious neo-con end of the spectrum are far less likely to accept Chomsky's universalist stance as regards linguistics just as they are less likely to espouse his universalist politics or sociology – and they do not have the academic tools to distinguish between the two, if such distinction is possible (as we have seen in chapter 2, such distinction is not clear-cut).

<sup>7</sup>I specifically use the term anti-particularist, which is not synonymous with universalism. As will be explained further on, universalism in its present incarnation is often the by-product of anti-particularism, not universalism *qua* universalism per se. In other words, universalism is the price some have to pay for espousing anti-particularism-at-all-costs. They are not necessarily universalists, but don't want to be particularists, either. By way of (a not entirely irrelevant) analogy, this is similar to the “new atheism” being not so much about atheism in itself (which has its flaws, since atheism is the belief that there is no God, and to reach that conclusion one would have to know everything that *is* in existence in order to know what is *not* in existence – itself an impossible task; agnosticism would be the more intellectually honest position); rather, it is a disowning of God because of what God represents to them, or a reaction to the evil people have perpetrated in God's name.

In the Jewish context, this is borne out by halakha, Kabbalah, folklore, and the writings of the *ba'alei mussar* (Jewish ethicists), which abound with discussions underscoring the importance of language and proper language conduct. There is even discussion of our responsibility as regards our thoughts,<sup>8</sup> as well as the link between thought, speech and action. This ethos lays the foundation for greater resistance to the Pinkerian notion that everything is encoded in our genes and that our language is just a “biological fluke.” The flipside of this is also a greater readiness and willingness to acknowledge a metaphysical existence in addition to the physical one, and the conception of language as a creative force thereof, in particular.

From a secular perspective, however, compartmentalising language, thought, and action/the reality we create is convenient: one is entitled to think and say whatever one wants, even if it is nonsense or patently false – and especially if it enshrines the sacrosanct notion of freedom of speech.<sup>9</sup> The consequences of speech, then, do not have to be considered; thoughts certainly don't warrant concern. Even action, to a degree, is viewed as a “function of society” rather than a product of conscious decision bearing personal responsibility.<sup>10</sup> Moral responsibility as far as language is concerned is sacrificed on the altars of free speech or cultural and moral relativism. The outcome of this is that that which has been adopted out of “convenience” or moral laziness assumes the moral high ground: personal liberty and its corollary freedom of speech become the new moral standard.

I digress here temporarily to discuss the Judaic conception of morality, to better contextualise the convenience of believing in innateness and universalism.

Understood psychologically, and quite ironically, a lack of adherence to a particular moral standard might be a sincere – albeit misguided – attempt at a higher morality. Not assuming moral responsibility – as regards language conduct or

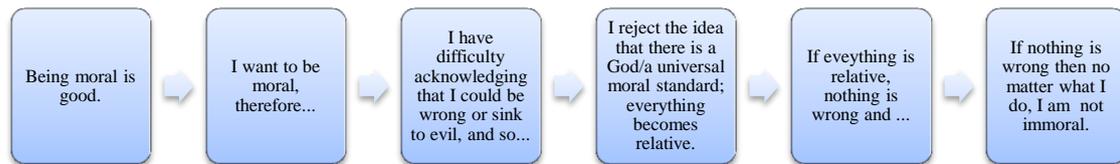
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<sup>8</sup> See *Sefer HaHinnuch*, §25; Maimonides' *Book of Knowledge*, 1:6; *Alei Shur* vol. I, 212. Rabbi Mattisyahu Solomon (in Orlowek, 2002), points out that we are not held accountable for our thoughts, rather only for *entertaining* them. The stray, ill-timed or ill-chosen thought is random; it is what we *do* with it that determines our degree of liability. He further states that rather than being viewed as a distraction, the stray thought serves as a reminder to get us back on track toward more productive reflection.

<sup>9</sup> As an extreme example thereof, consider the cases of Holocaust denial on the grounds of freedom of speech principles.

<sup>10</sup> Consider how often crime is blamed on external, societal factors – poverty, racism, lack of education, etc. Rather, we should be motivated to introspect and hold people accountable. Ultimately, which of the two holds humanity in higher regard – the view that excuses all behaviour as being the result of negative social constructs or influences, or the view that holds people as intelligent beings and therefore accountable, the implication of which is that people are inherently capable of good and of evil – and of choosing?

otherwise – is not simply a matter of moral laziness but sometimes a wish to be moral: we want to assume that we are all good people, the idea that we could be immoral is inconceivable, and so by not forbidding anything or deeming anything immoral, everything is made permissible. In such a context we can understand why postmodernists take such issue with God: when no one has the right to determine what is moral, no one has done wrong. Schematically, that would look something like this:



But scratching even lightly beneath the surface, at its core this misguided morality is arrogance: it is only through humbly recognising that human beings *do* have the potential to fall – and even sink to the depths of evil – that we can guard against such evil and become truly moral people. When nothing is “bad,” there can be no “good.”

Accepting that “bad” exists and that human nature has its flaws is necessary not only as the gauge against which “good” is assessed, but in order to enable human beings to *choose* to do good. According to Jewish philosophy, God, as the Ultimate Good, wished to bestow the ultimate good on humanity. He therefore created the world and the people therein, so that they could emulate Him and receive the ultimate goodness – God Himself (Luzzatto 2003 [1818], 2:1). God wanted people to *own* their reward, rather than Him giving it out freely, because doing so would constitute *nahama dekisufa*, “the bread of shame” – something given out of pity and not because it was duly earned (Luzzatto 2008, ch. 18). Such reward necessarily has shame attached to it, because one receives it not on his own merit. Furthermore, it carries the risk of being taken away at any moment, since it isn’t truly owned.<sup>11</sup>

Earlier (chapter 3) we discussed the link between the human capacity for discernment and human intelligence as manifest in free will. In order for people to truly own their reward, they must exercise free will, for it is only by *choosing* to do good – which necessitates the recognition that there is “bad” to be corrected, avoided

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<sup>11</sup> Consider the analogy to a student receiving an A when no work has been done. Initially the student might feel elated, but eventually the student would feel cheated for not having been noticed, for having been assigned a grade at random. Furthermore, were the student then to work hard and receive an A, it would be meaningless; the grade could have just as easily been an F or withheld entirely. The good mark, being arbitrary, could also be retracted. For reward to be meaningful, and enduring, it has to be earned.

or overcome – that we can truly own our reward. If everything is good, we haven't made any meaningful choice but merely chosen something at random, or by instinct (recall Taylor's mouse operating on autopilot). And if we haven't made any choice, we don't truly own our decisions and, consequently, neither can we own our reward.

To demonstrate this, consider the following question: would we praise an employee for breathing? Of course not; breathing is an involuntary bodily function. However we would praise an employee who persevered despite difficulties and finished a complex project, or who acted bravely in defending corporate principles or a co-worker. Likewise God only rewards those actions for which we are responsible, not those which are involuntary. Therefore the drive to do bad – or what in Judaism is called the *yetzer hara*, the Evil Inclination – was created: to enable free will.<sup>12</sup>

All things yearn to return to their source (Elyashiv 1990 [1948], §1, 83; §2, 14). Human beings, who have within them a *helek Eloka mima'al* – a Divine element – want to be good like the Ultimate Good – God Himself. Consequently humanity has an inherent drive to *be* good and thereby *get* the ultimate good. Stripped of materialism, on a metaphysical level, that which is good is that which is moral. Therefore, for lack of an imposed, universal morality, Godless societies seeking to

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<sup>12</sup> That is also why reward, in Jewish cosmology, is not given in real-time but only in the World to Come, after death. As the Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin, 39b) states, “There is no reward for good deeds in This World [only in the Next World].” The lag-time is necessary to ensure we have free choice because if we were rewarded in real time, we would be operating on base instinct rather than out of conscious thought and would not be able to own our actions – and our reward.

To explain this, consider the following analogy: if we were to lose a tooth every time we told a lie, eventually we would stop lying – not because we know that lying is wrong, but because we only have so many teeth we can afford to lose; eventually, we would come to realise that it is simply not worth it to lie. Conversely if every time we gave charity we would receive a bonus at work, we would be giving charity not because it is the right thing to do, but because it benefits us directly and immediately. That is why reward (and punishment) cannot be given in real time, because it would preclude the possibility of getting rewarded in the first place. Our actions would not be out of conscious decision but out of instinctual automation. Thus humanity necessarily has to have equal inherent potential for goodness as it does for evil, and reward cannot be given in real time. Belief in reward and punishment in the World to Come is indeed one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith, based on Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah (Sanhedrin, ch. 10), and it is comparable to the belief in God as well as in the Torah's authenticity and immutability. For it is only with belief in reward and punishment that actions – i.e., fulfilling commandments – have meaning.

On a deeper level, this is also why the nature of suffering is not known to us. If we were to understand why people suffer and how every event, good or bad, forms a piece of God's cosmic puzzle, we would become callous to others' pain and would not be motivated to alleviate their suffering, on the grounds that everything people go through is “justified.”

There is another reason why reward is never given in real-time, and that is because, according to Jewish philosophy, the reward differs for each individual, *even if the action is the same*. For example, reward for a single wealthy man who gives millions to charity cannot possibly be the same as the reward for a middle-class family giving charity. Reward cannot be given in this world, because comparison of rewards between people would be incomprehensible to us (Tractate Pesahim 50a and Tractate Bava Bathra 10b).

survive long-term develop new moral codes. In today's postmodern, Godless intellectual climate, morality does not have one uniform, universal standard but is flexible, bendable, relativistic and therefore entirely personal. In such a culture, morality can – and often does – amount simply to not judging anyone else's morality.

In other words, lack of morality can stem from two sources: there can be a lack of morality that is passive, simply the by-product of social decadence or laziness; or it can be an active lack of morality – the eschewing of any externally imposed, universally applicable moral code, with the claim that imposing morality on anyone is itself immoral. Without any moral standard, no one is wrong. And as we would like to believe that humanity is inherently good, it is convenient to believe this – far more convenient than acknowledging that human nature is inherently flawed and capable of evil.<sup>13</sup> To a secular way of thinking, moral relativism is, in and of itself, the new morality. The new moral code is “live and let live,” for “every man has his truth,” which at its core is a silent agreement to let others do what *they* want so that *we* are free to do what *we* want. The “respect” for others which relativists champion is not a respect *qua* valuing differences, but a way of maintaining personal freedom to do whatever we want, free of anyone's criticism and absolved from responsibility. Put another way, cultural and moral relativism is the rubber stamp for personal “freedom,” however mindless.

It is not hard to see how in such a cultural climate, the hallowed function of language becomes hollow.

To espouse the idea that language influences thought would mean accepting that we have to bear responsibility for our words; it would imply the necessity of a certain moral code of speech conduct. And so although we would think that moral relativists would espouse linguistic relativity (since everything is relative), they are, by and large, intent on demonstrating that there is no moral standard, anywhere, and therefore linguistic relativity is untenable. Accordingly, we are all the same, the differences in our respective languages are negligible. Universalism – in worldview, language and conduct as well – has become the new linguistic morality.

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<sup>13</sup> Consider the example of Americans who question whether the Civil War was really about slavery and its abolishment. The rationale behind such questioning is that they cannot conceive that half the nation's states would fight – and die – to keep the despicable institution of slavery in place.

#### 4.2.1.2. *The particularist framework for linguistic relativity*

Along with the moral basis for linguistic relativity, acknowledging that we have a role to play in civilisation – as individuals and as members of a particular faith or nationality, on a personal and collective level – lays the groundwork for the acceptance of linguistic relativity and the rejection of innateness and universalism. Taking this further, each culture’s identity and unique characteristics, including language, have a purpose in world history. It is thus understandable why religious individuals – and religious Jews in particular, where language is intimately bound with the religion – readily accept the idea that speakers of different languages view the world differently. This is not viewed negatively or with alarm at the supposed ethnocentrism; having differing worldviews is not a problem to be avoided but a fact to be honoured, for only by recognising our inherent differences can we appreciate our individual contribution toward our collective Divine mission.<sup>14</sup>

The claim, or accusation, that Jews are particularist or ethnocentrist was around long before the linguistic aspects of particularism became an issue; it is but an aspect of it. And on a superficial level, the concern is understandable: particularity necessarily mandates a measure of isolation or exclusion, and this is open to (mis)interpretation as aloofness. It is far more comfortable (not to mention politically correct) to adopt a universalist outlook where no one is excluded and all peoples – and languages, as those in the Chomskyan school of thought would have us believe – are basically the same.

But one cannot divorce Jewish particularity from the ethical monotheism that Judaism introduced to civilisation, and in turn one cannot divorce ethical monotheism from the proper governance and functioning of society. “Unless there is a God, all morality is opinion and belief” (D. Prager 2014). It is actually that very particularity which ethical monotheism introduced to civilisation – rooted in the ultimate particularity, one God – which enables (the ultimate) universalism. In the words of Prager (ibid.),

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<sup>14</sup> Consider the term “tolerance” and the verb “to tolerate,” whose definition is 1) “allow (something that one dislikes or disagrees with) to exist or occur without interference. 2) patiently endure (something unpleasant) (The Oxford English Dictionary 2003). If “every man has his truth” – or better yet, if we are all essentially the same and our differences don’t matter – then there is nothing to dislike or disagree with. The claim that “all things are tolerated except for intolerance” is vacuous; we haven’t tolerated anything, we have merely stated that anyone can do anything and no one can say anything about it. Genuine tolerance, however, is only relevant where we *disagree* with someone and *dislike* what they do, and nevertheless agree to work with them toward a common goal.

The point of biblical monotheism is that there is only one God and that only this God... is to be worshipped.... one God means one moral standard for all people. If God declares murder wrong, it is wrong for everyone.

It is indeed ironic that those who advocate moral relativism – generally the secular postmodernists who deny the existence of God and one moral standard in favour of an *über*universality – are generally the ones to advocate *against* linguistic relativity. For lack of a moral centre, they have adopted anti-particularism as the new morality.

Given the Jewish people’s monotheistic, God-centred morality and particularity, it is not surprising to find Judaic history, law and lore not only espousing linguistic relativity as a concept underscoring linguistic conduct but embodying it in the language itself, down to its most basic elements – its roots and even the *letters* of the Hebrew alphabet. Let us now explore how this is borne out by a Divine conception of language and made manifest in the conceptual and actual “building blocks” of the language.

### **4.3. The Hebrew Alphabet and Linguistic Relativity**

#### **4.3.1. Whorf’s work on oligosynthetic languages and Hebrew**

A major component in Whorf’s ideas was his work on oligosynthetic languages – that is, languages that have a

type of language structure in which all or nearly all of the vocabulary may be reduced to a very small number of roots or significant elements, irrespective of whether these roots or elements are to be regarded as original, standing anterior to the language as we know it, or as never having had independent existence, theirs being an implicit existence as parts in words that were always undissociated wholes.

(Whorf 1956, 12)

Whorf came to develop his ideas on oligosynthetic languages from his studies on Amerindian languages (specifically Nahuatl, Maya, and Aztec, though he is best known for his work on the Hopi language, on which he published many articles<sup>15</sup>); but he also studied Hebrew, and in his extensive (though mostly unpublished) work on

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<sup>15</sup> See Lee (1996, 12-13) for a comprehensive list.

roots in Amerindian languages as well as Hebrew, Whorf came to the conclusion that Hebrew (among Aztec and Maya) is oligosynthetic (Whorf 1956).

Whorf was profoundly influenced by Antoine Fabre d'Olivet's book *La Langue Hébraïque* and although he maintained that Fabre d'Olivet's ideas were ultimately untenable, nevertheless he valued his method of "root-signs." In his book, Fabre d'Olivet explained how each *letter* of the Hebrew alphabet has significance in and of itself and how different combinations of letters constituting the roots in Hebrew words represented a combined meaning of the individual letters' significances. In other words, not only did Fabre d'Olivet find Hebrew oligosynthetic on a tri-root level but also on the level of individual letters comprising the roots.

Whorf also did some research on binary groupings (following Fabre d'Olivet's method), namely, reducing three-letter roots further into two-letter sub-roots, where all words with the two-letter roots have something in common. Carroll, who edited Whorf's works posthumously, quotes an unpublished manuscript in which Whorf states that

A binary group is a group of Semitic roots having in common a certain sequence of two consonants, containing all the roots with this sequence in one language, and having these roots with but few exceptions allocated to a few certain kinds of meaning.

(Whorf 1956, 13)

Whorf was influenced not only by the *content* of Fabre d'Olivet's book, but by his method and the search for the inner meaning of things, which Carroll notes was a skill he applied to all his studies. "Just as Fabre d'Olivet pushed imagination to the limit in looking for an underlying significance in a segment of a Hebrew root, so Whorf persisted in the struggle to wrest from the bare linguistic fact its ultimate purport" (ibid.). Thus, it's not surprising that in his later years Whorf focused on finding a way to reconcile science and religion – a search that led him to believe that the contradiction between evolutionary theory and Judeo-Christian belief can be resolved by employing certain linguistic devices to interpret the Old Testament (ibid.).

Whorf's investigations demonstrated that certain languages can be broken down into basic units, with each one constituting or representing "a certain general idea, including something of the surrounding field of related ideas into which this central idea insensibly shades off" (Whorf 1928i, in Lee 1996: 3). This idea of breaking

words down into their basic elements wasn't merely linguistic in nature; Whorf describes how

[t]he oligosynthetic constitution of [certain] Middle American languages seems...to correspond to something in the social psychology of these people. They had a way of thinking in terms of the various combinations and permutations of a few elements. In other words, they attained a great range of expressive power from a relatively few units of meaning – call them signs, symbols, elements, characteristics, basic notions, or what not – by working with them in combinations, in which each unit was permitted to vary its complexion and nuance as suggested by the other units and the arrangement of the whole combination.

(Whorf 1928j, in Lee 1996: 5)

For Whorf, not only did linguistics hold the potential to bridge between science and religion but reflected a social psychology. As Lee (1996, 3, quoting Whorf [1929c]) notes,

In Semitic roots Whorf thought he had found the embodiment of a “root vocabulary” with “the likeness of a code of signals,” the laws of which related “not to inanimate nature but to human nature – to the social heritage and the social thought-forms of language.”

Whorf inferred that “these phenomena of regularity are the expression of laws and principles which perhaps have to do with the very fundamentals of the speech faculty” (ibid.).

If only Whorf had lived to discover the Kabbalists and Jewish philosophers' works on the Hebrew language... he would have seen Fabre d'Olivet's and his own ideas vindicated.

Without question, Hebrew is oligosynthetic: “Every Hebrew word derives from a three-letter root.... These three consonants form the template or basic structure of a family of related words” (Clark 1999, xv).<sup>16</sup> All words can be broken down into their basic three-letter roots (with all the words comprised of this three-letter root being related in meaning), and all roots can be broken down further into their composite roots (what Whorf termed “binary grouping”).

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<sup>16</sup> Again, the reader is referred to Matityahu Clark's *Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, based on the commentaries of Samson Raphael Hirsch*, NY: Feldheim, 1999.

Whorf's speculation that the root vocabularies express the "fundamentals of the speech faculty" is correct as regards Hebrew, on a phonological as well as metaphysical level. On the phonological level, the Hebrew consonants are grouped into distinct categories based on where the phonemes are vocalized – gutturals, palatals, dentals, labials and sibilants. Letters within the same group are interchangeable according to specific systems, permuted to express novel concepts related to the ones expressed by the word in the original spelling – what Clark (1999, 293) calls "phonetic cognates," or, grammatically, "homorganic consonants."<sup>17</sup> Clark brings as an example the root ל/כ/ר, *r/kh/l*, as found in Leviticus 19:16, which the commentator Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac, known by his Hebrew acronym as Rashi, explains to mean gossip-mongering, basing his commentary on the interchange of the root's middle letter, כ, *khaf*, and another palatal, the ל, *gimmel*, root, which would form the root ל/ג/ר, *r/g/l* – the root denoting foot/walking or "moving from place to place." Hence gossip-mongering: passing information from place to place or person to person.

As to the metaphysical aspects of the "fundamentals of the speech faculty," Whorf's conception of oligosynthetic languages as "corresponding to something in the social psychology" of their speakers is certainly apt to Hebrew and (should be) to its speakers. As Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 75) notes,

The Torah idea [in contrast to the Buddhist view of a harmonious flowing together of all manifest reality] is that in any organic system, all things that comprise that system unfold from an ultimately simple yet multipotent root. In the conception of a child, for example, the first moment contains all; in that moment of fusing of genes, all that will unfold is coded. The process thereafter is only a revelation of what the first moment held. Each moment unfolds from the previous moment, reveals it, and in itself holds the next and the root of all the rest, until finally the entire sequence has been revealed when the last moment brings to full revelation what was deepest in the first.

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<sup>17</sup> Commentators often make use of letter permutations in interpreting Scripture. Specifically regarding Hirsch, based on whose work Clark wrote his *Etymological Dictionary* mentioned above, Clark notes that "this principle [is] central to his approach to the Hebrew language in general and his translation and commentary to Bible in particular" (Clark 1999, 294). For a synopsis of Hirsch's letter permutation system, see pp. 293-301.

The idea that every word can be broken down into its three-letter roots, and further into its binary groups, and further still into its basic letters, and those letters broken down into their composite structures, (not to mention numerical value, alphabet position, root letter position, letter permutations<sup>18</sup> and parallel letters<sup>19</sup>), is reflective of the Judaic idea that a) all things can be broken down into their elements and returned to source (namely, one God), b) the Hebrew alphabet constitutes the “building blocks” of the world, and c) with the most basic building blocks at man’s disposal man is enjoined to create and build upon what he can.

### 4.3.2. Hebrew: the chemistry of speech

Commentators and Kabbalistic writings abound with discussion of the meaning and value of each individual letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each letter has inherent significance in terms of its shape, its position in the alphabet and its numerical value – *gematria*. As one example of many, the letter א, *aleph*, has the numerical value of 1, being the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and thus corresponds to the Judaic belief that there is only one God; He, like the *aleph* whose numerical value is one, is the Beginning of all things.<sup>20</sup> There is also significance to the letters’ combined numerical value and meaning in a given word, as well as the spelling out of the letter itself – for example, the letter *aleph* being spelled out, אָלֶף instead of א<sup>21</sup> (to illustrate the point, this is the equivalent of, for example, spelling out the letter “h” as “aitch, where the *a*, *i*, *t*, *c*, and *h* have significance in their constitution of the *h*).

Hebrew’s oligosynthesis goes even further, down to the basic elements comprising each letter’s form. To expand on the previous example of the *aleph*, א, it is formed from two *yuds*, ך, one above and another (upside down, mirror image) below, and a

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<sup>18</sup> As noted above, letters grouped together based on where their sound is produced in the mouth/throat can sometimes be interchanged with other letters from the same group, to produce theretofore unknown layers of meaning in a known word.

<sup>19</sup> There are different systems of paralleling letters in Hebrew, for example, interchanging first and last, second and penultimate, third and antepenultimate, etc.

<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, the Torah begins with the *second* letter of the alphabet, the *bet*, ב, demonstrating that inasmuch as the Torah contains everything (“turn it over and over, for everything is in it” [Ethics of the Fathers, ch. 5]), there is always the element of the unknown, the *aleph* – representing the unknowable God – that precedes the *bet* (Munk 2003). This is true intellectually as well as existentially: whenever we are born and however long we live, we enter history in the middle. This idea is also reflected in the *shape* of the letter *bet*: Hebrew being read from right to left, the *bet* is closed on the right side and open to the left, representing the idea that everything that was before the Torah (meaning God, who preceded the Torah and the world), is unknowable – the *aleph*; everything henceforth can, and should, be studied and mastered.

<sup>21</sup> אָלֶף is the root of אָלַף, master, and אָלַף, to train or to teach (Munk 2003: 44). It is not coincidental, then, that so many Attributes of God begin with the letter *aleph* (see Munk [2003, 45] for a full list.)

diagonal *vav*, ם, joining the two *yuds*. The significance of this, explain the Kabbalists (Munk 2003), is that the *aleph* represents the oneness of God, the Jewish people and the Torah: as the Zohar (3:73), the prime Kabbalistic work, states “God, the Torah and the Jewish people are one.” The *yud*, being the smallest letter and representing the most elemental form that cannot be broken down any further, represents God above; the *yud* below, the Jewish people – “a nation that dwells alone”; and the *vav*, whose numerical value is six, represents the six tractates of the Talmud – the Oral Tradition, which binds God and the Jewish people.<sup>22</sup> The composite numerical value of the *aleph* is significant as well: the two *yuds* together are twenty (ten each), plus the numerical value of the *vav* (six) totalling twenty-six, the same numerical value as God’s Ineffable Name, the קוּקֵי<sup>23</sup> (י= 10, ה=5, ו=6, ה=5), underscoring His Oneness (Munk 2003).

In a similar vein to Whorf’s assertion that Semitic “root-signs” and “binary grouping” systems are not only the basic elements forming the language but constitute the basic elements as they relate to the nature of humanity – “to the social heritage and the social thought-forms of language” (Whorf, 1929c, in Lee 1996: 3), Scherman (introduction to Munk 2003, 19) writes regarding the Hebrew alphabet: “The twenty-two sacred letters are profound, primal spiritual forces. They are, in effect, the raw material of Creation.”

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<sup>22</sup> The *vav* is the letter of conjunction (the “and” in Hebrew) when placed as a prefix. (The letter itself, spelled out – ם, *vav* – means a “hook,” that which joins two things.) It is specifically the Oral Tradition – namely, the Talmud, represented by the numerical value of the letter, six, corresponding to the six tractates of the Mishnah – that bonds God and the Jewish people, not the Written Torah (i.e., Scripture).

The Talmud (Tractate Gittin 60b) states that God’s covenant with the Jewish people was sealed specifically with the Oral Torah, and that it is forbidden to write down the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah, unlike the written Torah, was supposed to remain in oral form to ensure that the Jews would remain separate from the nations and thus guarantee their survival as a people. By keeping the tradition oral, it would remain unique to Jews (and thereby also be less open to misinterpretation and re-appropriation). Furthermore, in keeping the tradition orally transmitted, the intergenerational connection between teacher and student would be maintained, as would be the multidimensional, intertextual and dialectical nature of Talmudic study. It is specifically the Oral Torah that bonds God and the Jewish people because the Written Torah was freely available to the world, whereas the Oral Torah, in not being written down, was kept uniquely to the Jewish people.

(Note, however, that the Oral Tradition was eventually written down. When the Jews were being persecuted by the Romans and exile became imminent, Rabbi Judah the Prince made the bold decision to write down and codify the Oral Torah, in what has come to be known as the six tractates of the Mishnah, in order to prevent it from being lost. The basis for Rabbi Judah the Prince’s decision to go against the mandate that the Oral Torah not be written down was the verse (Psalms 119:126) “It is time to do something on behalf of God, because Your Torah has been desecrated.” In other words, better the Oral Torah be written down than be forgotten.)

<sup>23</sup> As noted at the outset, in order to avoid the Sacred Name being written in vain, the letter ק has been substituted instead of the letter ה, as is the common practice.

The *Sefer HaYetzirah* (lit. “The Book of Creation”), an early Kabbalistic source attributed to Abraham the Patriarch, concerning the mystics of Creation, explains that the Hebrew letters can be rearranged in endless combinations and permutations and, using Kabbalistic letter-systems, in effect produce new combinations for cosmic forces (Munk 2003). Scherman (in Munk 2003) gives the following analogy to explain this point: it is like hydrogen and oxygen which in certain combinations will make water, and with a slightly different combination in composition will result in hydrogen peroxide. This analogy is reminiscent of what Whorf said regarding oligosynthetic languages, that their oligosynthesis is “something like that which appeared when chemistry showed the various substances of nature to be understandable as varied combinations of a small number of elements” (Whorf 1928g, in Lee 1996: 4), as well as what he said specifically regarding Hebrew, namely that “[T]he region which I am entering through ancient Hebrew might be termed that of the chemistry of speech” (Whorf 1927b, in Lee 1996: 3). Whorf believed that in Hebrew he had found “relationships uniting hundreds of root words that have always been supposed to be entirely separate and unrelated and indeed are so in the sense of ordinary linguistics” (Whorf 1927b, in Lee 1996: 3).

In Jewish thought, the *Aleph-Beis* (or *Aleph-Bet* in Sephardic pronunciation) [Hebrew alphabet] differs from other alphabets:

[I]t is not merely a haphazard collection of consonants whose order was determined by convention and which could have been – or still could be – changed without loss of content. The individual letters, their names, graphic forms, numerical values, and respective positions in the *Aleph-Beis* are Divinely ordained.

(Munk 2003, 33)

Whereas in other languages the sound of the letters is random (for example, the letter *p* makes a “*p*” sound as in English, but in Russian it is pronounced like the English *r*, or the English *g* which in Afrikaans is a “*kh*” sound), in Hebrew, according to Jewish tradition, every letter contains within it its own unique characteristics that cannot be transmuted: “...the very existence of every creature from angels to pebbles

is dependent on the spiritual content with which it was created” (17). That spiritual content is the *Aleph Beis*.<sup>24</sup>

Humboldt said that “[Language] must therefore make infinite employment of finite means” (Heath 1988, in Taylor [2016, 115]). The significance of Hebrew being oligosynthetic, or constituting a set of “building blocks,” is that language – and specifically Hebrew – are not simply the building blocks of language and language interaction but are in fact the building blocks of the world – our physical world, and the world we are entrusted to better with language. Gottlieb (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 86) states that “No other religion that I know of...virtually encodes a specific language with the origins of its experience and its system of belief, knowledge and worship.”<sup>25</sup> Tatz (*ibid.*, 90), in kind, responds: “If ever the medium was the message, it is here [with the Hebrew language].” To explain the Judaic view of language in general and Hebrew in particular, it is necessary first to understand the Divine roots of language in Jewish tradition.

#### **4.4. The Divine Conception of Language in Jewish Thought**

##### **4.4.1. Language: The blueprint of the world**

As stated earlier, Hebrew’s oligosynthesis reflects the Judaic view that all things begin at Source (God), and must be built upon further by humans. Creation, in Jewish tradition, was accomplished through the letters – the basic building blocks with which God wanted humans to build upon His handiwork. By creating the world with dynamic building blocks, which can, in combination, create different things, God was sending a clear message: do not simplistically (and nihilistically) accept the world as is, rather *work with it* and make it better.<sup>26</sup>

According to Jewish tradition, although the Torah was *given* to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, the Torah actually predates the world, with the whole of Creation

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<sup>24</sup> Recall Taylor’s discussion of Condillac’s idea that “All linguistic signs are ‘instituted’ at some point. They are human creations and can be altered by humans.” In Hebrew, no word is “unmotivated” or “arbitrary.”

<sup>25</sup> The work quoted is a collection of letters between Gottlieb, a Buddhist Jew, and Tatz, an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. Gottlieb goes on to say to the rabbi that “[t]here is no way you could have risen to your level of Jewish literacy without being fluent in ancient Hebrew, whereas I could probably become a Buddhist priest with little more than a few words of Sanskrit, Pali and Japanese” (*ibid.*).

<sup>26</sup> This is a radical departure from determinism or a view of the world as static. It is interesting to note that when God commanded the Jewish people to build the Tabernacle, the prelude to the eventual Temple in Jerusalem which would serve as the Jewish people’s spiritual centre, it was specifically Betsalel, son of Uri, who was chosen to build it, because “he knew how to combine the letters with which heaven and earth were created” (Tractate Berakhot 55a).

being contained within the twenty-two Divine letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah, 1:1; see also Zohar 2:161a) states, “God looked into the Torah and created the world.” God looked into the mystics of the Divine Hebrew letters and used them as the blueprint for Creation.

This idea is hinted to in the first verse of Genesis, which states “In the beginning, God created *the* (אָ – Hebrew meaning “the”) heavens and the earth.” The Hassidic master Dov Ber, the *Maggid* (preacher) of Mezhyrich, notes that the word אָ, “the,” is comprised of the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, א, *aleph* and ת, *tav*, thus rendering the verse “In the beginning God created *the alphabet*, from *aleph* to *tav*” – and *then* created the heavens and the earth (Mezhyrich 1872, 43). This alludes to the tradition that the letters of the alphabet were created first, after which God created everything else using the letters as the building blocks.

Not only did God create the universe *ex nihilo* using the twenty-two letters as the building blocks and the Torah as the blueprint, He created the world with the *power* of speech: “The world was created with ten utterances” (Mishnah, Ethics of the Fathers, 5:1).<sup>27</sup> Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 87) notes, “When the Torah states, ‘And God said...’ in creating, it does not mean He gave instruction; it means He spoke a word and that word condensed, crystallized, concretized into the object it denotes.” The word *vayomer*, “and He said” (for example, “*and He said*, ‘let there be light’”) is mentioned nine times in the first chapter of Genesis. As to the tenth utterance, the Talmud (Tractate Rosh Hashanah, 32a) comments that the word *Bereishit*, “in the beginning,” constitutes the tenth utterance. The Maggid of Mezhyrich (1976) explains that the word *Bereishit* shares the same root as *arshet*, “expression.”

Thus not only do the letters constitute building blocks, but language itself – the ability to “language” – is a creative force, directly influencing or *creating* the world and everything in it. Not surprisingly, the Hebrew word for “thing” or “matter,” דָּבָר, *davar*, has the same root as the word for speech, דִּבּוּר, *dibbur*<sup>28</sup>; by speaking, one is in fact *creating* something. Not only is speech regarded as a divinely given power, but the ability to *write* is also considered a Divine gift, unique to humans. The Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers 5:6) lists ten wondrous things that were created at twilight on the eve of the first Sabbath of the world, among them “the letters and the writing,”

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<sup>27</sup> As to why specifically ten, when it could have just as easily been created with one, see chapter 7.

<sup>28</sup> The sounds of *v* and *b* in Hebrew are both represented by the letter *bet*, which can be read *vet* or *bet*, depending on whether the letter has a *dagesh* (stressed sound) in it, marked by a dot inside the *bet*, בּ, or not (ב).

referring to the physical manifestation – i.e., the written form – of the spiritual forces of letters.

Creation was achieved by the *word* of God, meaning His word was a creative force. And after God created the world with ten utterances, He bequeathed to humankind the ability to speak. The verse (Genesis 2: 7) states, “And [God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became *a living soul*,” which Onkelos<sup>29</sup> translates as a *ruah memalelah* – “a speaking spirit.” In other words, the “living soul” of man is the ability to speak; it is what differentiates him from the animal kingdom, with which man shares most of his DNA.<sup>30</sup> Animals have *some* level of soul (they’re more alive and have more free will – or rather, the ability to move – than the plant kingdom, for example) and do have means to communicate, but only human beings have the ability to manipulate language (for better or for worse) and use it as a creative force; or, as Lee (1996) put it, to “language.”

In these two respects was Man created “in God’s image”: free will to rise above the instinctual and with the ability to speak (and as we saw in the previous chapter, free will and the ability to language are linked). The ability to speak is a Divine element; as the Zohar writes,<sup>31</sup> *mahn denafah midilei nafah* – “when one blows into another, he blows of himself.” When God breathed life into Adam’s nostrils, a part of the Divine was placed within him.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Animals’ “speech” was designed to enable survival in the world, not thriving and prosperity – and certainly not the betterment of the world, as man was mandated to undertake by virtue of being given the Divine ability of speech. Animals, essentially instinctual creatures that do not have free will, were not endowed with language and responsibility like man. Just as God created the world with utterances, so too people were meant to emulate God by using their power of speech for creative purposes. Man has free will to choose to be a microcosmic representation on earth of the God Who uttered the world into existence, or to use

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<sup>29</sup> Second-century Roman convert to Judaism, who translated the Pentateuch into Aramaic, incorporating his commentary therein.

<sup>30</sup> Hence, in Jewish thought, in the hierarchy of creatures, there is the level of inanimate objects (rocks, sand), the level of the plant kingdom, the level of the animal kingdom and the level of human beings, called *medaber* – “the speaker.” It is in this aspect specifically that man demonstrates his ability to rise above the instinctual nature he shares with the animal kingdom.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi’s *Likutei Amarim*, §1, ch. 2. Note that Scholars have not found this exact quote in the extant Zohar, and presumably Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi had a different version of the Zohar from which he quoted.

speech for destructive purposes – “Life and death are in the hands of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

And that is why God endowed all humans with the gift of speech: so that He can be emulated. Linguistic relativity, in its mild form and in Judaic lore, is not a contradiction to linguistic universality: God bequeathed to all human beings the ability to speak, and so its basic underlying mechanisms are universal; however *how* people choose to use it falls within the moral decision-making of each individual.

#### 4.4.2. Man’s mark of distinction: speech

The Midrash (Tanhuma, Noah, §19) states that the language God used to create the world was *Lashon HaKodesh*, generally translated as “the Holy Tongue,” though a more accurate translation would be “the Tongue of the Holy.”<sup>32</sup> The original tongue was meant to be used for the expression of holy concepts. It was only after the episode of the Tower of Babel that language became confused and confusing (see section 4.4.5 below).

As soon as God granted the gift of speech to Man, He told him to use it. The ability to speak would in fact be his *raison d’être*. The Midrash (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana, 4:3; Bereishit Rabbah 17:4) relates that when God wished to create Man, He took counsel with the ministering angels<sup>33</sup> who objected, deriding Man’s worth.<sup>34</sup> God responded to the angels that the human being He wishes to create has wisdom that surpasses theirs. To prove it, He brought all the animals before them for them to name, and they could not. After He created Man, He brought all the animals before

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<sup>32</sup> If it were a “holy tongue,” the Hebrew term would be *Lashon Kedosha*, noun (*lashon*) + adjective (*kedosha*). (The word *lashon* is an exception to the rules of grammatical gender and is in fact feminine.) The term *Lashon HaKodesh*, “the tongue of the holy” (noun + “of” + definite article + noun it is associated with), indicates that already at the outset it was intended to be the tongue unique to holy matters. The case of Modern Hebrew, its successful revival and (some would say) its corruption, is a complex paradox, to be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

<sup>33</sup> As the verse (Genesis 1:26) states, “Let *us* make man,” in the plural. Rashi (ad loc.) comments that even though the angels did not assist God in the creation of Man, and even though stating “let us make man” in the plural could serve as a proof-text for heretics to say that God did not create Man on His own but with the assistance of others – thereby implying the existence of other deities – nevertheless God wished to teach us respect and humility, and that the one in a more senior position should first seek the counsel of those in more junior positions. That is why it is written in the plural. If God Himself seeks the council of the underlings, how much more so should we, mortal human beings, seek the counsel of others.

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew verb for seeking counsel, נִמְלֶכֶת, *nimlakh*, shares the same root as the word מֶלֶךְ, *melekh*, king. It is by seeking counsel from others prior to making decisions that a king shows himself to be a true king. This is indeed the difference between a *melekh*, a king, and a *moshel*, a ruler. A *moshel* rules by force, whether the people consent to his rule or not, whereas a *melekh* is appointed by the *people* and consults with them. “Any kingdom that does not have advisors is not a true kingdom” (Pirkei d’Rabi Eliezer, ch. 3).

<sup>34</sup> They said, “What is man, that You are mindful of him?” (Psalms 8:4).

him for him to name, and he did so (Genesis 2:19). It was at that point that God remarked to the angels, “His [man’s] wisdom is greater than yours, for he knows how to name.”

What was so profound about Man’s naming of the animals that proves he was wiser than the angels and worthy of having been created? In naming the animals, Man did not choose arbitrary names but names that expressed the animals’ essences. (Incidentally, the names he gave have stuck in *Lashon HaKodesh* till the present day.) Man was shown all the animals and once he understood the essence of each, he named them accordingly. For example, he called the dog a כְּלֵב, *kelev*, a compound word formed from *kulo lev*, “he is all heart” – loyal to its master, man’s best friend; the lion was named אַרְיֵה, *aryeh*, beginning with the letter א, *aleph*, which is not only the first letter of the alphabet but also spells out the word/root אָרַץ which means to train or to teach, as well as אֲלוֹהֵי, master, and the letter ר, *reish*, from the root of *rosh*, meaning head, the lion being the master of the animals, king of the jungle (Mirdash Shochar Tov, Psalms 22:28); and so forth.

This highly specific system of naming is radically different from the randomness of meaningless phonemes strung together. Consider Pinker’s (1994, 158) description:

Sentences and phrases are built out of words, words are built out of morphemes, and morphemes, in turn, are built out of phonemes. Unlike words and morphemes, though, phonemes do not contribute bits of meaning to the whole. The meaning of *dog* is not predictable from the meaning of *d*, the meaning of *o*, the meaning of *g*, and their order. Phonemes are a different kind of linguistic object. They connect outward to speech, not inward to mentalese: a phoneme corresponds to an act of making a sound. A division into independent discrete combinatorial systems, one combining meaningless sounds into meaningful morphemes, the others combining meaningful morphemes into meaningful words, phrases, and sentences, is a fundamental design feature of human language....

Adam’s naming of the animals made use of every letter’s individual and collective significance. Nothing was random, which is why naming required a degree of wisdom unparalleled by any creature, even angels. Indeed, “Man’s first exercise of mastery and demonstration of greatness came when God asked him to give names to all the creatures of the new universe” (Munk 2003, 20).

The Midrash (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana, 4:3; Bereishit Rabbah 17:4) relates further that after Man named all the animals, God turned to him and asked him what *his* name shall be, and he said “Adam, for I have been fashioned from the *adamah* [=earth].”<sup>35</sup> God then asked him what His name should be, and Adam said the Ineffable Name, “for You are the Master of all of Your creations.”<sup>36</sup> Not only does Adam name all the animals and himself, he names God Himself – the Name.

After Adam had named all the animals based on his understanding of each one’s true essence, he became aware that none matched him physically, emotionally, intellectually or spiritually. It was only after he had experienced this existential loneliness of not finding a single partner that God created Eve, the better for him to appreciate. As we saw earlier in chapter 3, inherent in Adam’s act of naming was the realisation not only that he has no comparable mate in the animal kingdom or that he is capable of naming and therefore superior to the animals, but a consciousness of the existential loneliness that having the capacity to language would invoke if there were no human partner with whom to share it.

When Adam named Eve, he said she “shall be called *isha* [woman] because she was taken from *ish* [man]” (Genesis 2:23). Rashi (ad loc.) comments that this is (one) proof that God created the world with *Lashon HaKodesh*, because in *Lashon HaKodesh* the term for woman, אִשָּׁה, *isha*, is derived from the same root as אִישׁ, *ish*. “[m]an and woman [are] designated by words coming from the same root and so regarded from the same trend of thought” (Hirsch 1963, 215).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague notes (Netivot Olam, Netiv HaTorah, 15) that the name Adam stemming from the word *adamah*, earth, is not simply because Man was fashioned from the earth, rather he has (and consequently all his descendants have) earth-like qualities: just as the earth has the ability to actualise the potential inherent within it in making seeds blossom, so too man has the ability to make the soul planted within him, thrive. Rabbi Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz (SheLaH, §1, *Toldot HaAdam*, 3) states that the name Adam stems from the future-inflected verb *edameh*, “to be likened to,” (similar to the words from the verse in Isaiah 14:14, *edameh l’Elyon*, “I will make myself like the Most High”), representing the idea that man has the ability to be like the Divine. In naming himself “Adam,” Man understood that he had the potential to sink low – “dust of the earth” – or be the most exalted creature, by emulating God. This would be achieved through his bringing his inherent potential – his soul, the Divine aspect implanted within his earthly body – to actualisation.

<sup>36</sup> As regards the Ineffable Name, אֱלֹהִים (again, the א has been substituted for the ה), it is comprised of all forms of the verb “to be” – הָיָה *haya*, “was,” in the past; הוּיָהּ, *hoveh*, “is,” in the present, and יִהְיֶה, “will be,” *yihyeh*, in the future. It is never read as written, but is pronounced *Adon-oy* (hyphen inserted to avoid writing the Name), plural of “master,” representing His mastery over all living things. (Though when referring to God outside of sacred contexts such as Torah study, reciting verses or blessings, etc., the term “Hashem” is used, literally, “the Name.”) The Ineffable Name represents the idea that only One Who can “be” in existence at all times – past, present and future – simultaneously – is the true Master of the World.

<sup>37</sup> I make quite a number of references to Hirsch’s commentary in chapter 4, as well as one in chapter 5, and so it should be pointed out here that some modern philologists (e.g. Barry Levy) have rejected

The words designating “man” and “woman” are essentially the same, both comprised of the *aleph* (א) and the *shin* (ש). Where they differ is in the additional letter each contains: woman has the *heh* (ה) and man has the *yud* (י), which together spell out God’s Name, יה-י. This idea of two halves complementing each other to form a greater whole is a cornerstone of Judaism, and permeates Hebrew – a highly gendered language.<sup>38</sup> Specifically regarding the union of man and woman in marriage, the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 17a) states that if they are deserving, the Divine dwells among them (represented by the *yud* in *ish*, man, and the *heh* in *isha*, woman, forming God’s Name); if they are not deserving, a “fire” – spelled by the remaining *aleph* and *shin*, אש, *eish*) consumes them – meaning, the results are disastrous.<sup>39</sup>

*Lashon HaKodesh* contains many such examples that demonstrate how each word and root thereof not only represents but *embodies* its designated concept. One cannot rename something (or someone) without changing its essence. Tampering with the language would inevitably mean changing the meaning of things, which would result in a multiplicity of perceptions.

That is, essentially, what happened at the Tower of Babel (to be discussed below), after which there was no longer an absolute, singularly Divine truth of things but a

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Hirsch’s system, going so far as to say that it is “totally unacceptable to any scientific appreciation of the dynamics of language” (Levy 1983, 148).

However bear in mind that Hirsch was foremost a Jewish philosopher, secondary to which he was a philologist insofar as this complemented his philosophy. He was not a linguist in the strict sense. He felt no need to compare Hebrew with other Semitic languages, for example. His commitment was to elucidate the Torah’s literal meaning, from within, and it is from this viewpoint that his linguistic and etymological discussions proceed. Or, to use Bronznick’s (2007, 49) terminology, Hirsch “min[ed] the Hebrew Language for ideological nuggets” and his milieu is one of “philosophical etymology (50) or (better yet, says Bronznick), “ideological semantics” (51). I personally have not come across any instance in which Hirsch’s elucidation of roots does not comply with his scientific system, even in cases where seemingly opposed or unrelated meanings are shown to cohere in the same root. For more on Hirsch’s methods, see Elias, J. 1996. *The Nineteen Letters*. New York: Feldheim Publishers, pp. 23-25; Lesser, A.H. 1999. “Samson Raphael Hirsch’s Use of Hebrew Etymology,” in Horbury, W. (ed.), *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, pp. 271-278; and Bronznick, N.M. 2007. “Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch as Bible Commentator,” in Shmidman, M.A. (ed.) *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature Presented to Dr. Bernard Lander*. New York: Ktav, pp. 29-56, and specifically pp. 49-53 therein, concerning Hirsch’s philological analysis.

<sup>38</sup> The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 8:1) notes that Man was an androgynous being, and only afterward was Man split into separate male and female beings, when God took one “side” of Man to fashion Eve. (The Hebrew word צֵלָה, *tsela*, generally (mis)translated as “rib,” in fact means a “facet” or “side.” This corresponds with the Kabbalistic idea that all things have both male and female aspects.)

<sup>39</sup> Taking this one step further, precisely that which is *different* between the male and female is what allows space for the Divine, spelled out by their respective *yud* and *heh*. In today’s postmodern climate, where God is cut out of the picture and woman and man are equated at the expense of their individuation, what remains is the all-consuming fire (אש) of mindless egalitarianism that sacrifices identity on the altar of sameness.

range of interpretation, in many diverse languages.<sup>40</sup> To understand the tragedy of the Tower of Babel, how things were before, what happened afterward, and what this means for us now, let us first explore the importance of truth in the Judaic view.

#### 4.4.3. Truth: The foundation of the world

The significance of *Lashon HaKodesh* being an essential, Divine language rather than a man-made, agreed-upon one is that in such a language, where Signifier and Signified are meant to cohere, truth is a founding principle.

The nature of truth, like the nature of any object in *Lashon HaKodesh*, is expressed in its name: אֵמֶת, *emeth*, is comprised of an *aleph*, *mem* and *tav*, the first, middle and last letters of the *aleph-bet*, underscoring the idea that truth must be the beginning, end and centre (i.e. the entirety) of all things. It is absolute, all-encompassing and exclusive – “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” God is called Truth (see Jeremiah 10:10) and His seal – meaning that with which He leaves His imprint on the world – is called Truth (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 55a); He is absolute, all-encompassing and exclusive.

God wished to imprint His seal of Truth on the world already at Creation, as truth constituted the word’s foundation. A seal, like a stamp or signature, is representative of something larger. Just as a State Department’s seal on official documents represents the country standing behind it, so too God wished to imprint His seal on the world, that we emulate Him and be, on earth, the representation of a much larger “He.”<sup>41</sup> This is alluded to in the last letters of the first three words of the Book of Genesis ברא אלקים, *Bereishit bara Elokim*, “In the beginning God created,” which, permuted, spell out the word אֵמֶת, *emeth*, “truth,” and appearing again in the concluding three words of the first chapter of Genesis – the chapter of Creation – ברא לעשות אלקים, *bara Elokim la’asot*, “[which] God created to [continue to] function,”<sup>42</sup> which also spell out *emeth*, “truth.”<sup>43</sup> The whole process of Creation, which was

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<sup>40</sup> Note that, as stated earlier, the lack of clarity came into the world already with the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, after which things were clouded. However there was still the unity of one language – *Lashon HaKodesh*. That changed following the Tower of Babel.

<sup>41</sup> There is another explanation for God’s seal, or signature, being truth: just as an artist signs off a painting only when it is complete, so too God’s “signature” on His artwork – the world – can only be visible after its completion, at the End of Days (to be discussed in the concluding chapter). In other words, we only come to see the signature once we can glimpse the world-picture in its entirety.

<sup>42</sup> See footnote 3 in chapter 5 for elucidation on the concept of the world having been created in order to continue to function.

<sup>43</sup> The letter מ, *mem*, is identical to the letter נ, (the *m* sound); the ם is the form of the letter used at the end of a word.

carried out by God's utterances, from beginning to end, is premised on Truth. Hence the medium used for Creation was *Lashon HaKodesh* – a language which leaves no room for arbitrary meaning.

Earlier I mentioned the Midrash which relates how when God wished to create Man, He took counsel with the ministering angels, who objected, and God demonstrated Man's mastery over them in his ability to name. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah, 8:5) relates another objection stated by the ministering angels when God was about to create Man:

R' Simon said: When the Holy One, Blessed Be He, came to create Man, the ministering angels formed themselves into [different] groups. Some said he must not be created and others said he should be. As it is written (Psalms 85: 10) "Lovingkindness and truth have come together, justice and peace have kissed." [The angels representing] lovingkindness said "let him be created, for he performs acts of kindness"; [the angels representing] truth said "let him not be created, for he is full of lies." [The angels representing] Justice said "let him be created, for he performs acts of justice," and [the angels representing] Peace said "let him not be created, for he is quarrelsome." What did God do? He took truth and cast it to the ground. As the verse (Daniel 8:12) states, "Truth was cast down to the ground." The ministering angels said before the Holy One, "Master of the Worlds, why do you degrade Your seal with which You are adorned? Let Truth arise from the earth!" As it says (Psalms 85:11), "Truth shall spring up from the earth"... While the ministering angels were arguing with each other and disputing one another, the Holy One Blessed Be He created Man. God said to them, "Why are you arguing? Man has already been created."

This seminal Midrash teaches two things: a) The importance of truth to the Divine mission, and b) the way humanity is to go about attaining truth. Let us see how.

God wished to create Man but (some of) the angels objected – and with good reason. Man, they said, was full of lies – and quarrelsome besides. Four groups are mentioned in the Midrash: Lovingkindness, Truth, Justice and Peace. Truth and Peace objected, and Lovingkindness and Justice approved; two against two, a tie.

God believed in Man's ability to rise above his limitations, and so He wished to create him nonetheless. He therefore needed to "tip the scales," as it were, in favour of

Lovingkindness and Justice. (Peace, by its very nature, can be made peace with; it is amenable and open to compromise. But Truth is absolute, immovable.) God, being Truth, could not create anything that would be untrue or result in an untruth. How could He use Truth to create Man in His image, if man could be untruthful, if man could live a lie? Particularly as Man would be granted the faculty of speech with which he could thwart Truth, how could God take such a risk? Yet God believed in Man's inherent ability to seek the truth, be truthful and elevate truth back to its source. That is why, although He "cast it down" to earth in order to get it out of His way, so that He could create man, He cast it *down*, not *away*: He cast it down to the ground – to Earth – for Man to bring it back to its Source. Truth had to "sacrifice" itself, so to speak, so that Man could be created. Therefore Truth mandates that Man use his Godly-ness – having been created in God's image, with free will and the ability to speak – to be loyal to the Truth, to seek it and never pervert it.

The second message in this Midrash is that no human can arrive at the absolute truth on his own, for God alone is privy to the absolute truth.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this is why the Midrash, in discussing the importance of truth and how Man was created on the assumption that he would seek it, begins with a discussion of God consulting with the angels. In this act of humbly consulting with His creations, God was instructing human beings to consult with others, in order to view matters from multiple points of view and arrive as close to the holistic truth as is possible, even if they cannot attain the ultimate truth. Only the One Who has always been in existence, and who will always be in existence, and can be everywhere at once, can know the whole truth.<sup>45</sup> As the saying attributed alternately to Aristotle or Rabbi Yosef Albo, author of the *Sefer Halkarim*, goes, *ilu yeda'tiv – hayitiv*, "If I were to know Him, I'd be Him." A similar idea is expressed by the Kosari (1972, 5 §21) "If we were able to grasp God's nature, it would indicate a lack in Him."

The Jerusalem Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 1:1) and the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 51:3; Tanhuma, Va'eira §16) state that any place where Scripture says *VaHashem*, "**And** God [for example "And God did X"]", it refers to God and His

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<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note that before giving testimony in court, witnesses have traditionally been asked to swear that they will "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," the implication being that it is possible to tell only *part* of the truth and not all of it, or to tell the truth but add other untruthful facts. Absolute truth is so specific that when requested of humans, the request needs such qualifying.

<sup>45</sup> This is reflected in God's Ineffable Name; see footnote 36 above.

heavenly court. Thus, when the verse (Jeremiah 10:10) says “**And** the L-rd God is Truth,” although it would seem a contradiction since God alone is Truth and no other, the implication is that He is truth *because* He seeks the counsel of others. He will ultimately do what He deems necessary (as we saw with the creation of Man), but will consult with those under Him. The message in this is that there can be no truth from a singular perspective, and therefore, in order for human beings to arrive as close as possible to the truth, we must seek the council of others.

To connect this with our earlier thesis sketched in Part I, this seeking the counsel of others as the key to a holistic truth represents a unity of the metaphor-less HLC and the metaphor-full HHH: the ultimate truth of words is when their meanings are unequivocal – not because they are exclusive to all other definitions but because they are all-encompassing of every possible definition represented by that word. As we will see in chapter 7, this status of truth has not yet been attained, and cannot be attained until the collapsing of time and space at the End of Days. At that point all the meanings inherent in words will be compressed into one focal point of truth and multiplicity will vanish – not because of words’ exclusivity, rather because they are all-inclusive. Though we haven’t yet reached that stage of unequivocal truth, we are mandated to work constantly toward it. Why is truth so important? Or, put differently, what does Judaism see as so terrible about a lie?

#### **4.4.4. Truth as the foundation of a moral society**

The simple answer is that, given the understanding that words are a creative force, by speaking falsehood one creates falsehood. A falsehood on a micro, individual level can be withstood; on a macro or societal level, it is disastrous. As Prager (2014) has said, “Virtually all the great societal evils, such as African slavery, Nazism and Communism, have been based on lies.” People who lived in such societies, or were even leaders in such societies, might have been very good people in their personal interactions. They might have been loving and caring, and had a well-developed sense of justice. But they were all living a big lie, and committed the most horrendous atrocities in the name of that lie. While an individual may perpetrate evil, the only way evil can spread and take place across whole societies is by the perpetuation of and belief in lies en masse: “Mass evil is committed not because a vast number of people seek to be cruel, but because they are fed lies that convince them that what is evil is actually good” (ibid).

Evil finds a safe haven in a society that does not uphold truth as an ultimate value. That is why truth is among the Ten Commandments, the rudiments laying the foundation for the proper conduct and governance of civilised society: “Though shalt not bear false witness.”<sup>46</sup> Giving false testimony is such a serious offence that the sentence of someone who bears false witness is the same sentence as would have been given to the person on trial, had the false witness’ testimony been believed.<sup>47</sup>

Though individuals may lie or espouse a lie as a personal belief, on a societal scale this can have disastrous consequences. Thus, although God could not create Man without casting Truth down, He expects Man to bring Truth back to its source; as if to say, I had to set truth aside in order to create you, therefore it is incumbent upon you to ensure that you are truthful and that truth remains a supreme societal value. A society wherein everything is relative and it’s all about subjective “narrative” is a society that will ultimately come to reject the idea of an outside, absolute truth. This is, essentially, what happened at the Tower of Babel, from whence all nations and varied languages branched off.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4.4.5. The Tower of Babel: humanity’s destruction and rebuilding through language**

In creating the world with *Lashon HaKodesh*, and then giving the language – and the ability to use it – to Man, with which to name everything, God imparted to humanity a

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<sup>46</sup> Note the Seforno’s commentary (ad loc.) that this commandment is not referring merely to courtroom testimony but to any untrue speech.

<sup>47</sup> In his commentary on Song of Songs (4:5), Rashi comments that each of the Commandments on the right Tablet is linked conceptually to its parallel commandment on the left – the first with the sixth, the second with the seventh, the third with the eighth, and so on. The Commandment not to bear false witness thus parallels the Sabbath. Sabbath observance is a testimony to the fact that God created the world in six days (see Exodus 20:11). Indeed, the Midrash states that one who bears false witness in court might come to deny God’s creation of the world. Based on what we have stated earlier, the connection is clear: one who undermines truth undermines the very foundation of the world and the very Founder – God himself, the Ultimate Truth.

<sup>48</sup> This is not to imply that truth resides solely with Hebrew as we know it. While Modern Hebrew is close to the original *Lashon HaKodesh*, the two are not the same at all. In fact, Modern Hebrew is a corruption of *Lashon HaKodesh*. (I will return to this point in chapter 6.) The ultimate Truth inheres only in the original, Adamic language, lost to us now. Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 84) notes that the real essence of the Hebrew language was lost when prophecy was lost: “[D]uring the era of *prophecy*, during that period when the higher world was manifest in the lower, when a clear vision of the transcendent was constant, when flesh and blood heard the Divine word, when the material was comfortable host to the spirit, Hebrew was the language of the everyday because the *everyday was elevated*, the mundane revealed the holy. There was not the degree of schism that we experience today, the war between flesh and spirit that is now the norm. While the Temple stood the Jewish people centered around a focus of spirit within the physical, and their everyday speech was invested with an elevation that the voice of prophecy makes natural.” And further, he notes, “Now that our language has broken down we have only shards of the original language in our Hebrew and in our language in general; but in essence language and reality are one” (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 88).

Divine conception of the world and everything in it. Thus, *Lashon HaKodesh* at that time was unequivocal. Humanity had a unified perception of the world and everything in it. Signifier and signified were explicit and not reducible to the simplistic: since Man had the Divine conception of things, his perception was all-encompassing; he had *all* the elements of the sign-vehicle, and could deduce which was most applicable to the signified in any given context. There was no platonic cave and world outside the cave; the world was a unified whole, the relation of parable and metaphor to object – complete and clear. With all the tools at his disposal to translate the signs, Man could ascertain the Divine will of each object. There was no moral relativism to cloud Divine will.

However, that changed with the Tower of Babel. As Olender (1997, 51-52) puts it, “It was there that the immediacy and translucency of the Adamic language was lost; it was there that sounds and sense mingled and clashed, spawning a plurality of tongues opaque to one another.”

What happened at the Tower of Babel is generally understood as a “mixing up” of languages to the point where one could not understand the language of another and so they ceased to build the tower which they had envisioned would reach the heavens. However based on the commentaries, it is evident that the story is much more complicated and pivotal than a mere linguistic mix-up. To understand what happened, we must ask the following questions, bearing in mind the Judaic supposition that no word in the Pentateuch is extraneous:

- What was the people’s goal – and sin – in building the tower?
- Why did they choose to settle specifically in a barren plain, having migrated from the East?
- Why did they fear being scattered all over the globe?
- Lastly, why were they punished specifically with a mixing up of language?

The verse introducing the story of the building of the Tower of Babel states that up until that point “the whole earth was of one language and of uniform words” (Genesis 11:1). Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher, known by the title of his commentary as the Ba’al HaTurim (ad loc.), asserts that they were all speaking *Lashon HaKodesh*, as deduced from the fact that the numerical value (*gematria*) of the words *safa ahat*, “one language” (mentioned in the verse, “the whole earth was of *one language*”), is

the same as that of *Lashon HaKodesh*.<sup>49</sup> Rabbi Barukh HaLevi Epstein, known by the title of his commentary as the Torah Temimah (ad loc.), is of the opinion that every nation had its own language, in addition to which they spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* as well.

However, according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1963), when the verse states that “the whole earth was of one language and of uniform words,” it does not mean that they all spoke the same language – the proof is that already prior to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 10:5) Scripture states that “From these the islands of the nations were separated in their lands – each according to its language,<sup>50</sup> by their families, in their nations” – in other words, they were already speaking different languages (or at least different dialects).

Hirsch comments that the “spreading out” described in Chapter 10 was natural, and not the “forcible scattering” that we find later on following the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11. He bases this understanding on two distinctions between the verses: a) the verse in 10:5 states that the peoples each separated לְלִשְׁוֹנָם, *lilshono*, “to their dialect,” not בְּלִשְׁוֹנָם, *bilshono*, “according to/based on their dialect” – in other words, the difference in communication described here was the *outcome* of their natural growth, spreading out, and consequent separation, not the impetus for it; and b) the word לָשׁוֹן, *lashon*, dialect, is used in this verse, whereas the term שָׂפָה, *safa*, language, is used by the Tower of Babel. Here, the emerging of different languages/dialects was a natural consequence of humanity multiplying and spreading out to different areas, with different climatic conditions inevitably engendering the evolution of different lexicons based on what the people needed to name; hence, different dialects, not different languages. The language – and more importantly, the worldview it encompassed – was still the same; as the verse describes, “the whole earth was of one language and of uniform words.”

Thus, whether we take the Baal HaTurim’s assertion that they spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*, the Torah Temimah’s opinion that the people each spoke their own language as well as *Lashon HaKodesh*, or Rabbi Hirsch’s that they were speaking different dialects which resulted from their respective environments and natural conditions, they were still able to understand each other. Beyond the ability to understand each other and communicate, humanity was in full agreement as to what

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<sup>49</sup>794 and 795, respectively; according to the rules of *gematria*, the total can be one off.

<sup>50</sup> Note that in Hirsch’s translation he refers to language as “dialect.”

words meant and what they represented. In other words, even if they spoke different dialects – or, if we take *lashon* to mean language literally and that they spoke different languages – they still had a uniform perception of things.

Every spoken word is a joining together of several sounds, both, as expressing a thought which is combining several characteristics to form one conception (a conception itself designates the combination of several characteristics), and, as the contents of sentences and speeches, the combination of several thoughts to the expression of one complete idea...the whole human race was still harmoniously in unison, for good and for bad, both organically and mentally.

(Hirsch 1963, 204-205)

But this unity of vision – this clarity of purpose – was short lived. With Nimrod’s lust for power, this unity of vision eventually became a vision of unity – *unity for its own sake*. The people sought to break away from the Divine and create their own, independent artificial community. Thus they said, “We shall make ourselves a name” (Genesis 11:4), in doing away with The Name. That is why they had migrated from the East (*Kedem*), which the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah, §38) explains means they sought to move away from God (*Kadmono Shel Olam*, “The First of the World”). The new generation sought to leave the old, natural way of doing things and running their lives; they wished to form a political affiliation under a political leader. Hence they found a barren plain, without natural resources, where they had to fashion their own mortar and stones for construction: they wished to harness the natural world for their purposes and thereby demonstrate that they had no need for God. By breaking away from the Source of Truth, they opened up the door for multiplicity and misinterpretation.

#### **4.4.5.1. *The inherent danger of the polity reigning supreme***

Human endeavour to utilize nature and improve it is a desirable thing – indeed, God expects humanity to develop the existing world further, as we have stated previously regarding the world being constructed from a set of “building blocks” capable of infinite combinations. However when the community comes together *for the sake of the community*, when community becomes an end in itself rather than the betterment of the individuals therein and to serve a higher purpose, it collapses under the weight of its own self-importance.

[T]he community only stands there as the flower of perfection if it takes the same stand towards God as the individual should, if like the individual, it does not consider itself above the Law of God, if it uses the power with which the united forces of the community invest it, only in the service of God, and looks on its mission as nothing other than to fulfil the service of God with the combined forces of the community more completely and more perfectly than lies in the power of the individual.

(Hirsch 1963, 207)

The danger inherent in a community establishing itself, says Hirsch, is that while an individual's power is limited (and he knows it), the community's power is less so – and is even more dangerous when led by a dictator (such as Nimrod). The community “easily comes to regard itself as the purpose of its existence, and the establishment of itself as its mission, as if the individual has importance only for the community” (ibid). When the community is an end in itself, the people therein have no value; they are “merely a pawn for the use of the community.” As the Midrash (Pirkei d'Rabi Eliezer, §26) relates, if someone at the building site at the Tower of Babel died as a result of a building accident, they did not pay any attention. But if a brick fell they wept and said, “when will we get another one up to replace the one that fell?” The community reigned supreme, Nimrod reigned supreme, and so the individual no longer had any value other than his role in building the community.

We can now understand their fear, “lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). If the purpose of establishing the community was to help the individuals therein and thereby be greater than the sum of their individual parts – to “enable the laws of morality to be fulfilled in a higher and more perfect degree” (Hirsch 1963, 208) – then they should not have feared being scattered nor sought to form a community by artificial means; if their focus was God then their connection would have been maintained regardless of where they were. But they were interested neither in God nor in the individual as God's microcosmic representation on earth, only in the community *qua* community.

With this [wanting to make a name for themselves], with the introduction of this false, so-called patriotism, with the unchaining of the lust for fame which in the individual is considered as a vice, but nationally as a virtue, the whole moral mission of states and individuals

is undermined...the whole of world-history has, for the greatest part, to relate only of such building of towers of imaginary glory for which Nimrods have understood how to lure and force the nations

(ibid., 208-209)

In a similar vein, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, known by his Hebrew acronym as the Netziv, (1975, on Genesis 11:1), explains that their fear of being scattered all over the globe is directly related to their being united in common purpose. Because they were all of “one mind,” as it were, the powerful among them feared dissenting views. That is why they built the tower in the first place – to stand guard and keep a watchful eye on anyone who might formulate a different opinion and leave the community. That is why God stopped them from completing the tower: He did not wish for them to be “of one mind” nor be under dictatorial rule, but to each have the freedom to think as they wished and to develop their own views, formulated upon their God-given unified perception of things.

And that is why God punished them specifically by scattering them and confounding their communication. They sought to prevent people from dissent, and so they were dispersed; they sought to claim the ultimate unity – as embodied only by God – for themselves, and so He divided them upon the earth; they should have used their unified perception of things as represented by their God-given language, but they didn’t, and so their language was confounded: if speaking one language brought them no good, they were no longer deserving of language’s unifying power and so it was taken away.

Thus, it was only natural that in reaction to the overemphasis on the polity reigning supreme came “the awakening of the consciousness of the individual of himself which made subjective caprice oppose the objective viewpoint which hitherto had been given him” (Hirsch 1963, 215). The individuals within the community were stirred by a sense that all people should be free to exercise their own free will, and no one individual had the right to rule over others.

[S]uch decentralisation is then the only means of saving humaneness in man. The subjectiveness, this feeling of oneself which names things, not according to the will of a forcing community, but just as they appear to oneself, would be the new element...which God allowed to awake so disintegratingly in the minds and hence in the speech of mankind.

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“Community,” which should have served as the medium to enhance the connection between humanity and God, was used to separate between the two. In rebelling against that very community, man *could* have come closer to God, but he didn’t. Instead of re-establishing the connection to the Divine, man focused exclusively on the individual *qua* individual. This individualization of the world brought about new names for concepts that were theretofore agreed upon:

The one would call something by quite a different name just out of spite, for independence shows itself in obstinacy of thought, of one’s own way of looking at things which is synonymous with obstinacy in the way one calls things. *Later on, in the course of history, every centralisation begins with robbing the language of its own special peculiarities.*<sup>51</sup>

(ibid., italics mine)

What emerges, then, is that the dispersion was not the result of a mix-up of languages, rather the decentralizing of government and a singular viewpoint inherent in a shared language, which eventually brought about a multitude of languages.

#### **4.4.5.2. *The withering of language***

Judaism maintains that Divine punishment a) is meted out *mida k’neged mida*, “measure for measure” – in other words, the punishment is directly related to the sin committed and is not an arbitrary burst of Divine anger, and b) constitutes a particular set of constraining circumstances or challenges put in the way of the one being punished so that he can overcome them and thus attain the pre-sin status. Given that, what was the measure-for-measure punishment evident here, and what unique circumstances were created in scattering the people all over the globe, which would enable them to rectify their wrongdoing and attain their prior status?

In the verse describing God’s intention to punish the builders of the Tower (Genesis 11:7), the verb וַנְבַלְלֵם, *venavla* is used, generally translated as “let us ‘confuse’ [or ‘mix up’] their language.”<sup>52</sup> However Hirsch contends that this cannot be the meaning of the word, grammatically and conceptually. Grammatically, the word comes from the root נ/ב/ל, *n/v/l*, which means to wither, not ל/ב/ל, *b/l/l*, which means to confuse or mix up. (The root ל/ב/ל, *b/l/l* to “mix up,” does appear at the end

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<sup>51</sup> See the quotes from Anne Michaels in Chapter 6 for a poignant example of this vis-à-vis Nazi manipulation of language.

<sup>52</sup> Note that here, too, we find God consulting with the angels, as evidenced by the use of the plural, *venavla* rather than *ve’evlah*.

of the story of the Tower of Babel, and is the root of “Babel,” which was thus named because of what ultimately transpired there, but it is not the root of the verb *venavla* found here.) Conceptually, the meaning cannot be to “mix up” because up until this point they were all speaking one language (or many languages, but with one common language spoken by all, in addition to their respective languages). A mix-up of language would only be possible if they were speaking *different* languages and they all came together trying to communicate ineffectively.

According to Hirsch’s system of phonetic cognates (see Clark, [1999, 293-301]), the root ל/ב/ג, *n/v/l* is related to ל/פ/ג, *n/f/l*, to fall. Something withers once it is cut off from its source of vitality, and eventually falls off (think, for example, of a flower). The “withering of language” that took place here, and humanity’s subsequent fall, was the result of a disconnect between language – *Lashon HaKodesh* – and its source, God Who gave it to them.

Divine justice mandated that they be punished measure for measure: they sought to create an artificial community that was above all else – Man, God – to distance themselves from the Divine and thereby prove they did not need Him, and so He caused their source of language to become withered. This would inevitably lead them to *have* to create man-made communities and man-made language, the result of which would be many countries speaking vastly different languages and espousing radically differing worldviews as a result.

So long as one was in agreement over things in general and this agreement had been given by a higher sanction, in short, as long as the language was objective and not subjective, for so long the language would be based on the actual permanent nature and purpose of things and not on the way each individual looked at them... All there is in the teachings of right and morality, of physics and metaphysics is nothing more than the conception of what things are and what they should be, and all this would be laid down in the language... For it is only when we call things by their right names that Truth remains clear and not clouded for us.<sup>53</sup>

(Hirsch 1963, 214-215)

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<sup>53</sup> Recall our discussion at the conclusion of chapter 3, concerning the importance of definitions (with the examples of abortion and democracy).

That which they feared most and sought to pre-empt – the scattering abroad upon the whole Earth – is exactly what happened. And as a result of being scattered, they developed different languages and cultures. They became entirely different, *disunited* peoples who would now have to bridge far more than just a language barrier. Humanity failed in its mission to bring truth back to its source, and so it was scattered across the globe following which having a uniform language – let alone a unified worldview – became that much more difficult to achieve.

Humanity sought to “overpower” God, and instituted an artificial political system in order to do so. Therefore God dispersed them into separate societies where they would have to create political systems to protect themselves against each other, engage in commerce, etc. God challenged them with a multilingual world, calling humanity to rise above its new limitation and see how people could advance society, individually and collectively, despite their differing worldviews and, operating *within* this multiplicity, seek a unified truth. They could enrich each other’s worldviews by sharing their language and inherent multiple perspectives, or they could reduce the role of language to the banal by creating an artificial brotherhood of common purpose – an Orwellian “Newspeak”<sup>54</sup>; the choice would be theirs.

Would the ideal situation, then, be that all people speak the same language? No, not in the present, post-paradisiacal world. In *this* world, diversity of language is one of humanity’s greatest assets: “[E]very language is a unique representation of the human experience, and every extinguished language makes humanity that much poorer” (Kelly and Zetzsche 2012, 30). When such linguistic diversity is valued and upheld, as Whorf, Fishman’s  $W_3$  and Taylor would have it, multilingualism will have served its purpose in creating a worldview that is much larger and richer than the sum of its parts. But when it is used to foster “otherness,” or alternatively when linguistic difference is downplayed or ignored in the name of an artificial polity imposed for the sole purpose of “community,” not only does a unified language and “being of one mine” serve no purpose, it is counterproductive; we will not have justified multilingualism having come into existence.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

We have explored the connection between the Judaic conception of language and linguistic relativity, the moral and particularist bases thereof, and the Divine

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<sup>54</sup> The reader is referred to George Orwell’s classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

conception of language and *Lashon HaKodesh* in particular. We have seen how central truth is in the Judaic view, and what happens when humanity attempts to create an artificial, unified “truth” in the polity rather than seeking the genuine truth in a higher power outside of itself; how far humanity has strayed from bringing truth back to its Source, and how the resulting multiplicity of views is the closest humanity can come to finding the ultimate truth. Just as God consulted with His angels (concerning the creation of Man and the scattering of the people at the Tower of Babel), He expects humanity to exercise humility in considering our worldview from multiple perspectives and ultimately espousing one that is aligned with our Divine mission; a universalism that is premised on particularism.

History has been neither clean nor pretty. It has been one long succession of nations literally and figuratively not speaking each other’s language, and differing so radically in their worldviews – politically, socially, economically and morally. The twentieth century – the bloodiest in world history – was rife with dictatorships upholding centralised governance as the ultimate virtue and the only truth, wishing to impose one worldview on millions of people, quashing any dissenting views and waging war to assert their worldview at all costs. As Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood succinctly put it, “War is what happens when language fails.” The twenty-first century, in turn, has seen the rise of new Nimrods who seek to impose artificial polities bent on eliminating dissenting views and committing the most horrific atrocities “in the name of God” and imposing His supposed “truth.” On the flipside, we are seeing new trends in atheism that, in retaliation against evil perpetrated in the name of God, seek to eliminate Him entirely, that “cut[s] [it]self off from the root which should hand down...all the human wisdom from its divine source...throwing [it]self into the arms of a vague pathless subjective life” (Hirsch 1963, 216).

As I mentioned in the discussion of protoplay and endpoint pleasure toward the end of chapter 3, in Judaic thought each millennium parallels a day of the six days of Creation, totalling 6000 years of history after which the seventh millennium will herald a new era. The events of history are on a course to bring humanity from its downfall to its rectification at the End of Days.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, in Judaic sources this rectification is described as a unity and purity of language. As the prophet Zephaniah (3:9) states, “At that time I will restore to the people a pure language, that they may

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<sup>55</sup> What this means vis-à-vis language in our time will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

call upon the Name of the Lord and serve Him united in purpose.” And as the prophet Zachariah (14:9) states, “The Lord will be king over the whole earth and on that day the Lord will be one and His Name will be one.” There will no longer be a disparity between the Name and the Named, Signifier and Signified; meaning will no longer be arbitrary or socially constructed and imposed, but inherent and unified. With God and His Name being One, no nation or individual will be able to commit atrocities in His Name, and no nation or individual will espouse an artificial atheism as the seemingly only antidote to religious fanaticism. That is the nature of God’s seal, or signature, of truth: just as an artist signs his handiwork only upon its completion, so too will God’s “signature” on the world only be visible when history is complete and the full picture emerges.

With this understanding does an observant Jew march (or plod) on through history, knowing that every event therein has its purpose in the world’s rectification and that he stands simultaneously within and outside of history. With exilic consciousness of an imperfect world in which truth is not evident but which is moving all the while toward a state of perfection, he knows that history will take care of itself but that this does not absolve him of his personal responsibility to bring truth back to its source, and that his personal actions have a redemptive quality and are part of the world’s advancing toward the end-point goal of truth’s revelation. Let us now explore how this worldview of language and its role in history come into play in the daily Jewish practice.

## CHAPTER V: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: LANGUAGE IN DAILY PRACTICE

The previous chapter discussed the Judaic view of the Hebrew language – and the ability to “language,” in general – as sourced with the Divine, and speech being humanity’s mark of distinction; the moral basis and particularist framework for the Judaic view’s affinity toward linguistic relativity; the oligosynthetic nature of *Lashon HaKodesh* and its reflection of the idea that all things return to Source; and the role of language in Creation, humanity’s downfall at the Tower of Babel vis-à-vis language and humanity’s mandate to rise from it.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how such a view of language-as-Divine plays out in Judaism – in halakha, lore and practice, in line with Lucy’s (1997) discursive relativity.<sup>1</sup> Whereas this chapter aims to show the link between the Jewish people and language on a micro, individual level, the next chapter will demonstrate this link on a macro, historical-collective level; as we will see in the next chapter, there is something uncanny about the revival of the Hebrew language, and I argue that its revival cannot be viewed in isolation from the history of the Jewish people’s survival throughout the ages.

### 5.1. Language as a Creative Force

There are several areas where the conception of language as sourced with the Divine is evident in Judaism, notably in the realms of Torah study and prayer, which I discuss more at length below. The implication of language being sourced with the Divine is that language is a creative force. The verse (Isaiah 51:16) states, “Say to Zion, you are My people,” which the Zohar (Tikkunei Zohar, Introduction, 5) interprets, “Do not read [the word] *ami*, ‘My people,’ rather *imi*, ‘with Me.’ Just as I create heaven and earth with words, so [can] you do.”

As stated in the previous chapter, in the Judaic view God created the world *ex nihilo* – perfectly, singly, and by His word. (Orthodox Jews acknowledge this numerous times a day, in the *Shehakol* blessing said before drinking and before eating certain types of foods<sup>2</sup>: “Blessed are You, Hashem our God, *by Whose word all things*

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that “discursive relativity” is the idea that the linguistic relativity hypothesis not only relates to grammar and semantics but to the way a culture uses and relates to the use of language at large.

<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, the *Shehakol* blessing is said on foods not categorised under the food groups of wine/grape juice, breads, grains, fruits, and vegetables, which have their own blessings.

came to be”; likewise the opening line of the *Barukh She’amar* prayer said daily in the morning states *Barukh she’amar vehaya ha’olam*, “Blessed is He Who spoke, and the world came into being.”) Judaism maintains that not only did God create the world, He created it to continue to function. As the verse at the conclusion of Creation states (Genesis 2:3), “God blessed the seventh day, and He declared it to be holy, for it was on this day that God ceased from all the work that He had been creating,” which Kaplan (1985) translates “...for it was on this day that God ceased from all the work that He had been creating [so that it would continue] to function.”<sup>3</sup> After He finished Creation, God handed over the medium – speech – to Man.

Thus we can understand why the Hebrew verb used for God’s utterances with which he created the world is *amira*, to make an utterance/statement, rather than *dibbur*, to speak/talk. The difference between *amira* and *dibbur*, explains Hirsch (on Leviticus 21:1), is that *amira* refers to a complete and specific statement, while *dibbur* refers to speech that is more condensed and is intended to be continued in discussion. God said (*vayomer*), ‘let there be light,’ and it *became*; it was actualised completely. In contrast to God’s utterances at Creation, which were complete and made Creation perfect, the Ten Commandments are called *dibrot*, the form of speech meant to be continued, because the Jewish people were meant to develop these principles further. The Written Torah – the Ten Commandments – are the *dibrot*, whereas the expansion of those ideas, transmitted in the Oral Torah which completes the written one, is referred to as *amira*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kaplan (1985) inserts the bracketed “so that it would continue,” based on his insightful understanding of the word *la’asot* “to do,” at the end of the verse; in other words, everything God created in order “to do” (not just to “be”). In the Judaic view the world was not left to its own devices after Creation; rather, God re-creates it anew every day, as stated in the daily morning prayers: “In His goodness He renews, daily, perpetually, the work of Creation.” According to the Kabbalists, although God re-creates it anew, He “minimised” Himself in the world in order to enable people to exist and exercise free will, which would not be possible were He openly revealed.

In this context, it is interesting to note the Talmud’s (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 15:3) assertion that ideally we should have been silent on the Sabbath (to the point of not even greeting another[!]), but for the sake of human interaction and peace the Sages permitted it, though barely so. The upshot of this Talmudic statement is that we are not to speak idle words on the Sabbath. Given that language is a creative force and that man’s speech thus emulates the divine, and that the Sabbath attests to God’s having created the world in six days and having rested on the seventh, the connection is clear: we refrain from speaking idly because on the Sabbath we desist from creating, and so specifically on the day of rest we must be extra careful with our words.

<sup>4</sup> Hirsch (ibid.) explains that this is the meaning of the title “Amora” given to the second generation of Talmudic Sages. It derives from the same root as *amira*, referring to those who completed the words of the Written Torah by their elucidation of the Oral Torah.

### 5.1.1. Naming: speaking into being

As stated in the previous chapter, following Creation God bequeathed to Man the ability to speak and tasked him with naming all the creatures He had just created, as if to say, “I have finished creating everything you need in order for you to continue to create, with your words.” In naming the animals based on his understanding of their essence, Adam paved the way for future naming as representative of essence.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, naming is one area where Man’s ability to emulate the Divine by speaking something into being is manifest:

Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name... By giving names, parents dedicate their children to God; the names they give do not correspond – in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense – to any knowledge, for they name newborn children. In a strict sense, no name ought (in its etymological meaning) to correspond to any person, for the proper name is the word of God in human sounds. By it each man is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative, as is expressed by mythological wisdom in the idea (which doubtless not infrequently comes true) that a man’s name is his fate. The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God.

(Benjamin 1997, 69)

Naming in Jewish tradition is as old as the Bible. Scripture abounds with examples of people who gave a particular name to a child for a specific reason (e.g., the Twelve Tribes); people who were given their names by God Himself – sometimes before they were even born (e.g., Ishmael, Isaac); and people whose names God changed (e.g., Abram’s and Sarai’s names to Abraham and Sarah, respectively, and Joshua whose original name was Hosea). Names have always been a mark of Jewish distinctiveness, and are one of the things which the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:20; Shir HaShirim Rabbah, §4; Vayikra Rabbah §32) says the Jewish people did not alter

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<sup>5</sup> See Hirsch (Genesis 2:19), where he explains that Adam’s naming of the animals and understanding of their essence was still only from the *subjective human* perspective, how Adam perceived them. The *objective Divine* essence was with God alone, in Creation. See Benjamin (1997) for more on this point.

even while in exile and nearly assimilated in Egypt, and one of the things in which merit they were eventually redeemed.<sup>6</sup>

Judaism regards the naming of a child as a serious decision, far more than merely giving a person a name by which he can be identified.<sup>7</sup> A person's name constitutes his essence, and thus his task in this world.<sup>8</sup> Hence the Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 7b) states, "One should always be careful when naming a child, for the name has an effect." Similarly, the Midrash (Tanhuma Ha'azinu, 7) says that "a person should carefully examine the names he wishes to give to his child [to ensure] that [the child] will become a righteous person, for sometimes the name brings about good and sometimes bad." In naming a child before they know what will become of him, parents exercise a type of prophecy, or Divine inspiration (Arizal, 1903, introduction §23). Hence choosing the "right" name is of great importance in determining the child's future: there is such a thing as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In chapter 4 we saw the Midrash which describes how God told the ministering angels that Man's wisdom was greater than theirs, for he knows how to name. But in naming all the animals, Man did not "create" anything new as God did by uttering the world into existence; rather, he merely designated their essence in "speech-form": all creatures were what they were, Man just put a name to it. What, then, was his greatness in naming them?

As mentioned earlier, Kabbalistic sources discuss the idea that this world parallels another, "spiritual" world, and that every creation in the lower world has "roots" in the upper world, much like an upside-down tree. The "roots" in the upper world – the letters, which are the life-source of everything in the lower world – are nothing like their physical manifestation. To Man's naked eye, there seems to be no connection between something's physical reality and its spiritual source. God "dilutes" these roots, till they are eventually made manifest in the physical reality humans know and can relate to, in this world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Note also the Torah Temimah's commentary (on Genesis 32:11), where he explains that the rationale behind the custom of naming after ancestors is to ensure the Jewish people would not forget their ancestry throughout their wanderings in exile.

<sup>7</sup> See Responsa of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe, Even Ha'Ezer 4:102.

<sup>8</sup> Consequently, and in line with the Judaic valuing of *all* life as serving a Divine purpose, regardless of how short-lived it may be, according to Jewish law a stillborn baby or baby who dies before being given a name is given a name before burial. The Shulkhan Arukh (Yoreh Dei'ah 263:5) states that this is in order for the child to merit Divine mercy and resurrection at the End of Days.

<sup>9</sup> To use a real-world example, consider the analogy to the expression of genes. The physical properties are encoded in the genes, but if one were to view a particular gene under microscope – for example, the

This, then, was Man's greatness in naming the animals: while he did not create anything new as God had done, he was able to make the connection between the physical and the metaphysical, the tangible and the intangible – something which the angels were incapable of doing, because they are exclusively divine beings. The angels could not fathom how a spiritual concept could be “reduced” to its physical expression. The angels were privy to the “roots” of each creature, meaning the true essence thereof, but could not tack a name onto them, for they could not fathom such a physical expression of a lofty spiritual concept. Only Man – a combination of an earthly body and a Divine soul – could achieve such a task. This was God's assertion to the angels and the greatest compliment to Man (even before he was created!): Man is inherently greater, *precisely because* of his earthly element, as that is what enables the expression of his spiritual side.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in naming, one is affecting (and effecting) spiritual forces which will impact on the nature of the child. The very act of naming, then, is designative *and* constitutive, and represents the Judaic ethos of integration between the physical and the spiritual.

Given the seriousness with which Judaism takes naming and names, one can understand the gravity of name-changing: it constitutes, in effect, tampering with one's “spiritual roots.” Yet there are times when name-changing is necessary (for example, when a person is deathly ill). The Talmud (Tractate Rosh Hashanah 16b; see Ritva [ad loc.]) states that there are four things that can nullify a (bad) heavenly decree, one of which is changing one's name.

Kabbalistically, since a name represents a person's essence and *mazal* (loosely translated as “fate” or “calling,” but more accurately referring to a person's spiritual root on high), if a certain *mazal* was decreed for a person, once that person's name has been changed, his spiritual essence has been changed as well and consequently his particular task in this world has changed. This, in turn, has the ability to alter his circumstances if different ones are now needed to accomplish his new mission.<sup>11</sup> On a

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gene for blue eyes – alongside those eyes in the real world, one would see no correlation. And yet, without the genetic encoding dictating the formation of blue eyes, there would be no physical expression thereof. In terms of *essence*, clearly the genes are the more “blue-eyed” of the two; but in terms of *expression*, from the limited human view, the blue eyes are the most “blue eyed.”

<sup>10</sup> This would offer one explanation as to why Moses had a speech impediment (see Exodus 4:10). Moses had a difficulty with speech – the “connector” between body and spirit – because he was at a remove from the material world.

<sup>11</sup> For example, if having an illness or being poor were part of a person's task in this world (for argument's sake, to show people how to cherish each moment, in the case of the former, or how to be

practical level, changing one's name is a step toward repentance. By changing one's name, a person declares his willingness to change by openly stating that he is no longer the same person he used to be.

### **5.1.2. Language taking on a life of its own**

By giving Man the medium of speech, God exalted Man above all creatures.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, He burdened him with an enormous responsibility:

When God created Man, He showed him all the trees in the Garden of Eden<sup>13</sup> and said to him, 'Look at all My handiwork – how perfect it is; everything is ready to serve you. Make sure that you do not destroy My world.

(Koheleth Rabbah, 7)

Whereas God's speech is a creative force, as is man's speech in emulating God, man's speech has the power to create as well as to destroy; it was inevitable that man would occasionally fail. And yet, God believed in man – enough to take the chance that the good that could result from man embracing his linguistic responsibility would outweigh the damage he might do thereby. Man was mandated to emulate God and so his language is not merely a practical means of communication but a metaphysical basis of his existence, his *modus operandi* of creation.

This burden bears great responsibility because once speech leaves the mouth it takes on a life of its own. As the Zohar (Zohar Hadash, Aharei 47a) writes, every utterance of a righteous individual creates a guardian angel to serve him in good stead; and, uttered by an evil person, a destructive angel (Zohar Beshalah 49a; Kedoshim 85a). Furthermore, Weissblum (1973 [1787]) writes that negative or faulty speech never disappears; it finds no resting place and thus wanders the cosmos, till it finds a safe haven in the minds of the righteous.<sup>14</sup> The task of the righteous, then, is to "redeem" these word-thoughts and bring them back to Source (*ibid.*, 183). Thus we

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content with modest means, in the case of the latter), once a person's name – and consequently, his task – has changed, he may no longer need to have those particular circumstances to serve his life's mission. He might indeed recover or become wealthy thereafter.

<sup>12</sup> Note Benjamin's (1997, 68) description: "God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served *him* as a medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator."

<sup>13</sup> I will return to the Tree of Knowledge, at the conclusion to this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> In Jewish mysticism, evil cannot exist on its own and so it must necessarily be grounded in something good.

find The Talmud (Tractate Avoda Zara 19b; Succah 21b) instructing people to pay attention to the *sihat hulin*, the “casual speech” of the righteous, for even from their idle chatter one can glean wisdom.

Another example where we see the weightiness of speech – even to the extent that it can alter one’s future – is the Talmud’s (Tractate Berakhot 60a) instruction that “One should never open his mouth to Satan” (i.e., foretelling of bad events that might possibly come true), on the grounds that such words do in fact have the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 55b) as well as the Jerusalem Talmud (Ma’aser Sheini 27:2, 4:6) we find that dreams can portend good or bad depending on how they are interpreted *verbally*, and should therefore always be given a positive interpretation even if they seem negative. There is also a Talmudic injunction (Tractate Bava Bathra 21a) to teachers and scholars to steer clear of equivocating speech, for an error in instruction (however unintentional) can lead to a student misinterpreting the lesson, which can have disastrous effects.<sup>15</sup> This is obviously applicable not only to speech but to the written word as well – and probably even more so, given its more permanent nature and the possibility for its distribution en masse.<sup>16</sup>

And in the here-and-now, there is the prohibition against *nibbul peh*, vulgar speech or expletives,<sup>17</sup> and swearing,<sup>18</sup> especially using God’s Name in vain.<sup>19</sup> The Talmudic Sages (Tractate Shabbat 37a) note that oaths taken in vain or made falsely bring about great calamity to the world, and troubles abound for the sin of vulgar speech; the Talmud goes on to say, regarding one who employs vulgar speech, that even if it were decreed that he have seventy years of good fortune, the heavens will reverse the decree for bad.

Lastly, it’s interesting to note that even in seemingly trivial matters letters and words are taken seriously, such as when letters are used to signify the Jewish calendar year or pages of a book by virtue of their corresponding numerical value (*gematria*). If the letters spell out a negative concept, the common practice is to transpose the

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<sup>15</sup> And as we saw earlier (Chapter 2), the Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:11) states, “Scholars, be cautious with your words, for you may incur the penalty of exile and be banished to a place of evil waters. The disciples who follow you there may drink and die....”

<sup>16</sup> The implications thereof in the context of today’s post-literate, hyper-textual society will be discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Sha’arei Teshuva* 3:229

<sup>18</sup> Leviticus 19:12

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 20:6

letters. Since the composite numerical value remains the same, the number/pagination is not affected, and the word's meaning is now rendered harmless.<sup>20</sup>

### 5.1.3. Speech accountability

Inherent in man's knowledge of his Divine endowment of speech – to create or to destroy – is his accountability. As such, speech cannot be neatly separated from thought.

Lee (1996, xvi) writes that

Too many linguists today, just as philosophers, psychologists, and linguists have generally done in the past, continue to dichotomize language and thought, taking the fact of their separability in some respects as unnecessarily fundamental to their operation in others.

In Jewish philosophy, Lee's idea is taken one step further: not only are language and thought linked but *mahshava* (thought), *dibbur* (speech) and *ma'aseh* (action) as well are inextricably linked, with speech serving as the go-between, or conduit, through which thought translates into action. This is true not only in the sense of language bringing about action, but in its inherent actualisation of thought:

When we think, we take our various ideas, thoughts, and desires and distil them into words. Thus, letters represent the raw material with which we express the products of our intelligence... this requires the vocabulary of thought.

(Scherman, introduction to Munk [2003, 23])

Speech, then, plays multiple roles: it is inextricably linked with thought, for it is the “vocabulary of thought,” and it also serves as the go-between between thought and action. It forms a continuous loop, wherein thought produces language which then impacts back on thought.

In a different context but applicable more broadly and specifically regarding speech, the Sefer HaHinnuch (A. Halevi 1978 [1257?], §16) writes that “after one's acts is the heart drawn...every man is influenced in accordance with his actions.”

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<sup>20</sup> For example, the Jewish year 5744 (1983-1984), which should have been represented by תשמ"ד (the ת=400, the ש=300, the מ=40 and the ד=4, totalling 744, of the fifth millennium – 5000), was reversed and written דשמ"מ, which has the same numerical value, but is written thus so as to prevent spelling out the word תשמד which means “you will destroy” or “will be destroyed,” depending on which diacritics are applied. Likewise, a page number like 275, which would normally be represented by רעה (the ר=200, the ע=70, and the ה=5) is spelled out ערה, so as not to spell the word רעה, “evil” or “bad tidings.”

Accordingly, one cannot treat thought and language (and the resulting action) as discrete; the three form a loop whereby the one infinitely affects the others. That is why so much emphasis is placed on speech conduct in Judaism: while thoughts may be excused to an extent,<sup>21</sup> no speech act goes unnoticed – in and of itself, as the conduit through which thought is translated into action, and as the medium influencing thought. Words shape thoughts, which in turn shape action, which in turn create the reality by which we live.

Furthermore, speech is viewed as the underlying mechanism of desirable or undesirable behaviour. In *Iggereth Ramban*,<sup>22</sup> Nachmanides instructs his son as regards actions he should ensure to make a habit of, as well as those he should do his utmost to avoid. Prominent among the character traits to avoid, and the first one he lists, is anger – “a bad character flaw that causes many people to sin.” But what is interesting is Nachmanides’ advice on *how to avoid* anger in the first place: “Make it a habit to speak all your words calmly, to everyone, always; and this will prevent you from anger.” Nachmanides’ instruction is revolutionary in its simplicity and its seeming counter-intuitiveness: speech is not the *result* of how we feel (i.e., I feel anger, I shout); rather, feelings can be *aroused by how we speak*. Anger is not an inevitable feeling, the automatic reaction to other people’s actions; rather it can be avoided altogether by speaking calmly.<sup>23</sup>

Note, as well, Nachmanides’ statement that one should ensure *all* his words are spoken calmly. Commentators on Nachmanides’ letter explain that this refers even in cases where one must rebuke another. This is stated specifically by Maimonides (Hilkhot De’ot 6:8), who says that one must rebuke another calmly, without causing him pain or shame. Even when arguing on a matter of principle, a Torah scholar is obligated to speak his mind calmly (Tractate Ta’anit 4a).

In addition to speaking *all* words calmly, Nachmanides states that this is applicable to speech engaged in with *every person*. Even if one has been insulted by

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<sup>21</sup> See fn. 8 in Chapter 4, regarding one’s accountability for thoughts.

<sup>22</sup> A letter Nachmanides wrote to his son as a spiritual will, which has become a classic and is printed in many editions of the prayer book and recited daily by many.

<sup>23</sup> Here the Judaic view parts ways with Western psychologising which sometimes focuses too much on “getting in touch with feelings” rather than taking action. The Jewish approach, while not minimizing feelings, strongly advocates action as having the ability to change a person. Rather than wait for the feeling to come which will lead to action, action is taken to awaken the feeling. Not coincidentally the word for love, אהבה, *ahava*, comes from the bi-letter root אה, *hav*, which means “to give.” Love is not something we *feel*, it’s something we *do*; or, in the oft-quoted words of Garry Chapman, “love is a verb.”

another, and even though by Torah law he has the right to respond and is not obligated to remain silent in the face of his insulters (moreover, his silence would indicate that he agrees with the insults and accepts them as true), still the better tactic would be to respond calmly (HaLevi 1990 [1257?], §338). Taking the wind out of the other's sails by remaining calm is more effective than fighting back.

Lastly, Nachmanides instructs that all of one's words be spoken calmly, *always* – in every situation. Here again we see how the ability to control one's speech is inherent and up to each person's free will. It is not dependent on others and what they do to us, or the particular circumstances we are in. Man is always in possession of his free will.

The view of language as the link between thought and action and as influencing thought, and the resultant ethos of accountability for speech, spans the development of a person from birth, throughout life and on to old age – even death. Earlier (chapter 2) I mentioned the Talmudic passage (Tractate Niddah 30b) concerning a child in utero and his designated angel with whom he learns the entire Torah, and how just before birth the angel taps the infant on the mouth whereupon everything he has learned is forgotten. I mentioned, further, that the infant is tapped specifically on the mouth – the organ of speech – as that is what connects the soul with the body; it is the *ruah memalelah*, what makes a person a “living soul,” a human being.

It is specifically at the moment of birth that the human being is given free will by virtue of being given a *yetzer hara*, an evil inclination (Bereishit Rabbah 34:10).<sup>24</sup> Every person has free will to exercise as he wishes throughout life; however, as the Talmud (Tractate Hagigah 5a) states, every conversation – even casual conversation between spouses – is recorded and will be relayed to a person on the Day of Judgement (i.e., after death). As language is the “raw material” with which man continues to create the world God created for him, he is obligated to give an account to the One Who gave him the building supplies to begin with. Scripture (Proverbs 21:23) put it succinctly: “He who guards his mouth and tongue guards his soul from troubles.”

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<sup>24</sup> As we saw in Chapter 4, having both a good inclination and an evil one “levels the playing field,” enabling people to choose freely between good or bad and consequently own their reward.

## 5.2. Constructive Speech

The above is just a sampling of the many sources indicating the seriousness with which Judaism regards speech, and how we are held accountable as a result. From these, it would appear that the scales are heavily tipped in favour of a speech-is-dangerous-and-should-therefore-be-avoided approach. However two points should be kept in mind. The first is that Judaism does not advocate silence, just as it does not advocate asceticism in any other area of human life; rather, the “middle ground” of balance is preferred, of channelling the basic human drives to a higher purpose. Thus, although individuals may take on a *ta’anit dibbur* (lit. “fast of silence”), a vow of silence, for a set time, it is not meant to be a way of life or condoned as such. The very fact that God created Man, despite his inherent flaws, obligates him to take positive action.<sup>25</sup>

The second thing to keep in mind is that only once the destructive potential of language has been duly recognized, and boundaries instituted to curb it, can we ensure that it is used positively. Certain protective measures need to be in place in order to ensure that people can use speech for its ultimate purpose. When speech is used positively, it has the power to effect enormous change. Even the same action can have radically different results depending on the nature of the speech that goes along with it. As an example, the Talmud (Tractate Bava Bathra 9b) states that one who gives charity is blessed six-fold, but one who gives charity with a kind word is blessed eleven-fold.

I now turn to two major arenas of Orthodox Jewish life wherein speech plays an active, positive role on a daily basis: Torah study and prayer. These two commandments, wherein the power of speech to effect enormous change inheres, underscore Judaism’s view of man’s endowment with speech as a Divine creative ability.

### 5.2.1. Torah Study

The commandment to study Torah is a cornerstone of Judaism, as the Sefer HaHinnuch, (HaLevi 1990 [1257?], §419) states, “it is the mother of them all.” The commandment is not merely to enable adherents to better know its precepts and how

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<sup>25</sup>As mentioned in chapter 2, were God merely concerned about Man’s transgressions, it would have been more efficient for Him not to have created him in the first place. From the fact that He did, we deduce that life’s purpose is not just to avoid the negative but to engage in the positive. (See Tractate Eiruvim 13b, and Maharsha [ad loc].)

to keep their many details, but as a means through which one comes to learn more about the ways of God (ibid). It is derived from Deuteronomy (6: 6-7), “And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them thoroughly to your children and *you shall speak of them...*” To fulfil the commandment of Torah study, one must ensure its dialogical and dialectical nature.

#### ***5.2.1.1. The dialogical nature of Torah study***

Torah study is, by its nature, dialogical. Halakha mandates that Torah study be *verbalised*; it is not enough to just “think” it (R. S. Liadi 1993 [c. 1880], Hilkhhot Talmud Torah, 2:12), as derived from the words of the verse quoted above “and you shall speak of them” as well as the verse (Joshua 1:8) “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall study it day and night.” It is not sufficient to simply read it aloud on one’s own, as the verse predicates the commandment specifically on discussion and engagement with one’s children.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, it becomes incumbent *specifically with the onset of speech*. From the moment a child begins to speak, his parents are obligated to speak with him in *Lashon HaKodesh* and teach him Torah, specifically the verse “The Torah that Moses commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob” (Rashi on Deuteronomy 11:19; HaLevi 1990 [1257?], 418). Commentators explain that the word *morasha* (heritage), is used in this verse, rather than *nahala* (inheritance) because while an inheritance is bequeathed to a person and he can do with it as he wishes, the Torah was given as a *morasha* – not an inheritance but a heritage, something to pass on to the next generation. Such an intergenerational tradition can only be transmitted and maintained through discourse.

That Torah should be engaged in through dialogue was determined already when it was given. As we saw in the previous chapter, while the Torah given to Moses at Mount Sinai was written, the Oral Tradition given to him was specifically *not* written down, in order to ensure that it would be *communicated* and would serve as the basis of continual discourse throughout the ages. Maimonides (Introduction to Mishneh Torah) writes that from the days of Moses till Rabbi Judah the Prince codified the Mishnah, the Oral Tradition was never recorded. Rather, the leader in each generation would record what he had heard from his teachers, and would then teach the masses

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<sup>26</sup> Note Rashi (ad loc., quoting Sifri §33), who states that this refers to students as well, as Judaism regards students like the teacher’s own children.

from these notes. Each student would write his own notes based on what he had heard, recording new developments by deduction in halakha which the High Court's rulings had validated. The teacher's written notes were never passed on or copied, to ensure that those who studied it would engage in dialogue in their study, and in turn form their own conclusions and notes.

Several verses discussing the commandment to study Torah indicate the importance of the oral component. Two examples are the verse from Deuteronomy (6:7) quoted above: "you shall teach them thoroughly to your children and *you shall speak of them* [these matters – i.e., Torah]," on which Seforno (ad loc.) comments that through speaking of them diligently, one will come to always remember them (i.e. memorising by heart<sup>27</sup>); and the verse (Deuteronomy 11:19) "You shall teach them to your children *to discuss them*, while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise." It is not enough to simply teach the next generation about the commandments or "hand down the Book"; one needs to engage them in discussion.<sup>28</sup>

Torah is to be shared and discussed, necessitating a conversation. The Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers, 3:2) states that "two people who sit together and no words of Torah are exchanged between them, it is as if they have sat with scorners. But if they exchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence rests with them." Tosafot Yom Tov (ad loc.) opines that it is specifically for *lack of dialogue* that they are called scoffers: Even if they are each engaged in Torah study on their own, but there is no discussion taking place *between* them, they are regarded as scoffers since they each think the other doesn't have what to contribute to their own knowledge and consequently show no interest in what the other has to say.

One need only enter a *Beit Midrash* (house of Torah study) to see (or rather, hear) the difference between the style of engagement in Torah study and, say, study in a library. A library requires silence, as indicated by the many warning signs upon

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<sup>27</sup> Note that while in English the expression for memorising something is "by heart," in Hebrew it is *b'al peh*, "by the mouth." This is a reciprocal relationship: through repeatedly verbalising it, one comes to memorise it, and once something is memorised, in turn, it leads to one speaking of it naturally and articulately. This is also an example of the Judaic principle that behaviour, however seemingly external, awakens the internal.

<sup>28</sup> A classic example of this is the Passover *Seder*, the night Jews commemorate the Exodus from Egypt and their birth as a nation. The *Seder* is structured for the purpose of soliciting questions from the children. The main point of the commemorative event is *Sipur Yetziat Mitzrayim* – **telling over the story** of the Exodus, without which one hasn't actually fulfilled the obligation to remember the Exodus.

entering, and is furnished with individual cubicles where every person sits alone and reads. A *Beit Midrash*, in contrast, is alive with hot debate between *havrutot* (study partners) or *habburot* (study groups); exemplifying the old quip, “Two Jews, three opinions.”

#### ***5.2.1.2. The dialectical nature of Torah study, premised on an oral tradition***

The dialogical nature of the Torah forms the basis of its dialectical one. This is indeed why only the Pentateuch was given to the Jewish people in written form, whereas the Oral Tradition was not. More than that: as we saw in the previous chapter, it is the *Oral* Tradition that sealed the covenant between the Jewish people and God (Tractate Gittin 60b), not the written one. The Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 47:1) relates:

When God revealed Himself at Sinai to give the Torah to Israel, He said it to Moses in the following order: Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud and Aggadah, as it says: “God *spoke* all these words, *saying...*” [i.e., God’s “speaking” was for the purpose of a “saying” later on<sup>29</sup>]. Even what a student will ask his teacher [in future times] was said to Moses at that time.

After Moses had learned the Torah from God, He told him to teach it to Israel. He said to Him, “Master of the World. Shall I write it down?” He answered him, “I do not wish to give it to them in writing because I know that in future times the nations will rule over them and take it from them, and it will be disgraced. So the Scriptures I will give them in writing but the Mishnah, Talmud and Aggadah I will give orally. If the nations will enslave them, they will be separate from the nations... [When the verse<sup>30</sup> says] “Inscribe” [it] refers to Scripture; [when the verse<sup>31</sup> says] “for according to those words” [it] refers to the Mishna and Talmud, for those are what separate the Jews from the nations.

The Bible was and remains open to all (and is consistently a best-seller the world over). To remain distinct, as a “kingdom of priests” and as God’s emissaries on earth, the Jewish people would need an Oral Tradition that would remain uniquely theirs, and which would keep their tradition in perpetuity since every generation would be obligated to relay it orally to the next one. Thus we have one reason for the Oral

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<sup>29</sup> See Hirsch on Leviticus 21:1 quoted above.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 34:27

<sup>31</sup> Continuation of the verse above.

Tradition being maintained specifically as an oral tradition rather than being written down.

Sefer HaIkarim (Albo 1930 [1425], §3:23) expounds on this further and explains that the covenant between God and the Jewish people was contingent specifically on the Oral Tradition not just because it keeps them distinct and maintains the inter-generational connection, but because without it, the Written Torah is incomplete. In the Judaic view, the Written Torah and Oral Torah are one unit, and the former cannot be properly understood without the latter. Furthermore, he writes, the Oral Tradition is necessary to ensure not just that the Torah be transmitted to each generation, but that the Written Torah *remain applicable* in every generation – and that is only possible through active, current dialogue. This is manifest in the very definition of halakha, Jewish law, whose root, ח/ל/ה, *h/l/kh/*, means “to walk” or “to progress step by step toward a goal” (Clark 1999, 59).<sup>32</sup> halakha is in a constant dialogue with the principles set forth in the past and the reality of the present.

Hence the words of the Midrash (quoted above), “Even what a student will ask his teacher [in future times] was said to Moses at that time.” Everything was contained in that original script. By having a Written Torah, and its corollary Oral Tradition, every generation’s leaders would have the ability to debate it and apply it to the present reality. In the orthodox view, halakha does not change; rather, it contains within it the necessary components to contend with the changing reality of every generation’s innovation.<sup>33</sup>

We can think of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai as the “seed” containing all the genetic material being given to Moses, to be fully developed throughout the generations. The Talmud (Tractate Menahot 29b) relates:

When Moses ascended to the heavens [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and attaching crowns to the letters.<sup>34</sup> He said to him, “Master of the World! Who is holding You back [i.e., why are You doing this]? He said to him, “There is one man

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<sup>32</sup> Contrast this with the word Torah, which comes from the same root as *hora’ah*, to instruct. Whereas Torah (and *hora’ah*) indicates a giving over/handing down, *halakha* indicates movement, engagement with the material.

<sup>33</sup> This is the orthodox view, in stark contrast to reform or conservative (and notably also some strands of Feminist so-called Orthodoxy), which maintain that “where there is a rabbinic will there is a halakhic way.” The orthodox view is “where there is a halakhic way there is a rabbinic will.” Concerning Feminist (so-called) Orthodoxy, see Halachic Feminism or Feminist Halachah? in A. Feldman, *The Eye of the Storm*, 2009, pp. 77-102, especially fn. 6.

<sup>34</sup> There are seven Hebrew letters which, when written by a scribe, get crowns at the top.

who will live after many generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name, who will expound on every crown and crown many many laws.” He said to Him, “Master of the World, show him to me.” He said to him, “go backwards.” [Moses] went and sat at the end of eight rows [in Rabbi Akiva’s Beit Midrash] and he did not know what they were saying. He became weak [from distress]. As soon as [Rabbi Akiva] got to a certain [study topic] his students said to him, “Our teacher, from where do you learn this?” He said to them, “It is a law [that was taught] to Moses at Sinai.” [Whereupon Moses] became reassured.

Moses became weak because he did not understand from where they had derived their logic. But when he heard Rabbi Akiva say “It is a law that was taught to Moses at Sinai,” he was no longer troubled because he understood that everything being taught was an *expansion* of the Torah he had given them at Sinai and was directly derived from it, not something they had fabricated from thin air generations later.

Only by having an unwritten Oral Tradition as the companion to the Written Torah would the dialogical and dialectical nature of Torah be maintained. Halakha has set categories: The Written Torah, laws that are categorised as having been given to Moses at Sinai, Rabbinic injunctions, *Rishonim* [sages during 1100-1500], *Aharonim* [sages during 1500-present], etc., with each era’s conclusions being sealed and not generally argued upon by Halakchicists of later eras. However *mahloket*, disagreement, so fundamental to Torah study, is dynamic and vibrant within each era.

The ability of each generation’s leaders – the “kings,” as it were – to expound on the Torah is represented by the crowns God was attaching to the letters. In effect, what God was saying to Moses was, I’m putting the unknown into the written, so that people generations down the line will extract them through debate. Only through discussion could His Word be made relevant in every generation – not because the halakha changes but because the reality changes, and every generation needs (and has) the ability to interpret and apply it.<sup>35</sup> What Moses had to deal with in his time is not what Rabbi Akiva had to deal with in his time – and certainly not what today’s Halakchicists have to address, be it in modern technology, medicine, psychology or finance. God wanted the Torah to be in the hands of the sages of each generation, and

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<sup>35</sup> For example, the prohibition of kindling fire on the Sabbath meant one thing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and something entirely different in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of electricity.

so it had to be premised on an Oral Tradition which would necessarily require dialogue and a dialectical approach.

In a sense, the dialectical nature of the Written Torah conversing with the Oral Tradition parallels God's creation of Man despite his flaws. God knew Man was likely to fail, but created him nonetheless because of the good that he is capable of doing. So too God gave the Torah – the immovable – together with the dialectic halakha, knowing that it is possible for man to misinterpret it (either intentionally or accidentally in seeking its ultimate meaning), but knowing that it is the only way the Jewish people would be grounded in tradition yet capable of innovation and finding halakhic ingenuity in the context of the present reality.

The Torah had to be given in written form, like “genes,” so that in every generation, based on the developments of the time, different “genes” could be given different “expression.” Or, to use a high-tech analogy, it is like hyperlinks which encode all the information but require a “click-through” to understand what is meant. (The text of the click-throughs, in turn, have their hyperlinks, which in turn have theirs, which in turn have theirs, etc.)

#### 5.2.1.2.1. *The value of disagreements*

The dialectic nature of Torah study is far reaching. The entire Talmud consists of disagreements between the Sages, most noted of these between the schools of thought of Hillel and Shammai, both Talmudic Sages of the Second Temple Era, about which the Talmud (Tractate Eirubin 13b) state, “Both these [Hillel's opinion] and these [Shammai's opinion] are the words of a living God.” Both opinions are not only valid but the dialogue and disagreement is necessary, as representing two facets of Divine truth.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, a *lack* of debate is not regarded positively. The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 17a) states that if the entire *Sanhedrin* (High Court) rules that the defendant is guilty, he goes free. Why? Would not a unanimous decision indicate that the *Sanhedrin* had indeed found the truth and ruled correctly?

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<sup>36</sup> The Talmud (ad loc.) states that although both schools of thought are equally valid, since the disputation was solely for the sake of Heaven and not for personal gain, nevertheless halakha rules like Hillel's school of thought because his school of thought was the more merciful/relativistic one, whereas Shammai's was more on the strict justice/absolutist side, and the world as we know it cannot exist by pure justice alone. Note the Kabbalists' assertion that in future times halakha will revert to ruling according to Shammai's school of thought, as by then the world will have “graduated” from being unable to exist by the strict standards of truth alone (heard in the name of the Arizal, Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi).

Evidently not. The Jerusalem Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 4:2) relates that when Moses received the Torah he asked God to tell him what the halakha is, whereupon he was told that halakha follows majority rule: if the majority of the *Sanhedrin* holds the defendant innocent, he is innocent; if guilty, guilty. But if the entire *Sanhedrin* is in agreement, there is no “majority” (since there is no “minority”). And the reason the law was not laid down but is predicated on debate was to enable the Torah to be expounded upon with forty-nine arguments to the one side and forty-nine arguments to the other. Torah thrives in multifariousness, with the final decision being decided by majority rule.

And it is specifically by human derivation, which may be flawed, and not Divine revelation, which is deemed perfect, that halakha is carried out. The Talmud (Tractate Bava Metzia, 59b) discusses a halakhic case debated by Talmudic Sages, some of whom rendered an oven *tameh* (lit. “impure,” but meaning unusable by Jewish kosher standards). The Talmud relates that Rabbi Eliezer brought every possible proof to support his position, but the other Sages rejected his logic. He then enlisted nature to support his opinion, stating that if he is right, the nearby carob tree would prove it. The Talmud relates that the carob tree became uprooted and moved 100 *amot* (cubits). The Sages said to him that one does not bring halakhic proof from a carob tree. He then invoked the nearby stream to prove he was right, and it began to flow backward. The Sages said to him that one does not bring halakhic proof from a stream. He then invoked the walls of the study hall in defence of his opinion, and the walls began to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua admonished the walls and said they have no right to be involved in a halakhic dispute between scholars. Rabbi Eliezer then argued that if his halakhic ruling is correct, the heavens will prove it – whereupon a heavenly voice said that there was no point in arguing, Rabbi Eliezer was right. Rabbi Yehoshua countered that a heavenly voice cannot prove anything since, as the verse (Deuteronomy 30:12) states, “It [the Torah] is not in the Heavens,” which the Talmud goes on to explain means that from the moment the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, it is no longer in the hands of Heaven, rather halakha is determined according to the majority opinion. Consequently, Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion was not upheld.

The passage doesn’t end there: sometime later, says the Talmud, Rabbi Natan met Elijah the Prophet and asked him what God had said when Rabbi Yehoshua had stated that halakha is ruled by the Sages and not by Heaven. Elijah responded that God had smiled and said, “My children have triumphed over Me.”

This passage illustrates that while Divine truth ultimately eludes us, we come as close to it as possible by dialectical debate and majority decision.

This sheds light on the concept of truth, touched upon in the previous chapter as the foundation of a moral society. Truth isn't "one way," but the composite picture comprising a unified whole. The only one who can thus house truth and be truth is God Himself, for no human encompasses everything. The purpose of dialectics, then, is not to distil opinions for the purpose of pitting one against the other, but to give expression to many facets of the same issue. That is why halakha was given to dialectics and not handed down with the Written Torah.<sup>37</sup>

#### 5.2.1.2.2. *Peace constitutes the unification of fragments comprising truth*

This multifariousness is not only the only path to truth but the only path to peace. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Pre-State Eretz Yisrael, explains that

People mistakenly think that peace will be achieved solely by uniformity of thought and agreement. When we see scholars investigating and delving into the Torah's wisdom, and various facets and opinions emerge thereby, we think these scholars cause *mahloket*, discord – the very opposite of peace. But this is not the case, for real peace cannot come to the world but by the value of multiplicity of peace.

(1939, §I, 330, translation mine)

This "multiplicity of peace" means that all facets and opinions are distilled and a clear picture emerges as to how each has its place and value within the whole picture of truth.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, Rabbi Kook notes that even those things that appear superfluous or contradictory will be revealed once truth is revealed in all its facets. Only by ingathering all of truth's various parts and details, and all the opinions that seem so different, can the light of truth and justice be visible. That is why the Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 64a) says that Torah scholars bring peace to the world. They do so

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<sup>37</sup>Truth, thus, requires humility: only in humble acknowledgement of our incomplete view do we allow space for other views – and sometimes the complete opposite of what we hold to be true – as comprising, together, the whole truth.

<sup>38</sup> Recall that just as an artist signs his handiwork only upon its completion, so too will God's "signature" on the world – Divine Truth – be visible only when history is complete and the full picture emerges.

specifically through diversity, in elucidating and bringing forth new – and sometimes opposing – views.

It is not coincidental, then, that the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, comes from the root ש/ל/ו, *sh/l/m*, which means “complete.” *Shlemut*, perfection and wholeness, bears the same root as peace, for only when all parts are brought together is peace achieved – not in erasure of distinctiveness but in harmonisation of composite parts. In our fragmented reality, it is not possible to define or attain one absolute truth. Consequently, any form of peace generally means a compromise, an erasure of something of the self or a core value. But genuine peace is made only by revealing the many different facets of things, which complement each other to form a fuller, richer picture.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (Likutei Moharan 64:4) writes that *mahloket*, dispute, is “like the creation of the world.” Creation was made possible only by God minimising Himself, to enable space for others. The initial “empty void” was necessary, for without it the *ein sof*, infinity, would leave no space for anything else to exist. God – the Infinite – therefore minimised Himself, creating an “empty void,” wherein He created time and space with His power of speech. Dispute among scholars parallels God’s same “minimising of self” which enables others to exist. If all scholars were in agreement, as one, there would be no space for creation, no space for creativity. It is only through *disagreement*, in which each one differentiates himself from the other and debates the other, that scholars enable the “empty void” in which things have space to be created.

### **5.2.1.3. Knowledge of Hebrew is integral to Torah study**

The above section discussed the dialogical and dialectical nature of Torah study, the latter being premised on the former and both being premised on the Torah having an integral Oral Tradition. That is on a discursive level. Now, I turn to the lexical level, specifically how Torah study requires knowledge of *Lashon HaKodesh* and its nuances, without which it is virtually impossible.

Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1893) opens his monograph *Safa LeNe’emanim*, on the characteristics and value of *Lashon HaKodesh*, by stating that knowing the language is a foundation of the religion and studying it is obligatory and a

commandment like any other in the Torah.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore he writes that learning something in translation is not the same, because inevitably the grandeur of the Torah housed in language will be lost in translation.

By its very nature, Torah study necessitates a nuanced sensitivity to language, without which it would be impossible to glean even the literal meaning of the text, not to mention the intertextual nature of the text and the deeper/Kabbalistic meanings and interpretations thereof. For example, take a simple verse such as the statement made by Eve upon naming Cain: “I have acquired a man, with God” (Genesis 4:1). The statement makes no sense in the translation, since the name “Cain” shares no common root with “acquire.” Likewise Peleg being given the name Peleg because “in his days the earth was divided” (Genesis 10:25) does not cohere in the translation, where the root of his name, *p/l/g*, has nothing to do with “divide”; whereas in Hebrew *niflega* (“was divided”) shares the same *p/l/g* root.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Abram’s and Sarai’s names being changed to Abraham and Sarah, one would need to know not only the meaning of the former and later names but the characteristics of specific letters – in this case, the *heh* added to Abram’s name, and the *yud* in Sarai’s name, which was replaced with a *heh* – and what these particular letter represents Kabbalistically (and how this particular letter added to or changed in their respective names would change their *mazal* and enable them to have a child together).

Furthermore, *Lashon HaKodesh* is concise and precise in its word choice; any seeming superfluity in Torah will have Talmudic Sages and commentators grappling to understand and reconcile the deviation from the Torah’s general succinctness, with commentaries abounding as to why the seemingly redundant words or letters are there. Many insights are gleaned from such phenomena, as well as missing words or letters, grammatical disagreements or inconsistencies, alternate spelling, smaller/larger letters, and more. Common to the hermeneutical approach are interpretations of letters/words according to their numerical value, different systems of acronyms (first or last letters in a string of words), letter permutations, the *kri* and *ktiv*,<sup>41</sup> and interpreting a word based on reading it with different diacritics, rendering a

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<sup>39</sup> He actually questions why halakhic authorities neglect to list it as one of the 613 commandments.

<sup>40</sup>The *p* and *f* sounds, פ, *peh*, and פ, *feh* are the same letter, just read “hard” or “soft” depending on whether the letter is marked with a *dagesh* – a dot for emphasis – or not.

<sup>41</sup>Words which are written one way in the Bible but which according to the Oral Tradition are intended to be read a different way, or words that don’t appear in the text but are nonetheless read, or appear in the text but are silent.

completely different meaning – all of which is lost in translation, unless provided with annotations.

*Lashon HaKodesh* is also multi-layered and full of idiomatic usage that cannot be translated literally – i.e. without the Oral Tradition – and so study of the Bible necessitates a hermeneutical approach, which requires a good command of the Hebrew language. Indeed, it's quite impossible to understand the Written Torah without the Oral Tradition, and a literal rendering is never authentic to the intention. Hence the Talmud (Tractate Megillah 9a) states that the day the Septuagint took place darkness descended on the world for three days: once the Torah was translated, not studied in the original, it was bound to bring misinterpretation in its wake.

#### 5.2.1.3.1. *Halakha as derived from a hermeneutical approach*

The Torah's being multi-layered is not just hermeneutic in nature but has halakhic implications as well. The Talmud may derive a halakhic ruling from an alternative reading of a word, based on differing diacritics. As one example, the verse (Leviticus 23:4) states "These are God's festivals that you shall celebrate [them] as sacred holidays at their appropriate times" (it then goes on to list the festivals). The Talmud (Tractate Rosh Hashanah 25a) states that the word *otam*, "them" (referring to the festivals), is written without the *vav* vowel, such that the word can be read *atem*, meaning "you."

The Talmud notes the missing *vav* (and not just here but in two other instances in the verses discussing the festivals), explaining the verse can thus be read "These are God's festivals that *you* determine." This is God's declaration that the timing of the festivals – determined by the *Sanhedrin*'s setting of the calendar by declaring each new month upon observing the new moon – is in human hands. The Talmud goes on to say that it says the word *otam* with the missing *vav* three times, to teach that the *Sanhedrin* in each generation is authorized to determine when the new lunar month begins (and consequently set the dates of the festivals), even if 1) they unwittingly establish the New Moon on the wrong day, 2) they did so intentionally (for whatever reason, and the new month has already been declared), or 3) they were misled by false witnesses who testified that they had seen the new moon when they hadn't.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Nowadays this practice is no longer applicable. In the fourth century C.E., Hillel the Second set a fixed calendar by his astronomical calculations, effectively sanctifying the New Moon for all future times. This calendar has remained accurate and is still in use today. It constitutes a 19-year cycle which takes into account the lunar year as well as the standard solar year, adding an extra month in seven out

This example is doubly poignant because it attests not only to the fact that knowledge of *Lashon HaKodesh*'s nuances is essential to halakhic interpretation, but it also demonstrates that halakha rests in the hands of humans: even if the *Sanhedrin* errs, even if the holiest day of the year – Yom Kippur – is set on the “wrong” date, it de facto becomes the correct date. The Heavenly Court follows the ruling of the Court on earth, all premised on the reading of one letter, the missing *vav*.

5.2.1.3.2. *The underlying premise of the Torah's inherent Divinity and resultant sacredness*

The idea that nothing is superfluous in Torah is premised on the belief that the Torah is Divine. Consequent to such a view is that it is not only a book of instruction whose content can be handed down irrespective of its form; rather, the *form itself* bears sanctity. This is evident in the halakha (Maimonides, the Laws of a Torah Scroll, 10:1) that a Torah scroll that is missing even one letter or has even one superfluous letter is invalid and cannot be used (e.g. for the Torah reading in the synagogue) until it is fixed by a qualified scribe – *even if the added/missing letter does not change the pronunciation or meaning of the word* – because tampering with the letters is akin to tampering with their spiritual forces.

In this regard, Judaism holds that *Lashon HaKodesh* differs from other languages. As we saw in chapter 4, letters are not arbitrary, and have intrinsic value. As the Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero writes (quoted in Munk [2003, 21-22]), unlike books that have no value in themselves other than their *content*, sacred texts comprised of the Hebrew letters have inherent value because each letter (and each combination and permutation thereof) contains significance, mystical concepts and spiritual realities.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, even though a missing letter or added letter (particularly the vowel letters *vav* and *yud*, which feature in words that can also be read without these letters, by using diacritics) does not change the *meaning* of the words, it changes their *form* and therefore invalidates the Torah scroll. The *form itself* is integral to its meaning.

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of 19 years of the 19-year cycle, to ensure the lunar year (approx. 354 days) doesn't lag behind the solar one (approx. 365 days). (The extra month added is a second Adar, the one just before Nissan, to ensure that the Passover holiday is celebrated in the springtime, as the Torah dictates.) For more on the significance of the Jewish calendar's combining of the lunar and solar years, see Kosman (2014).

<sup>43</sup> Note that this does not apply to Modern Hebrew texts such as novels or newspapers. However this does create numerous problem when these quote sacred texts.

Furthermore, not only is the Torah viewed as Divine, it is comprised of God's Names. In the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, Nachmanides writes that according to Kabbalah, the Torah preceded the world and is comprised entirely of God's Names. In its pre-world state, it was one long string of letters, without beginning or end. Once it was given at Mount Sinai, it was broken down into the text we now have. Changing letters tampers not only with their sacred meaning but with the very Names of God. Thus, sacred texts that are no longer usable (for example, if they are damaged beyond repair by flood or fire) cannot be discarded or recycled for other purposes but must be buried in a dignified manner.

In this context, one can better appreciate the halakhic ruling (Responsa of Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch, 4:17) regarding whether the daily blessing said before studying Torah must be said before learning the *Aleph-Beis* with a child. Learning the *Aleph-Beis* is not regarded as the same as learning any other alphabet. While the latter might be deemed important, the former is seen as Divine, in embodying the Torah's content and form. The ruling is, therefore, that one does recite the blessings said before Torah study, even before learning the *Aleph-Beis* with a child.

One can also better appreciate the use of *Lashon Nekiya* (lit. "clean speech") in Scripture. As I mentioned in chapter 4, *Lashon HaKodesh* should really be translated as "the tongue of the holy," not "the holy tongue," for it is a language that was intended for speaking of holy matters. However Maimonides (*Moreh Nevukhim*, 3:8) states that *Lashon HaKodesh* is deemed a holy tongue because Hebrew has no words for the sexual organs, and refers to them euphemistically.<sup>44</sup> Speech is so powerful that once we verbalise something, it creates that concept in a real and concrete way, and once a concept has been reified, it can be misused.<sup>45</sup> The Torah wished to avoid this from happening, particularly with things as private and consecrated as sexuality

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<sup>44</sup> Modern Hebrew has deviated from this standard.

<sup>45</sup> For abundant examples of how body parts/bodily functions have been derogated, one need only look the plethora of four-letter words sprinkling the lexicon of literature and the media. By and large, they are all basic bodily functions or body parts which have been uprooted from the hallowed realm of the private to the public domain and degraded, when really they are simply biological functions consecrated within the appropriate framework). This is in line with the Jewish concept of holiness, which in *Lashon HaKodesh* does not mean "holy" but "separate," i.e., separate from anything else, reserved especially for a particular task, removed from the public domain and consecrated within the private. The more holy something is, the less it is visible and concretised in the spoken word. Hence all objects of holiness (e.g., a Torah scroll) are kept covered, hidden from the public eye.

within its appropriate framework,<sup>46</sup> and therefore does not refer to these things directly but uses euphemistic expressions instead.

Nachmanides (on Exodus 30:13) disagrees with Maimonides, opining that if that were the case, it would be termed *Lashon Nekiya*, clean speech, not *Lashon HaKodesh*. Rather, says Nachmanides, the reason it is called *Lashon HaKodesh* is because it is the language God used to speak with the prophets and with His people when He gave them the Ten Commandments, and with which He created the world and everything in it was named.

Whether *Lashon Nekiya* is the basis on which *Lashon HaKodesh* gets its description or not, it is evident that wherever possible the Torah makes use of the euphemism and circumlocution for the sake of more dignified speech. As one example of many, when Noah is commanded to gather the animals into the ark (Genesis 7:2), he is instructed, “Of every clean [i.e. kosher] animal take unto you seven pairs and of the animal *that is not clean*, two.” The Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 3a) picks up on this seeming redundancy: the Torah could have simply stated “from the טהור, *tahor* (clean, i.e., kosher) animals, and the טמא, *tameh* (impure<sup>47</sup>) animals.” However, the Talmud explains that although the Torah always employs the most concise term possible, it uses these seemingly extra words to teach us to speak *b’lashon nekiya*, with “clean speech.” If there is a euphemistic way of saying something vulgar, the euphemism is preferred (though never at the expense of clarity). Rather than define the non-kosher animals as *tameh*, the Torah states it as “of the animal that is not *tahor*” – i.e., nothing inherent in the animal, rather merely stating what it isn’t. The Torah prefers circumlocution where dignified speech thus

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<sup>46</sup> Celibacy is not considered holy in Judaism – in fact, it is strongly condemned. One example where this is evident is the halakha that the High Priest was not permitted to perform the Yom Kippur service in the Temple if he was not married (Mishnah Yoma 1:1). Only through an intimate relationship with another human being could the High Priest understand the relationship between the people and God and perform the Temple service on their behalf.

<sup>47</sup> The English rendering of *tahor* and *tameh*, “clean” and “unclean” or “pure” and “impure” as some translations have it does not explain the full extent of the Hebrew *tahor* and *tameh*, which have nothing to do with “clean” or “unclean,” rather are spiritual states of being. (Here is another example where knowing *Lashon HaKodesh* is essential to Torah study.) *Tahor*, related to the root *z/h/r* (the sun in the afternoon, a bright light, an illuminating window), means being “receptive, that which allows God’s rays to pass through, offers no resistance to them. He is a ‘pure’ man, who is receptive for the spiritual, the divine; whose mind, feelings, and body are penetrated with the godly” (Hirsch 1963, 146). *Tameh* is the opposite of *tahor*, and means “closed up, non-receptive to the godly” (ibid., 147). In the context of animals, this simply refers to animals that are permissible for Jews to eat (and Noachides to bring as offerings), and alternatively those that are forbidden. Although these laws were only given later, at Sinai, here there was already an indication as to the animals’ future status.

necessitates. Note, also, that without a nuanced understanding of Hebrew, these subtleties and their underlying messages would be lost.

### **5.2.2. Prayer**

The second major arena where we see the power of language to effect change is prayer. Prayer, another cornerstone of Judaism, reflects the Jewish people's affirmation of their connection to God. Beyond this affirmation, prayer reflects man's ability to dialogue with God and his ability to effect change, both of which reflect God's image of man's greatness: man is able to converse with the Divine, and also be in command of his own providence.

#### ***5.2.2.1. Prayer as dialogue with God***

Judaism does not regard prayer as a form of meditation, supplication premised on blind faith, "appeasement" to God or a talisman to evoke a desired outcome. Such a view of prayer is indeed juvenile – what we might call the "vending machine syndrome": you deposit a coin (prayer) in a vending machine (God), select your beverage of choice (your wish), and if you don't get what you want, a complaint is filed with the vending machine company (and likely you get reimbursed).<sup>48</sup> As Scherman (1984, xiii) notes,

If prayer were intended only to inform God of our desires and deficiencies, it would be unnecessary [since he knows them]. Its true purpose is to raise the level of the supplicants by helping them develop true perceptions of life so that they can become worthy of His blessing.

In prayer a Jew conceives of God not only as the Provider of everything he has but as being *personally interested* in the requests made before Him. Prayer is a conversation, an active engagement in dialogue, with God (Leuchter 2012). The very act of praying, before even delving into the specific words being said, is an acknowledgement of God's presence in the dialogue.

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<sup>48</sup> Incidentally, the vending machine attitude toward prayer would render prayer an anachronism in our times, where man can control pretty much every element of his life: his time, his food, his shelter, even the weather conditions within his private quarters. But if we understand prayer as a dialogue with God, it is more relevant today than ever, when God does not feature in the public discourse, let alone in personal dialogue.

Which begs the question: how does one engage with the Deity? And yet, Luzzatto (1978 [1740], §19) states that when one prays, one must envision a *masa umatan*, “an exchange or negotiation,” with God:

The premise underlying any negotiation is that what is being discussed is of mutual concern. Out of this mutual concern flows an exchange, where each party presents his needs and, in turn, listens to the needs of the other.

(Leuchter 2012, 21)

In prayer one demonstrates his unshakable reliance on God that He is *there*, listening as an active partner in the dialogue, and *that* is what effects the change within the one praying – the acknowledgement that God is personally involved. Prayer thus has the power to change *ourselves*, not (only) the circumstances. When we know that there is a Higher Power who knows what is best for us, and we demonstrate this knowledge in the very act of prayer, we are better equipped to deal with life’s vicissitudes, comfortable with the knowledge that whatever happens is for our own good – be it evident in this world or only in the next one.<sup>49</sup> It is not that I pray and things change in response to and as a result of my prayer; rather *I* change as a result of my prayer, and as a result of my understanding that God is listening as a committed partner and has my best interest in mind.

Not surprisingly, the root of the word prayer, *tefilla*, is פ/ל/ל *p(f)/ll*, which means to mediate or to judge. In prayer, one stands in self-judgement: is he ready to receive what God has in store for him as being ultimately for his good? If one enters prayer knowing that it is not a “shopping list” but a dialogue with God, he necessarily acknowledges that God is attentive. This acknowledgement underpins the belief that God will respond with what is best for us (even if it isn’t always immediately obvious as such).

And that is also why prayer has to be *verbalized* (Shulhan Arukh Orah Haim 62:3; Be’ur Halakha [ad loc.]). Merely “thinking” it can be done with oneself, it requires no conversation partner. By vocalising our prayers, we affirm there is a Partner listening to us.

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, without belief in some form of Afterlife or World to Come, the injustices of this world can be unbearable.

### 5.2.2.2. *Prayer as effecting change*

Following the above, in the Judaic view God's goodness is there, ready to be bestowed; prayer merely "awakens" this goodness and brings it down to us (Leuchter 2012, 22). This is evident in the very first prayer in history, said by Adam, shortly after Creation. Scripture (Genesis 2:5) relates how no tree or vegetation in the field had begun to grow, because there was no man to work the soil. Rashi (ad loc.) comments that there was no one to recognize the goodness of rain, and only when Adam came along and recognised its necessity and prayed for it did the rain come down and the vegetation begin to grow.<sup>50</sup>

Several generations later, the prayers instituted by the Patriarchs demonstrated the understanding that we have the ability to effect change. The Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 26b) states that Abraham instituted the Morning Prayer, Isaac the Afternoon Prayer, and Jacob the Evening Prayer. For each, the Talmud brings a proof-text demonstrating the nature of that Patriarch's prayer: Abraham instituted the Morning Prayer, as it says (Genesis 19:27) "Abraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had *stood* before God."<sup>51</sup> (Italics to be explained shortly.) Isaac instituted the Afternoon Prayer, as it says (Genesis 24:63) "And Isaac went out to *supplicate* [*lasu'ah*] in the field toward evening."<sup>52</sup> And Jacob instituted the Evening Prayer, as it says (Genesis 28:11), "And Jacob *encountered* [*vayifga*] the place and spent the night there because the sun had set."<sup>53</sup>

Beyond the proof-texts elucidating the specific words designating prayer, another point can be gleaned from the Talmud's exegesis on which Patriarch instituted what prayer, and that is that prayer consists of these three elements – *standing* before God, *engaging in conversation* with Him, and having an *encounter*. Let us explore each of these.

In Jewish prayer, one stands before God, erect, not prostrate. This is in contrast to some other forms of prayer where prayer is seen solely as an expression of God's

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<sup>50</sup>This also represents God's concealment of Himself which enables us to pursue Him. If everything were given, we would never seek God in prayer.

<sup>51</sup> The Talmud explains that "standing" before God is an expression of prayer, and brings as a proof a different verse, concerning Phineas, who "*stood up and prayed*" (Psalms 106:30).

<sup>52</sup> The word *lasu'ah* means to converse, and thus the Talmud states that "conversing" refers to prayer, bringing as a proof-text a verse from Psalms, "A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint [*siho*, from the same root as *lasu'ah*] before the Lord."

<sup>53</sup> The Talmud states that the word *vayifga*, encounter, refers to prayer, and brings as a proof-text the verse (Jeremiah 7:16), "And you, do not pray on behalf of this nation and do not raise on their behalf song and prayer, and do not *encounter* [*tifga*] Me, for I do not hear you."

greatness relative to man's lowliness, and where prayer is therefore said in prostration (sometimes even with the forehead touching the ground). Prayer is not an expression of man's lowliness but of his greatness: he is able to stand before God on equal footing, so to speak. Indeed, the highpoint of prayer, the *amida* (lit. "standing") prayer, is said, as its name indicates, standing.

Prayer is also, as mentioned above, a dialogue. Dialogue can take place between two partners in conversation who are in essence in agreement to have the conversation in the first place. Prayer need not be reserved for the discontented; it is possible to talk with God for no particular reason, as a child would freely converse with a parent.<sup>54</sup>

But prayer also has its place when the two partners – God and man – *disagree* with one another. This is represented by the third aspect of prayer – encounter, in the sense of *en/counter*, offering a *counter* view to God. This underscores Judaism's belief in a world that is dynamic, not static, and in man's ability to change things. This is *en/counter*: facing the facts of reality, and changing what we can.<sup>55</sup> In *en/counter*, one has the opportunity to grapple with God, to not take things as inevitable and

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<sup>54</sup> An observant Jewish colleague of mine related that shortly after 9/11, when she took out her prayer book in flight, a flight attendant gently reassured her that the flight was safe, that nothing was going to happen. She told the flight attendant there was no need to calm her down, that she was feeling alright. When the flight attendant asked her why she was praying if she wasn't anxious, she responded, "God and I had a relationship long before 9/11." To those who view prayer as a talisman, it is only logical to assume that someone praying is in a desperate situation.

<sup>55</sup> Facing reality, with a commitment to changing what we can, has always been the Jewish *modus operandi*. An example of this can be found in Genesis (41), which relates the dreams Pharaoh had of seven gaunt cows swallowing seven robust cows. The verse (41:8) states that Pharaoh "summoned all the necromancers of Egypt and all its wise men; Pharaoh related his dream to them, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh."

Egypt at that time was the height of civilisation, with experts in astrology and astronomy, and likely experts in dream interpretation. In fact, as the verse relates, "none could interpret them *for Pharaoh*," which Rashi (ad loc.) understands to mean that there were in fact interpreters who interpreted the dream, but Pharaoh found none of these interpretations satisfactory. How could this be? The dream itself is not very complicated – seven skinny cows swallowing up seven fat cows and still remaining thin. Surely, the interpreters could ascertain what the dream portended. What was so revolutionary about Joseph's interpretation, which made Pharaoh nominate him as viceroy of Egypt?

Joseph's genius was not the interpretation of the dream – which, as he himself says (41:16), is beyond his ability "for God alone will provide an answer concerning Pharaoh's welfare." Rather, the difference between Joseph and the Egyptian interpreters was that while the other interpreters accepted their fate, stating that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of severe famine and there was nothing to be done to alter the course of destiny, Joseph's response to the dream's meaning was, essentially, "So what?" So what if it's been decreed that there will be seven years of famine? Let us prepare accordingly. The brilliance of Joseph was that he was not locked into a destiny-paradigm. He accepted those aspects of fate he knew he couldn't alter, and set out to change those aspects he could, by building storehouses for the grain and planning in advance for the years of famine.

Incidentally, this idea of accepting what we must and changing what we can is reflected in the Jewish calendar's fusing of the solar and lunar years, mentioned earlier. The sun represents a constant; the moon, changeability – it waxes and wanes and is "reborn" every month. The Jewish calendar ensures the two work in unison, representing a rock-solid faith and concurrent dynamism.

unchangeable, but at the same time to see that God is present in the dialogue and therefore interested in us and involved.

This idea of en/counter is evident in Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom. Even there, where God had already decided what He was going to do, Abraham protests:

It would be sacrilege to You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the righteous along with the wicked; so the righteous will be like the wicked. It would be sacrilege to You! Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?

(Genesis 18:25)

Abraham does not accept acquiescently. He prays, he pleads, he bargains as best he can.

It is interesting to note that Abraham's prayer of behalf of Sodom is not one of supplication. Not once does he utter so much as a "please don't destroy the people of Sodom." All he says is, essentially, "God, You don't work this way. It doesn't suit You."

How does stating what God does or does not do constitute a prayer?

Firstly, this demonstrates the dialogical nature of prayer; it isn't merely about "depositing" a request with the Divine but about talking with Him. Second, as I will explain below, stating what God does or does not do – stating what God *is* – is *precisely* the nature of prayer. It is a tapping into the Divine essence merely by stating it and thereby bringing about change.

### ***5.2.2.3. Verbalising prayers: calling something into being***

One of the holiest Jewish prayers, recited in many communities only during the High Holidays and always only in a *minyan* (quorum of ten or more), is the *Yud-Gimmel Middot*, the Thirteen Attributes of God. This prayer, like Abraham's on behalf of Sodom, is neither supplication nor begging for forgiveness. It is simply a listing of God's Attributes (kindness, mercifulness, etc.). Yet this is deemed a most powerful prayer – indeed, it is the prayer God taught Moses when he beseeched Him to forgive the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 34:6-7) – because by merely *verbalising* these Attributes of God, we awaken God's "ability," so to speak, to act toward us with those particular Attributes (Nachmanides n.d., 419). That is why, explains Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azoulai, known by his name's Hebrew acronym as the Hida, (quoted in Munk [2003]), prayers must be *verbalised* and not just thought.

By verbalising our wishes before God, we have the power to awaken spiritual forces and bring down cosmic changes.

How far reaching is the ability to “create” with words? Evidently, very far-reaching. There is a Talmudic concept of *tzadik gozer vaHashem mekayem*, “a righteous person decrees and God fulfils” (Tractate Shabbat 59b) – in other words, a righteous individual has the ability to effect Divine action with his words.<sup>56</sup>

In this context, it is interesting to note the halakha mentioned above, which requires that prayer be *verbalised*; it is not enough to just “think” it (Mishnah Berurah, Hilkhot Kriat Shema 62:3, Be’ur Halakha [ad loc.]). One would think that by not verbalising prayers, by just “feeling” or “thinking” them, it would be a greater honour to God, in that He can fulfil unspoken wishes. However Hida (paraphrased in Scherman 1984, xvi) states that

[T]he combination of letters – as formulated by the masters who composed the prayers – have the power to arouse forces beyond our imagination. Thereby new spiritual lights can be created through the agency of human beings. To accomplish this, we must *articulate* the prayers. This causes unprecedented combination: The interaction of the *Aleph-Beis* is combined in the respective prayer and the particular set of circumstances prevailing on earth at the instant the words are uttered.

In addition to the obligation to verbalise prayers, they must also be audible. Practically, when we can hear what we are saying, we are better able to focus. However the *amida* prayer – the most intense part of prayer – is said silently, because it is an “intimate heart-talk with God” (Scherman 1984, xv). This is derived from

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<sup>56</sup>The Talmud (Tractate Bava Kama 50a) relates that Nehunya the well-digger’s daughter once fell into a well. The people came to notify the leader of that time, Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, and asked him to pray for her. After the first hour, he told them she is fine. After the second, he told them she is fine. After the third, he told them she is out – and she was, safe and sound. They asked Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa how he knew that she was alright and he responded, “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, rather, thus I said [“to myself” – i.e., I reasoned] that it is inconceivable that through something for which Nehunya had worked hard on behalf of the public [digging wells so that pilgrims to the Temple would have water to drink], harm would come to his offspring.” Nevertheless, the Talmud goes on to relate that Nehunya the well-digger’s son died of thirst.

Tosafot (ad loc.) explains that dying of thirst is not the same, since it did not involve a well directly. However Rabbi Betsalel Ashkenazi (ad loc.) offers a different explanation: the words of Hanina ben Dosa, “Thus I *said*,” do not mean “I said *to myself*” (i.e., “I thought to myself”), rather “I said – *literally* – to God.” So long as the righteous leader of that time, R’ Hanina ben Dosa, was alive, his prayers could have such an effect. When he said “God, You don’t work this way,” it had an effect on high and Nehunya’s daughter was saved. But by the time the incident with Nehunya’s son dying of thirst occurred, R’ Hanina ben Dosa was no longer living and so there was no one to “say” this prayer into being and decree upon the heavens to save him.

Hannah's prayers (Samuel I 1:13), where she poured out her heart to God, but silently. "Her lips moved but her voice was inaudible." Yet even though the *amida* is said silently, it must still be spoken. The reason for this is because, as stated previously, the soul of man is a Divine spark, a *helek Eloka mima'al*, and part of that Divinity is his ability to speak – the *ruah memalelah*. "Prayer is the innermost longing of the soul," and so "it must be expressed in the form that is most representative of the human soul, intelligent speech... for the spoken word is symbolic of the most elevated facet of man's soul." (Scherman 1984, *ibid*). By enunciating the prayers, man expresses his connection to God. The vehicle for connection is his words.

#### 5.2.2.4. *The language of prayer: redemption in the word*

We have seen prayer's ability to effect change, and that prayer must be verbalized. But what of the language of prayer itself? Must it be in *Lashon HaKodesh*?

Interestingly, while it is permissible to pray in any language so long as one understands the words,<sup>57</sup> it is permissible to pray in *Lashon HaKodesh* even if one does not understand it (see Be'ur Halakha, Orah Haim §61). Judaism regards *Lashon HaKodesh* as significant in and of itself, whether one understands it or not.<sup>58</sup>

The Men of the Great Assembly<sup>59</sup> had the ability to combine letters, verses, and ideas in ways that unlock the gates of heaven. Their composition of the *tefillah* [prayer] is tantamount to an act of creation, which is why it is so important not to deviate from their language and formulation. This is not to denigrate the importance of comprehension and emotional involvement. Prayer in the language one understands is sanctioned by the Sages themselves, and surely, a well-understood prayer is immeasurably more worthy than one that is merely mouthed as a string of uncomprehended sounds. Nevertheless, this does not detract a whit from the importance of praying in the Holy Tongue; it merely

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<sup>57</sup> Note, however, that halakha views praying in other languages as less than ideal even though it is technically permitted (see Mishnah Berurah and Arukh HaShulhan to Orah Haim §62 and §101).

<sup>58</sup> Similarly, there is an obligation to hear the Purim story read from a *megillah* (parchment scroll) on the Purim festival. Halakha dictates that one can hear or read the *megillah* for him or herself in whichever language one wishes, as long as one understands that language (i.e., it does not have to be *Lashon HaKodesh*). However, one is allowed to read it in *Lashon HaKodesh*, even if one does not understand it. The Talmud (Tractate Megillah 8b) explains the rationale is because *Lashon HaKodesh* is Divine and therefore has "meaning" irrespective of whether the reader/listener understands it or not.

<sup>59</sup> The Assembly was comprised of 120 sages and prophets of the Second Temple Era who, among other things, codified the standardised *amida* prayer, which has endured till today.

points up the responsibility to understand the prayers in their original, holiest form.

(Scherman 1984, xvi)<sup>60</sup>

Genesis (ch. 6) relates how Noah was instructed to build an Ark – *teyvah* in Hebrew. Interestingly, the word *teyvah* has two other meanings: a word, and a lectern for prayer. As stated previously, multiple meanings of words are linked in their interpretation, to represent a larger, composite concept. The Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, explains that alluded in the verses instructing Noah to build the *teyvah*, Ark, is God’s directive not only to Noah for the sake of his and his family’s survival but to every individual – to seek redemption in the “word” and the “lectern” – namely, in each word’s meaning and in prayer (quoted in Gross, 2004).

Understanding the meaning of words, their potency, and their infinite possibility to recombine and create, is redemptive. This is alluded to specifically in the dimensions of the ark, the *teyvah* Noah was instructed to build to save humanity: 30 cubits high by 50 cubits wide by 300 cubits long – the numerical values of the letters comprising the root of the word *lashon*, tongue/language.<sup>61</sup> The hermeneutic message for humanity was to build itself through harnessing language, and assessing the ultimate Divine meaning of each word. In so doing, Man is able to transcend his finitude in creating anew, with words, and assumes a higher plane – that of creator. “Language is the point of transition and encounter between the Divine and the human and the human and the Divine, in both directions” (Gross 2004, 121, translation mine).

What emerges from this brief exposition on Torah study and prayer is that the linguistic aspect is unavoidable: the practicing Jew cannot escape the force of language – and *Lashon HaKodesh* specifically – be it in Torah study or three-times-daily prayer. In Torah study he plays his part in revealing the layers of meaning in God’s words, and in prayer he effects change with his words.

Next, we shall see several halakhic implications representative of our linguistic responsibility, given language’s Divine origins and creative force.

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<sup>60</sup> Note that Rabbi Nosson Scherman himself is a living example of this, having translated the prayer book, among many other classic Jewish texts, in a manner that is current and accessible while remaining authentic to source.

<sup>61</sup> ל=30, ש=300 and י=50.

### 5.3. Halakhic Implications

Judaism is ever cognisant of language's creative as well as destructive force, and Jewish sources abound with discussions of speech's ramifications, our resultant accountability, and safeguards to be implemented because once speech is unleashed, it takes on a life of its own.

Shortly after Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan published his monumental work *Hafetz Haim* on the laws of guarding one's speech, he was approached by a fellow who complained that with the publication of the book he would never again be permitted to open his mouth. The Hafetz Haim, as he was known eponymously, responded to the contrary: "Till now you were unable to open your mouth; now, finally, you can."

This anecdote reflects the Judaic outlook that laws governing conduct are in place not as ends in themselves but to ensure that what we *are* able to do is done optimally. All things need a framework within which to function. The limitations are necessary, in recognition of human failings. In the context of the Judaic view of language, which holds that language is Divine and has effects on thought and action, we can better understand why there are so many halakhot governing speech and communication.

The verse (Job 19:26) states "In my flesh I shall see God," which commentators explain to mean that through the human body one can glimpse the Divine. Every characteristic of the human body parallels a spiritual concept.<sup>62</sup> Jewish ethicists explain that the fact that the mouth was created with two "safeguards" – the teeth and the lips – demonstrates how careful one has to be with what comes out of his mouth.

The Maggid of Dubno (Kranz 2011) gives the following analogy, in reference to the severity of oaths but applicable broadly to our linguistic accountability: two neighbours, both poor, one a woodcutter and the other a thief, both of whom had children to marry off. The poor woodcutter managed to do so, despite his modest means, while the thief could not. He asked the woodcutter what the secret to his success was, and the woodcutter answered that when each child was born, he designated a savings box in which he regularly deposited his savings under lock and key. When the time came to set them up on their own, he was able to do so. He suggested the poor thief do the same, and save up. The thief laughed at the

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<sup>62</sup> For example, the fact that man stands erect as opposed to four-legged animals demonstrates his authority over the animal kingdom, paralleling God's authority over the world. Or that male and female creations parallel male and female aspects of the Divine. For more on the latter point, see Kosman (2014).

woodcutter's advice, saying it was good advice for the woodcutter himself but not for him, a thief. The woodcutter, he said, knows not to touch the lock on the savings box, but the thief, a professional lock picker, would not be able to restrain himself and would open the box the moment he needed the money.

The parable is that one who observes the laws regarding what he is permitted to say, has safeguards against what might pass by his lips. But one who transgresses the laws in this regard, even those safeguards put there for his own benefit (his teeth, his lips) will not be able to protect him. This parable is all the more relevant nowadays, when we have so many more opportunities via social platforms and digital media to broadcast whatever we want to whomever we want (and don't want), whenever we want and however we want. The idea that once words leave our mouth (or keyboard or touch screen) they take on a life of their own is truer now than ever.

It would be impossible to cover all the speech-related commandments and their derivatives here. I mention here but three, by way of example: the prohibition against tale-bearing and evil slander, the severity of oaths and the importance of keeping one's word, and the prohibition against causing another pain verbally. I focus specifically on these three because I believe they are particularly relevant in our era of explosive social media and ever-diminishing boundaries between the realm of the public and the private, where it is that much more difficult to define (let alone adhere to) any linguistic-moral standard. A decade or two ago phenomena such as shaming through social media platforms (and, in the extreme case, resultant suicide) were unheard of. Equally, people thought about what they said before committing it to paper (or screen). But the more accessible the medium becomes, the cheaper words become. Everything is permissible to be said, and nothing is beyond good taste.<sup>63</sup> In such a digitalised climate, words lose their currency. Consequently, it is inevitable that people will be unaware of the potential value of words – and, unfortunately, what their words can do to people.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> One would think that the exception to this would be university campuses, now rife with “speech codes” and “trigger warnings.” Yet, ironically, this has created a culture of stifled academia. It seems everywhere we *should* be voicing our opinions we're not, and everywhere we *should not* be sharing our opinions, we are. See Rachael Pells' (2017) article concerning university safe-space policies and the fear in which academics are living.

<sup>64</sup> See Keen (2008) for more on this point.

### **5.3.1. Gossip-mongering and evil slander**

Scripture prohibits tale-bearing (Leviticus 19:16), and regards it as such a terrible sin because of its resultant consequences that in the very same verse it enjoins us “do not stand aside while your fellow’s blood is shed.” While these are two separate commandments, Maimonides (Hilkhos De’ot 7:1) notes the link between the two, the implication being that gossip mongering causes bloodshed.

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Metzia 58b) states that slander and tale-bearing are considered so severe, likened to murder – quite a serious accusation, especially considering that murder is one of the three cardinal sins for which a Jew is obligated to give up his life rather than commit. (Elsewhere [Tractate Arakhin 14b] the Talmud states that tale-bearing is actually worse than *all three* cardinal sins for which a Jew is obligated to give up his life rather than commit.] In fact, the Talmud (ibid., 15b) takes this statement quite literally, stating that “there are three that evil speech kills: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it and the one they are speaking about.” The Talmud goes on to say that one who is a tale-bearer is considered as if he denies the core belief of God’s existence.

The prohibition of speaking evil slander and tale-bearing is not just because of the damage caused thereby to the people involved, but because it influences the mind. Rabbeinu Yonah (Sha’arei Teshuva §3:204) states that “From the habit he has formed, he is no longer in control of his mind. It is as if his tongue controls his thought.” Consequently, says Rabbeinu Yonah, someone who makes a habit of speaking slander has a difficult time repenting.

### **5.3.2. Honouring one’s word**

Earlier I mentioned how with the cheapening of the medium, words lose their currency. When ink, quill and parchment were material substance, when books were original manuscripts painstakingly copied – and with the advent of printing, when writers were charged per letter of print – one gave more thought to what was penned. But now, in a digitalised climate where words literally and figuratively have no weight, their potential force goes unnoticed. Precisely in such a climate value needs to be reinjected into words; one way of doing so is to honour them.

Judaism places much value on keeping one’s promise, and for that reason regards oaths as a very serious matter. Scripture emphasizes the severity of oaths (Numbers, ch. 30; Deuteronomy 23:22-24) – in fact, the entire Talmudic tractate of Nedarim is

dedicated to the topic of what constitutes an oath/how to nullify it and under what circumstances, and elsewhere (Tractate Shabbat 33a) the Talmud details the punishment incumbent for oaths taken in vain and false oaths. Vows and oaths are in specific contexts, but the broader implication of this commandment is the importance of keeping a promise. Not honouring one's word is regarded as a grave infraction.

Practically, this is why there is a custom among many orthodox Jews of tacking on the words *bli neder*, lit. "without oath," before committing to something, even the most casual statement like "I'll drop off the book at your house later today, *bli neder*."<sup>65</sup> More solemnly, this is also why the *Kol Nidrei* prayer is recited just before the commencement of the Day of Atonement, in which one effectively makes null and void any vows one has taken upon oneself.<sup>66</sup>

*Kol Nidrei* emphasizes for us the extreme gravity that the Torah attaches not only to formal vows and oaths, but to the general concept that one must keep his word...Consequently, when we preface the Yom Kippur prayers not with pleas for forgiveness, but with a declaration regarding vows, we are reminding ourselves of the importance of scrupulously honoring our commitments. Thus we begin Yom Kippur with the recognition that a Jew's word is sacred...It is indicative of the gravity Judaism attaches to vows and promises that the Jew prefaces his Yom Kippur prayers for forgiveness and repentance with *Kol Nidrei*; we cannot make peace with God until we absolve ourselves from the grievous sin of violating our word.

(Scherman and Zlotowitz 2000, 52)

Throughout history many accusations of insincerity have been made against Jews, with *Kol Nidrei* being brought as proof of the "ease" with which vows can be nullified. However *Kol Nidrei* was instituted *solely* for cases where an individual has made a vow or an oath concerning *himself* (e.g., abstaining from a certain activity, or committing to some other ritual or regulation), and inadvertently forgot about it, and is now found in violation of his word. (Obviously, it would have been better had he

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<sup>65</sup> Note that it is also customary for people to say "*bli neder*" when taking on a new custom or religious stringency or practice. The Code of Jewish Law (Yoreh Dei'ah 214:1) rules that any custom that has been accepted and followed assumes the status of common practice and cannot be dismissed without *hatarat nedarim*, nullifying the "oath" (i.e., the commitment to the practice). To avoid the possible need of nullifying an oath, one should state *bli neder* when taking on the particular practice.

<sup>66</sup> This also explains the practice of *Hatarat Nedarim* customarily performed before Rosh Hashanah, ten days prior to Yom Kippur.

not taken his oath so casually so as to have made it in the first place.) “The *Kol Nidrei* declaration can invalidate only vows that one undertakes on his own volition. It has *no* effect on vows or oaths imposed by someone else” (ibid) – for example, a contract agreement with another or a court ruling.

### **5.3.3. The prohibition of *Ona’at Devarim* – causing someone pain verbally**

One final area within the halakhic implications of language as a creative force which I touch upon here is the prohibition against causing another pain verbally. The prohibition is derived from the verse (Leviticus 25:17) which states that one is forbidden to wrong another. The Talmud (Tractate Bava Metzia 48b) explains that this refers specifically to causing another pain verbally – for example, teasing, or reminding a penitent person of his old ways. Rashi (ad loc.) says the prohibition also includes giving bad advice, which is why the verse concludes with the words “fear your God; for I the Lord am your God”: Lest one think his intentions are not known and therefore there will be no repercussions, God knows what is really in his heart and promises to react in kind if there was an ulterior motive in giving particular (bad) advice.

Similarly, there is a prohibition against embarrassing another, derived from the verse (Leviticus 19:17) “Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him.” Even where rebuke is mandated, one is forbidden to shame another and one would incur guilt by such rebuke (Sifra, quoted in Rashi [ad loc.]). This is applicable in private and all the more so in public (Maimonides, *Hilkhot De’ot* 6:8). Shaming another is regarded as so severe, as the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 107a) states, one who publicly shames his fellow man is denied a portion in the World to Come.

In a similar vein, there is a prohibition against calling someone by a nickname (even if he goes by it generally) if the speaker’s intention is derogatory or if it is a name he does not like. Beyond the insult entailed, by verbalising something, we create a reality: once we have called someone by a derogatory name (e.g. “stupid”), we’ve now reduced that person to the status of “stupid.” Even if one’s intention is not bad, if the term is a derogatory one, one must not call his fellow by it (Bava Metzia 58b).

The above examples are a mere sampling of extensive and intensive halakhic discourse. Halakha mandates that an observant Jew be ever cognisant of his words’ weightiness. Words are not arbitrary, and as such we bear responsibility for them. While it is true that it is up to the hearer to choose how he reacts to any insult, in

Jewish law the speaker has to take responsibility for his words. The old maxim that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me” does not absolve the speaker from responsibility toward speech.<sup>67</sup>

In his commentary on the Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers 1:17), Maimonides enumerates five categories of speech: 1) Speech which constitutes a mitzvah – for example, Torah study, prayer; 2) Speech which is forbidden – for example, giving false testimony, tale-bearing, cursing and foul speech; 3) Speech that constitutes what the sages define as *siha beteila*, “idle talk.” This includes things such as how much we paid for a particular item we purchased, current fashion trends, or other common information; 4) Speech which is permissible – meaning, neither praiseworthy nor forbidden, but simply necessary for daily functioning (e.g. for social or professional interaction); 5) Speech which is desirable, such as discussion of philosophy and matters relating to character development.

What type of speech constitutes a mitzvah and what type is prohibited are clear; it is the “grey areas” where personal mastery is mandated and which constitute a lifelong work. Beyond the explicit what is and is not permissible, in the Judaic view excessive talk is unfavourable as it inevitably leads to sin (Ethics of the Fathers, *ibid.*). The classic example bearing this out is Eve: God forbade only *eating* from the tree, and she added the prohibition against *touching* it (Genesis 3:3), which God had never said. With her excessive talk, Eve led to the sin of forbidden fruit and humanity’s subsequent downfall. When the serpent tried to lure Eve to eat from the tree, she told him God had said not to eat from it and not to touch it, either. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 19:3) relates that the serpent told Eve she would not die from touching it, and then pushed her against the tree to prove it. He then told her, just as you did not die from touching it, as you claimed you would, so too you will not die from eating from it.<sup>68</sup>

On the flipside, many sources extoll the virtues of silence. For example, the Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers, 3:17) states, “Silence is a protective fence for wisdom” and in the words of the Sage Shimon ben Gamliel (*ibid.*, 1:17), “All my days I grew up among the Sages, and found nothing better for oneself than silence.” Silence has a unique place in Judaism, which warrants a companion study of its own.

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<sup>67</sup> See Kodish (2003) for more on this point.

<sup>68</sup> As to God’s warning that the day they eat from the tree they would die, the punishment for eating from the Tree of Knowledge was not *instant* death, rather an *eventual* death – i.e., becoming mortal, whereas previously they were destined to live forever.

What emerges is that Judaism is not content merely with adherence to what is obligatory and what is forbidden, rather with what lies in the “grey area” of speech and how that is used, and what lies in the realm of the silent. The Jerusalem Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 1:2) states, “Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, ‘If I had been at Mount Sinai, I would have needed two mouths.’ Afterward he said, ‘Now that we only have one, I am unable to save our souls from evil speech – all the more so had we had two.’” Man was created with pairs – two eyes, two ears, two nostrils; yet, one mouth. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s wish for two mouths was so that one could be used for holy purposes – Torah study, prayer – and the other for every-day necessary speech that isn’t lofty or ideal but simply functional. But his conclusion was that, if now, with *one* mouth, we are unable to avoid harmful speech, how much more so had we had two.

In a similar vein, the Hafetz Haim (1984, ch. 10) brings the analogy of an artist who needs impeccable tools to produce his artwork. The organ of speech is man’s tool with which he can produce his art – his words – in study and prayer, in building up the world. Even if one were brilliant and could perfectly envision the artwork, without proper tools nothing would come of his vision. Moreover, if the tools were damaged in some way, the final result in the artwork would reflect the imperfections of the tools. So too, says the Hafetz Haim, one who sullies his organ of speech with lies, tale-bearing or defamatory speech – how could he then turn to Torah study and prayer and bettering the world with the same tongue? In the Judaic view, there is no bifurcation, no “comfort zone” where one can say whatever he wants. We do not have the option of compartmentalising speech into what is in the presence of God and what isn’t.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

We have seen how seriously Judaism regards speech and its language, how in the Judaic ethos these constitute a creative force and one is thus accountable for every utterance. We have seen how this plays out in Judaic practice, particularly in Torah study and prayer, and in the many *halakhot* governing speech and communicative interaction, only some of which we brought here by way of examples. In sum, Judaism regards language as no simple matter; it can neither be ignored nor compartmentalised; and, when used correctly, can effect enormous change – intra-personally, interpersonally and even cosmically.

My point here was not to promote Judaic belief (vis-à-vis language or otherwise) or practice (again, vis-à-vis language or otherwise), nor to expound upon the Bible, halakha or Jewish lore, though it be interesting (or in the realm of the fanciful to the secular-minded). Regarding the former, Judaism has never sought to missionize – and strongly discourages the practice; regarding the latter, such exposition would be impossible in one dissertation, let alone one chapter therein, and would prove superfluous given the tomes of halakhic discourse available on the subject, authored by halakhic authorities and people with far greater knowledge than I possess.

Rather, my point here was to demonstrate how seriously Judaism regards speech and the ability to use it and that in a culture wherein the capacity for speech is viewed as Divine, and wherein the language itself is viewed as Divine, speech and language and their resultant products and usage necessarily will be regarded differently than in societies where speech isn't given much consideration, is considered a "right" rather than an obligation, or is regarded as an arbitrary cultural appendage or curiosity (or worse, as "fluke" of an otherwise "animalistic" human being).

Some linguists (Cameron, Boroditsky) have described language as what makes us uniquely human. In the Judaic view, it is not only what makes us uniquely human but uniquely *Divine*. (Accordingly, we are uniquely *human* only in the sense of distinction from the animals.) If present culture relegates speech to the arts (or, as it were, to the sciences), the Judaic view presented herein stands somewhat at a remove from the discussion – though not in contradiction to either side – consigning speech to an entirely different realm, that of the Divine.<sup>69</sup> A Divine conception of language has two insights to offer: the concrete force of the intangible and the idea of an absolute, though not yet revealed, truth.

#### **5.4.1. The concrete force of the intangible**

The Judaic view of language as a creative force – intangible, yet so intricately woven into our lives – serves as a metaphor for the greater intangibles permeating our existence. However many theories there are for language acquisition, development, maintenance and decay – on an individual, as well as on a collective level, and on a lexical as well as on a discursive level – what we know about it falls dramatically short of what we don't know. Regardless of whether we consider language a science

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<sup>69</sup> Thus, the Judaic view of language offers a universalist perspective in that language is a universal endowment, and concurrently an individualist perspective, in that man, as Speaker, can emulate the Divine in his own way.

or an art and linguistics as belonging in the (neuro)sciences or the humanities,<sup>70</sup> so much of it remains unknown and yet in use, daily, by everyone the world over.

Language is probably the most well used tool humanity has ever possessed. Humanity possesses many tools, without necessarily understanding their underlying mechanisms. Does the average person using a mobile device understand how it works? Does the average car owner know about mechanics, other than where to put in petrol, oil and water? But language differs from other tools in the sense that humanity not only knows how to use it but can *create* with it, infinitely, *without even understanding how it works*.

No doubt there are other “languages” – art, sculpture, music etc.; the language employed in speech is but one form of representation of mind.<sup>71</sup> But whereas art, sculpture, music or other art forms are, in perfect form, the gift of the uniquely gifted, language is a universal endowment not requiring any particular giftedness.<sup>72</sup> Certainly, some individuals will be more gifted at wielding language, be it in writing or oratory skills, and many can learn to hone this gift; but with rare exceptions pathological in nature, it is available to every human being. It can be used, fully, effectively, without ever being properly understood – and can be developed even further. What is unexplained in language acquisition and development (and which is therefore regarded as fluke), Judaism regards as a Divine element – an unknown whose very “unknown-ness” clues us in to its uniqueness.

In this sense, language is a microcosmic representation of how the intangible can effect enormous change in the world, and man’s Divine role in this ability. Just as God created the world, man has to create with his words, beginning with himself, his character development and internal world-creation. As the Mishna (Tractate Sanhedrin 4:5) states, each person is a “world unto himself.”

[Man] includes within himself a microcosm of the full spiritual content of the universe...Just as the larger universe was created and survives by virtue of the twenty-two manifestations of spirituality contained in the *Aleph-Beis*, so too, the miniature universe has his own *Aleph-Beis*, his own flows of spirituality that he brings to bear upon himself and his surroundings.

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<sup>70</sup> It is hoped that by the conclusion of this paper the reader will consider that it is actually both – and so much more.

<sup>71</sup> See Benjamin (1997) for more on this.

<sup>72</sup> Indeed, this is one of Pinker’s claims to innateness.

(Munk 2003, 24)

The Judaic view of language enables us to consider the concreteness of the intangible, of transcendence inherent in the physical realm. Language is proof of the unknown, a window through which the Divine can be glimpsed.<sup>73</sup> It is our means for concretising the abstracts of our higher selves – the mind. In the words of Boroditsky and Gaby (2010, 1638),<sup>74</sup>

How are we able to think about things we can never see or touch? Our mental lives go far beyond those things observable through physical experience... The ability to cognitively transcend the physical is one of the very hallmarks of human intelligence.

The Jew, being in possession of the language most closely approximating the language of Creation, and having an understanding of language's creative force and living it daily, offers humanity the idea of human-as-creator, as well as self-change. Nothing is static; we can each determine our destiny and create our world – with the intangibles we possess, with words. Language is not by fluke. How we regard and harness speech to better our world is entirely within the domain of our free will. The believing Jew knows the power that language has to create or to destroy, and is therefore obligated to use it accordingly. He does not have the privilege to hide behind embellished rhetoric.<sup>75</sup>

#### **5.4.2. Language as metaphor for the absolute: truth beyond words**

In addition to the idea of the intangible permeating our lives, the Jew, being in possession of the language of the Bible – a language whose oligosynthesis underscores the belief in the oneness of God and the unity of all things – offers humanity the idea of an Ultimate Truth that stands outside of the subjective mind; that Truth is not a singular entity (i.e., to the exclusion of all others) but a *unified* singular entity – a composite whole of all things – and thus cannot be any one element therein but is everything, concentrated into one focal point.

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<sup>73</sup> The poignancy of this on a national level will be touched upon in the next chapter, concerning the Jewish people and the revival of the Hebrew language in our time.

<sup>74</sup> Said in regard to a study whose results showed markedly different spatial representations of time in an Australian Aboriginal community wherein the words “right” and “left” aren't used rather only cardinal directions (north, south, east and west) – similar to Boroditsky's study discussed in chapter 1.

<sup>75</sup> Incidentally, this is another possible explanation, in addition to the one mentioned earlier, as to why Moses had a speech impediment. Were he an eloquent orator, the truth of what he had to convey would be clouded (Hirsch, Shemot 4:11). God purposely chose a leader with a speech impediment, so that the truth he had to convey would stand on its own.

The Jew offers the world the weightiness of words, in the idea that God spoke and what He spoke, became; the ultimate truth. There was no lag-time between utterance and its manifestation in existence, no need for interpretation of the object and the name signifying it.<sup>76</sup> Words didn't just represent the concepts behind them, they *were* what they were, represented by the fact that, as mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word for "thing," *davar*, is from the same root as the word for "speech," *dibbur*. In the Judaic view "any thing is none other than the word the Torah uses to create that thing" (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 87). This idea works vice versa as well: "all things in the world are speaking their words, the world is created to be a dialog; we should be listening" (88).

In the words of Hamann, quoted in Benjamin (1997, 70),

Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close, and as easy as a child's game.

And in Benjamin's (1997, 70-71) own words,

Since the unspoken word in the existence of things falls infinitely short of the naming word in the knowledge of man, and since the latter in turn must fall short of the creative word of God, there is a reason for the multiplicity of human languages. The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation – so many translations, so many languages – once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language... The paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge, whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language, was indeed forced to differentiate itself on a lower level as creation in name.

In the Original Language, words cohered with what they were, and truth corresponded with the higher dimension of things. But with Man's downfall the multiplicity of languages (and meaning), was inevitable. It was a necessary

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<sup>76</sup> This idea is encapsulated in the Kabbalistic idea of טעם העץ כטעם הפרי *ta'am ha'ets k'ta'am hapri*, "the taste of the tree is identical to that of the fruit" – meaning, the true essence of something was evident in its manifestation. Indeed, in the Judaic view, that is how things were in Paradise – the trees themselves tasted identical to the fruit they bore. But following humanity's downfall, this was no longer the case. Vessel and content would henceforth not be identical. No longer did a thing's internality necessarily match its internality.

consequence of humanity's deviation from an absolute truth. However the multiplicity of meaning in itself reveals that there is an ideal somewhere out there – by virtue of its distance from where language/truth ought to be, as well as the fact that with the multiplicity of language comes a multiplicity of views, each comprising a part of the composite whole truth. This, in turn, lays the foundation for a unified truth which is all-inclusive.

The idea of a long lost paradisiacal state in which there was no disparity between words and their “being” might seem farfetched or fanciful to some, but it can serve as an interesting counterculture to the egocentric worldview, wherein truth is only what we personally think or perceive and therefore necessarily relative. The Jew, in possessing the language that is the closest approximation of the pre-sin language of absolutes, offers the world the idea of true meaning – not a singular, exclusivist meaning but a unified, multi-layered one.

The idea of an objective truth, without which the very concept of “truth” is mutable, links directly with the idea that there is an objective moral standard, without which any moral standard is relegated to personal preference or belief. Earlier I mentioned Eve's sin of verbosity with the Tree of Knowledge. Benjamin (1997, 72) comments that “The Tree of Knowledge stood in the garden of God not in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner.” The test was whether Man would keep to the belief that there is an *objective* truth/moral standard that lies *outside* of him, or would he consume from the Tree and deify himself as the Knower of things, as the Namer, and therefore as capable of objectivity.

In this sense, the Jew posits a counteroffer to the postmodern view of truth as subjective and relative. Particularly in today's era, where the multiplicity and mutability of meaning renders meaning meaningless, the Judaic view is of importance in fostering a counterforce to the void left by postmodern meaninglessness which has been slowly filling with radical fundamentalism promulgating an exclusivist truth.<sup>77</sup>

In the Judaic view, there *is* an objective, outside truth, but one that is not yet fully revealed and therefore not yet complete; parts are still unfolding, as history unfolds.

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<sup>77</sup> Consider the Judaic view of the End of Days, which does not maintain that all people become Jewish. Rather, that all people come to know God, whatever nation they belong to. This is in contrast to other religions which maintain that in the End of Days people will convert to their religion. (Unfortunately some fundamentalist groups are attempting to artificially enforce their vision of the End of Days already now.)

This truth *includes* everything yet maintains distinction. This not-yet-revealed and therefore incomplete truth, which creates the space for everything to exist, is only possible in exile, in God's hiddenness. The Jew, in exile, represents the imperfect, the unknown, simultaneously with the striving toward the goal of being known, of revelation. His monotheistic particularism is necessary for the eventual, not-yet-revealed universalism, and is achievable only through concealment, through exile.

In a small way, we glimpse this at times when we are "at a loss for words." When, and why, do we find ourselves at a loss for words? At times when the emotion, whether happy or sad, overwhelms us; at times when suddenly the weightiness of words catches us off guard, by surprise. When we become cognisant of the power of words – *that* is when we become cognisant of their insufficiency.

Hence, when Aaron learned of his sons' death, the verse says he was silent (Leviticus 10:3). That in itself is a level of faith: words could never express Aaron's acceptance of Divine will, and so he remained silent – *vayidom*. Yet King David offers the higher level of expression, in Psalms (30:12): "that I may sing Your praise and *not* be silent" – *velo yidom*. There are moments of silence, in recognition of the power of words. And there are moments of speech, demonstrating that we have mastered the art and overcome the words' limitations – moments where the words serve us rather than fail us, and express who we truly are.

Ultimately, language is the tool humanity has, not only for recording its history but for rebuilding itself and charting an alternate course of it. The odd revival of the Hebrew language in our time, in defiance of the normal rules of language decay and language death, is one such manifestation, symbolic of a much greater revelation-in-process and the concrete force of the intangible. This is the topic of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER VI: HEBREW AND THE MODERN STATE OF ISRAEL

### 6.1. The Oddity of Hebrew's Survival and Revival

The previous chapter explored the Judaic conception of language as Divine as manifests in daily Jewish practice, from a micro-perspective. Now, I turn to a macro-perspective, namely, what the Judaic conception of language as Divine has to inform us vis-à-vis Lucy's (1997) discursive relativity and the revival of the Hebrew language and the modern State of Israel.

The Hebrew language is an odd case, reportedly the only language to have been revived on such a large scale after two thousand years of being a “dead” language; this, despite not having large-scale, top-down formal national programs for this purpose<sup>1</sup> and being achieved bottom-up, by the sheer insistency, consistency and determination of the foremost Hebrew revivalist, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Born Eliezer Yitzhak Perelman to an Orthodox Jewish family in Lithuania in 1858, Ben-Yehuda grew up speaking the vernacular as well as Hebrew for the study of sacred texts. Lured by the secularism of the times, Ben-Yehuda eventually left his Orthodox upbringing and Yeshiva education in favour of a gymnasium education. Later, inspired by the rebirth of European nations in his time, Ben-Yehuda began contemplating the revival of his own people. He wrote several articles on the revival of the Jewish people, in their national homeland, as well as on the revival of their language.

Ben-Yehuda believed that by speaking Hebrew and only Hebrew, in school and at home, it was possible to revive the language – and threw himself headlong into this endeavour. He immigrated to Palestine, and brought up his oldest son this way – hearing only Hebrew in the home, with Ben-Yehuda coining new words for terms for which classical Hebrew didn't have any. His son became the first child to grow up speaking Hebrew only. Ben-Yehuda sought to implement his revivalist vision in schools, teaching for a while and then devoting his time to writing his dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew, completed posthumously by his wife and son and comprising seventeen volumes. Ben-Yehuda also founded the Hebrew Language Council, in time to become the Academy of the Hebrew Language – an institution still

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<sup>1</sup> For example, language preservation programs like those found in Iceland, or those used to preserve Native American languages.

in existence today, which decides on all matters related to the Hebrew language and its new coinages.

Ben-Yehuda's ideas, as zany as they seemed, proved successful.

...in the forty years between 1881[the year Ben-Yehuda came to Eretz Yisrael]-1921, a core of young, fervent Hebrew-language speakers was formed, with Hebrew as the unique symbol of their linguistic nationalism.

(Fellman n.d.)

The status of the Hebrew language would be confirmed in 1922 by the British Mandate, which recognized Hebrew as the official language of the local Jews.

However, while a few scholars have referred to Hebrew's revival as nothing short of a miracle<sup>2</sup> the oddity of Hebrew's revival is largely ignored, relegated to the footnotes of linguistic history, or downplayed and demystified with the explanation that Hebrew was never really "dead" in the first place.

But if we are to take the demystified approach and claim that Hebrew was never really "dead," we would then be left to explain how it remained alive throughout the ages, despite not being in daily use outside of religious study and the liturgy. Does that, too, not defy the natural course of languages, whereby a language not spoken in everyday conversation or maintained by a cohesive people in shared territory, is destined to die? How has Hebrew survived for millennia? What do the causes underlying its survival have to teach us about its resurrection in modern times? What does this revival have to inform us about the Jews' present condition and their vision for the future?

Speculations as to *why* the oddity of Hebrew's revival has been ignored or downplayed will be discussed later on. Here, I wish to offer merely a framework for better understanding this oddity, and to posit that 1) Hebrew is indeed an exceptional case; 2) Hebrew's modern-day revival cannot be divorced from the underlying mechanisms of its survival; and 3) Hebrew's survival – and revival – is as odd as the survival of the Jewish people itself; the two are inextricably linked. Jewish peoplehood is bound with Jewish language-hood and the two must be explored hand in hand.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Naftaly Tur-Sinai, first president of the Academy of Hebrew Language, said "The revival of the Hebrew language in Israel is the almost miraculous fulfillment of a religious vision of scholars and priests" (1960, in Fellman [1973, 256]).

While Hebrew's revival as an every-day language is credited to secular Zionism, it is crucial to note that its *survival* (which means, ultimately, its revival) is intimately bound with the Jewish people's adherence to tradition and religion. Hebrew's survival throughout millennia was made possible only by the Jews' grounding in Torah observance and its study and the language's use for liturgical purposes, as a result of which Jews everywhere were, to varying degrees, diglossic. It is the religious anchor of the language that ensured Hebrew's survival and eventual revival in every-day life – and eventual use in *all* fields, religious and secular, including literature, politics, science and modern technology, with its status and purpose obviously still being maintained and honoured in religion.

Whether we take Hebrew as being revived from the dead or as having never really been dead, the extent to which Hebrew has thrived and developed since its national reawakening is noteworthy. Its case is radically different from, say, Latin, which was also used solely for religious and liturgical purposes and is today no longer a spoken language, anywhere, despite the long period it enjoyed as the second language of diglossic peoples. While Latin has survived, unlike Hebrew it has not been revived. And, unlike Hebrew, it has not thrived. It informs other languages, certainly, in terms of etymology; but it isn't used for every-day conversations, religious or otherwise.

Just as the European peoples overthrew Latin, “symbolically rejecting the centralized religious authority of the feudalistic medieval world whose basic creed found its most potent expression in Latin,” (Fellman 1973, 252), paving the way for eventual nation-states formed by common territory and language, the Jews held on to their national (by which I mean religious) identity by using Hebrew. As Fellman (*ibid.*) notes,

Indeed, the concept of nationalism based on territory and spoken language versus religion was incomprehensible to many Jews, accustomed as they were to being perpetually a nation without a common territory or spoken language, but rather a people based on religion and the Holy Tongue.

Thus, paradoxically, just as the use of the spoken languages of Europe for written purposes was an act of European nationalism, so the use of

Hebrew by the Jews in the post-medieval world was a substitute for a Jewish nationalism which as yet did not exist.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, one would think that with the advent of Jewish (secular) nationalism, Hebrew would fall by the wayside. It is ironic, then, that the Hebrew language has not only been revived but is such an iconic symbol and foundational element of the secular State of Israel.

Up until the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement, it was understood that Jewish continuity – its very peoplehood – was possible only through steadfast adherence to halakha. Jews who had abandoned the commandments of Judaism survived for two, perhaps three, generations till they eventually intermarried and became completely assimilated. The Hebrew language’s survival, too, was contingent on religious observance. Once Jews had left the fold, not only did they lose the practice of religion but eventually lost the language as well. In other words, Hebrew’s “substitute[ing] for a Jewish nationalism” was only possible insofar as it reflected and served the religious purpose of the people who spoke it.

It is only since the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, with the *Haskalah* movement and later with the (secular) Zionist movement, that Hebrew was revived as a *secular* language, irrespective – or, some would erroneously argue, devoid (see below) – of its religious and spiritual import. This is intimately bound with (some of) the Jewish people seeking a secular nationalist-political existence bereft of religious identity. But, as will be demonstrated below, the attempt of Ben-Yehuda and other Hebrew revivalists to strip Hebrew of its religious content had an inherent flaw: their wish to wrest Hebrew from the sacred could not be actualised, for it is only *because* of Hebrew’s religious basis, core, and ultimate purport that it survived in the first place. Put differently, the “Holy Tongue” cannot be divorced from the “Holy Nation” that speaks it.

## **6.2. Language as the Marker of Jewish Identity**

How do we understand the concepts of a “Holy Nation,” and, consequently, a “Holy Tongue”? “Holy nation” is the standard translation of *goy kadosh* (Exodus 19:6), but the most crucial element is missing, inherent in the words “to Me” in the verse: “You shall be *to Me* a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation” – meaning, a nation that is *kadosh* because it is *for God*.

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<sup>3</sup> Or, rather, which had been lost.

The word *kadosh*, generally translated as “holy,” actually means “separate.” “Holiness” is not some lofty state of being, but a separation and distinction. The Jewish people’s being a nation apart, though often (mis)interpreted as unjustified aloofness, is a call to responsibility – a “kingdom of ministers,” for God. That, and only that, is the basis for “chosen-ness.” The Jews, entrusted to be God’s emissaries, were told unequivocally, “I *separated* you from the nations” (Leviticus 20:26). They were thus destined to be “A nation that dwells alone” (Numbers 23:9), no matter how much they would try to be like the surrounding nations.

Many precepts have kept the Jewish people segregated throughout the ages, such as dietary laws, Sabbath observance, the laws of family purity, and more. When these precepts were not honoured by Jews, assimilation was just a matter of time. But along with these precepts was a sacred (and “secret”) language uniting them to each other and keeping them apart from other nations. (Ironic, then, that Ben-Yehuda believed the Jewish people could have no national revival without their own language in their own country, when the very language he’d revived had been theirs for millennia, despite their having been exiled from their homeland.)

The Judaic sense of chosen-ness is intimately bound with the language. This is reflected in the *Kiddush* blessing said on the Three Festivals: “Blessed are you, God, our L-rd, King of the Universe, Who has chosen us from every people, *exalted us above every tongue*, and sanctified us with His commandments...” (Italics mine; see section 6.3.2. below for more on chosen-ness). Just as the Jewish people are enjoined to be a Holy People, so too were they given the Holy Tongue; just as they have been designated a “nation that dwells alone,” separate from all other peoples, so too has their language kept them distinct, and so too is this separation between the sacred and the secular made manifest in language.

The peculiarity and particularity of the Jew from his surrounding environment was present already from the moment the first Jew, Abraham, walked the Promised Land. Interestingly, he is called *Avraham HaIvri*, Abraham the *Ivri* – the “Hebrew” – because he comes from *ever hanahar*, “the other side of the river” (meaning, Aram). Others opine that he was called *Avraham HaIvri*, Abraham the Hebrew, because he is a descendent of **Eiver** (Eber). The significance of this title is not simply that he came “from the other side of the river” or that he was a descendent of Eiver. Rather, *conceptually* he was from “the other side” (the first interpretation), or Eiver’s student and spiritual successor (the second interpretation), in promoting monotheism in the

then pagan society worshipping the Molech. This distinction came to manifest in the language, *Ivrit* – Hebrew.<sup>4</sup>

The Jewish people maintained this distinction of tongue even upon their descent to Egypt. Already when Joseph arrived there (who eventually paved the way for the rest of Jacob’s family to find refuge during the years of famine in Canaan), he identifies as a “Hebrew.” Imprisoned after being unjustly accused of committing adultery with Potiphar’s wife, he relates to his inmates that he was kidnapped (sold, really<sup>5</sup>), from “the land of the *Hebrews*” (Genesis 40:15), not Canaan. This mark of distinction was not only how he viewed himself but how others viewed him as well.<sup>6</sup>

The Jews maintained this distinction even during their enslavement in Egypt, which began shortly after Joseph’s death. As mentioned in chapter 5, the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:20; Shir HaShirim Rabbah, §4; Vayikra Rabbah §32) relates several things the Jewish people did not abandon in Egypt – their place of national conception – despite the harsh slavery and their nearly total assimilation: their (Jewish) names, their language, and their dress code. The Midrash goes on to say that it was in the merit of the Jews’ holding steadfast to these things that they were eventually redeemed. Why specifically these cultural markers?

A person’s name represents his essence, the most internal, inalienable core. It is what awakens one from deep slumber.<sup>7</sup> The Jews held on to traditionally Jewish names as a sign that despite assimilation and the harsh conditions of slavery, their core remained intact and unvanquished.

Whereas a name represents one’s internality, clothing or dress code represent ones externality – how the world sees us. Our core essence (and our names themselves, generally speaking) are pretty much unchangeable; clothing, however is: we can “dress up” or “dress down” for a particular occasion; we can “dress the part.” Not coincidentally, the Hebrew word for clothing is **בגדים**, *begadim*, from the root **בגד**, meaning “betrayal.” Clothing can betray us in giving others (and ourselves) false perceptions.

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, when the sailors on Jonah’s ship ask him what his nationality is, he responds, *Ivri anokhi*, “I am a Hebrew,” (Jonah 1:9).

<sup>5</sup> He was indeed sold, yet Joseph said he had been kidnapped. It was here that he rectified his flaw of tale bearing (see Genesis 37:2), by refusing to speak negatively of his brothers, despite what they had done to him.

<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 41:12; 43:32

<sup>7</sup> Try waking someone in a deep sleep by calling a different name – they generally do not wake. But upon hearing their own name, they’re more likely to wake.

The third unchanged element, language, serves as the bridge between the internal and the external. This bridge of language connects between individuals as well as between individuals and their host culture. Even in Egypt, the Jews remained faithful to their language. They spoke the language of the Egyptians, certainly; but they had their private, sacred haven in *Lashon HaKodesh*. The Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 5:18) relates that they had ancient scrolls with them in Egypt, written in Hebrew, which they would read in order to uplift their spirits amidst slavery. This was the case throughout history: wherever the Jew found himself in exile, he spoke the vernacular but had his sacred Hebrew with him.

These distinctions of language, dress and name have been evident throughout the exiles of the Jewish people, at times by their own choice – as in Egypt, in ancient times – and at times having been forced upon them by their oppressors, as in Nazi policy in our day and age.

### **6.2.1. Nazi highlighting of Jewish distinction**

It is eerily disturbing to see how Nazi policy paralleled these three markers of distinction – name, dress code and language. Miller (2013) lists several such policies from the 1930s that, he notes, should have served as a wake-up call to Jews but tragically went unheeded as by this time the vast majority of European Jewry had already become so assimilated and deeply entrenched in the host society, they could never suppose what would befall them. The largely assimilated German Jewry, which considered themselves more German than Jewish (and more German than some Germans) and held German culture in such high regard, were sorely disillusioned. Concerning names and dress code, note the following laws (in Miller [2013, 185-186]):

- The law of compulsory Jewish names (January 5, 1937), by which “the Nazis restored Jewish consciousness and put a stop to assimilation.” Under Nazi rule, Jews were obligated to adopt a Jewish name if they didn’t already have one.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Zaslow (in Miller, 2013, fn. 297) notes, “The irony of forcing Jewish names on Jews who over the last hundred years had attempted to shed themselves of all signs of Jewishness is pointed out as a clear sign of Heaven’s intention to fulfill a Torah axiom: the Jews are and must remain a nation dwelling separate and apart, no matter how intertwined in a secular society. Retention of Jewish names had always been a hallmark of fidelity to the Jewish Nation, since the earliest days of Jewish slavery in Egypt.”

- Jews had to carry identification cards (July 23, 1938). Their passports, too, were marked “Jew” (October 5, 1938). Even the most assimilated Jews could no longer hide their Jewishness.<sup>9</sup>

Precisely those marks of distinction which the Jews had maintained so well of their own accord during their sojourn and later enslavement and torture in Egypt were now forced upon them under Nazi rule, reminding them of the distinctiveness they had tried so hard to erase in making their way into high German society.

As for language, our topic at hand, the Germans found the Jews’ relationships with language deeply disturbing. Hitler wrote:

On this first and greatest lie, that the Jews are not a race but a religion, more and more lies are based in necessary consequence. Among them is the lie with regard to the language of the Jew. For him, it is not a means of expressing his thoughts, but a means of concealing them. When he speaks French, he thinks Jewish, and while he turns out German verses, in his life he only expresses the nature of his nationality.[...]

[O]f Germanism he possesses really nothing but the art of stammering its language – and in the most frightful way – but apart from this has never mixed with the Germans, his whole Germanism rests on the language alone. Race, however, does not lie in the language, but exclusively in the blood, which no one knows better than the Jew, who attaches very little importance to the preservation of his language, but all importance to keeping his blood pure... This is best shown by the Jew who can speak a thousand languages and nevertheless remains a Jew. His traits of character have remained the same, whether two thousand years ago as a grain dealer in Ostia, speaking Roman, or whether as a flour profiteer of today, jabbering German with a Jewish accent. It is always the same Jew.

(Hitler, in Hutton [2001, 300-301])

It was not so much that the Jew *did not care* for the preservation of his language, rather that there was a greater force unifying him with his people; he did not *need* a mother tongue in order to maintain his Jewishness. The mother tongue in question was a *function* of his Jewishness, while his real mother tongue – the revered “dead”

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<sup>9</sup> They also had to wear a yellow star on their clothing and were forbidden to grow beards.

Hebrew – had a life and force of its own, far greater and more enduring than any individual Jew or Jewish community.

That is what disturbed Hitler so deeply, for while Germans in post-Versailles Europe faced the grave existential danger of assimilation, the Jews as a people were immune, as always, to such threats: “The Jew... can speak a thousand languages and nevertheless remains a Jew.” The Jews were scattered all over, and spoke the host culture’s language wherever they were, yet they had their own language of the sacred Scriptures keeping them united and setting them apart from other peoples. They maintained their cohesiveness and distinction in the Diaspora precisely because a Jew in Austria could communicate with a Jew in Galicia and find common affiliation: their Torah, commentaries, prayers and religious documents were the same. Their religion – a force greater than any Jewish language they may have had in common (Ladino, Yiddish), or territory they clearly did not possess – kept them unified, via their religious language.

But the Germans in the diaspora were endangered. Language was “the point of vulnerability[, f]or it provides a bridge to racial mixing” (Hutton 2001, 301). Scattered all over Europe, with no fatherland, the one thing uniting diaspora Germans between the World Wars was the German language, and they were fast losing their tenuous linguistic grasp of German-ness.

The Germans had survived “diaspora” through the will to language, and this special relationship to the mother-tongue was the key to the survival of the people as a racial or ethnic unity. The language could unite an otherwise divided national consciousness, transcending confessional, regional, political and class divisions. But in post-Versailles Europe, it was clear that the boundaries of the *Volk* were falling.

(Hutton 2001, 5)

A German child growing up in the German diaspora would likely grow up speaking the host country’s language – perhaps in addition to his German from home, at least for the first generation. In subsequent ones, however, German would be forgotten. Equally, with no distinct fatherland, if other peoples – say, Jews – came *into* what was left of Germany and spoke German, how were Germans to know who was the real German and who was the imposter? With outsiders – say, Jews – speaking German, what was really “German”? What did German-ness mean, without a fatherland and with the mutability of mother tongue?

And so, Hitler took this point of vulnerability, glorified it when it came to the German people and the German language, and denigrated it when it came to the Jews.

Hutton (2001) offers a unique perspective on the role of language and linguistics as a science in Nazi Germany, and a detailed account of how different academics employed the field to serve the Final Solution. He shows how “mother-tongue fascism was the contribution linguistics made to Nazism” (260) and how language came to embody everything that was lacking in the German people and inherent in the Jewish people, which formed the German rationale for seeking to destroy the Jews:

German history offered a mirror-image of Jewish history. Jews were the evil twin of the Germans, their racial opposites (*Gegenrasse*) [counterculture]. The story of the Jews was one of survival and continuity through a set of texts in a sacred language, and through a race instinct that was indifferent to mother-tongue. The Jews were a special case and a unique threat, since their capacity for racial survival was superior to that of the Germans, and since they had no need of territory and no need of mother-tongue.

(5)

Hitler projected this German existential crisis onto the Jews:

The mightiest counterpart to the Aryan is represented by the Jew. In hardly any people in the world is the instinct of self-preservation developed more strongly than in the so-called “chosen.”

(Hitler, in Hutton 2001, 303)

The Germans identified something of themselves in the Jewish people, for they, too, had been exiled from their land and scattered all over. However unlike the Germans, the Jewish people had proved time and again, for millennia, that it was on the whole immune to assimilation. Jews lived everywhere and spoke many languages, but maintained their cultural distinctiveness because of their distinction between the vernacular (wherever they were) and the sacred. In fact, they revered a sacred language that was specifically *not* their mother tongue. This baffled the German national psyche, which identified German-ness so strongly with mother tongue.

It is understandable, then, that German linguists between the World Wars, beset by national-existential angst, idolised German. They were “committed to the notion of mother-tongue,” believing that

it was their sacred duty to protect and preserve the mother-tongue, to contribute to the salvation of the German people itself and its liberation from history, hybridity and social divisions, and the horrors of assimilation, thereby reconnecting it with the foundation national Being.

(6)

Jews were regarded as the German counterculture not just in terms of Judeo-Christian belief and conscience (which Hitler had said held “humanity” back) but in terms of linguistics. Nazis perceived the Jews as lacking a sense of fidelity to their mother tongue, which underscored the “unnatural” (5) relationship Jews had with their language. I would argue that the relationship between Jews and their language is not “unnatural” as Hutton says the Germans perceived it, but rather *supernatural*, and that is (at least partly) what drove the Nazis to such madness. The Jew was unconquerable, his survival defied all logic and Darwinian law, and so the superior Germans sought to prove they could destroy him and, thereby, everything he represented.

To do so, the Germans first had to liberate themselves from the constraints of language, so poignantly described by Michaels (1996, 143; 165-166):

While the German language annihilated metaphor, turning humans into objects, physicists turned matter into energy. The step from language/formula to fact: denotation to detonation. Not long before the first brick smashed a window on Kristallnacht, physicist Hans Thirring wrote of relativity: It takes one’s breath away to think what might happen to a town if the dormant energy of a single brick were to be set free... it would suffice to raze a city with a million inhabitants to the ground [...]

Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as “figuren” “stücke” – “dolls,” “wood,” “merchandise,” “rags.” Humans were not being gassed, only “figuren,” so ethics weren’t being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society. In fact, they’re a fire hazard! What choice but to burn them before they harm you... So, the extermination of

Jews was not a case of obeying one set of moral imperatives over another, but rather the case of the larger imperative satisfying any difficulties.

For millennia Jews have survived in exile from their homeland and without a mother tongue in use. Wherever they were, language was always a key aspect of maintaining their distinction and separation from their respective host culture. Indeed, they may have spoken a thousand languages, but they had another language, unique to them and to their Divine mission, and which would not allow itself to be cut out of their history. Despite speaking a thousand languages, they never gave up their deepest language and the religion it represented and maintained. It would come alive once more, imperceptibly as if on its own, to haunt them when they most rejected everything it represented: in a bizarre twist of fate, a few short years after the Holocaust, there arose a modern state on the ancient Jewish homeland, with the people's 2000-year-old language that had been phenomenally revived a few decades prior becoming its national language.

Had the laws of history vis-à-vis the Jews changed? Did the Jews suddenly somehow step back into history and follow its rules? What does it mean to have a secular state, to have secularised a Holy Tongue?

### **6.3. Hebrew and the Secular Israeli Jew: The Return of the Repressed**

I have explained above in chapter 4 how the ideas that language, thought, and reality are interconnected, and that speakers of different languages view the world differently, offer a glimpse of the secular-religious divide.<sup>10</sup> This divide is dramatically brought to the fore in the case of the Jews, where peoplehood is bound up with language.

The interesting exception lying somewhere in between the religious and the secular is the secular Israeli Jew, who exhibits an undercurrent of wonder and sentiment (dare we call it reverence?) when it comes to the subject of language. He may be inclined toward secularism in everything else – except his language. Even those affiliated with the political/social/religious Left, who generally espouse a universalist worldview, still exhibit somewhat of a particularist bent when it comes to language. Why?

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<sup>10</sup> This divide is not only as regards the secular and religious but as regards political right-vs.-left as well, to be discussed in the concluding chapter.

For many secular Israelis, the line between that which is “Jewish” and that which is “Israeli” has been somewhat blurred.<sup>11</sup> Many secular Israelis have replaced Judaism with “Israeli-ness,” believing that it is not necessary to be a commandment-observing Jew, one can simply be a good (or good enough) citizen. They are proud of their “Israeli-ness,” not their “Jewishness,” Jewishness being open to very wide-ranging, personal interpretation – what some call “buffet Judaism”: take what you like, no commitment necessary.

Yet inasmuch as they may be proud of their “Israeli-ness,” at the expense, at times, of their “Jewishness,” the secular Israeli cannot escape the religious undercurrents inherent in the very language he speaks. This lone remaining vestige of particularism – the Hebrew language – will, at some point, in some way, come alive.

Curiously, while the secular, Left-leaning Israeli, who wishes to be “a nation like all other nations”<sup>12</sup> panics at any hint of particularism or religiosity in the public (and private) domain,<sup>13</sup> the concern about speaking a language that is sourced with the Divine is never raised. The irony is that nothing scares the secular Israeli more than having the repressed God return, and that which they uphold so much as their (secularised) national-cultural value – their language – is precisely the medium through which the God they have so vehemently repressed will return. Language is,

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<sup>11</sup> Consider the many religious holidays (Hanukah, for example) which are celebrated as national, not necessarily religious, holidays; or the fact that the Sabbath, what has been the quintessential Jewish marker throughout history, has become the subject of ongoing debate as to its place in the public domain and is the subject (and object) of much mudslinging and indignation on both sides of the secular–religious and political divide; and the oddity that Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day, is more sacred to many Israelis than the Sabbath day itself. (For example, stores open on Israel’s Independence Day are fined, whereas stores open on the Sabbath are not – in fact, as has recently come to light, some franchises *refusing* to be open on the Sabbath are fined by their managing chains.) This is not odd considering Israel’s founding as a secular state, but very odd considering that the Sabbath has been with the Jewish people for millennia; in the words of (the secular, it should be noted) Ahad Ha’Am, “More than the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people.”

The Sabbath was given to the Jewish people shortly after leaving Egypt, at Marah, en route to Mount Sinai – before they even received the Torah, and millennia before the modern State of Israel was even conceived. In fact, although the Sabbath was given after they left Egypt, the concept was actually introduced to them while they were still enslaved. In his commentary on the Talmud (Tractate Bava Bathra 14b), Rashi says that Psalm 92, which begins “A psalm for the day of the Sabbath,” was composed not by King David but by Moses. (To be precise, Moses composed Psalms 90 through 101.) Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky (2007, 259-260) explains that Moses composed this Psalm for the Jewish people whilst they were still enslaved in Egypt, in order to give them hope. The inherent message of the Sabbath, the weekly universal equalizer, is freedom for *all* people. In composing this psalm for the Jewish people, Moses was telling them they will not be slaves forever. It is thus ironic that in the Jewish state, the Sabbath – the ultimate Jewish symbol of freedom – is routinely desecrated, whereas the national day of independence has assumed a religious status.

<sup>12</sup> See Samuel I, 8:5.

<sup>13</sup> Take, for example, the many issues of separation of religion and state that come up almost daily in the Jewish State: civil vs. religious marriages, laws of Kosher, laws regarding halakhic conversion, and more.

by far, much more of a threat to them than any other marker of Jewish-religious identity, its danger magnified by the fact that it goes largely unnoticed.

In a letter written in December 1926 to Franz Rosenzweig (who, it should be noted, was on the brink of conversion and returned to Jewish observance toward the end of his life), Gershom Scholem, a secular Zionist Jew who was active in reviving the Hebrew language, confessed his greatest fear: that secular Zionism's attempt to revive the Hebrew language for nationalistic purposes and political ambitions, and to strip it of its religious roots, was fraught with peril. Hebrew, he feared would never become completely devoid of its spiritual content. Its spiritual force would, at some point, burst forth. He wrote:<sup>14</sup>

This country is like a volcano, for it houses the [Hebrew] language. One speaks here of many things that could make us fail. One speaks more than ever of the Arabs. But there is another, far more troubling threat than the Arab people, that is necessarily the product of the Zionist enterprise: the “actualization”<sup>15</sup> of Hebrew.

Is this abyss of a holy language which is being handed down to our children not going to erupt one day? Indeed, people here are not aware of the significance of their actions. They believe they have secularized the language and removed its apocalyptic thorn. But this is not true, of course; the secularization of the language is only a *façon de parler*, a phrase. It is impossible to empty of their meaning words filled to bursting, if not at the expense of the language itself. The ghastly speech we hear on the streets presents precisely the linguistic world devoid of expression in which the secularization of language is made possible. But if we transmit to our children the language that has been transmitted to us; if we, the transitional generation, revive the language of the ancient books for them in such a way that it may disclose itself anew to them – must then not one day the religious force of this language break out against its speakers? And which generation will be struck by this outbreak? We walk over an abyss with this language, almost all of us

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<sup>14</sup> There are several translations (into Hebrew and English) of Scholem's letter, written in German. The translation here is mainly from Martin Goldner and Alexander Gelley, in Cutter (1990), and is also based on the excerpts translated into Hebrew (Gross 2003), with some emendations on my part.

<sup>15</sup> Note that in one Hebrew translation of the original German, the term *הילון*, *hilun*, is used, meaning the “secularization” of Hebrew.

with the false security of the blind. But will we not, we or those who come after, plunge in once we are able to see? And no one knows whether the sacrifice of individuals who will be destroyed in the abyss will suffice to close it.

Those who initiated the rejuvenation of the language believed blindly and almost obstinately in its miraculous power. That was their good fortune. Nobody with clear foresight would have mustered the demonic courage to try to revitalize a language in a situation where only an Esperanto could have been created. They walked and still walk above this abyss, which remained hidden, and have transmitted this language to our youth together with all the ancient names and seals. Today it seems weird to us and at times we are terrified when we hear a religious phrase quite out of place, in a totally unrelated context. *Ominous is the Hebrew language!* It cannot and will not remain in its present state! Since our children no longer have any other language, they and they alone will have to pay for this predicament which none other than we have imposed upon them without forethought and without question. If and when the language turns against its speakers – and this has occurred already on bitter and unforgettable occasions when the arrogance of this undertaking has become apparent – will we then have a youth which can exist in and survive the revolution of a holy language?

Language is a Name. In the name rests the power of language, its abyss is sealed with the Name. We have no right to conjure up the old Names day by day without calling forward their hidden power. They will appear, since we have called upon them, and undoubtedly they will appear with vehemence! We speak in rudiments, we speak a ghastly language: no names go in circles in our sentences, one plays with them in publications and newspapers. It is a lie that that is not important, even if a holy force may erupt suddenly out of the shame of our language! Names have their own life! If it were not so then woe to our children, who would be pushed into the void and emptiness without any hope!

Each word that has not been newly coined but drawn from the good old treasure chest is full to bursting. A generation which accepts the most fruitful of our holy tradition – our language – cannot simply live without

tradition even if it would fervently wish to. The moment when the power stored in the language unfolds again, when the spoken word, the reality of our language, assumes its form once more, that moment will again offer the holy tradition to our people, offer it as a decisive sign that allows only the following choice: to submit or to go under. God will not remain mute in a language in which He has been invoked and summoned into our existence in countless ways. This unavoidable revolution of the language, however, in which His voice will be heard again, is the one thing that is not spoken of in this country; for those who called the Hebrew language back to life once more did not believe in the judgement that was thereby loosed over us. May the thoughtlessness that has led us on this apocalyptic path not lead to our ruin.

One could sum up Scholem's letter by saying that language is the fault line between the secular and religious.

### **6.3.1. The Zionists' choosing of Hebrew**

Given that the Zionists' intent was to foster political nationalism devoid of God and religion, it is surprising that they chose Hebrew. But the fact that they chose it illustrates just how unaware they were of what they were doing; they were blindsided by ideological and practical considerations.

Ideologically, "[t]he Zionist pioneers believed they were breaking new ground, curing the illness of two millennia of Diaspora life" (Morris-Reich, 125). Understandably, they opted for Hebrew's revival instead of their native Yiddish. Yiddish symbolised "the 'old' exilic Jew, who had to be cast off in order to create the 'new' one" (124).

The first generation of Zionist immigrants, all of whom were native Yiddish-speakers, chose not to speak it and rather to develop the seeds planted by the *maskilim*.<sup>16</sup> The Zionists attempted – and succeeded – "to revive Hebrew as the unique spoken language of the 'new Jews' Palestine" (131). This shedding of history, "[t]he distinction between the 'old' and 'new' Jew" became ingrained in the Israeli ethos (125).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Members of the *Haskalah* (enlightenment) movement.

<sup>17</sup> As an example, take naming: Zionists tend to give their children names symbolizing the rebirth of the Jewish people in their homeland; Modern Hebrew names from a variety of themes – nature, character traits, places, or uncommon biblical names, particularly those of characters who settled the Land.

Practically, especially in the early years of the State, Hebrew facilitated communication between immigrants from different countries who spoke different languages. Hebrew served as the *lingua franca* of the “melting pot,” as Ben-Gurion had envisioned the new Jewish State, where Jews would shed their respective exilic background and become “new Jews.”

Reviving Hebrew was no simple task, as Hebrew lacked words for the Twentieth century. Some words were invented, some borrowed from Arabic or Yiddish (in the case of the latter, some were back-borrowed<sup>18</sup>); “[t]hreads of continuity and break between Hebrew and Yiddish communications are deeply and intricately spun on various linguistic and cultural layers” (134). There are also many words borrowed from other languages, and some words were coined from Biblical/Mishnaic terms and given a slightly different or altogether new meaning, often leaving the original word bereft of its sacred meaning.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the ideological or practical considerations behind the revival of Hebrew, no one – neither secular Zionist nor orthodox anti-Zionist – could have envisioned its success.

The particular (or I should say particularist) status of Hebrew has been evident since before the founding of the State of Israel. Hebrew has always assumed national

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Among those not affiliated with the Zionists (i.e., the ultra-Orthodox), however, children are traditionally named after deceased relatives, sometimes as far back as great-grandparents or even further, or after Rabbis, Hassidic masters or Torah scholars. Yiddish names are not uncommon, though sometimes given as a second name with the first one being a Hebraised version of the Yiddish (e.g., Tova Gittel, both meaning “good,” the latter in Yiddish, the former in Hebrew, or Shoshana Raizel, meaning “Rose,” in Hebrew and Yiddish, respectively.).

Whereas the ultra-Orthodox wish to cement the connection to the past, the Zionists wish to forge a new future. This explains the reverence for ancient Hebrew and the link with the ancient past – Biblical times – since it is by way of “skipping over” 2000 years of exile. As one passionate Zionist put it to me, when questioned why he had trouble naming his son after his grandfather whose name was Avraham (Abraham), “No child of mine will be a monument to the dead!” This is in stark contrast to the ultra-Orthodox mind-set, where the link to the past is seen as vital to forming a future. (Interestingly, in the end he did name his child Avraham, but clarified that it was *not* merely [at all?] for the grandfather, rather for Avraham the Patriarch, the first Jew to walk the Promised Land and break new ground.)

<sup>18</sup> For example, the Hebrew expression “*takhles*,” which means “the bottom line” or “practically speaking” (as in, “*Takhles*, what have you decided to do?” or “Let’s talk *takhles*: what are our options?”) comes from the Yiddish, but is actually from the Hebrew *takhlit*, which means “purpose.” Now back in Hebrew, it’s *still* pronounced the Yiddish way, *takhles*. (See Morris-Reich [2007] for more on this term.). Or, the Hebrew term “*brogez*,” meaning in the midst of an argument or in the state of not being on speaking terms (as in, “I’m *brogez* with her”), which comes from the Yiddish but is actually from the Biblical *berogez*, “in anger.”

<sup>19</sup> Consider the Modern Hebrew word for electricity, *hashmal*, from the Biblical *hashmal* (see Ezekiel 1:4). The true meaning of *hashmal* is not simply a “bright light” but something far more ethereal and spiritual, something of the Divine.

importance to Israeli Jews, even – or especially – in the secular State.<sup>20</sup> Under article 82 of the (pre-state) Palestine Order in Council, Hebrew, Arabic and English had equal status as official languages (Bakshi 2014). The Law and Administration Ordinance which came into effect with the founding of the State of Israel nullified the official status of English and asserted that Mandatory law would continue (ibid., 171). Although the implication would seem to be that Israel thus had two official languages, Hebrew and Arabic, several laws have passed since then that make it clear that, generally speaking, Hebrew enjoyed more status than Arabic as Israel's official language.<sup>21</sup>

That a culture is intimately bound with, and takes pride in, its language, is not unique to Jews.<sup>22</sup> The difference with Hebrew, however, is the *extent* to which language is bound with culture, specifically the fact that so much of the secular-religious tension comes to the fore in the issue of language. As stated in chapter 4, a

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<sup>20</sup>Not surprisingly, anti-Zionist strands of Hassidism (notably Satmar, Toldot Aharon), and certainly members of the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta sect, which maintains that the founding of the State of Israel is in defiance of God's will as it has been established as a secular state and prior to the heralding of the Messiah, refuse to speak Hebrew. They view it as an embodiment of the Zionist dream of a secularised, politicised Jewish-national revival.

<sup>21</sup>However, note that in the years since Israeli Supreme Court President Aharon Barak's Constitutional Revolution in the early 1990s, there have been several Supreme Court rulings and petitions concerning language that indicate a demotion in the status of Hebrew, itself reflective of a larger slow but definite erosion of Israel's Jewish identity in favour of its democratic one, and a preference for political cosmopolitanism and social multiculturalism over Jewish particularism. (For more on this, see "Israel as a Nation-State in Supreme Court Rulings" by Aviad Bakshi and Gideon Sapir, in *The Israeli Nation-State: Political, Constitutional and Cultural Challenges*, eds. Fania Oz-Salzberger and Yedidia Z. Stern, Academic Studies Press, Brighton, MA: 2014.) In such a post-Zionist climate, it is no wonder that Hebrew has been demoted.

One can argue that though in the years since the Constitutional Revolution the status of the Hebrew language as Israel's official language has been eroded, it was never a question of the *value* of the Hebrew language, rather one of *which* value – Hebrew or the other values at stake (freedom of speech, consumer rights, rights of the deceased, etc.) – takes precedence. However, one cannot ignore Justice Barak's pitting of, for example, the *right* to freedom of speech against the *interest* in nurturing the Hebrew language as a national value [see for example CA 105/92 "Re'em" Engineers v/ Nazareth Eilat Municipality, PDF 47(5) 189 (1993) (*Re'em*)], and his stating that the *right* takes precedence. The ruling in this case (and others) demonstrates a definite shift in attitude toward Hebrew. This shift is telling, considering the Left-orientated judicialisation taking hold in Israel. Language being the last vestige of connection to Jewishness for the secular Israeli, this erosion reflects another step toward alienation and is an exemplar of post-Zionist identity shedding.

<sup>22</sup>Consider the case of Hindi and Urdu in India: the two are, essentially, different dialects of the same language, with Hindi being written left-to-right using Devanagari/Sanskrit characters and Urdu being written right-to-left using Perso-Arabic script. Yet Hindi and Urdu speakers claim they are distinct languages (quite understandably, given that Hindi is spoken chiefly by Hindus and Urdu is spoken chiefly by Muslims, and given the animosity between the two peoples in Northern India). Or, consider Iceland's pride in Icelandic, its efforts to keep the language alive, its broadcasting (literally and figuratively) its language wherever it can on its national airline, and its Dagur Íslenskrar Tungu – Icelandic Language Day, marked on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November. Or consider Islam's regard for Arabic, the "language of revelation," and the Muslim tenet that the Quran cannot be properly translated, among other examples.

culture that maintains its language is Divine and that the ability to “language” is a Godly endowment will necessarily regard its own language – and any “linguaging” for that matter – as something of a spiritual nature that assumes a high moral and/or national importance – even when a vast majority of members belonging to said culture aren’t aware of it, and even by virtue of said culture’s constant waging battle against that very divinity.

Thus, even though the oedipally complexed secular Israeli Jew has tried to deny his differentness or “chosen-ness,” he will still find the moral drive brimming under the surface (reminiscent of Scholem’s volcano), though he may channel it in other ways and Jews have always differed in how this moral drive is to be put into action (as the saying quoted earlier goes, “two Jews, three opinions”). A nation cannot speak the Holy Tongue without being reminded of their mandate to be a Holy People. As the people who introduced ethical monotheism to the world, the undercurrents of the Jew’s essence will always come to the surface and remind him of his roots – for better or (as he may perceive it) for worse. To those who have so virulently tried to repress God, He will return, unbeknownst to them, by the very language they speak. This moral drive, as in the case of their revival of a sacred language, comes at a price of inescapable particularism: chosen-ness.

### **6.3.2. The meaning of chosen-ness**

I digress here for a much-needed explanation of “chosen-ness.” The idea that the Jews are the “chosen people” is problematic, to say the least, to many people – even to some (largely secular) Jews themselves. A proper understanding of what this “chosen-ness” means, in general and specifically in the context of particularism, is in order.

The prevalent definition of “chosen-ness” – that it implies superiority or isolationism, and which is often offered as an explanation for or justification of anti-Semitism – is lacking in that a) it is not compatible with Judaism’s definition of “chosen-ness” and b) it is wholly inadequate to explain the universality, perpetuity and intensity of anti-Semitism. I offer, instead, an explanation as to what “chosen-ness” actually means, or should mean, which will hopefully shed light on the term specifically and on secular Israeli angst over anti-Semitism more generally.

### 6.3.2.1. *Chosen-ness was not a priori*

First, according to Judaism, God did not choose the Jewish people a priori. Initially, *all* of humankind was destined to be on Man's pre-original-sin status. Once Man fell, humankind was given the opportunity to rectify itself, which it did not utilise. There were a handful of righteous people (Noah, Methuselah, Shem, Eber, Abraham) during this opportune time, which closed at the Generation of Separation (approximately 1764 BCE), after which the seventy nations branched off.<sup>23</sup> The seventy nations could have still chosen to include themselves in the Abrahamic family, but they didn't. (They had this opportunity once again at Mount Sinai, but they rejected it; see Tractate Avoda Zara 2b.) From that point onward, individuals – not nations – could graft onto Abraham's family tree (Luzzatto, *The Way of God* 2008, 2:4).<sup>24</sup>

Thus, according to Judaism, God did not select the Jewish people exclusively, rather he intended for *all* nations to aspire to Godliness. But it was Abraham who found God, and committed his life to spreading His message of monotheism and morality. British Journalist William Norman Ewer's quip, "How odd of God / to choose the Jews," is not accurate: God did not choose the Jews, the Jews chose Him.<sup>25</sup>

### 6.3.2.2. *Morality is not exclusive to Jews*

Although God designated the Jewish people from Abraham onward, anyone can join; but they don't *have* to do so in order to be considered righteous. Unlike other religions, which maintain that those outside of the religion are "infidels" deserving of death or that those who don't subscribe to the religion's commandments are doomed to hellfire or are beyond redemption, Judaism does not require non-Jews to take on the

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<sup>23</sup> See Genesis, ch. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this is the meaning of God's promise to Abraham, *Venivrekhu bekha kol mishpehot ha'adamah*, "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you." Not only will the nations of the world be blessed through Abraham, but they can graft onto him (from the same root forming the word לְהַבְרִיךְ *lehavrikh*, to graft). Hence converts are called *Ben/Bat Avraham* (son/daughter of Abraham) – specifically Abraham, because he was the starting point.

<sup>25</sup> Some will argue as to the fairness of being born to a particular family line, where one's ancestors made decisions that have a direct bearing on one's Jewishness or non-Jewishness. It is difficult to explain the metaphysical to those who believe only in the tangible, but consider the analogy of a foetus of an alcoholic mother, who is going to be born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. One can argue that this is unfair, that it is not the child's fault; no one is saying that it is, it is simply an unavoidable fact: the mother's actions have ramifications on the child. In the Judaic worldview, the effect of the metaphysical on the physical world is no different than the effect of the physical on the physical world.

faith – in fact, it *strongly* discourages it.<sup>26</sup> “[W]e neither seek nor encourage converts. We do not teach that all people must be Jews; quite the contrary. Those who insist can convert, but we tell those who would that it is not necessary” (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 97). One is simply bidden to keep the seven Noahide laws intended for everyone.<sup>27</sup> Righteous gentiles<sup>28</sup> (i.e., those who keep the basic Noahide laws) are likened to God’s priests, and merit the World to Come.<sup>29</sup> In other words, although a person may have been born to another nation, he can graft onto the Jewish people if he so chooses and pursue a life of holiness (i.e., separateness, a life that is inherently particularist), but can also lead a moral life as a non-Jew. Thus, being “chosen” does not signify exclusivity.

### 6.3.2.3. *Chosen-ness has no bearing on the role of all nations*

Furthermore, the Jews’ “chosen-ness” was never intended to negate the role and specialness of other nations or individuals. In fact, it is only by embracing one God as promoted by Judaic monotheism that we are all one race and no individual is inherently superior to another,

...because one God means one human race. Only if we all have the same Creator, or Father, as it were, are we all brothers and sisters... having the same parent also means that no person or group is intrinsically more valuable than any other.

(D. Prager 2014)

According to Jewish tradition, God created seventy nations, each with its own unique culture, characteristics, and role to play in world civilization.<sup>30</sup> Each nation of

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<sup>26</sup> See Tractate Yevamot 47b. In this regard, Judaism departs radically from missionary ideology, or Islam’s division of the world into Dar al-Islam, “the World (or domain) of Islam” – those parts of the world where Islam reigns and Sharia law is in effect – and Dar-el-Harb, “the world (or domain) of war,” where Islam and Sharia law have not yet seized control and disbelief reigns till it is taken over by Islam. Judaism has never advocated gaining control of the world or converting people to Judaism, neither by use of missionary tactics nor by force.

<sup>27</sup> Upon examination, one can see that these laws are the rudiments for the proper functioning of any society – do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery (which, at its core, is about upholding the sanctity of marriage and the family structure as imperative for the functioning of a normative society); set up a judiciary, do not harm living creatures, do not worship other Gods and do not blaspheme – in other words, there is an imperative to acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being. (See Prager “No Other Gods,” 2015, for more on these last two points.)

<sup>28</sup> Note that although Yad VaShem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center uses the term “righteous gentile” to refer to non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust, the halakhic definition of the term is as explained here.

<sup>29</sup> See Yalkut Shimoni, Isaiah 429; Tosefta Sanhedrin 13; and Maimonides’ *Laws of Repentance*, 3:5.

<sup>30</sup> As mentioned earlier, nowadays we do not know what the seventy nations are, as King Sennacherib (Assyrian ruler, 705 BCE–681 BCE) mixed up all the nations during his conquests. However in future

the world has attributes which the other nations lack. Indeed, the Talmud (Tractate Pesahim 87b) states that one of the reasons God exiled the Jewish people was for the purpose of bringing back converts. By virtue of having grown up in another culture, converts have something the Jews lack and need to learn.<sup>31</sup> The universalist ideal of everyone-is-the-same is not a Jewish ideal. As Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 92) notes,

asserting that all things are connected... is not to say that all things are or should be the *same*. When the parts of an organism are properly connected so that the organism functions as a cohesive and integrated unity, its parts yet remain separate in identity.

In fact, the separate identity of each part is absolutely necessary to the survival and well-being of the organism as a whole... A piece of music works because it comprises *different notes in correct relationship*. Or in that overworked but useful analogy, an orchestra is successful because it comprises *different instruments in harmonious synchrony*. Different instruments and different notes, but one piece of music; and if it is a great piece, it is great not despite but *because* of those differences....

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times each nation will be restored (See Tractate Shabbat 32b; see also the Gaon of Vilna's commentary on Song of Songs, 1:2).

Incidentally, the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 17a) states that members of the Sanhedrin, the High Court, had to speak seventy languages. The reason given is because they cannot base halakhic rulings on testimony heard through an interpreter. But perhaps speaking the languages of other cultures also enabled them to be in a better position to decide on matters of national import and foreign affairs.

<sup>31</sup> Two examples of converts who brought theretofore unknown characteristics to the Jewish people are Jethro and Ruth. Jethro introduced a hierarchical system of government. Moses, indoctrinated with Judaic monotheism, could not conceive of a system of governance that necessitated intermediaries. It took Jethro, a former priest of idol worship and expert at “intermediaries” between man and higher powers, to teach Moses the concept of hierarchical governance.

Ruth, the Moabite convert, brought the concept of monarchic pride to the Jewish people, which they did not yet have at that point in history. This lack of monarchic pride is evident in the episode surrounding King Saul's decline. When Saul was questioned by the prophet Samuel as to why he did not wipe out Amalek's cattle as he had been told to do (because the Amalekites had disguised themselves as animals, and indeed that is how King Agag survived and perpetuated his people, who would seek to destroy the Jewish people generations later), he said that he “was afraid of the people.” Samuel responded that a true king must not be swayed by the people, and so Saul lost his kingship. David, in contrast, *did* have leadership qualities, which he inherited from his paternal great-grandmother, Ruth. Moab had a sense of pride, as the prophet Isaiah (16:6) notes: “We have heard of Moab's pride – how great is her arrogance! – of her conceit, her pride, and her insolence.” King David inherited this attribute of pride and channelled it to his service of God, which is why although Saul erred only once (by not wiping out Amalek when he had the opportunity to do so), it cost him his kingship while David, who erred twice (taking Bathsheba prematurely as his wife, and counting the people which resulted in a plague) did not lose his kingship (Tractate Yoma 22b).

#### 6.3.2.4. *Chosen-ness is not just a right; it is an obligation*

Being chosen does not signify superiority, rather it is predicated on obligation – to live not just a moral life but a *sanctified* one,<sup>32</sup> to become better and to better the world – the same way that someone who has more knowledge or more resources is obligated to help those in need.

But there are many people, still scarred by the Nazi ideology of a superior race, who are fearful of a “Chosen People,” conceptually and terminologically. Jews are not immune to this fear – in fact, some of the greatest harbourers of this fear are Jews – and some secular ones among them try to blur the lines of distinction, either out of fear that they will be regarded as “other” or because they are so scarred at having been regarded as “other,” they now wish to avoid conferring the term on anyone. Mordecai Kaplan of the Reconstructionist movement claimed that chosen-ness is “morally untenable.” Evidently, he was not aware that morality is the *precondition* for chosen-ness. Kaplan assumed the order is the reverse and that Jews have declared themselves “chosen.” However, authentic Judaism never condoned such views; rather, Jews are “chosen” in that they are charged with bearing a message of universal moral law.<sup>33</sup>

#### 6.3.3. **The secular Israeli Jew’s angst: why are Jews hated?**

One of the biggest questions for many secular Israelis (and secular Jews worldwide) these days is whether maintaining notions of “chosen-ness” and particularism is the cause of anti-Semitism. Many secular Jews will claim that it is, and feel an existential angst when the term is applied to them, even endearingly (say, by evangelicals). But chosen-ness is insufficient to explain the universality, perpetuity and intensity of anti-Semitism; in fact, on a metaphysical-existential level, its universality, perpetuity and intensity are proof of it.

The subject of anti-Semitism is far too lengthy to be covered properly in one dissertation, let alone one section of one chapter therein.<sup>34</sup> I mention it here solely in the context of the interconnectedness between Hebrew, the Jewish people and the

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<sup>32</sup> As explained earlier, the Hebrew word for sanctity, *kedusha*, literally means “separate.” Jews were mandated to lead a sacred, elevated life, and by necessity this requires a degree of particularism.

<sup>33</sup> In its simplest meaning, “chosen-ness” simply means being marked or selected for a task, not a privileged status. Can anyone claim that Jews throughout history have enjoyed a privileged status? To those who would, I recommend Professor Robert Wistrich’s *A Lethal Obsession: anti-Semitism from antiquity to global jihad*, New York: Random House, 2010. Jews have had to pay a heavy price for their “chosen-ness”; as Tevye quips in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “I know that we’re the chosen nation, but couldn’t You for once choose someone else?”

<sup>34</sup> Again, I refer the reader to Robert Wistrich’s *A Lethal Obsession*.

modern State of Israel, and the existential angst of the secular Israeli Jew over his particularity, which he so often misunderstands as the *cause* of anti-Semitism.

Many a reason has been given to try and make sense of anti-Semitism – by non-Jews as well as Jews who are bent on finding a way to rise above their fate by taking it into their own hands. Among the reasons given for anti-Semitism are: Jew’s (supposed) wealth and power, their having killed Jesus, their differentness, and the claim that they brought this upon themselves by claiming they are chosen (Deutsch 2013). Additionally, there is the present-day form of anti-Semitism shrouded in anti-Zionism that demonizes the State of Israel, purportedly premised on the “prevention” of “global Jewish domination” (Wistrich 2010).

Deutsch (2013) suggests we ask ourselves two questions to determine whether something can be truly labelled as the cause of anti-Semitism. The first is whether, when we remove condition/characteristic X to which anti-Semitism is attributed, anti-Semitism disappears, and the second is whether other people who exhibit condition/characteristic X are hated as well.

Upon closer examination, we see that the aforementioned justifications for anti-Semitism fall short. If wealth and power were the cause of anti-Semitism, then during periods when Jews were not wealthy and held no power – and there were several such periods throughout history – anti-Semitism should have waned. Yet it didn’t. Equally, if wealth and power were cause for hatred, surely other people who amass wealth and wield far more power should be equally hated. Yet they are not.

If the reason for anti-Semitism is because Jews killed Jesus, then people who have no connection with Christianity should, in theory, not have any issue with the Jews. Yet they do; Islamist hatred toward Jews is a glaring case in point. Furthermore, Deutsch (2013) notes, if Jews are hated for having brought about Jesus’ death by handing him over to the Romans, shouldn’t the Romans who actually killed him be hated as well? One could argue, of course, that the Romans as a people aren’t around today and the Jews are, and therefore they are the next-best object of hate. But even back then, shortly after Jesus was killed, the Romans were not hated. If the hatred toward Jews was because they were responsible for Jesus’ death, it should have erupted immediately and died down over time. But it hasn’t.

As for the claim that Jews are hated because they are different, there have always been people who have been viewed as “other.” World history has been neither clean nor pretty when it comes to people being regarded as – and hunted down for being –

“other.” Yet no other people or group has been hated so vehemently, throughout the ages, and throughout the world.

Some might argue that other “other” people have died out, while Jews have always been in existence, that other “other” hated people inhabited designated parts of the world, while Jews have inhabited most parts of the world, having been exiled from their homeland for millennia and having wandered from place to place following each targeted expulsion. The logical explanation, then, is that whereas other people have eventually died out or become assimilated, the Jews still exist – and everywhere, too – making them the ubiquitous scapegoat. The irony is, of course, that it is precisely their being an eternal, ubiquitous people that makes them hated. It is not just a pragmatic result, namely, Jews are around and therefore a convenient target; rather, it is a far deeper, primal hate: there is something infuriatingly unconquerable in the Jew. Somehow, somewhere, there is always some Jew who survives, against the odds.

As to the claim that Jews are hated because they claim to be “the chosen people,” as discussed earlier, this was not a claim they made of their own. Furthermore, Christians, too, believe the Jews were chosen, but that God then switched His chosen people to the New Israel. There are other peoples who claim to be God’s chosen as well, and they are not hated with the same virulence. And even when Jews have done everything in their power to erase their chosen-ness and were fully integrated into society, such as in pre-Holocaust Europe and in Germany in particular, they were still hated – in fact, even more so.

#### **6.3.3.1. Why is the claim of chosen-ness so disturbing?**

Deutsch (2013, 125) asserts that “we only get uncomfortable with or offended by claims of chosenness to the extent that we believe them to be true.” Take, if you will, the following trivial example: were a random stranger to call us “stupid” as we walked down the street, we wouldn’t think twice about it. But were someone very bright – say, a professor – to call us stupid, we would feel unnerved.<sup>35</sup>

What, then, is the reason for anti-Semitism?

To understand what anti-Semitism really is, the term itself should be examined. According to Deutsch, Anti-“Semit”ism is a misnomer; the term for the hatred of

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Jews’ chosen-ness features prominently in Nazi-era writings; it was precisely *because* the Nazi’s believed in it that they hated the chosen people so much. As Hitler told Hermann Rauschning, “There cannot be two Chosen peoples.” And Rauschning wrote, “Israel, the historical people of the spiritual God, cannot but be the irreconcilable enemy of the new, the German, Chosen People” (Wistrich 2010, 20). It was one chosen people pitted against the other.

Jews should be anti-*Jewism*, not anti-*Semitism*. By calling it anti-*Semitism*, the real reason for the hatred is masked, namely, “Jewism” itself and what Judaism represents.<sup>36</sup>

What is it about Judaism that makes it so disturbing to the world? It is the message of a universal moral law, that there is a moral standard and one cannot do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, however he wants. From the moment the Jewish people received the Torah, they were destined to be a hated people, always. The Talmud (Tractate Shabbat, 89a) states that Mount Sinai, where the Jews received the Torah, was called Sinai, “for it is there that *sin’ah* [hatred] came to the world.” In bringing ethical monotheism to the world, the Jewish people set a high standard which would always be at odds with most of civilisation.

But on an existential level, anti-*Semitism* de facto ensured that Jews remained separate from the nations around them. Even when they tried to integrate, such as in pre-WWII Germany, for example, they were still hated – in fact, all the more so, for “infecting” German society. This separation has served the purpose of ensuring that Jews remain loyal to their universal moral mandate. While the finite human mind can never fully comprehend the workings of God (and certainly not the theodicy of the Holocaust), on a meta-historical level anti-*Semitism* is indeed the high but necessary price Jews have had to pay for their particularism, to ensure God’s message would be universally *present*, at least, if not heard. In being an eternal and ubiquitous people, having been exiled from their homeland for millennia and having taken up residence in numerous host countries, the message of ethical monotheism would remain eternal and ubiquitous, despite the Jews’ being exiled, forced to convert, tortured, massacred, blamed for all the ills and setbacks of humanity and hated so instinctively. The incomprehensible magnitude and repercussions of anti-*Semitism* are matched only by the incomprehensibility of the Jewish people’s very survival.

### **6.3.3.2. Why specifically Anti-Semitism?**

We can offer another explanation for the term anti-*Semitism*. In his essay *She’ar Yisrael*, found at the conclusion of his commentary on Songs of Songs, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, known by his Hebrew acronym as the Netziv, offers a different, novel understanding of the term anti-*Semitism*, which sheds light on Jewish

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<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, it is used to mask hatred specifically of Jews. Consider, for example, the oft-stated claim that anti-Israel propaganda is not anti-Semitic on the grounds that it cannot be so, since Arabs are Semitic people, too.

particularism. Based on his understanding, anti-Semitism serves as a wake-up call reminding Jews of their differentness; anti-Semitism's purpose is to bring Jews back to their Source (She'ar Yisrael 1993 [1887], ch. 3). When Jews do not see on their own that they are different, when they do not distinguish themselves from the surrounding nations – or worse, seek to assimilate and be just like them – anti-Semitism rears its ugly head to remind them of that very differentness they so wish to erase.

In contrast to Deutsch's assertion that anti-Semitism is a misnomer, the Netziv understands anti-Semitism as a highly specific term and not a misnomer at all. Accordingly, it represents anti-Semitism's true essence and holds the key to understanding it.

Anti-Semitism, explains the Netziv, is, as it sounds, rooted in the name "Shem," one of Noah's three sons, brother to Ham and Japheth and ancestor to Abraham and his descendants. The verse (Genesis 10:21) states, "And to Shem, also to him were born; he was the ancestor of all the descendants of Eber; the brother of Japheth the elder." Following the principle that the Pentateuch does not use any superfluous words, the Netziv asks why, when the Torah details the descendants of Shem, is Shem described as "the brother of Japheth the elder"?

He answers as follows: Jews are the descendants of Shem, through Eber (Shem's great-grandson), Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From then on they were called *Bnei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel (Jacob's newly given name after wrestling with Esau's archangel; see Genesis, ch. 32; more on the name Yisrael in chapter 7). Regarding these descendants of Shem the verse (Genesis 9:27) says, "May God extend Japheth, but he will dwell in the tents of Shem." Japheth will be complementary to Shem, assisting him insofar as Shem would embrace his endowed responsibility to bear God's Name in the world. But Shem had other descendants as well, who were not part of the direct Eber-Abraham-Isaac-Jacob line. These descendants did not reach their full potential as descendants of Shem, as they neglected to carry out their Divine mission.

The message gleaned from the aforementioned verses is that Shem had two types of descendants: those from the Eber-Abraham-Isaac-Jacob line who, in bringing ethical monotheism to the world, fulfil their mission and are on the deserving spiritual plane, and Shem's other descendants who are referred to as the siblings of "Japheth the elder" – subordinate to Japheth and his descendants, because they disregard their

Divine duty. The Netziv is not referring simply to genealogy but to a metaphysical-spiritual genealogy: chosen-ness is duty-derived.

Thus, the term anti-*Semitism* is not a misnomer but a criticism. Being labelled as “Semites,” the “(other) Children of Shem” rather than the Children of Israel, serves as a reminder that the Jewish people are not living up to their Divine Abrahamic-Israelite mission. And when they fall short, they are called the children of Shem who was “brother to Japheth *the elder*”; they are subordinate to Japheth, having forfeited their status.

When Jews alienate themselves from God and from their true essence; when they claim a chosen-ness for themselves that is not premised on any Divine mission but on a mind-set of “my power and the strength of my hands have gotten me this wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:17); when they prefer to blend into the world and be “a nation like all other nations” and do away with the commandments and Torah obligation, not only are they not respected as equal citizens of the world, they are regarded as lowlier.<sup>37</sup>

At the conclusion of *The Jewish State* (Herzl 1946 [1896]), in which Theodore Herzl outlined his vision for the Zionist enterprise and a (secular) Jewish state, he asserted that with the establishment of the Jewish state anti-Semitism would cease immediately, everywhere, and forever. The State of Israel’s bloody history, with wars being waged against it every decade or less by enemies surrounding it on all sides and Iran’s openly declared plans to annihilate it, render Herzl’s words hollow. Though many have stated that the necessity of having a Jewish state is to prevent another Holocaust from ever occurring, there are never any guarantees. The modern State of Israel has not solved the problem of anti-Semitism; some would say it has in fact exacerbated it, with anti-Zionism having become the accepted (and acceptable) whitewashed version of anti-Semitism threatening it from without and many internal conflicts ripping its society apart from within.

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<sup>37</sup> This is alluded to in the verses in Genesis (ch. 13 and ch.16), where God promises Abraham that his children will be numerous like the stars and like the sand/dust of the earth. According to the Talmud (Tractate Megillah 16a), the analogy to the sand and the stars is not merely one of numerical greatness (indeed, Jews are not great in number and have consistently constituted but a tiny percent of the world’s population); rather, it comes to teach the essence of the Jews: when they are doing what they are supposed to, they are like bright stars in the night sky, unique individuals, each with a distinct persona and role, each a world unto himself. But when they are not living up to their mandate, they have the potential to sink low, to become dust of the earth, exiled, trodden and scattered all over the world.

To believing Jews, the modern State of Israel is indeed a wonder, an integral part of an unfolding Divine plan (as was the incomprehensible Holocaust, as have been the last 5778 years of Jewish history); some would say it is nothing short of miraculous. Indeed, the fact that it continues to survive despite being surrounded by hostile enemies wishing to destroy it, as well as being the only country whose right to exist is repeatedly questioned,<sup>38</sup> indicates something of a supernatural, different existence. But it is also a wake-up call to Jews, a reminder that they have not yet arrived at any Messianic era of peace, and that they are still far from having achieved the task they were meant to on this earth.

In a talk given by then EU ambassador Lars Faaborg-Andersen to a group of university students,<sup>39</sup> when questioned about the EU's double standard regarding Israel (particularly in light of the civil war raging in Syria), the ambassador said that, as the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel is "held to a higher standard." Ironically, though as students reported the undertone was anti-Semitic, in a way he is right – not in practical terms, but on an existential scale: *being chosen is not only a privilege but, more importantly, an obligation.*<sup>40</sup>

The modern State of Israel, however, founded with the express intention of eliminating God,<sup>41</sup> sometimes appears to have embraced superiority and determination but not the obligation to be a holy people, a "kingdom of ministers" (Exodus 19:6) – meaning, a nation of individuals entrusted with bringing a consciousness of God to the world.

The State of Israel is indeed a success story on so many levels.<sup>42</sup> It has a flourishing State and an outstanding army, and is an OECD member; it is a world leader in science, technology, agriculture, medical advancement, water conservation, GDP per capita, and many other markers of success – and has much to be proud of, given its youth. But it is holding at the stage of being a nation that bears God's

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<sup>38</sup> See Alan Dershowitz's brief talk "Israel's Legal Founding," at <https://www.prageru.com/courses/political-science/israels-legal-founding>

<sup>39</sup> At the Jewish Statesmanship Center's Identity and Public Policy Program, in the spring of 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Robbins (2009, 556) makes an interesting observation (concerning America, but equally applicable to our discussion here of the double standard applied to the Jews/the Jewish state), noting that "If [Chomsky] has deviated from true universality by always putting the United States at the center, it might be argued that the United States *belongs* at the center, precisely because it has so much power." In other words, one can't hold someone (or a people or a nation) to a higher standard without also admitting – even if by virtue of the very fact that they are held to a higher standard – that they belong on that plane. If there is a double standard, perhaps it is because they (Jews) are supposed to be held to a higher standard.

<sup>41</sup> See Dr. Dror Eydar's article *Em Kol Hahitnatkuyot* (Hebrew), in *Akdamut*, 21 Nissan, 5769.

<sup>42</sup> See *Start-Up Nation* by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, New York: Twelve, 2009.

message and is a “light unto the nations.” In the vacuum created by an arrogant, Godless society, school violence, drug and alcohol addiction, rape, prostitution, the mafia, family breakdowns and disrespect for the elderly, have become the norm; too often the headlines report on Members of Knesset or government officials – even so-called “religious” ones – being charged with fraud, bribery, sexual misconduct, and other iniquities and crimes.

To the secular Jew, this is normal (and the media reaffirms this for him): the Jews are a nation like all other nations, and just as one will find social flaws in any society, even the best ones, one finds them by the Jews as well; all nations have their “fringe.” To a secular Jew, the notion that from a Jewish nation more is expected seems supremacist, incongruous with (post)modern values wherein sameness has supplanted equality.

The casual attitude toward a deviant society stems from the secular angst and fear of bringing God into the public discourse or into their lives. So fearful are they of this that they are unaware of the heavy price society is paying. It is not a matter of coercion or freedom of (or from?) religion; the danger inherent in a Godless society, where God features neither in the public discourse nor in collective consciousness, is that people eventually begin to search for something else to worship. This might be an alternative to religion, such as communism, socialism, or any other “ism” for that matter (and, some would argue, *Zionism* not being an exception); it could be love of country and army duty that supersedes all else; it could be money or permissiveness, whitewashed with the postmodern claim that “every man has his truth”; and it could even be nihilism – all the more so in the name of God.

But to the believing Jew who has not espoused Zionism for its own sake and whose allegiance therefore is not divided between God and a secular state he wishes to worship, even ostensibly as the *at’halta d’geula* – the first stage of the Final Redemption – a deviant society is not normal and should not be the norm. The believer knows that more is expected of the Jew and that in an ideal Jewish society crime wouldn’t be the norm.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Incidentally, this is reflected in the idea – though not the execution (excuse the pun) – of capital punishment. Generally, society sees the abolishment of capital punishment as the culmination of a gradual move toward enlightened law enforcement. The question is, has the abolishment of capital punishment brought down crime or has it just facilitated more of it?

Furthermore, a distinction should be made between having capital punishment as an option at the courts’ disposal, and actually exercising it. In other words, in an ideal society, capital punishment

### 6.3.3.3. *Why is anti-Semitism so scary for the secular Jew?*

This leads us to a better understanding of the difference in how the secular and the religious understand – and contend with – anti-Semitism. For the secular Jew, it is scary – far more so than for the religiously affiliated Jew. The believing Jew understands why he is hated; the secular one is dumbfounded. For those Jews for whom chosen-ness is a source of pride, anti-Semitism is a given (in the theoretical sense, not the applied), and is the strongest reminder of who the Jewish people are mandated to be. For the secular, it is a random, bizarre phenomenon – or a very solvable problem, if only Jews would be like the rest of the world.

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should exist; but in an ideal society the threat of it would be such a deterrent that the court systems would rarely have to actually impose it.

Consider the model of capital punishment laid out in the Bible and expounded upon in the Talmud. (As discussed previously, authentic Judaism maintains that there is no way to interpret the Torah without the Talmud; the Written Torah and the Oral Torah are inseparable.) Capital crimes could only be judged – and the corresponding capital punishment meted out – by a *Sanhedrin* (High Court). (The large *Sanhedrin* consisted of 71 members, the smaller ones of 23 and smallest courts of 3 judges. In order to rule on capital offenses, it had to be a *Sanhedrin* of at least 23 members.) The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Makkot, 7a) relates that “A Sanhedrin that executed a person once every 7 years/others opine once in 70 years was considered a harsh/murderous Sanhedrin.” In other words, even though the Bible mandates the institution of capital punishment for capital crimes, capital punishment was a very *very* rare occurrence. The reason this was so rare is because firstly, in order for judgment to be meted out and capital punishment exacted, there would need to be two valid witnesses who saw the crime taking place (“valid” witnesses according to Jewish law means they cannot be related to each other, nor to the defendant; there are other criteria as well, all centred on the need to ensure the testimony of the two witnesses is valid and uninfluenced by other factors, such as emotions, as would be the case, for example, with relatives). Second, the witnesses would also have to have issued a warning to the defendant, at the time of the crime. This warning had to include the two witnesses making clear to the defendant what the consequences of his actions would be. The chances of two valid witnesses *both* being present at the time of the crime *and* having issued the warning *and* the defendant still knowingly committing the crime (and having the ability to do so despite two people being present and presumably doing everything they physically can to stop him), is pretty much nil. The testimony as well as the person’s mental state when committing the crime would then be considered by the *Sanhedrin*, and in order to sentence the person there would have to be a majority (i.e. at least 12 out of the 23 judges). Thus, practically speaking, capital punishment hardly ever occurred. (Nowadays it is irrelevant because there is no *Sanhedrin*.)

If capital punishment was such a rare occurrence, why, then was it even instituted in the first place? The message in the idea of capital punishment is that it is necessary to have a system of laws that govern society, with clear boundaries of what is right and what is wrong. This idea seems radically conservative. But without the concept of capital punishment, in a society where “everything goes” and the rights of the defendant supersede the rights of the victim – and the larger-scale societal imperative of educating people and deterring them from committing crimes – those boundaries between what is moral and what isn’t become blurred. While it is true that Judaism maintains that ultimate justice is handled by God alone, hopefully in This World but possibly only in the World to Come, human beings are still entrusted to mete out justice as best they could.

A similar question can be posed regarding the biblical verses stating that justice must be meted out “an eye for an eye,” which the Talmud states is never to be interpreted literally. Why then was it written literally? The reason is to make clear the magnitude of what has been done; it *should* have been punishable “an eye for an eye.” Furthermore, it teaches that the person must pay the damages of the eye, and what the eye was worth to the person harmed. (For example, if one has damaged the hand of a gifted musician, obviously reparations for such damage would be much greater.) Thus, though the Torah did not mean it literally, it still states it to demonstrate that there is an unspoken norm to be adhered to.

The secular Jew, largely, does not embrace the obligation, and does not see his being Jewish or his role in being Jewish as unique – perhaps genuinely so, perhaps because he is trying to outsmart his fate. However history proves otherwise: there is something different – call it uncanny – about the Jewish people who, by all accounts, shouldn't be here. As Russian historian Nicolas Berdyaev (1936, 86) put it, “their destiny is too imbued with the metaphysical to be explained in either material or positive-historical terms.” And as Paul Johnson (1987, 25) said:

When the historian visits Hebron today, he asks himself: where are all those peoples which once held the place? Where are the Canaanites? Where are the Edomites? Where are the ancient Hellenes and the Romans, the Byzantines, the Franks, the Mamluks and the Ottomans? They have vanished into time, irrevocably. But the Jews are still in Hebron.

Mark Twain (1899, 286) was in awe of Jewish history as well:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race... the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of... has made a marvelous fight in the world...and he has done so with his hands tied behind him... The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dreamstuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was... all things are mortal but the Jew... What is the secret of his immortality?

Jews denying their differentness is patently illogical in the face of their history.

Anti-Semitism is a serious threat, globally; but it is not an existential threat in historical–metaphysical terms.<sup>44</sup> As Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 85) notes, in response to the watering down of Torah Judaism for the sake of “Jewish continuity,”

Compromising Torah beyond the limit that Torah itself allows, whether in the matter of language or law, for the sake of Jewish survival[,] is

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<sup>44</sup>This in no way implies complacency in the face of anti-Semitism and everything being done to mitigate it. However it does mean that just as Jews look outward to solve anti-Semitism, they must look inward and reconsider what it is about their very peoplehood that makes them so hated. If being Jewish exacts such a high price, doesn't that say something about Judaism?

fundamentally flawed. Beyond the question of whether the compromise is likely to be effective in holding Jews, or generating greater numbers to bolster Jewish survival, there is a more basic issue here... [T]he Jewish people's survival is not our problem. It is not a problem at all; it has been promised by the One who is entirely capable of delivering on His promises....They may be His problem when His children insist on being wayward, but they are not ours. Our problem is not the survival of the Jewish people; *our problem is the survival of Jews* – individual Jews have no guarantee of survival.

Believing Jews know that the Jewish people are eternal, just as the Torah given to them is eternal, just as the God Who gave it to them is eternal.<sup>45</sup> They know that though they have been threatened, exiled, forced to convert, tortured and butchered by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Cossacks, Germans – and now radical Islamists – somewhere, somehow, the Jewish people has endured, just as their language has. And they are going to survive assimilation too, because God promised them so. But for this to happen, in language as in peoplehood, the Jewish people needs to be anchored in its Divine mission.<sup>46</sup> When they deviate from that mission, God has His ways of bringing them back.

Not all secular Israelis espouse this vision of peoplehood. As noted by the Pew Research Center (Israel's Religiously Divided Society March 2016), “Most secular Jews in Israel say they see themselves as Israeli first and Jewish second, while most Orthodox Jews (Haredim and Datiim [Ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox, respectively]) say they see themselves as Jewish first and then Israeli.” To believing Jews, the uniqueness and obligation inherent in Jewishness is a source of pride. For some secular Israelis, it is a shameful, inconvenient truth. They are proud of their Israeliness, not their Jewishness. They are proud of their country and their service of

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<sup>45</sup> This eternity stretches toward the future as well as toward the past. The believing Jew knows that his history dates far back, long before the Holocaust or the advent of Zionism at the turn of the century. He is here because of an ancient covenant. For the secular Israeli, however, particularly those on the Left, the State of Israel is a modern phenomenon, its links to a glorious past viewed as entirely arbitrary or unnecessary. The State of Israel is seen as the direct consequence – or rather, the answer – to the Holocaust. If the Germans viewed the Jews as their *gegenrasse*, having no fatherland or mother tongue, the secular Israeli is here, with a fatherland and a mother tongue, to prove to himself (and, he hopes, to the world) that “never again” will a Holocaust be perpetrated against his people, for he is on equal footing with the Family of Nations: he is in possession of land and language.

<sup>46</sup> Note the Pew Report from October 1<sup>st</sup> 2013, “Jews by religion are much more connected to their Jewish heritage than are Jews of no religion.” <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/>.

it, their academic institutions, cultural centres, literature, and music; their national pastimes and foods; their pop stars, imported performances of Rihanna and Madonna, night clubs and XTC. They are not proud of their God; some hardly even know Him or have turned Him into a complete abstraction, out of a perpetual fear of the commitment that acknowledging Him would engender. The “live and let live” approach, which on the surface appears as a gesture of benevolence, is essentially an absolution from obligation. To their way of thinking, for all intents and purposes Jews can be Hebrew-speaking gentiles. And if they are a nation like all other nations, they wonder, why does the world still hate them?

Jews who believe that they are an eternal people endowed with a unique history and universal message know why they are hated. Though well aware of anti-Semitism and actively involved in combating it, they do not suffer the co-morbid existential angst over their particularity. They have answers as to why they have suffered throughout history – and why they have survived. But Jews who don’t believe they have a unique, Divine mission are hard pressed to answer these questions; without accepting that they are a covenantal people, there are indeed no answers. And in that context anti-Semitism is very scary indeed; for if the Jews are no different than any other nation, they are subject to the laws of nature and, as nations have gone throughout the ages, will fade into history.

And yet, even for the most secular Israeli there is one remnant of Jewishness: the Hebrew language spoken every day. One can take the Israeli-ness out of the Jew – the Jew living in Paris, London or New York (perhaps not in the first generation but in the second or third, certainly) – but one cannot take the Jewishness out of the Israeli, by virtue of the Jewishness of the language he speaks. Let us now see how this plays out.

#### **6.3.4. The “Eyes of Language”: Scholem’s confession revisited**

The road to a “secularised” Jewish political entity on sacred soil, wherein a “secularised” sacred language is spoken, is fraught with peril, as Scholem said. Israelis are all speaking a Divine language – whether they are aware of it or not, or are in total denial of it – and, as Scholem predicted, the language will come back to haunt them and ultimately bring them back to their Source.

It is ironic how panicked many secular Israelis are at the thought of the repressed God's return,<sup>47</sup> while remaining completely unaware that it is by their own doing, in invoking Him in their daily speech. That, by their own standards, should scare them more than anti-Semitism. Even if they try to be a nation like all others, and even if they think they have succeeded in doing so, there comes the Hebrew language, brimming under the surface, to remind them of their particularism.

Scholem's letter of confession, presented to the terminally ill Rosenzweig on the occasion of his fortieth birthday, comes three years after Rosenzweig's vehement disagreement with Scholem's vision that the only solution to Diaspora Jewry's "clinical death" is the Zionist-driven rebirth of the Jewish people in their own independent nation-state, and his countering assertion that Zionism is a "secular form of Messianism"<sup>48</sup> and "profanation of messianic sacredness" (Derrida 2002, 194). Derrida's reading of Scholem's confession reveals a three-pronged problem with Zionism's revival of the Hebrew language: its inherent threat or danger, its failure, and, at the core of these two issues, its being a "form of profanation, of corruption and sin" (ibid.). Derrida goes so far as to call this a "linguistic evil" (!) and to say that it is "total" (195):

[I]t has no limit, first of all, because it is entirely political. The evil stems from the fact that Zionists... do not understand the essence of language. They treat this abyssal mystery as a problem – worse, as a local, specific, circumscribed, technolinguistic or technopolitical problem. This is why they are asleep and why one day they will wake up on the verge, even in the midst, of the catastrophe, at the moment when the sacred language will return, as punishment and return/ghostliness [sic].

(ibid.)

The "catastrophe" that Scholem refers to, says Derrida, is not limited to the linguistic but has political and national implications. Derrida's (and others') reading of Scholem's confession – made all the more poignant, having been made to the anti-Zionist Rosenzweig – points to an "evil" that is

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<sup>47</sup> Consider the surprising finding of the Pew Report that "secular Jews in Israel are more uncomfortable with the notion that a child of theirs might someday marry an ultra-Orthodox Jew than they are with the prospect of their child marrying a Christian." (Israel's Religiously Divided Society March 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Gil Anidjar, quoting from Stéphane Mosès, "Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem," in *Archives de Science Socialies des Religions* 60:1 (July-September 1985), 87, in J. Derrida, "The Eyes of Language," in *Acts of Religion* (2002, 193).

...worse and more uncanny than any other properly political danger. This evil of language is also a political evil, but it is not an infantile illness of Zionism. This “necessary consequence” is congenital to every Zionist project for a nation-state.

(201)

Scholem’s letter to Rosenzweig isn’t merely an expression of his fear; the title itself says it’s a confession. What is Scholem’s confession, really?

- That there can never be any real, or total, secularisation: “a profaned sacred language remains a sacred language” (Herzog 2009, 231);
- That (according to Derrida’s reading) in such secularisation there is a three-pronged problem of danger, of failure, and a “form of profanation, of sin.”<sup>49</sup>

In the introductory notes to his translation of Derrida’s “Eyes of Language,” Anidjar (2002) encapsulates Scholem’s confession in the possibility and simultaneous impossibility of the revival of Hebrew, as well as the possibility and simultaneous impossibility of secularising a sacred language. One could just as easily substitute “secularised Jew” for “the revival of Hebrew” and the “secularisation of a sacred language” as regards the possibility/impossibility thereof, and the conclusion would be the same: While the Jew may have succeeded in being secularised – Zionism being a glaring example thereof – he is never completely secularised. And while the secularised Jew may have enjoyed (and might still be enjoying, somewhat) his own apparent secularisation, it poses a threat, is doomed to failure, and is rooted in sin.

Scholem’s confession is not just about his fear of language or what that language will awaken, but about what that language represents vis-à-vis the Jew himself; it is his confession of fear as to the Jew’s true essence and what Zionism has attempted to do to it. Thus we can rephrase his confession as,

- There can never be a complete secularisation of a Jew. “A Jew, although he has sinned, remains a Jew” (Tractate Sanhedrin 44a).

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<sup>49</sup> Note that this is not contradictory to the previous point, namely, that there can be no secularisation. Secularisation is not entirely synonymous with profanation; the former would seem to include within its definition even a gradual, and/or passive process, a gradual departure from sacredness, while the latter would seem to imply an *active* process and something more imminently radical. I posit that not only are secularisation and profanation not a contradiction on a semantic level, they are not a contradiction on a conceptual level either. These two points encapsulate the “possible impossibility” and “impossible possibility” referred to in Scholem’s confession (see paragraph below, in the text).

- Zionism, as the solution to the “Jewish problem” or “Jewish question,” is the real threat or danger, a failure, and a form of profanation.

Zionism is an “ism” like any other, but far more complicated in terms of its seeming success, leaving some anti-Zionists confused as to what to make of the movement (and others more passionately against it, claiming that it is the workings of Satan who has made Zionism *appear* so successful). Up until recent history, there was no such thing as an enduring secular Jewish political movement.<sup>50</sup> It is only since the Emancipation and the granting of rights to Jews that Jews have sought new-fangled self-definitions (Feldman 2009). With their newfound freedom, some Jews maintained that if they would just do away with their particularism, if they would look, think and act like their gentile neighbours, they would be accepted into their ranks. A common saying of the *maskilim* was “Be a Jew in your home but a *mentsch* (“a human being”) in public.<sup>51</sup> To these “progressive” Jews who sought to reform Judaism, “behaving like a Jew was sub-human” (Feldman 2009, 50).

Thus, “enlightened” Jews sought to do away with any halakhot or customs that kept them apart from their non-Jewish neighbours, such as Sabbath observance as well as the laws of family purity and kosher. The synagogue was turned into a “clone of a church” (50). It was never about honing in on what was unique to *Judaism* and coming closer to God but about being as non-Jewish, as universalist, as possible.

The roots of Zionism were not much different. Its founders envisioned a political and cultural Judaism, not a religious one. What led Theodore Herzl to develop his ideas for a sovereign state for all Jews was the erroneous belief that anti-Semitism – which he had witnessed first-hand while covering the Dreyfus Affair as a journalist –

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<sup>50</sup> Certainly, throughout history there were sects that broke away from mainstream Judaism (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, to name three ancient ones; or Reform Judaism in modern times), but these were breakaway sects which, with the exception of Reform in Germany, didn’t really formalise themselves politically, and none has endured. Interestingly, recently Reform Judaism has sought to gain legitimacy as a stream of Judaism within Israel’s political systems. The unholy alliance between Reform Judaism and Left-wing Zionism, then, comes as no surprise: Left-wing Zionism, like Reform, has sought to do away with the exilic Jew and convert him into a Godless, liberated one, into “a self-reliant master of his destiny who fears no one – not even God – and who sees himself as a member of the family of nations” (Feldman 2009, 50). They are both driven by a desire to “normalise” the Jewish people, and that is why, although ideologically the Left differs from Reform, they are Reform’s greatest ally: they share a common goal. “When the Left works for Reform’s legitimization, it is not working to enhance religion. It is working to uproot authentic Judaism, a goal it seeks with fervor equal to its partner’s” (52).

<sup>51</sup> “Mentsch” literally means “person,” but it has come to mean an upstanding individual. The quote is attributed to Moses Mendelssohn, and was captured in Y.L. Gordon’s poem *Awake, My People!*

would disappear if Jews were akin to their non-Jewish neighbours and had their own polity.<sup>52</sup>

Secularised Judaism has never endured beyond three or four generations.<sup>53</sup> The Zionists sought to change that by anchoring Jewish existence in political existence, and now, looking back, the State of Israel would seem to prove that it is indeed possible to have an enduring political, secularised form of Judaism. This is the abyss/volcano, the possible impossibility and impossible possibility that Scholem feared: for a secular Jewish state cannot be, and yet it is; it is, and yet it cannot (or should not) be.

Taking this one step further, one could easily substitute “God” for “Jew” and “language” and the equation would remain the same: There can never be a secularisation of God, and the deification of Zionism, the State, or indeed anything other than God constitutes grave danger, a failure, and is obviously a form of profanation, of sin.

Curiously, Anidjar does not draw attention to Derrida’s title, *The Eyes of Language*. Perhaps we can explain the title like this: The Zionists are blind, as Scholem himself confesses. It is *language* that sees. Language is the Seer, who walks ahead of the people and guides them toward the abyss and the volcano. And ultimately, that is not a bad thing. Scholem understood this. There is a duality manifest in Scholem’s fear of God’s apocalyptic return: God will indeed take revenge, but by virtue of God’s taking revenge He will have revealed Himself.

On the one hand, Scholem confesses the major sin of Zionism, which consists of taking Hebrew names in vain, and thus also taking God’s name in vain (“He is invoked back a thousandfold into our life” [as Scholem wrote in his letter – T.F.]). On the other hand, the sin that is leading us to a terrible punishment will also lead us to a renewed Revelation, to “This inescapable revolution of language, in which the Voice will be heard again.”

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<sup>52</sup> Notably, initially Herzl intended for a mass conversion of Jews to Christianity. He also did not circumcise his son – the quintessential marker of Jews throughout the ages. He had also initially envisioned a Jewish state not in the Holy Land but in Uganda.

<sup>53</sup> Consider the quintessential example of the *Maskil* Moses Mendelssohn, referred to above: four out of six of his children converted to Christianity and three generations later not one of his descendants remained true to his Jewish faith. See also Jack Wertheimer’s study in *Commentary*, February, 1999, which showed a rate of over 70% intermarriage among Reform Jews. “The Reform Jews and their leftist allies pursue their universalist tendencies with what can only be described as mindless fanaticism; for only fanatics persist on a path which leads to an abyss” (Feldman 2009, 53).

(Herzog 2009, 230)

From a Jewish perspective, the apocalypse certainly isn't entirely bad. The prophets throughout the Bible abound with visions of the Apocalypse and Judgement Day which, while horrific, signify the imminent repentance of the Jewish people (and the world at large, with each nation embracing its unique God-given mandate), heralding God's revelation and the Final Redemption. *That* is Scholem's confession: it is a prophetic vision of a nation returning, via its language, to the faith – a step Rosenzweig had already taken a few short years before, and which, Scholem was now admitting, in his own way, Rosenzweig had been correct in taking.<sup>54</sup>

### **6.3.5. The abyss and volcano: the secularisation of Jewish messianism and national rebirth in sin**

#### **6.3.5.1. *The linguistic fault line: exilic Jew and modern Jew***

The revival of the Hebrew language defies natural laws of dead or decaying languages. As we have seen, some will argue that there is nothing miraculous about it, for Hebrew was never really “dead.” But that, in itself, points to its uniqueness: how are we to understand the fact that it – like the Jewish people – has survived for millennia in exile? If its revival is not miraculous, its survival surely is. At the same time, it is a complex miracle – one might say a hidden one, not a revealed one – one of the many workings of God, just like the Zionist enterprise credited with its revival.

Paralleling the threat, danger and profanation/sin that Derrida notes in Scholem's confession on language, Zionism and its political aspirations were premature and thus constitute a threat to genuine Jewish messianism; they are a failure in that they have achieved their goal and thus exhausted their purpose and are now rendered unnecessary (with the exception of putting out fires sparked by Zionism itself), with both right- and left-wing Zionism exhibiting serious problems, from within and from without; and they are a form of profanation of something which is essentially positive – Jewish sovereignty in their God-given homeland, at the right time – by virtue of its prematurity and consequent failure.

The Jew, as standing outside of history, feels perpetually foreign and estranged – either from himself or from the nations around him – and wishes not to be. Jews in the

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<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this is why Scholem, despite knowing what he did about Hebrew's power to invoke the repressed God (and surely he did, with his vast knowledge of Kabbalah), still embraced the language wholeheartedly. Having seen how far removed Zionism was from Jewish tradition, speaking the Hebrew language was Scholem's tenuous grasp of tradition; perhaps it was his form of repentance.

Diaspora didn't have Hebrew at their daily disposal. Those who wished not to be estranged from themselves found refuge in their Source – their Torah and Talmud which they learned and maintained, using their dormant, hidden Hebrew language. In holding onto their tradition, in a language they did not allow to be secularised by every-day use, their language remained alive.

...when Hebrew is used only in the context of Torah, its concepts and constructs point always to the transcendent. The language retains its luminosity. When you speak the language of holiness to convey the mundane, you strip it of that aura. If you do that, you can never again convey the sensitive higher meanings in the words you have prostituted; they have fallen in your consciousness and can mean only the mundane. Forever after, when you say the word and mean its sanctity, I shall hear its lower message.

(Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 83-84)

The Jews in exile could speak the host culture's language, or even their own exilic language (Yiddish, Ladino), and still remain apart because they possessed a holy, unspoken language, something that was untouchable outside the confines of religion. It was that foreignness and distance that kept them separate and distinct – the yearning for something they did not fully possess but which was also, therefore, beyond corruption.

Those who didn't care about being estranged from themselves and were concerned solely with not being estranged from others not only spoke the host culture's language but aimed to be just like them. Within time they lost their tenuous connection to the sacred language. Thus, it is ironic, then, that although Jews are now ensconced in Israel and are speaking the Hebrew language, and are therefore no longer foreign – not to themselves (for they are speaking the sacred language, on sacred home soil) and not to others (for they have language and land, ostensibly like any other people); though they can now be who they are, they aren't who they can and should be. They suffer from a perpetual identity crisis inherent in the dissonance between the desire to “normalise” the Jewish people and make it “a nation like all other nations” (Deuteronomy 17:14), and the historical proof that the Jewish people stands outside of history, and is in fact “a nation that dwells alone.”

The images of the abyss and volcano reflect “recurring opposed poles” in Scholem’s letter (Herzog 2009).<sup>55</sup> The abyss, being underground, represents the low point, the depths to which the sacred language has been sunk; the volcano, the peak from which God’s Voice will burst forth once again. The two cannot be separated: “[R]evelation will come only in relation to the fall into the abyss” (ibid., 231).

If God’s revelation is inherent in the apocalypse, then the seeds of national redemption lay within the sin itself – the precursor to the apocalypse. How do we reconcile this? Put differently, was the Zionist sin of reviving the Hebrew language justified on the grounds of a teleological suspension of belief? Would it have been possible to speak the sacred language once again, on sacred soil, without secularising the language, or was secularisation a necessary precursor thereof?

#### **6.3.5.2. *The necessity of secularised politics***

Herzog (2009) opines that the language’s secularisation was necessary. “The risk of foreignness and estrangement from tradition *necessarily* lies at the core of Jewish political existence” (232). She brings the coronation of King Saul as a paradigmatic example. While the Jewish people were indeed commanded to appoint a king once they entered the Land of Israel (see Deuteronomy 17:15), the commandment was not merely a question of territory and sovereignty but of timing and intent. The Jewish people’s request for a king during the time of Samuel the Prophet (see Samuel I 8:4) was premature. Furthermore, their intentions were not pure. They openly stated their rationale for wanting a king – to be “like all other nations.” (The proof being that they didn’t really need a ruler, since Samuel was still alive at that time.)

Likewise Zionism’s political aspirations were not purely motivated; even if they were – as in the case with (some) religious Zionists – they were premature. While the Zionists did succeed in resettling the land, making it fruitful once more and establishing a successful state,

Secular Zionism outwardly succeeded in changing large numbers of Jews from the people of the Torah to the people of Zion. The majority of those who came to settle were weaned away from a Torah life in a state whose laws and lifestyle often contradict the Torah’s teachings. Much of

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<sup>55</sup> See p. 227, where Herzog notes that the metaphors are based on the verse in Psalms (36:7) “Thy justice is like mighty mountains, Thy judgements like a vast abyss.”

the State of Israel is now suffering from the same moral and social problems as the rest of Western society, whose culture it imitates.

(Heshelis 2006, 50)

However, Kabbalistic sources on the *at'halta d'geula* – the Dawn of Redemption<sup>56</sup> – have a different take, in which context the Zionist enterprise cannot be brushed off as insignificant or as being in complete opposition to God's will.

Ezekiel prophesied, “And you, the mountains of Israel, give forth your branches, and carry your fruit for My people Israel, for they are close to arriving” (Ezekiel 36:8). The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 98a; Tractate Megillah 17b) says that the Land of Israel bearing fruits after years of lying desolate is proof that the redemption is near.<sup>57</sup>

The Gaon of Vilna, (Kol HaTor 1969 [1780]), however, interpreted this verse to mean not only that when the land becomes fruitful it is a sign that the redemption is imminent, rather by *actively settling* the land and *making* it fruitful – obviously in sanctity and by the word of God<sup>58</sup> – the redemption could be hastened. He said further (ibid., ch. 5) that speaking in *Lashon HaKodesh*, especially in the Land of Israel, would hasten the redemption. Though Modern Hebrew is far removed from the Holy Tongue it should be, and “is all too often used to express ideas antithetical to [its] purpose” (Heshelis 2006, 50), nevertheless we cannot deny its connection with its linguistic origins and that its revival is nothing short of miraculous. Its sinking into the abyss will enable the Godly explosion of the volcano. “The revenge of language or

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<sup>56</sup> Notably Kol HaTor, written by students of the Gaon of Vilna, who settled the Land of Israel in the 1800s, based on the Gaon's teachings that doing so would hasten the redemption.

<sup>57</sup> As God promised in Leviticus (26:32), “I will make the land so desolate, and your enemies who dwell in it will be desolate.” In his commentary (ad loc.), Nachmanides says that this promise was intended as a comfort to the Jewish people in exile: no nation that will ever take possession of the Land of Israel will be able to make it blossom; it will lie in ruins till its children – the Children of Israel – return to it. Indeed, As Gilder (2014) has noted, the Jews who settled in mandate Palestine in the 1880s [and those who lived there beforehand – T.F.], “wrought an agricultural miracle in th[e] desolate territory, then sparsely populated by a few score thousand Jews and a couple hundred thousand Arabs. The[y]... drained malarial swamps, leached salt from the soils, terraced the barren hills, and planted millions of trees... In the two decades between 1921 and 1943, Jews quadrupled the number of enterprises, multiplied the number of jobs by a factor of 10, and increased the level of capital investment a hundredfold... Crucial to Israel's accomplishments were world-leading technological advances in the recovery of water through desalinization, drip irrigation, and sewage recycling. Over the past fifty years, Israel has increased its population ten-fold, its agricultural production sixteen-fold and its industrial production fifty-fold while actually reducing net water consumption by ten percent since 1948. This huge expansion of effective water resources enabled the land to support not only more Jews, but also millions more Arabs.”

<sup>58</sup> Namely, in keeping the commandments pertaining to the Land, such as tithing all produce, observing *Shemittah* (letting the land lie fallow every seven years), etc.

‘return of the repressed’ would be the result of the alienation of the Jewish people in its own land” (Herzog 2009, 230).

### 6.3.5.3. *Teleological suspension of belief*

Going back to our earlier question, was the secularisation of Hebrew justified, if it is the only means of bringing about the apocalypse and eventual revelation?

The Midrash (Tanhuma, Ki Tisa, 2) states,

Come and see how beloved are the Jewish people, that [even] their sins bring about great virtues. And if the grave sin which they committed [the Golden Calf] brought about such a mitzvah and merit [being commanded to build the Tabernacle, so that they would have a tangible means of serving God – T.F.], how redoubled is the merit of the mitzvot they perform.<sup>59</sup>

The Jewish perspective on teleological suspension of commandments, ethics or belief is that it is not justified a priori, and actions that are thus motivated are not condoned. (Such actions are only warranted as a *hora'at sha'a*, meaning on a temporary basis, under highly specific circumstances.) Human beings, being linearly bound by time, cannot view history in its entirety and therefore can only make decisions based on past and present and *predictions* of the future, which may or may not pan out (more on this in the next chapter). However God, who is above time, holds all of history in His hand: “For a thousand years in Your eyes is like a day gone by” (Psalms 90:4); where time is not a linear constraint, sin can retroactively justify itself in God’s hands. As the aforementioned Midrash demonstrates, a flawed or downright wrong action can lead to good results. The action might be rooted in sin, but by Divine Will it blossoms into something else entirely. This, however, is possible

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<sup>59</sup> This idea is evident also in the fact that the Messianic Davidic line, descended from Ruth the Moabite convert, is – bizarrely – a product of incest: Lot and his daughters. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 51:8) comments on the verse (Genesis 19:32) “Come let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father” that “it does not say ‘that we may create a son, rather *seed* [i.e., progeny – T.F.] – that seed which comes from a different place. And who is that? That is the King Messiah.”

Obviously, *no* one will say that the ends justify the means a priori. What Lot’s daughters did was wrong (as was what Lot did – once he had become sober and knew what had happened on the first night, he should have refrained from drinking on the second night, yet he didn’t). Equally, the sin of the Golden Calf was wrong; and the ends do not justify the means. But the import of the Midrash is that there is a much larger scope of the Divine’s plan for history, one which is not within the Jewish people’s (or anyone’s) control, much as they think they can control their destiny. They may have done it for every wrong reason; but that still does not preclude the God from utilizing their actions and resultant consequences for Divine purposes.

only insofar as we acknowledge God's Hidden Hand orchestrating events, and His ability to be everywhere and in every time, simultaneously.

Thus, in hindsight, we cannot say that the Zionist revival of Hebrew was entirely bad, just as Zionism itself isn't entirely bad (the sinking into the abyss), if the result of it is (or is going to be) God's revelation – the volcano bursting forth). But this necessitates an acknowledgement of a His guidance of Jewish (and world) history and destiny; His Hidden Hand that employs Zionism for His purposes; a Hidden Hand that, like the Jewish people, stands *outside* of history. The Jewish people – and indeed all peoples – are in control only insofar as the individual actions they undertake, and ultimately all are pawns on the Divine chessboard: “The kings' heart is in the hand of God” (Proverbs 21:1). In other words, we *make* the teleological suspension of belief retroactively justified by our acknowledgement of God and His making it so.

Scholem and Rosenzweig agreed that Jews stand outside of history. What they disagreed on, however, was what Jews are meant to do about this fact. The Zionists, Scholem among them, maintained that Jews should take their destiny into their own hands, reclaim their land and language and forcibly put themselves back *into* history, even if doing so would eliminate the God Who kept them out of it all these years. In the case of the Zionists, then, a priori the sin is not justified. But those who view Zionism from the outside, who do not wish to eliminate God from the picture but to find Him in history, the sin is retroactively justified. This is Scholem's confession, written in awe upon realizing the magnitude of what had been awakened by his awareness and invoking of God: just as language cannot be secularised, the Jew cannot be secularised; neither can God.

#### **6.4. Conclusion**

We have explored the oddity of the Hebrew language's survival (or revival), and how language has been a quintessential marker of Jewish identity throughout history – and specifically in the twentieth century, with the Zionist revival of the Hebrew language. We have seen how, unbeknownst to the Zionists – but predicted by Scholem – this revival would inevitably bring the Jewish people back to Source, despite their best efforts to alienate themselves from it. Though a few digressions were made in the discussion of chosen-ness and antisemitism, I hope they have given a better perspective of the secular-Jewish angst and have underscored the strangeness of Hebrew's revival and its being in daily use in the modern State of Israel.

The uncanny revival of the Hebrew language – a sacred language no less, and revived by secular Zionists seeking a political Judaism stripped of its religious import, as if such were possible – can be seen as exemplifying God’s Hidden Hand – even if the Jews are blind to it<sup>60</sup> – and the fact that Jews indeed stand outside of history. But this blindness, by its very nature, is not eternal, irreversible or total.

When Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir expressed her wishes to then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that the two of them will have a good working relationship, Kissinger clarified his position by responding that he considers himself an American first, Secretary of State second, and a Jew third. Golda Meir responded that this is precisely why she looks forward to having a good working relationship with him, because “In Israel, we read from right to left.”

This humorous anecdote reflects the inextricable link between the Israeli and his Jewishness, as manifest in language. Language – and specifically Hebrew’s revival – is a microcosmic representation of what is happening to the Jewish people on a global scale, and the questions they are contending with in the twenty-first century: are they particularists or universalists? Can they be both? *Should* they be both? Is one necessarily at the expense of the other?

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<sup>60</sup> It is ironic that Hebrew is spoken today by Israel’s fastest growing and non-Zionist sector – the ultra-Orthodox. Scholem’s accusation against the secular Zionists’ profanation of Hebrew might be just as apt nowadays to the ultra-Orthodox who, in not recognising the language’s potency, commit a form of profanation as well. (In this sense they differ from the anti-Zionists – Neturei Karta, for example – who adamantly refuse to speak Hebrew on the grounds that it is the product of the Zionists’ secularisation of language and that doing so would only prostitute the language.)

The ultra-Orthodox, like the secular revivalists, are unaware of the abyss and the volcano. This is the case not only with the ultra-Orthodox in Israel but with those around the world: they’re not conscious of Hebrew’s import. This is surprising and unfortunate. Surprising, given that Orthodox Jews are in daily contact with the ramifications of a Judaic worldview of speech and language, made manifest in the many halakhot governing speech and language conduct; and unfortunate because most of them are anyhow diglossic, to varying extents: the learned among them are well versed in Judaic texts; the very learned, in grammar as well and the unique linguistic phenomena of the Hebrew language, with which they come in contact on a daily basis given the many Biblical and Talmudic commentaries’ explanations premised on linguistic phenomena as discussed above in chapter 5.

In this context, note the remonstrance of Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschütz (1983 [1863], 2:2, translation mine): “Come and behold the great merit of *Lashon HaKodesh*, which hastens the redemption and salvation. Yet in our great sins, the Hebrew language is... miserable and torn to pieces. No one takes to heart to speak the Hebrew language eloquently; everyone strives to teach his son the language of Tzarfat [France] and Ashkenaz [Germany] and the like... but he has no regard for the Hebrew. Who can speak the Hebrew language without mixing into it other languages, with many mistakes? And because of this their prayers are not said properly with the syllabic accents and diacritics; they stress what should not be and leave unstressed what should be, mispronouncing the *schwa*, which impedes the proper saying of the *Shema* prayer and anything sacred. I am ashamed of you, the people holy to God. How have you forgotten *Lashon HaKodesh*...?”

Given that it was secular Zionists who wished to establish a Jewish political state and thereby solve the “Jewish problem,” given that their orientation was completely material-practical and not spiritual, it is indeed surprising that they reverted back to the “ancient treasure chest” and successfully revived the quintessential Jewish language. One would think that they would cut off ties with it, just as they had cut off ties with Yiddish and other “exilic” languages, wishing to create “a new Jew.” Was their rationale simply that something ancient, something that had survived solely in the liturgy and Torah study, was less “Jewish” than the every-day Yiddish or other exilic languages?

The answer to this question reflects Scholem’s biggest fear. Going back to the source – the “ancient treasure chest” – and reviving the ancient words – that act in *itself* caused not only the awakening of God but the awakening of us to God. Just as Scholem’s self-defeating nihilism led him to include himself as a guilty party to this apocalypse and not just as someone viewing it as an outsider, there will be an awakening of secular Jews, who are realising that in emptying Judaism from its Divine content, Zionism has effectively rendered itself hollow. As the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 98a) states, “The Messiah will come either in a generation that is wholly worthy or that is wholly undeserving.”<sup>61</sup> The two alternatives are indeed the abyss – nihilism – or the volcano – an explosive, total revelation of God.

We are already witnessing this trend, with Israelis (re)turning to religion to varying degrees, in search of something to worship other than themselves<sup>62</sup>; Kibbutz members who haven’t prayed in over half a century are organizing Yom Kippur services; Israeli youth are travelling the world seeking their roots in mysticism and

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<sup>61</sup> Many explanations are given for this cryptic statement. How can it be that the entire generation will be either wholly good and meritorious or wholly bad and undeserving of redemption? Some commentators explain that this is not referring to any single individual but to the generation as a whole. (In other words, there may still be some individuals who are good or bad, even if their generation is not.) However we can also explain this in light of what was mentioned earlier regarding all social and political trends functioning as a spiral through time, with individuals and societies bouncing from one extreme of the spiral to the other. Perhaps the Talmud is saying that the Messiah will only come at a time when people are unbalanced, when they go to either extreme, which is to show that no position – neither extreme on the spiral – will bring about a total solution; the solution must be a composite whole, not an exclusivist fragment.

<sup>62</sup> In a 2014 talk with Israeli performing artist Mika Karni at the Jewish Statesmanship Center, regarding her stint with Orthodox Judaism, she commented that many Israeli artists are “tired of worshipping themselves,” and are therefore looking to worship something else – and some of them are turning to God or at least becoming a little less alienated from Judaism. Obviously not all people sick of worshipping themselves will turn to worship God. In the Israeli context, for some, army duty is the new religion, with its rules and regulations, obligations, moral standards, code of ethics, mythology and heroes. For some, religion takes the form of renewed Zionism, devout socialism, or any other “ism”; and, as mentioned earlier, for some it is nihilism – even in the name of God.

ashrams, searching for the ancient treasure chest of *something* – some unknown that wishes to remain unknown. In an era where there is so much knowledge but very little wisdom; when specialists in any given field know more and more about less and less; when everything in every field of science is revealed – and what isn't yet revealed is promised to be revealed – people are looking for the un-revealed, the mystical, the secret element.

The original founders of the State of Israel chose specifically Hebrew, when they could have chosen any language (or writing Hebrew with Latin letters, as Scholem had suggested at one point). But they had – unconsciously – awakened something eternal, something greater than themselves which would never be truly secularised despite their greatest efforts.

In essence, the story of Hebrew's survival and revival is the story of the Jewish people at large – trying to be a secular nation “like all other nations,” feeling perpetually foreign and always searching for roots. But *that very thing which they employ to try and be like other nations*, God turns around on them to bring them back to Source.

In a sense, then, Scholem's fear of the return of the repressed, expressed in his letter to the born-again Jew Rosenzweig, parallels the return of the repressed Cameron (1999) discusses vis-à-vis Whorf's linguistic relativity. History, like linguistics, like all academic and social trends, functions like a spiral through time. Trends stretch to the outermost extreme, only to bounce back to the other side of the spiral in reaction, with both extremes of the spiral remaining uninformed by each other as they aspire for dominance and remain staunchly unconvinced.

Identity politics are not unique to politics. They are evident in academia as well, and linguistics is no exception: Academics and laypeople alike espouse universalist or particularist viewpoints as regards language irrespective of linguistic facts. With the struggle for identity in the postmodern era, and the consequent fuzziness of identity politics, either of two things can result: people may espouse ideas wholly foreign to them simply because the people they identify with, or would like to be identified with, are promoting those ideas and they happen to be popular (in academia, the media, etc.) at this particular time; or, hopefully we can open up the door to re-examination of existing schools of thought.

Every orthodoxy, being simultaneously an orthodoxy... (in respect to what is known and in respect to how knowledge may be pursued – whether this be Chomskyism, ethnomethodologism, ethnographism, or natural scientism in the language-related disciplines – leads away from certain topics, sensitivities, and questions as well as toward others. If we are lucky the gain may equal or exceed the loss, and if we are wise, no orthodoxy – not even our own – will remain unchallenged for very long.

(Fishman 1982, 5)

Perhaps the “comeback” linguistic relativity has made, it being “among the Big Ideas of the twentieth century” (Cameron 1999, 154), isn’t merely a phase balancing out extreme universalism but heralds a new understanding – a move from a predominantly Chomskyan era not to an anti-Chomskyan or post-Chomskyan era but rather simply to an a-Chomskyan one.<sup>63</sup> Might this parallel the move from a Zionist (or anti-Zionist, or post-Zionist) era to an a-Zionist one? Might this indicate a move toward an era of *no* inherently exclusivist “ism”?

The latent nihilism of Chomsky’s universalism will eventually implode – much the way Zionism’s attempt at universalism is already self-destructing.<sup>64</sup> But this implosion is not entirely a bad thing; nihilism as the one extreme will make way for Whorf’s – and Judaism’s – particularist universalism, and universal particularity, and this has the capacity to demonstrate that the latter are not polar opposites of the former but actually represent a balance amid the flux. The repressed – language, God – will come to haunt us; not only because “it [Whorf’s idea] refuses to die” (Cameron 1999), but because it was never really dead. It was merely waiting in the wings for the right time to (re-)emerge. As is written in *Kol HaTor* (Shklov 1969 [1780], Introduction, 7), God enables man to reveal only those secrets which he has been allowed to reveal because of a need of the times.

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<sup>63</sup> By “a-Chomskyan” I mean rendering Chomskyism a non-issue. If we speak of “anti-Chomskyism” or “post-Chomskysim,” we’re still acknowledging Chomskyism. Likewise for anti-Zionism and post-Zionism versus a-Zionism.

<sup>64</sup> Note Scholem’s words: “I did not know that he [Rosenzweig] regarded me as a nihilist” (*From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books (1980, 139)). Note, too, Derrida’s comment on Scholem’s words: “I do not know what Rosenzweig may have thought of the 1926 letter addressed to him by Scholem. But, as paradoxical as this may seem, it could have confirmed this diagnosis: nihilism. It is true that the very ‘logic,’ the ‘program’ of ‘nihilism’ – and these words must be put within quotation marks – always give it the most gripping resemblances with its opposite” (Derrida 2002, 192-193).

Forty-nine days after being liberated from Egypt, the site of their national conception, the Jewish people stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received the commandments which would set them forever apart. At that seminal moment, the people “saw the sounds” (Exodus 20:15). This earliest documented case of a synesthetic experience was more than simply a cross-neurological phenomenon: it was essential to their becoming a people. Just as God had created the world by His word, so too would the Jewish people be entrusted to mimic the Creator and “create” with their words. It was therefore necessary that at that moment of national birth, they “see the sounds”; they had to experience the Word in living colour.

It is not coincidental, then, that in the era considered the Dawn of Redemption (more on this in the next chapter), Hebrew has been so successfully revived. Equally, the timing of the comeback linguistic relativity is making is not arbitrary. As stated, things are revealed when the needs of the time so dictate. It is time for Jews to wake up to their Divine mission, in understanding the power of language in general and what their language in particular has evoked. The time is ripe, then, for a Jewish reconsideration of Whorfianism.

**PART III**  
**RECLAIMING SPEECH**  
**IN THE MODERN-DAY TOWER OF BABEL**

## **CHAPTER 7: RECLAIMING SPEECH IN THE MODERN-DAY TOWER OF BABEL**

Part I of this work, consisting of chapters 1, 2 and 3, discussed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its particularist bent; the innateness hypothesis of Chomsky and others, and its universalist bent; the somewhat artificial dichotomisation of innateness and empiricism; and the grounding of linguistic relativity and innateness in distinct philosophical traditions, viewed through the prism of Taylor's (2016) discussion of language as being designative or constitutive.

Part II of this work, comprised of chapters 4, 5, and 6, linked the theoretical grounding laid out in the first section with the Judaic conception of language. As we have seen, the Judaic view is more aligned with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Taylor's constitutive view of language. We have also seen how the Judaic conception of language as sourced with the Divine and as being a creative force plays out in halakha, lore and custom, in line with Lucy's (1997) discursive relativity. We saw the link between the Jewish people and language on a micro level, specifically as reflected in Torah study and prayer and the many halakhot concerning speech, and on a macro level as well, in the case of Hebrew's revival in the modern State of Israel.

This third and final part aims to bring the two previous parts together in their application to our present sociolinguistic reality. As we near the outer edge of the "hermeneutical circle" sketched herein, it seems appropriate to borrow an oft-quoted line from George Sarton's *Introduction to the History of Science*:

The progress of science implies not only the accumulation of knowledge, but its organization, its unification, and this involves the periodic invention of new syntheses, coordinating existing knowledge, and of new hypotheses which give us methods of approaching the unknown.

There is nothing revolutionary in this dissertation; the only novelty is the linking between points, and within the context of a Judaic view of language. And while there is always the danger of reducing a topic to one aspect of it alone and thereby oversimplifying it, delineating a focus and formulating a defining framework within which to contextualise ideas does help to illuminate them.

Some might argue that language is merely one aspect of mind or socialisation and altogether not important enough to warrant such discussion. The Judaic worldview,

however, would suggest that since language is a creative force, is what makes us uniquely human and especially Divine, and cannot be neatly separated from thought (which perhaps explains why we generally don't give it much thought), it is indeed a big issue; and in our precarious times, probably one of the biggest issues (specifically in the Judaic conception of the End of Days, to be discussed shortly).

So where does this Connect-the-Dots between linguistic relativity, innateness, empiricism, particularism, universalism, Judaism, secularisation and sacredness leave us? Specifically, what possible conclusions can we draw from the Judaic conception of language vis-à-vis our own use of speech, and our present global reality and the role of language in the Judaic cosmology? The answer to these questions is the subject of the seventh and final chapter, in the hopes that fellow linguistic philosophers bear in mind Hutton's (2001, 8) words that "The linguist is the gatekeeper of the language, just as the lawyer is the guardian of the rules of law."

### **7.1. History's Critical Junction: Radical Individuation and Secularisation**

By the Jewish calendar, we are at a critical period now – the year 5778 since Creation, a mere 222 years away from the sixth millennium by which time, according to the Kabbalists, the Messiah must arrive. As mentioned earlier (chapter 3; chapter 4), Nachmanides (among other commentators) explains that the six days of Creation parallel the 6000 years of history according to the Jewish calendar, with the seventh millennium paralleling the Sabbath – the final destination of world history. As the verse quoted earlier (Psalms 90:4) states, "For a thousand years in Your eyes is like a day gone by" – one millennium per day of Creation.

Jewish scholars of recent centuries (notably, the Gaon of Vilna) have opined that as of 5500 – the halfway point of the sixth millennium, beyond which the sixth millennium is closer to the seventh – we have entered the era which the Talmud has called *at'halta d'geula*, "the Dawn of Redemption," or known elsewhere in the Talmud as *ikveta d'meshiha*, "the Footsteps of the Messiah." This is a critical period in many respects<sup>1</sup> but germane to our discussion of language and society I highlight two, and they are interrelated.

The first is that we are in an era of extreme individuation at the expense of unification. We have broken things down into their most atomised components and in

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<sup>1</sup> The Sages of the Talmud said of this time "Let him [the Messiah] come, but let me not behold him [i.e. endure the calamitous events concurrent with his arrival]" (Tractate Sanhedrin 98b).

the process have become bereft of wholeness and laden with fragmentation. We deify the micro-level being and exalt his individuality above everything else – what DeGraff (2017) has described as “the glorification of our selfie culture.”

At the same time (perhaps by warped way of compensation?), we have created artificial communities premised on a false common denominator<sup>2</sup>; even when the common denominator is a genuine one, oftentimes it is so marginal to who and what we wholly are or should be.<sup>3</sup>

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different.

(Heyes 2016 [2002])

Society enshrines diversity; similarity, even if objectively more mutually beneficial in a given situation, is shunned. These artificial diversity-inspired communities, ostensibly formed to give expression to the individual’s uniqueness (be it political, sexual orientation, gender or other identification), engender groupthink, which ironically compromises the individual which the very group identity purports to support. Such groups can never really support the individual’s distinctiveness because the cohesiveness is an externally imposed institution, a would-be “‘individualistic’ we,” not the amalgamated product of individuals’ own free thinking, ideas, achievements and/or values from within coming together – what Sharansky (2014) has termed “the collective ‘I.’” In such a climate, independent thinking is a major threat to the dominant groupthink. That is only natural: it wasn’t independent thinking

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<sup>2</sup> It is inevitable that people seek out community, as man was created to be a social being: “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Locke echoed this, in his talk of “God’s design of man ‘for a sociable creature’ as the reason for language” (Taylor 2016, 108).

<sup>3</sup> One area where we see this play out is “intersectionality” – a term coined by Columbia Law School professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, and used to convey the points of contact between different marginalised groups (for example, blacks, LGBT, women). Although noble sounding, what intersectionality really amounts to is fighting for all seemingly marginalised people despite no genuinely shared affiliation between them (except for the underlying perpetuation of the status of victimhood).

that enabled the formation of the identity group to begin with, and so it is improbable that independent thinking would be supported by the group.

This identity-shifting is evident on the individual level as well as at the level of nationality. Nationalism has been questioned or undermined, and many would have it sacrificed for the sake of an illusory, borderless world peace. A top-down “unity in diversity” worldview trumps a bottom-up, *e-pluribus-unum* identity and a sense of shared history. And we are now beginning to see the results of this nihilistic idolisation of non-identity<sup>4</sup> – not only with the unravelling of Western values but with the backlash of alt-right groups emerging in America and across Europe with an insidious brand of hypernationalism.

The second respect in which we are living at a critical historic juncture, and which is very much connected with the overemphasis on diversity identity, is that we are living in an era one can categorise, as Bodhi (2010) has, as the “radical secularisation of life”:

The triumph of materialism in the sphere of cosmology and metaphysics had the profoundest impact on human self-understanding. The message it conveyed was that the inward dimensions of our existence, with its vast profusion of spiritual and ethical concerns, is mere adventitious superstructure. The inward is reducible to the external, the invisible to the visible, the personal to the impersonal. Mind becomes a higher order function of the brain, the individual a node in a social order governed by statistical laws. All humankind’s ideals and values are relegated to the status of illusions: they are projections of biological drives, sublimated wish-fulfillment.

If only that were all. The problem, however, is not just with the radical secularization of life but with the consequent reactionary fundamentalism, which can be (and, as we are seeing, is) just as lethal. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, people abhor the vacuous and will search for *something* to fill the void.<sup>5</sup> Earlier (chapter 4) I

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<sup>4</sup> What I mean by this is the formation of an identity premised on not having one. As Robbins (2009, 552) describes it, “There is no cosmopolitanism without some degree or mode of belonging, even if that belonging takes the negative form of shame rather than positive form of pride. All cosmopolitanism is really ‘local’ or ‘rooted’ or ‘discrepant,’ ‘patriotic’ or ‘vernacular’ or ‘actually existing.’ Therefore all cosmopolitanism is more or less paradoxical.” A definition by what I’m *not* is still a definition, and it can engender, as Robbins put it, “a double standard based on national identity or location – not universalism at all, but nationalism in reverse” (Robbins 2009, 552).

<sup>5</sup> As G.K. Chesterson said, “When men stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.”

mentioned the idea that all things yearn to return to their source. Man is a finite being, yet houses an element of the infinite Divine within him – a soul; as such, man will always seek the transcendent (Gross 2012), to return to Source. It should come as no surprise, then, given today’s post-identity climate, that young, intelligent, middle-class or even affluent people are turning to radical fundamentalism as their saving grace, to combat the inevitable emptiness engendered by the nihilistic worshipping of self. Fundamentalism offers meaning, belonging, redemption in the glorification of a deity that is higher, or at least other, than ourselves. It also offers the possibility of living with purpose and a sense of mission – even if that purpose and/or mission is destructive, and all the more so when carried out in the name of said deity.

At this critical juncture, then, language’s role in forming individual and group/cultural identity cannot be underestimated. The connection between language and the mind (at the individual level), and language and society (at the group/cultural level), should be examined anew by way of formulating a more balanced personal and collective identity that comes with self-knowledge and which is not at the expense of others’ identity.<sup>6</sup>

As to the radical secularization of life and the reactionary fundamentalism it brings in its wake, and in the context of language, innateness and empiricism should be examined anew as well. Innateness, in its present form, finds a safe haven in a Godless, egocentric society. The empirical view, on the other hand, would allow space for the Divine, by virtue of its acknowledgement of the world around us and that we are not the centre of it. It is thus the more humble one, enabling us to find objective meaning and to serve something other than ourselves and our *ism* du jour. It also assumes humans are endowed with the ability to change – a prerequisite for any growth and moral development.

To contextualize these two issues – post-identity extreme individuation resulting in groupthink, and radical secularism resulting in fundamentalism – and present a tentative Judeo-philosophical counterview, I would first like to present two models of history: the linear and the spiral. But before that, it is necessary to first explain the concept of time-binding, without which history has no meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> This is of particular relevance with regard to the Jewish people and the revival of their language, as I have tried to demonstrate in the previous three chapters, and will wrap up briefly in the conclusion to this chapter.

### 7.1.1. Time-binding and time-bound existence

According to Kodish (1998, 132), time-binding is the

...characteristic human ability to use language and other symbols to transmit information across time. This allows for the formation of cultures and the ability to study cultures. It gives each individual the potential to profit from his or her own experiences and other people's experiences. Through time-binding, each generation potentially can start where the last generation left off.

The value of cooperation seems vital to us as time-binders. We build on what others have said and done, as others will build upon what we say and do. Seeing ourselves as time-binders, potential contributors to the future wealth or illth of humanity, can thus give us a sense of responsibility towards others.

Time-binding is, essentially, an expansion of the function of memory. Memory in turn, is the language mechanism of time-binders. It enables us to learn anew every day, not just in the sense of acquiring new information but in applying it – “slotting it in” – to what we already know. Knowing what something is (and, equally, what it *isn't*), requires language and memory. That it requires language is obvious; but it requires memory, too, because knowledge is cumulative: if we were to process new information but not retain any of it, all naming – language – would be meaningless and life would be one big theatre of the absurd, where truth is a door and death a window, a cup a boat and a human a butterfly.<sup>7</sup> Without memory, the naming of things would be moot because no one would have any previous concepts on which to build. In contrast to the early behaviourist account of language acquisition – that a child learns to exercise his command of speech based on “reward” – a child delights in naming things and learning the words for new objects not because of reward (which

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<sup>7</sup> These are silly examples, brought just to demonstrate the point. On a larger scale, however, this has ramifications as regards the collective *social* memory, or what might be termed a collective sense of history. A society's having a definitive understanding of concepts (for example, “life,” “death,” “god,” “morals,” etc.) is necessary in order to bequeath said society's understanding of said concepts to the next generation. Language and collective memory are at play in the changing of such concepts (for better or for worse) over time, and they are what enable us to *record* how concepts have changed over time. (See the conclusion of chapter 3 concerning this point.) As Taylor (2016, 332) notes, “Encoding, in fact, allows us to store information and knowledge, given certain means of passing it on, if only instructing by elders, or learning the sagas of the tribe by heart. This has had immeasurable consequences in the development of human cultures and technologies. The knowledge thus accumulated makes possible informed instrumental deliberation, planning, the devising of new modes of organization and operation in the world.”

would be narrowly applicable as in a case, for example, where the child says “biscuit” and gets one), but because *naming objects enables more human interaction*, and consequently leads to intellectual expansion.

Thus, language constitutes thought, by virtue of cumulative memory. If we had to constantly build our language from scratch, what we learn would have no meaning. Things only have meaning *because memory is cumulative*. Memory provides the frame of reference; when memory fails us, intelligent life is over.<sup>8</sup>

But whereas memory recounts past up till the present, time-binding gives us access to the future as well. Hence time-binding is an *expansion* of the function of memory – the taking of whatever memory has accumulated up until this point and “projecting” it onto the future. As such, time-binding is a microcosmic representation of the Divine, in its ability to *rise above* time-bound limitations.<sup>9</sup>

Time-binding gives us a sense of our finitude as well as our ability to rise above it. Man was given a soul – the innate *helek Eloka mima'al*, the Divine element – which is not bound by time. But housing a Divine element obligates man to use it: knowing that we are not going to be around forever, yet knowing that our actions will have

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<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, it is interesting to note that studies have found that people who speak two languages or more have a better chance of coping with memory loss such as Alzheimer’s, with the onset of symptoms being delayed. See for example Perania, et al. (2017).

On a socio-historical scale, Floridi (2014, 1) notes, “It is only when systems to record events and hence accumulate and transmit information for future consumption became available that lessons learnt by past generations began to evolve exponentially...and so humanity entered into history.” (This would explain, also, our reverence for monuments, gravestones, archaeological and heritage sites: “our relation to monuments of past civilizations, our seeking them out, visiting them, perhaps manifests our need to be rooted in meaningful time” [Taylor 2016, 344]). However, when memory is relegated to the external (even in the most basic sense – for example, the hard drive) – on an individual and societal level – there is less space for internal memory; at that point, we have entered what Floridi (2014) has termed the “perpetual present.” More on this, below.

<sup>9</sup>Tangentially, perhaps this offers an explanation of what *déjà vu* might be. In Kabbalistic lore, the soul, being an element of the Divine, is not bound by time or forgetfulness; only the body is. Hence, when the soul returns to its Source, before Whom “There is no forgetfulness,” as stated in the *Amida* prayer of Rosh Hashanah, it undergoes a process of retribution by virtue of the fact that it inhabits eternity and so it no longer has the benefit of human forgetfulness or delay in memory. While in this life one can forget about something wrong he has done and the consequent shame, in the Next World there is no such luxury. There is an inevitable degree of pain when the soul recounts everything that has been done – or opportunities missed – and so the soul’s lack of forgetfulness constitutes its own reckoning. We experience this mini-death regularly, when the body is asleep and the soul ascends. (The Talmud (Tractate Berakhot 57b) likens sleep to one-sixtieth of death.) The ascendant soul could, theoretically, inhabit all times, being unbound by the sleeping, time-bound physical body. When the soul is thrown back into the body upon waking, spiritually it “knows” more than it did before. (Perhaps this explains why, when we encounter a seemingly insurmountable problem, we say “let’s ‘sleep’ on it.”) When we have the experience of *déjà vu*, it is possible the soul recognises having been in this time and place before.

ramifications for future generations that will be linked with these actions – and furthermore, that our actions will have ramifications in some Afterlife – enables us to take action regardless of whether or not we personally will see results from said action. This is, essentially, what makes man capable of morality, since moral existence necessitates a transcendence of the moment – a past-presence and future orientation.

Moreover, the fact that we are also *bound* by time gives meaning to our ability to be “time-binders”: without the understanding of time – the pressing of it – we would feel no inclination to get anything done (if we’ll be around forever, why rush to do anything?). And were we to be above time, with the ability to inhabit past, present and future, our choices, too, would be meaningless because we would know the end result. (Why donate bone marrow to save a leukaemia patient, for example, if you know she’ll die in a car crash a few months after being cured?). Our being time-binders enables us to function in the present while anticipating the future without knowing the future. As the Talmud (Tractate Tamid 32a) states, “Who is wise? He who can foresee the results of his actions.”

### **7.1.2. Linear and spherical models of history**

Given that we are bound by time, history, for us, functions linearly. In other words, we cannot inhabit more than one “time” at a time. A linear view of time posits that events happen as points on a timeline, in succession. Ideas, too, be they in theology, philosophy, linguistics or any field, appear in succession, the later ones building upon previous ones, possibly negating them and possibly expanding upon them, but necessarily always in succession:

In any age, ideas are assembled, disassembled and reassembled according to their usefulness and whoever has the power to move them... over time, ideas get updated, like versions of a computer program. Each version is an extension or a complete reimagining of the previous one.

(DeGraff 2017)

Earlier (chapters 2 and 3; conclusion of chapter 6) I mentioned briefly the idea that trends (be they in linguistics, academia, politics or society at large) function like a spiral through time, stretching to the outermost extreme only to bounce back to the other side of the spiral in reaction; the “pendulum” of ideas. Within the linear view of

time, we can conceive of ideas on the timeline as a pendulum swinging back and forth between two infinite parallel lines, representing opposite extremes. New developments in thought are not only in succession but might be in reaction to their opposite on the timeline, but still they are always in succession. Someone standing at the point of departure of the two parallel lines would, in theory, see the development of ideas on either side, as well as the zigzag formed between the two lines of thought, until they would merge at some unforeseeable point down the horizon. Such a view is, therefore, static, stuck in what we can see wherever we happen to be standing on the parallel-lines continuum. Such a view would not enable us to view *all* points on the timeline simultaneously or congruously.

In contrast to this two-dimensional, linear model, there is the spiral model of history. This dynamic model coheres with Jewish philosophers' (notably Luzzatto [2008, §4 ch.7]) version of Jewish and world history, namely, that history functions not only linearly (with a "pendulum of ideas") but spherically, as a spiral through time. In the spiral model of history and world events, ideas have their extremes (positioned opposite each other on the spiral's curves) and time functions as a moving helix. We advance along the rising spiral, as history unfolds, with equally opposing forces at the outer curves but advancing upward all the time. At any given time our position on the curve is aligned with all the events and ideas in the identical position on previous (lower) rungs on the spiral and we can recognise a common "thread" running through each particular time-phase/idea. As Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 253) describes it,<sup>10</sup>

In the very act of exact repetition we discover a new taste, a new creative expression in each revisitation of a point we may think we know already. Looked at from above, there is only a circle, but looked at from the side, each ring moves up and each one is entirely new. Each revolution brings us back to the same point in one sense, but in a deeper sense that point has never been reached before. Physical eyes see a circle, but spiritual eyes see a spiral.

The Midrash (Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha, 9) states that God gave Abraham "signs": everything that happened to him portended what would happen to his children. Nachmanides (on Genesis 12:6) echoes this, stating that everything that happened to

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<sup>10</sup> Tatz's description is in reference to the mystical significance of dancing in a circle, but the idea is equally applicable here. I will return to the circle concept in the conclusion to this chapter.

the Forefathers happened to their children as well. More broadly, the common saying that “The actions of the fathers serve as a sign for the children” (based on Bereishit Rabbah 70:6) expresses the idea that history repeats itself. This is reflected in repeating “threads” in the Jewish calendar, for example, where certain times of year have certain characteristics based on previous historical events that took place at that time of the year and are therefore more apt for certain events to take place then (e.g., the month of Nissan in which Passover is observed being in general a time of redemption; the month of Av, in which the two Temples were destroyed on the ninth day, as being a time of sorrow,<sup>11</sup> etc.).

The time-binding function, as Judaism perceives it, is not just about being linked to past events but to the future as well. As we mentioned, the 6000 years of history parallel the six days of Creation, with the seventh millennium paralleling the first Sabbath.<sup>12</sup> Time is not a static thing which we inhabit or pass through but is a dynamic force propelling us forward toward an endpoint – an endpoint whose nature we can glimpse in a microcosmic way, even while on the lower rungs of the spiral, having recognised a pattern in the time-space continuum.<sup>13</sup>

History has not always been pretty, as the pendulum of ideas has swung from one extreme to another. The ideal, in the linear model, would be if the ball were perfectly poised between the parallel lines, where the forces pulling at it from either direction are of equal weight such that any given idea is never pulled to extreme in either direction and the zigzagging is eliminated. But there is a danger inherent in this two-dimensional view: it can all too simply turn into an ideal of “nothing matters” and that the only position to be espoused is the position of *no* position, ostensibly to enable the supposed possibility of all options.

In contrast, in the spiral model, ideas not only move back and forth but upward, propelling humanity toward its ultimate purpose, toward an endpoint (which will

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<sup>11</sup> The ninth of Av was actually designated as a tragic day centuries before, when the Explorers sent out by Moses prior to the Jewish people’s entering the Land of Israel returned with negative reports about the Land and with shaky faith as to their ability to scale it. The verse (Numbers 14:1) states that the people “cried on that night,” and the Talmud (Tractate Ta’anit 29a) comments, “That night was the ninth of Av. God said to [the Jewish people], ‘you cried for no reason, and I will [therefore] set this day as a tragic day, giving you reason to cry for generations to come. [Indeed] the First and Second Temples were destroyed [on this day].’”

<sup>12</sup> This is an expression of being time-bound, on a much larger scale. The knowledge that we are not here for eternity, that there *is* an endpoint to history, gives humanity a goal. It also gives humanity hope: the world will not go on indefinitely in its present state, but will reach an endpoint at which point – revelation – existence will change, for the good and for good.

<sup>13</sup> The Sabbath marked every seven days is regarded in Judaism as *me’ein Olam Haba*, “a taste of the World to Come,” namely, a microcosmic experience of the new world order of the seventh millennium.

actually be the beginning, as a circle has no beginning or end). In other words, there is a force outside of humanity that propels it onward, upward. Humanity is locked within the spiral flux and therefore cannot see the levels above or those below which it has already surmounted, and how these fit together. If one could picture the three-dimensional helix from the outside, however (with “spiritual eyes,” to use Tatz’ term), one could see that humanity is progressing. The ideal, in the spiral model, would be a collapsing of the spiral into one circle whose circumference contains all the events and ideas on *all* the rungs, no zigzag between points warring against each other, just a unified ring, or multidimensional sphere, equidistant from a central point – the focal point of truth. But before morphing into that unified ring equidistant from a focal point of truth, the spiral will necessarily appear to be going out of control.

## **7.2. Truth in the End of Days**

In chapter 4 we discussed the importance of truth in the Judaic perspective, its being the foundation of the world and the basis for a moral society. Now let us turn to a Jewish view of truth in the End of Days.

Regarding this era of the Footsteps of the Messiah, or the Dawn of Redemption, the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 49a, italics mine) states,

In the era preceding the Messiah, impudence will increase and costs will soar. Though the vine will give forth its fruit, wine will be expensive. And the monarchy shall turn to heresy, and there will be no one to give reproof. The meeting place of the Sages will become a place of promiscuity, and the Galilee shall be destroyed and the Gavlan will be desolate, and the men of the border shall go round from city to city to seek charity, but they will find no mercy. And the wisdom of scribes will putrefy, and people who fear sin will be held in disgust, and *the truth will be absent*.

It is no secret that impudence has increased,<sup>14</sup> with the younger generation having little regard for the older one; as the rest of the passage quoted above relates, “The youth will shame the face of the elders, elders will stand before minors.” Families are breaking down and members of a household turn against their own families.<sup>15</sup> And although we are living in times of great abundance, costs (and inflation) have

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<sup>14</sup> See Lynn Truss’ *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door*, NY: Penguin Books, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Also in the Talmudic passage quoted above.

increased. There is enough produce to feed the entire world several times over, but global wealth is not distributed evenly; many things are unaffordable for many people; in some parts of the world, people are still affected by famine.

“The monarchy” mentioned here refers to world leaders, who have turned to heresy; secularism dominates, and there is no one to give reproof because of moral relativism. World leaders believe in their *ism(s)* of choice, exchanging belief in a Higher Power for total belief and (over)confidence in the Self.

This arrogance is not limited to world leaders, but to anyone in a position of leadership. According to Weitzman (2006, 207), this includes

...media barons, the new idols of our time. They set the world’s daily agenda... The rulers of the world are no longer diplomats or generals, but journalists. There is no need for wisdom or education to become part of this ruling clique, either. With a little muscle plus control of a newspaper or media outlet, a person can become all-powerful.

Whereas in previous times the media played a vital role as the watchdog of democracy, keeping politicians in line (if by no other means other than sheer fear of exposure<sup>16</sup>), it has nowadays been reduced to a mere tool in the hands of politicians (and sometimes even monetarily supported by said politicians), and is mere opinion, political affiliation or propaganda, not facts. Journalists are no longer the unbiased voice of truth but have a vested interest (J. Miller 2016).

### **7.2.1. Truth’s relativism and post-truth politics**

This leads us to the concluding statement in the Talmudic passage quoted above, namely, that *truth will be absent*. Never before has so much content been generated, published, disseminated, and so much corruption exposed, and yet we are at so far a remove from truth. We can say this: Truth is inversely proportional to the inflation of language. With the proliferation of social media and the explosion of the blogosphere, with the multiplicity and subjective “narrative” they generate, there is no space for a coherent, objective truth. With an attitude of “every man has his truth” comes total

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<sup>16</sup> One can argue, further (as Professor Yossi Schein of Tel Aviv University has), that over-reporting on political corruption has the opposite effect: rather than exposing corruption and preventing other cases of it, it normalises corruption, making society jaded: if “everyone’s doing it,” it must not be all that bad.

subjectivity.<sup>17</sup> We now have “post-truth politics” and concepts such as “truthiness” to absolve us from fact verification; spin doctors are the movers and shakers, presumptuous enough to claim to cure all the ills of society.

Curiously, Pinker (2007) claims political white-washing (“Newspeak”) is wrong not because it brainwashes us, but because it is lying. What appears to be semantic precision on Pinker’s part is in fact misleading; clarification as to what is essentially wrong with lying is in order.

The definition of a lie, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2003) is “1. An intentionally false statement. 2. A situation involved in deception or founded on a mistaken impression.” The definition of “brainwash” is (also according to the OED), to “subject (someone) to a prolonged process to transform their attitudes and beliefs totally.”

First, note that by this definition brainwashing isn’t always a bad thing (for example, if the initial attitudes and beliefs were harmful to the individual or society, some brainwashing might be in order, if it amounts to “washing” the “brain” of preconceived – or bad – ideas (asylum seekers fleeing dictatorships who have to adjust to their newfound freedom come to mind).

Second, given the above definitions, it’s not hard to see how brainwashing can function as a result of a *continuous lie*. Brainwashing can in fact constitute lying, just in a higher dose and with a slow-release effect: a lie that is perpetuated eventually comes to brainwash and it is doubly pernicious because people take it to be true since it is repeated so often and has developed gradually over time, thus giving it the appearance of having a “tradition.”

The occasional “stretching” of the truth can be tolerated (for a benign example, as we see in the advertising industry, and which is generally for the purpose of engaging the audience – and usually in a humorous way). But when truthiness is rampant, and ongoing, it is a brainwashing problem, as we see in the media and the dying out of authentic journalism. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and contributing editor of City Journal Judith Miller contends that social media have taken the place of professional journalists, noting that in 2003 there were approximately one-hundred thousand

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<sup>17</sup> It is only natural, then, that “the wisdom of scribes will putrefy, and people who fear sin will be held in disgust, and the truth will be absent.” There can be no fear of sin if nothing is deemed to *be* a sin because everything is relevant.

bloggers, which rose to twenty-seven million in just a few years. She notes, further, that

Many sites, including mainstream sites, have abandoned traditional journalistic practices and standards in search of more and more “eyeballs.” Objectivity, once the gold standard of reporting, is now often seen as old-fashioned, a ratings loser. When success is measured mainly in terms of “clicks,” the outrageous beats the sober just about every time. Inserting opinion, even in the middle of a news story, is a way in which journalists can distinguish themselves.

(J. Miller 2016)

If only the problem were solely with journalism. But it’s within far broader circles as well. Inasmuch as the internet is ostensibly democratic in making everything accessible, it has unleashed a pandemic of relativistic “truth.” In such a climate, what constitutes a lie? Is it merely an “untruth”? Where do we draw the line between an “untruth” and “truthiness,” between “fuzzy facts,” “fake news,” “narrative” and an all-out lie? If “every man has his truth” and “my truth” is a nice way of saying “this is how I see things from my perspective” or how I “feel,” who’s to say who’s speaking the truth? And when people *do* speak the truth, what is to ensure their voice is heard amid the raging cacophony?

If language did *not* have such an effect on our thoughts and decision-making processes, the media and PR industry would not be saturated with words and visual interpretations and representations thereof, and would not be investing the billions they do on advertisements, slogans, brand names, product names, taglines, localisation and all things marcom-related. Teams of copywriters, strategists, translators and localisation experts would not be working so hard to convince us of whatever it is they’re trying to sell, be it an idea or a product. The news outlets and media wouldn’t be steeped with and spewing half-truths and concepts such as “truthiness.” Books would not be banned for fear they might actually cause billions of people to reorient their moral compass. Even Pinker, clearly a nativist and Whorf’s staunchest opponent, acknowledges the power of language in the opening of his book *The Language Instinct*, where he writes that “we can *shape events* in each other’s brains with exquisite precision” (1994, 1, italics mine). In the words of Lamb (2000, in Kodish 2003) “Those who doubt that language can influence thinking are unlikely to be vigilant for the effect of language on their own thinking.”

### 7.2.2. The wisdom of crowds: multiplicity and the death of democracy

There is another way to interpret the absence of truth predicted to take hold at the End of Days. The word used to describe truth as “absent” in the aforementioned Talmudic passage is בעדרת, *ne'ederet*, which shares the same root and meaning as the word עדר, *eder*, “herd.” According to Weitzman (2006), the term *ne'ederet* signifies not only that truth will be absent but that truth will acquire a “herd mentality.” It will not be based on facts and objectivity, and not even on subjective personal opinion (clearly stated or subtly inserted), but on the wisdom of crowds. The voice of the masses will become the new truth.

While the wisdom of crowds has its technological merits (apps such as Waze come to mind), it will inevitably lead to mindlessness and an antidemocratic internet climate – much the way false group identities cannot uphold individual identities. Whether something is deemed true is now dependent on the masses – whatever makes for better ratings and therefore gets bumped up in search engines. The less “newsworthy” items, regardless of their truth, will never make it into the internet oligarchy. What was heralded at its outset as the freest creative commons – the ultimate in democratic dissemination of knowledge – has got literally out of hand for most people. Inevitably the larger search engines will take over the smaller ones, limiting our access to knowledge even more.

[T]he web is no longer the free and open space it was a decade ago. It's now a feudal system run by a handful of ultra-large and ultra-sophisticated monarchs. The rest of us are just serfs handing over a percentage of our crop to the lords and ladies who have the power to grant us access to the digital world of meaningful commerce. Our chances of actually becoming web royalty are about the same as retiring from that scratch-off lottery ticket.

(DeGraff 2017)

Years ago, when there weren't many TV channels to choose from, people were exposed to different (and objective) views and reached their own conclusions. Journalists' professionalism ensured people heard all views, whether they identified with them or not. Not so now. One can choose to hear only what he wants to hear. No one has to contend with upsetting truths or opposing views. In no time at all Google will figure out where your interests lie, and direct you only toward “relevant” content.

It is ironic how that which has been heralded as our most potent tool yet for self-expression and transcending the limitations of language and intercultural communication is proving to be the most limiting of all.

So what happens in a climate where our own intelligence is dependent on the masses' intelligence, which in turn is lorded over by few (Google; YouTube which is owned by Google, etc.); where "every man has his truth" – and all the means at his disposal to distribute it to the masses? The internet (and the world) becomes a lot less democratic. The internet appears to give voice to every opinion, enabling everyone to access everything and say whatever, whenever, wherever and however he wants – be it via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest or whatever other social media platforms will be developed to compete in the race for loudest digital noisemaker – until he gets censored and ousted because his content has been deemed "offensive" to certain populations, is taken offline or demonetized.<sup>18</sup>

Fishman (1998-1999, 26) said that "With unprecedented reach comes a form of unprecedented power." Though he said this in connection with globalisation and English as the *lingua franca*, it is equally apt in the digital context. We are no longer free to search for what we want; Big Brother Google is doing it for us, and making us more idiotic, unsure of ourselves and naively trusting in the process. Everything might be "out there," but with no way for us to find it. When Google has the power to decide what is popular, and consequently dictate what the people read, hear, purchase – indeed, what they *think* – we have a big, antidemocratic problem on our hands. The consolidation of cacophony is making way for totalitarianism; and multicultural totalitarianism, even if democratically initiated, is still totalitarianism.

Consider, too, the imbalance between public and private, between disseminating information freely and disseminating too much.<sup>19</sup> The verbosity engendered by the internet, coupled with all the options of remaining anonymous, have grave repercussions. While anonymity is crucial in certain instances in order to ensure freedom of expression, it also absolves users of accountability. The internet has

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<sup>18</sup> Consider the current lawsuit Prager U is filing against Google for banning several of its videos, and the firing of Google engineer James Damore in August 2017 over his memo, "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber." Obviously, Google has a right to fire employees whose personal beliefs run contrary to its corporate ethos. The point here, rather, is to demonstrate where Google stands on socio-political issues and how this affects the internet climate.

<sup>19</sup>For more on this, see Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today's user-generated media are destroying our economy, our culture and our values*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

provided a platform where not only can anyone say whatever he wants, whenever, wherever and however, he can pretend to *be* whoever he wants, presenting a false identity – or even appropriating someone else’s. We can set up aliases on just about every social media platform, and no one has to know who we really are. To ostensibly combat this, not only do we have verification codes, PINs and passwords linked across platforms and devices, we have technologies to keep track of who’s keeping track (for example, Mail Chimp or other email tracking programs that check when the recipient opened the email and how many times, or WhatsApp showing the sender whether the recipient of the message opened the message or not and when – and when they were last online; in theory, they could have been online and purposely ignored your message). When we are not truthful to ourselves, the world will doubt us being truthful to it, and we will have to overcompensate.

The further we deviate from the source/truth, the more we seek that truth – either by over-authentication or by saying there’s *no* truth and that everything is relative, in an attempt to avoid the issue altogether.<sup>20</sup> And there we have it: the coronation of the post-truth king; we look the king in the eye, and discover that he is us. When we consider the amount of time people spend (waste?) with social media and unreliable “news” outlets; the families and relationships that have been compromised or destroyed thereby; the “shaming” phenomenon and resultant suicides (granted, not in every instance, but enough to serve as a wakeup call); reputations trashed by smear campaigns; and falsehoods perpetuated by true and false identities, one questions whether this is too much of a good thing.

### **7.2.3. Language, left and right**

Another example where we are witnessing the decline of democracy and truth – and at the very hands of democracy – viz. language and communication, is the Left’s hijacking of free speech. Before I discuss this, a note on the political divide between Right and Left in regard to the linguistic relativity question and its moral and particularist bases which we discussed earlier (chapter 4).

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<sup>20</sup> This aptly describes the distinction between fundamentalism and secularism, with respect to the question of truth: fundamentalists will resort to over-authentication (“there’s only one truth, and it’s with us,” while secularism will claim there is no truth, it’s all a matter of personal opinion.

One would think the Left would espouse linguistic relativity since the Left is ostensibly attuned to all things multicultural; yet I have not found this to be the case overtly.<sup>21</sup> I posit that this is because of key differences between the Right and the Left.

Traditionally the Right has been more concerned with improvement at the *individual* level as the basis for improving society on the whole,<sup>22</sup> and with individual citizens' obligations to society. The Right generally views society as good but the individual as fallible, consequently necessitating various systems – call them safeguards – in place to protect the individuals in said society. The Right also values being grounded in a tradition of belonging (to family, society, nationality, shared history, religion, God). As such, it more readily espouses the idea that our speech affects how we think and that we are therefore responsible for it, as well as the idea that cultures differ in, among other things, language, and that these differences are and should be noted, celebrated and upheld.

The Left, traditionally preoccupied with the problems of society regardless of the role the individual plays within it, enshrines rights and freedoms at all costs, holding society (or the government, the patriarchy, white privilege or any other *objet d'horreur* du jour) responsible for all the ills individuals have suffered or perpetrated, leaving very little room for personal accountability. To assert that language influences thought, which in turn influences action, implies that *we* – not society or any external entity – are responsible and that is at a far remove from Left-oriented ideology. While fighting for rights seems noble (who *wouldn't* want inalienable rights and freedoms?), it fails in its inability to address personal responsibility.<sup>23</sup> It is, instead, a means of shifting the blame. As regards the idea that people and languages differ, it obviously does not cohere with a universalist agenda and the venerating of sameness; and given

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<sup>21</sup> Judging by the intellectuals of the respective innateness and empiricism camps on language, as well as from personal discussions with academics, students and laypeople here in Israel and abroad. However note the inconsistency: for example, in Feminist attempts at correcting “man-made” language by making it more egalitarian (a real thorny issue, it should be noted, for Israeli Feminists trying to institute language reforms, given that Hebrew is a highly gendered language; but that is subject for another paper.) (See Khosroshahi 1989 for more on feminist adoption of a Whorfian view.) It would seem, then, that the Left does in fact make great use of the very view with which it does not wish to be associated.

<sup>22</sup> And never drastically but gradually.

<sup>23</sup> This is why the discourse of victimhood is so detrimental. When everything is blamed on an outside force, we take away people's right to free will and consequently their hope for meaningful progress and a brighter future. For a society to survive long-term, its members need to have a sense that the world is here for a purpose, not by random fluke, and that the nation by virtue of its existence has a purpose, comprised of the individual purposes of its citizens.

the disregard for history and traditional sense of “belonging,” it is clear why the Left feels more comfortable with innateness claims.

Whereas the Right would view as noble the embracing of responsibility for what comes out of our mouths, the Left seems bent on ensuring nothing unpleasant enters our ears.<sup>24</sup> Thus, university campuses in the United States (and elsewhere) are rife with “speech codes” delineating what constitutes a “microaggression,” which aim not to encourage respectful dialogue but to protect those who might possibly be offended by something someone has said and which might have simply been taken out of context. What this amounts to, is, generally, ensuring the Left has the last word, be it in politics, religion, or social affairs. As masters at rewording, the Left has deftly got hold of the marionette strings to move and shape society.<sup>25</sup>

The compromising of free speech is tragic. But it is doubly tragic when it is taking place on university campuses – what are supposed to be the freest, most inquisitive and intellectually honest places on earth. In reality, they are not free. They are fast becoming hotbeds for political activists using “speech codes” to close down arguments before they’ve even started and opening up for debate things which only a few decades ago were beyond questioning.<sup>26</sup> Facts are irrelevant, it’s now all about feelings and opinion. As DeGraff (2017) notes,

We no longer collectively possess the ideas, the range of lenses, or the apparatus to think clearly, freely and independently. The constructive conflict of classroom debate was replaced by safe spaces and trigger warnings, and with it went the courage to confront the mediocrity of second-rate ideas. Ironically, this has left us without the ability to rightly judge fact from fiction. Bloom<sup>27</sup> predicted that there would come a day when many Americans saw the truth as relative. That day is here.

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<sup>24</sup>As Dennis Prager has defined “political incorrectness,” it is “a truth that people on the left find too painful to acknowledge and therefore do not want expressed.”

<sup>25</sup>Consider Knowles’ (2018) numerous examples: “‘Global warming,’ which can be measured and challenged, has morphed into ‘climate change,’ which means essentially nothing because the climate is always changing... young criminals have become ‘justice-involved youth’... government spending becomes an ‘investment’... justice means getting what you deserve without favor. ‘Social justice’ means getting what you don’t deserve because you *are* favored.”

<sup>26</sup>Consider the bizarre comparison of communism and capitalism as two equally valid economic systems, or when Oxford University hosts a debate on who is a greater threat to the Middle East – Hamas, a declared terrorist group, or Israel.

<sup>27</sup> Professor Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind: how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students*. 1987. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Universities are supposed to be centres of education and open-mindedness. But in today's academic space, instead of educating students to assume responsibility for their speech – as well as for what they hear, however seemingly offensive – and to develop new ideas and coherent arguments (for or against), universities are safe spaces for people who, as George Will (2016) put it, “[Are] competing to see who can most flamboyantly claim to be offended...by something that someone has said or by something they have seen.”<sup>28</sup>

This padding of university students against thought, aside from doing them a tremendous disservice by not preparing them for real life, leads to moral and intellectual bankruptcy. When facts are deemed immaterial so long as the narrative fits the agenda, people with the facts constituting an inconvenient “narrative” will be reluctant at best – or at worst, afraid – to speak the truth. When there is no longer any original source just a copy (which, as Derrida would have it viz. translation, is what gives legitimacy to the original text<sup>29</sup>), we have gone as far as we can go from authenticity and one objective voice of reality to total smoke-screened subjectivity. Truth will inevitably disappear. As Bodhi (2010) notes,

Even ethics, the philosophy of moral conduct, comes to be explained away as a flowery way of expressing personal preferences. Its claim to any objective foundation is untenable, and all ethical judgments become equally valid. The ascendancy of relativism is complete.

### **7.3. The Consolidation of Words: Multiplicity Leading to Oneness as Metaphor of Oneness Yet to Come**

In his discussion of Simon's theory on hierarchicality and its application not only to biology but to language universals, which we discussed in chapter 2, Sampson (1979, 101) notes that

all sorts of social institutions... have grown from simple beginning by processes of gradual modification in which successful innovations have

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<sup>28</sup> Consider, too the Left's war on anonymity in the name of transparency. While transparency is a good thing – certainly when it concerns the government (with the obvious exception being issues relating to homeland security) – it should not be required in the personal realm – for example, demanding non-profits disclose the identity of their donors. But the Left is constantly pushing for more transparency which, in the case mentioned here, essentially amounts to bullying people out of giving donations because donors don't want their personal opinions and beliefs – as evident in the causes to which they donate – to be held against them.

<sup>29</sup> See the sections on “Translation as Metaphor,” and “Balancing Copy and Original,” below.

been retained and unsuccessful ones eliminated, and Simon shows that hierarchicality is characteristic of such institutions too, as predicted.

As I explained there, Simon's model can be represented by a branching-out tree with all its offshoots. All innovation and human development (not just linguistics) can be understood to follow such hierarchical structure. Now, however, in a weird way, we are seeing Simon's hierarchicality idea in reverse: everything is being consolidated – no offshoots, or very few offshoots, excluding some very important offshoot developments. DeGraff (2017) notes that the internet is presently in a “consolidation phase,” with “a few big players...gobbling up niche providers and creating enormous storefronts and networks.” To take retail as one example, as DeGraff (ibid.) notes,

55% of all searches for online products start with Amazon which also accounts for over half of all the retail growth on the web.<sup>30</sup> The numbers for Facebook, Netflix and Wikipedia are similar for their own domains.

Such consolidation inevitably leads to one-way thinking. As mentioned earlier, people no longer have to be exposed to differing views – not on TV, not in newspapers, and not online, where google shows them only what they're interested in. Consider this:

Google companies get over 50 billion visits each month. There are only 7.5 billion people on this planet, and only about a third of them have regular internet access. That means that every person with internet access visits Google almost every day. The search engine decides what you will find, because these visits aren't free. Some company has sponsored your trip on the web and expects the search engine to deliver you to them.

(DeGraff 2017)

Furthermore, we are losing our sense of history. In the words of Floridi (2014), we're in “the age of the zettabyte,” what is known as “big data.” We're not really recording history but rewriting it all the time and living in the present, without any historical context<sup>31</sup>:

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<sup>30</sup> One can argue that this is simply the internet version of what happened to local stores in 1950s America, which were slowly taken over by the chain stores and multinationals. However the present takeover is much more significant, given the ubiquity and accessibility of the internet.

<sup>31</sup> Quite poignant, apropos our time-binding capacity mentioned above.

“[S]ave this document” means “replace old version”, and every digital document of any kind may aspire to such an ahistorical nature. The risk is that differences are erased, alternatives amalgamated, the past constantly rewritten, and history reduced to the perennial here and now. When most of our knowledge is in the hands of this forgetful memory, we may find ourselves imprisoned in a perpetual present.

(18)

The consequence of this is a shallowness of mind, and the inability to think broadly or sequentially. This is tragic from a moral perspective because, as stated earlier, all moral existence necessitates a transcendence of the moment – an anchor in the past and an orientation toward the future. Being locked in a “perpetual present” is disastrous; not only is the *world* flat, as Thomas Friedman (2006) would have it, but the *mind* is flat as well, able to assimilate information only in a two-dimensional, one-tracked linear fashion, without understanding the depth of ideas, their historical context and spherical wholeness.

So what is the antidote to this cacophonous word-saturation and its resultant shallowness? How do we bring ourselves back from the edge of words – the constant rewriting of history, being stuck in a “perpetual present”? The Judaic perspective might give some direction.

There is a Kabbalistic concept that the greater something’s spiritual potential, the greater are its opposing forces which will try to block it from materialising. Thus, from a Judeo-historical perspective, the present cacophony<sup>32</sup> makes perfect sense: the storm before the calm.

Not only does the cacophony make sense in its incomprehensiveness, it is reason to be hopeful. We can understand this concept based on the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 680:2), which relates a story of a father and son who were journeying and the son got weary and asked his father, “where is the city?” The father answered him, “My son, this will be the sign for you: if you see a graveyard before you, know that the city is near.”<sup>33</sup> The Midrash concludes that if one sees he is surrounded with troubles (represented by the graveyard – T.F.), he should know that redemption is imminent (represented by the destination, the city – T.F.), for it says (Psalm 20:1), “The Lord

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<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the emphasis should be on *cacophony*, in the sense of fake.

<sup>33</sup> Traditionally, cemeteries were placed on the outskirts of the city.

will answer you in your times of distress [i.e. the distress indicates salvation's nearness]." In our context, the more multiplicitous truth appears to be, the closer we are to arriving at the ultimate truth.

According to Floridi (2014), once humanity mastered the ability and technology to record events, it had entered history, and once it became completely dependent on such technology for recording and transmitting information, it had entered what he calls "hyperhistory." The abundance of language – the cacophony of words, of communication, of *noise* – as well as the duplicitousness of language we are presently experiencing is a final stage, the final scream before the "still small voice" (see Kings I ch. 19). Indeed, according to the Judaic view of history, this final stage may last several centuries; but equally, it will not go on indefinitely. The language breakdown will eventually lead to a reclaiming of it.

In a sense, this "narrowing down" of options<sup>34</sup> is a metaphor of an ultimate narrowing down, a collapsing of the spiral of time and history with the coming of Divine revelation. The distinction is this: when things are narrowed down in an exclusivist fashion, humanity becomes impoverished. When things are narrowed down to *Source* – the Source that is *inclusive* of everything – we are all the richer for the authenticity and completeness of things thus guaranteed.

Yet inasmuch as humanity has drifted far from truth, this falsehood is necessary because it is the only way truth will eventually be revealed and discovered – not "discovered" in the sense of finding something new, but dis-covered: it will be instantly recognisable as having been there all along, having been merely covered over with layers of interpretation. The joy of learning something will not be the joy of new information, but that of recognising the familiar, what we have always known.

#### **7.4. Conclusion: Moving Beyond Words: The Still, Small Voice**

In this chapter we have explored the present critical juncture in history: extreme individuation and radical secularisation, on the one hand, and the counterforce of reactionary identity politics and radical fundamentalism, on the other. We have explored the Judaic spiral model of history, whereby history repeats itself and ideas are reincarnated, sparring all the while yet moving upward toward an end goal where everything will collapse into one unified whole, pivoting on one focal point of truth,

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<sup>34</sup> This metaphor is also evident in the fact that, as McWhorter (2009) notes, of the 6000 languages we have now in the world, only 600 or so will survive the next 100 years.

at which point we will see that ideas were not in contradiction, and that the seeming contradiction was in fact necessary in order for everything to move forward and ultimately cohere.

We have seen how in the Judaic cosmology toward the End of Days truth will fall as far as possible from where it should be; how, in a warped way, this multiplicity of meaning is being consolidated into an imbalanced, exclusive “oneness”; and how this consolidation serves as a precursory metaphor of an *inclusive* oneness yet to come.

Now, as we tie up the threads running throughout this work, let it be clearly stated that this dissertation has by no means been exhaustive. No topic herein has been neatly wrapped up, but that was not the intention at the outset. It is hoped, rather, that more issues have been raised than stated conclusions; that the picture emerging serves as a springboard to further exploration of each of these topics; and that with time I will have the opportunity to expand on the topics presented.

So, while I haven’t wrapped up any one topic, the upshot of my argument can be summed up in three points (the first two clearly stated; the third, more subtle):

- a. Humans are not “*linguaging animals*”; they have *no relation* to animals but are a distinct, entirely different being, *specifically* by virtue of their ability to language.
- b. The ability to language is a Divine, creative force.
- c. Language (and its study) is a means, not an end in itself.

Concerning the first point, I mentioned earlier (chapter 2) how academics and philosophers regard the human being and the human linguistic capacity as merely a step beyond (or above) the animal kingdom. Judaism departs radically from this view, and regards humans as so intrinsically different, precisely because they can language. They are not animals that just “happen” to also have a linguistic capacity; they are entirely separate, far nobler, free-willed beings by virtue of intelligent language.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The irony is that with the proliferation of manmade language – digital media – we are moving from thinking/linguaging beings to becoming irrelevant automatons. Consider the following example: now, thanks to digital reminders such as Google Calendar or various apps, we can be reminded of our spouse’s upcoming birthday and that we need to purchase a gift. We can take this a step further and sync our calendar with the florist’s, even on a regular yearly basis, as well as with our bank via stop-order or credit card, and pretty much set up the whole operation to work on its own – even (theoretically) after we die. (And the day is not too far off when we’ll be able to personally link the system to track our loved one’s browsing habits to see what kind of flowers or other gifts she likes.) On the surface, the system appears wonderfully efficient: we’ll never forget anyone’s special day ever again, and will not run the risk of getting anyone an unwanted gift. But we’re also training ourselves not to be emotionally invested or involved. What significance could an automated gift possibly have for

Concerning the second point, earlier (conclusion, chapter 2) I mentioned the idea that the innateness-vs.-empiricism issue is really a quest for the Divine. Since speech is a Divine element, we can understand why innateness and empiricism have become such opposites in linguistics.<sup>36</sup> While language has certainly developed and changed throughout the ages, the Judaic view posits that its evolution had a definite, Divine starting point after which people were united in their speech up to the Tower of Babel, after which languages branched off.<sup>37</sup>

These two points lay the groundwork for the third point. The fact that language is what makes us human and at the same time constitutes a Divine element within us explains our obsession with innateness and empiricism, with what language *is*. Searching for the transcendent is a sign of the Divine within us. Following that, the focus in our study of language should not be (solely) on what it is but rather on what it does with us, and what we ought to do with it.

The Judaic worldview holds knowledge has value insofar as it is directed toward self-improvement.<sup>38</sup> If the study of language enriches our growth and development as individuals and as a society, if it enables us to appreciate what is uniquely human about us and to contribute our knowledge to others, it is a worthwhile pursuit. If it is pursued for its own sake, or used as a way of erasing our unique contribution to each other and to the world and cementing our animalistic selves, its study does not fulfil a purpose.

Ecclesiastes (1:9) states, “Whatever has been is what will be, and whatever has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new beneath the sun”; and elsewhere (3:15), “What has been, already exists, and what is still to be, has already been.” (Nietzsche and Schopenhauer echoed the concept with their discussion of “eternal return.”) The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and linguistic nativism/universalism are not

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the recipient? The more automated things become, the less humanly meaningful *we* become. It is precisely at such times that we need to revitalise the human aspects of language and communication.

<sup>36</sup> Following an argument previously stated, if linguistic nativism is just another term for overall intelligence, then the innateness vs. empiricism issue is a hot topic vis-à-vis overall intelligence.

<sup>37</sup> Incidentally, this would offer a Judaic explanation of language universals. For a not mutually exclusive, non-religious and non-nativist account of language universals, see Sampson (1979) (Note as well that, as I mentioned earlier, according to some commentaries, people did speak different languages prior to the Tower of Babel, but they had one common language as well – *Lashon HaKodesh* – which they all spoke, and were thus able to understand each other. After the separation, they lost that unifying force of language.)

<sup>38</sup> While there is certainly value in learning for the sake of learning, even if not *lishma* (“for the sake of Heaven”), the assumption is that *mitokh shelo lishma ba lishma* – though one may initially begin learning solely for learning’s own sake, one will eventually come to accrue wisdom for a higher purpose.

new, but modern-day reincarnations of ancient ideas which should be revisited – not only in light of new evidence but in light of where we are holding at present in our critical historic juncture.

As we wrap up our exploration of what the Judeo-philosophical take on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has to inform us, it seems appropriate to address the six questions DeGraff (2017) states we should ask ourselves when examining a novel idea: 1) Where have we seen an idea like this before? 2) When has this idea been tested? 3) How will this idea actually work? 4) Who is proposing this idea? 5) Why are they trying to advance this idea? 6) What are some alternatives to this idea?

The idea of human beings having a Divine element, made manifest specifically in language, is as old as the first chapter in Genesis<sup>39</sup>; and it has carried through in the Judaic ethos till today: man is inherently good given his God-centred potential, and has the capacity to rise above his animalistic limitations and achieve greatness of spirit. This idea has been tested and valiantly demonstrated throughout history, in every generation, with people transcending the confines of human shortcomings – be it in rising above their physical limitations (mountain climbers, athletes, even more so paralympic athletes) or the limitations of intellect (gifted artists and musicians; Nobel prize winners). And then of course there is the nobler transcendence – that of altruistic action taken out of a consciousness of a Higher Self, even when intuitively, rationally, one should have chosen otherwise (people who risk their lives to save others); or people giving up neither hope nor humanity, even under extreme duress (prisoners of conscience, prisoners of war).

These examples point toward a higher purpose of being; that man was not meant to remain static and leave the world as he found it but to better himself and the world around him – to rise above the instinctual, and *that* is what makes him Divine. The human limitations were instituted specifically for the purpose of transcendence.

As to DeGraff's third question of how these ideas will work, they don't actually have to do anything, just percolate in the minds of those willing to contemplate the possibility that we are more than the earthy baggage we carry; to think about what our lives and our world would look like if we were to entertain the notion of a Divine-inspired language capacity (and, in the case of Hebrew, a Divine-inspired language, or an objective – though not-yet-revealed – truth). To address DeGraff's fourth and fifth

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<sup>39</sup> And as we saw in chapter 3, this idea has a rich philosophical tradition.

questions, these ideas are being advanced from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, out of an interest in language and what it does to us – individually, nationally and globally – and because the Judeo-philosophical perspective might have what to offer, for Jews and non-Jews alike. I begin, then, with the application of these ideas to the Jewish people, followed by broader application to Jews and non-Jews alike. I do so bearing in mind Schiller’s advice from one of his letters: “Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise” (Bloom, et al. 1960, 84).

#### **7.4.1. Application to the Jewish people**

For the Jewish people, the ideas presented herein may serve as a wake-up call: any universalism Jews wish to espouse must be underpinned by Jewish particularism.<sup>40</sup> The Jews, being the people who gave the world ethical monotheism; who have stood outside of history and the natural laws of the decline of civilizations; whose particularism has not only kept them alive and distinct but has underpinned a universal moral truth; whose Holy Tongue has been revived successfully in a matter of decades, bottom-up, and by the sheer stubbornness of one secular-oriented Eliezer Ben-Yehuda; who live out, daily, the tension between the sacred and the secular, made manifest in their language and national existence; who have yearned – individually and collectively – to return to their national homeland for 2000 years of exile, who have done so thinking that doing so as an irreligious political entity would solve all their problems but are seeing, painfully, that it hasn’t – that their political existence in said homeland has neither solved the problem of anti-Semitism nor of identity or religious self-determination; whose right to exist in said homeland is constantly questioned by political leaders and intellectual figures around the world (Jews among them), the (partial) result of which is that we are rife with divisiveness within the State of Israel and in the world at large – such a people cannot afford to ignore what language does to it. All of this should tell us something about who we are, what the laws of history have to say for us and that this uniqueness does not single us out but for the purpose of obligating us.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> To extend this idea more broadly, all virtue deemed necessary in the public sphere must first begin in the private sphere.

<sup>41</sup> This is why the Jewish Left (around the world, and especially in Israel) is such a confounding phenomenon. Extreme Left-oriented universalism gives us reason for concern, surely; but doubly so when it is promulgated by Jews and/or the secular State of Israel, because of all people Jews should understand why particularism must underpin universalism. Especially now, with such extreme brands

The verse in Isaiah (51:16) states, “I have put My words in your mouth and sheltered you with My hand; I, who planted the skies and made firm the earth, have said to Zion: You are My people.” Commentators on this verse (notably Metzudat David [ad loc.]) explain it to mean that God has sheltered the Jewish people with His hand throughout exile, *because* of the “words” put into their mouths – namely, the Torah; in the merit of those “words” they will survive exile, till the time comes to “plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth” – namely, to re-establish the Jewish people in their homeland.

Even if we were to claim that the Hebrew language was not really “revived” since it was never really “dead,” we would have to ask ourselves *why* – namely, how the language has survived for millennia. If we and our language have survived, it is only because of the “words” loyally held in our mouths throughout the ages that God has committed to re-establish those words – the language – in our mouths. The revival of the language, spoken today by over eight million people, would not have been possible were it not for those Jews who, throughout the ages, remained authentic to Source and steadfast in their commitment to Judaism and its sacred texts. Given that we are nearing the end of the sixth millennium, the time identified in our tradition as the Dawn of Redemption, the time is apt to re-examine the “treasure trove” abandoned by so many Jews in the hopes that a political, universalist existence, with a (secular) homeland-based peoplehood, would solve all their problems. We, of all people, are simply not in a position to disregard the force of language in our lives.

As we have become painfully aware, a secular existence hasn’t solved “the Jewish problem.” At the same time, one cannot conclude from this that the return to the homeland and revival of Hebrew was a mistake; *de facto*, both happened and both *exist*, and in the Judaic cosmology everything happens for a reason. Far be it from us to claim to know the Divine intention behind our national and linguistic revival. Claiming such knowledge merely reduces the Divine to understandable human terms, and is more an indication of an inflated national ego than of comprehension of the Divine. The question should be, simply, what do we do now? I digress here to explore the metaphor of translation, by way of offering one possible answer to that question.

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of identity emerging around the world in reaction to radical non-identity, the Jew must offer the world the idea of a particularistic basis that is not in contradiction to but in fact serves a universalistic order.

#### 7.4.1.1. *Translation as metaphor: the Jew's hanging in the balance*

Benjamin (1997, 62) said that

Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language... [It] means the tendency inherent in the subjects concerned – technology, art, justice, or religion – toward the communication of the contents of the mind. To sum up: all communication of the contents of the mind is language, communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of the justice, poetry or whatever underlying it or founded on it.

In light of the above, and in light of the fact that all acts of communication are essentially acts of interpretation, anything “communicated” is at a certain remove from the original, and thus runs the risk of minimising the original mental or metaphysical concept by reducing it to mere words/depictions. Sometimes, with enormous talent and inspiration, words (or artistic expression such as a painting or a piece of music) can bridge the gap between the original concept and the conveyed product used to describe it, while capturing the enormous distance between them; more often, however, words (or other forms of expression) fall short. True perfection can only be attained when there is total harmony between a thing's essence and its name.<sup>42</sup>

And so there is a constant paradox: on the one hand, without words no concept could exist; it would be completely, well, “conceptual” and not “real” in any practical, understandable sense. Yet at the same time words confine the true dimension of any given concept.

In my profession as a translator, I and my colleagues are perpetually troubled by a certain question – if not philosophically then practically – which relates to our discussion, and that is whether translations can and should be faithful to the original at the expense of the text's appeal in the target language, or rather be beautiful in the

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<sup>42</sup> Incidentally, the Talmud (Tractate Nedarim 66b) tells of a woman named Lakhlukhit, literally “an unsightly woman,” who was indeed an unsightly woman. The Talmud concludes that this was her beauty – that her name matched what she was. In other words, that which reflects its essence is the ultimate truth and therefore perfect. In this sense, beauty is in the eye of the beholder insofar as the beholder is able to uncover layers to get to the truth. On a cosmic scale, we have not yet arrived at such time. Only with Revelation will “God and His Name be One” (Zachariah 14:9).

target language at the expense of authenticity to the source text.<sup>43</sup> If, as we have stated, all communication/language is interpretation, then the act of translation or interpretation necessarily entails a paradox: since languages (and media for their transmission) differ, a translation that is faithful to the original can never be pretty in the target language, and conversely if beautiful in the target language it necessarily is a compromise of the original – what Pedro (1999) refers to as “*les belles infidels*.”

Beyond the ramifications of such discussion as regards translation, this question symbolises an existential paradox of the Jewish people. On the one hand, Judaism mandates that the Jews remain apart – “a people that dwells alone,” faithful to their unique laws which are not to be imposed upon others; on the other, they are enjoined to be “a light unto the nations,” and through exile have been scattered all over the globe to make their mark.

Where does the Jew find himself – as a particularist or universalist? Is the task of the Jew, like the translator – a “translator” of God’s ethos – to render the translated text beautiful, a work in itself? Or is the task of the Jew, like the translator, to be faithful to the original, at the risk of being ugly or cumbersome to the world and getting “lost in translation”?

The question, as in translation, is this: can Jews be “pretty” to the world, at the price of authenticity to themselves, or should they be authentic to themselves at the risk of being ugly to the world?

For much of history, the Jew didn’t have to answer that question. The nations of the world answered it for him, reminding him, always, of his position in society – sometimes better, sometimes worse, sometimes horrifically; but always, he was different. However with the Enlightenment and emancipation, as Jews were suddenly able to leave the ghetto, the question became relevant and Jews grappled with questions of identity: are we to remain our own people or are we to integrate and become part of the world at large? *Can* we ever be, given our history – and *should* we be? Or, in terms of the translation metaphor, can the Jew be both comprehensible, perhaps even beautiful, to the world, while at the same time remaining authentic to Source? The latter necessarily means he will be regarded as “other” by the world; the

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<sup>43</sup> Which is why, ultimately, translation is not only a science but an art – and why, as I stated earlier (conclusion to chapter 1), as sophisticated as machine-translation gets, it will never replace human translation.

former requires some degree of sameness: is he meant to sacrifice his particularism for the sake of universalism?

I digress here to explain a Jewish law concerning kosher fish, whose underlying hermeneutic understanding provides an answer. In Jewish law, there are two signs of a kosher fish: fins and scales (see Leviticus 11:12). The Talmud (Tractate Hulin 66b) states that any fish that has scales, has fins [though they may have shed at some point – T.F.], whereas a fish with fins does not necessarily have scales and would therefore be inedible to a Jew. The Talmud asks, since we know that any fish with scales necessarily has fins, why was it necessary to state both signs? Would it not have been sufficient to just state that scales are necessary? How does this square with the dictum that the Torah does not include any superfluity? The Talmud concludes with a puzzling statement by R' Avahu, and in the name of the School of R' Yishmael, quoting a verse from Isaiah (60:21), that the purpose was so that “the Torah be made great and glorious.”

Many explanations are given for this seemingly cryptic statement (how *do* the kosher signs of the fish glorify the Torah?). One allegorical understanding, given by Jacobson (2011) is that the two signs represent two concurring (and at times, warring) traits of the Jew, who has to strike a balance between his particularism and his universalism.

Fins are what enable fish to swim, what propels them forward. Scales, on the other hand, resemble protective armour. The message inherent in *both* kosher signs being given, even though the Talmud says that it would have been sufficient to state just scales because any fish with scales necessarily has fins, is that scales – the protective shield – is a prerequisite to fins. In other words, Jews first need to be concerned with safeguarding their Jewishness (represented by scales), and then they can propel themselves and humanity forward (represented by fins). When Jews are authentic to Source, they can then “translate” beautifully to the world. But to attempt to translate beautifully to the world without having a proper understanding of the original will never move the Jews forward; they will remain fin-less, static – or worse, get swept by the current. Although they will appear to be moving forward, making “progress,” as it were, they are really simply being pulled by the universalist tide.

A poignant example of this is found in Genesis (32:25), which relates how after passing the Jabbok River, “Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him.” If there was another person there, wrestling with him, clearly he wasn’t alone. Why then

does the verse state that he remained “alone”? One possible explanation, given by Jacobson (2011), is that Jacob was indeed alone, and was wrestling *within himself*. His whole life he had been trailing his older brother Esau, even from the moment they were born, holding onto his brother’s heel (and hence the name Jacob, from the Hebrew root for “heel” and “he will follow”). Jacob spent his life trying to be like Esau, eventually buying his birth-right. Now, on the eve of the fateful encounter with Esau, who was seeking revenge, Jacob struggled within himself trying to free himself from his own image.

Whereupon Esau’s archangel – the man with whom Jacob had wrestled, according to the Midrash (see Bereishit Rabbah 77:3; Tanhuma 8) – changes his name from Jacob to Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל), whose letters form the words *li rosh* (לִי רֹאשׁ), meaning “I have a head,” or “the head/the lead belongs to me.” Jacob is no longer defined as being at the heel of his brother, but as having his own head, his own Self.<sup>44</sup> When Jacob is sure of who he is, Esau (representative of the nations of the world) has no issue with him (and hence in the encounter right after Jacob’s battle with the angel, Esau embraces him in brotherly love); when Jacob flounders with his identity, the world comes to despise him.

When Jews know who they are, and are proud of their heritage, the nations of the world come to respect them. When Jews are receptive to the force of their language, the abyss and volcano need not catch them off guard. With scales in place, their fins can propel them forward. But when they try to be like the surrounding nations, the nations of the world find it disconcerting. It is not the nations of the world who want the Jews to be like them, it is the Jews themselves who think they can outsmart their destiny by being like everyone else. And when that happens, along comes history – which stands distinct from them just as they do from it – to knock them into place.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Note, as well, that the angel changed his name on the grounds of *ki sarita im Elokim ve'im anashim vatukhal* – “you have grappled with the Divine and with man and have overcome.” Why, then, was his name based on *sarita*, “you have fought” (from the word *sar*, master), rather than a name based on *vatukhal* – “and you have overcome”? Is not the triumph more significant than the struggle?

The message was that Jacob would always struggle for his identity – and would rise again. It was not the ability to triumph which characterised Jacob, but the ability to rise up again and again. That is indeed why the Jewish people have always been known by the name “Israel” (the Land of Israel, the Children of Israel, etc.). It is this characteristic of wrestling – *sarita* – within themselves, and for their identity within the family of nations that would accompany them throughout history.

<sup>45</sup> This is indeed why the revival of the Hebrew language and the founding of the State of Israel are completely bizarre given their secularized, political nature. (Equally bizarre is the State’s survival against all odds, despite enemies – from without and from within – calling for its destruction.) The Jews appear to finally have “made it” in the world – a national homeland, a revived ancient language spoken by its eight million citizens and taught in hundreds of Jewish schools worldwide. And yet, they

A Jew who would put his political existence before his religious existence, who would throw his history in the Dumpster in the name of diversity and so-called universalism, has little hope of remaining Jewish long term. His political, “cultural” or economic success is just another false prophet. “Just as chauvinism – excessive and amoral nationalism – can lead to nihilism, so, too, the absence of any national or religious identity can lead to nihilism” (D. Prager 2007). Or, in the words of Gross (2012, 11, translation mine),

A society that has lost its meaning of life is fraught with the grave danger of creating totalitarian regimes that seek to impose organic cohesion modelled after religion. To counter this [trend], it is important to understand the underlying reasons for this crisis and the need of every society to set up boundaries<sup>46</sup> that will give meaning to its existence – a meaning with which the individual could identify.

“Just as a face finds its reflection in water, so does the heart find its reflection in another” (Proverbs 27:19). It is only through recognising ourselves and knowing who we are that we can begin to recognise the other.<sup>47</sup> This necessarily means recognising clear boundaries where “I” end and “thou” begins. Once people recognise their own being and formulate their identity, they can begin to recognise others’ being and identity. As Kodish (1998, 137) notes,

As we look for agreement, we do well to remember to give up the search for complete agreement. However, let us seek what agreement we can by uncovering and clarifying our own values and helping others to uncover and clarify theirs.

We must first know ourselves and what we value; only *then* can we begin to assess where we agree or disagree with another, and how these differences might be mutually beneficial.

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haven’t really “made it”: It is one of the most hated countries, constantly being judged by double standards and targeted by one UN resolution after another (38% of UN Human Rights Council resolutions have been directed at Israel). In fact, since the founding of the state in 1948, more Jews have been killed in Israeli wars and terrorist attacks than in all anti-Semitic attacks worldwide combined during this same time period. As to those who claim that although that is true, Israel is still, however, preventing a holocaust from happening again, are there any guarantees? Iran doesn’t seem to think so.

<sup>46</sup>From Gross’ context, “boundaries” is meant in the social and moral sense, not necessarily the physical sense, though inevitably that would correlate or follow therefrom.

<sup>47</sup>Indeed, this is the basis for the commandment to love your fellow as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). One must first love himself, in order to be able to love another.

#### 7.4.1.2. *Balancing copy and original*

On the one hand, the act of translation expands the language, giving it an “afterlife” (Benjamin 2002). It is also necessary, in Rosenzweig’s view, for promoting understanding and brotherhood since wholeness cannot be achieved in any one language on its own. On the other hand, translation “secularises” in the sense that it deviates from the original and anything but the original is necessarily inauthentic to some degree.

The question is, are Jews meant to leave the original in the original, requiring those who don’t know it to come closer to it, or do we “translate” the original and “bring it down” to the masses regardless of the fact that we will lose some of its authenticity? In the context of the Judaic worldview and a universalistic moral order, would the ideal be, then, to leave the original “up there” and have people reach toward it or to “bring it down” to the people, necessarily diluted?

The question concerns the relationship between secular and religious Jews, as well as between the Jewish community and the world at large. It also concerns not only the Judaic universalistic moral order, but the very Hebrew language. The act of translation alerts us to the fact that the original and its copy are never the same. This is particularly true of sacred works in *Lashon HaKodesh*, or works in the Hebrew based thereupon, wherein the multi-layered textuality is not readily visible or accessible. As bearers of the Holy Tongue, Jews are caught in the middle: To remain true to Source and not to translate it would leave the Divine where the Divine is (and should be), untarnished by our limited human comprehension and bungled translations; to reveal the Divine is to risk profaning it, for no “copy” or expression of the Divine is the Divine itself. How does the Jew reconcile this, if his mandate is to be “a light unto the nations?”

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, leader of the religious Zionists and Chief Rabbi of pre-state Eretz Yisrael, maintained that for his generation, it would be necessary to “translate” things and bring them down to the people. Translation, an “opening up” of the language, would enable more people to have access to the “ancient treasure trove.”<sup>48</sup> This would necessarily lead to some mistranslation, and subsequent alienation from the authentic Source.

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<sup>48</sup> I speculate that perhaps this is what Rabbi Kook had in mind when he authored *Reish Milin*, his esoteric Kabbalistic work published during his sojourn in London in 1917, on the Hebrew alphabet,

It is not coincidental, then, that the Hebrew word for translation, *targum*, is the same numerical value as – and thus conceptually linked with – the Hebrew word for slumber or hibernation, *tardema*. Translation represents a “dormant” communication – not the real thing, but the real thing veiled, masked. On the one hand, it does reveal the original which would otherwise not be revealed. On the other, it is a cloak of the original and can never take its place. But just as slumber enables the unconscious to come to the fore,<sup>49</sup> so, too, translation enables that which is unknown because it is in a different language, to come to the fore.<sup>50</sup> The very concept of slumber makes us conscious of the unconscious; the very act of translation – if it is a good one – makes us conscious of the distance or closeness between the translation and the original.

Thus, in cases where people are already “bringing down” language (literally and figuratively), according to Chief Rabbi Kook it would seem to prove more beneficial if we do so knowingly and with thought, not randomly, to ensure the meaning of the message is kept as close as possible to its truth-source.<sup>51</sup>

That is indeed a very delicate balance. It requires that the “translation,” which will necessarily be imperfect, entail a “revelation” of how much more the original is and what was lost in translation. It would also require being aware of the danger inherent when the translation is turned into the original (as Derrida claims can and should and does happen, there being no longer any “original”). When we take the copy as the original itself rather than as the representation of the original which affirms the *distance* between the original and the copy, when the author is presumed “dead” for purposes of interpretation, the consequences are grave.<sup>52</sup>

Concerning specifically the translation of the Torah, Kaplan (1985, v) notes that

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diacritics, cantillations and letter-crowns (referred to earlier; see pp. 206-207). Purportedly Rabbi Kook’s son objected to the work’s publication, on grounds that the generation was not equipped to comprehend it.

Note that although *Reish Milin* deals directly with many of the concepts central to the theme of this work, I have not made direct reference to it since it is a cryptic work, known to be one of the most difficult of Rabbi Kook’s works, virtually impossible to understand without a thorough background and understanding in Kabbalah.

<sup>49</sup> See footnote 9 above.

<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this explains the Midrash (Pesikda Zutreta, Bereishit 41; Yalkut Shimoni Bereishit 41, §148) that says that just before Joseph stood before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams – the unconscious coming to the fore in sleep – he was taught the seventy languages by the angel Gabriel.

<sup>51</sup> This aligns with his view of merging church and state, thereby sanctifying political existence to a higher purpose and justifying secularisation as the unfortunate but necessary – and temporary – means to the nobler end of a religiously based political existence.

<sup>52</sup> We can now better understand the initial prohibition of writing down the Oral Torah, lest it fall into unskilled hands and become the original. While we need the “interpretation” to understand the original, if people just take the translation in and of itself, without going back to the Source, the end product is inauthentic.

From the beginning, the translator knows that most of [the significance and depth of the words] will be lost in translation. Yet, at the same time, the translator has the responsibility to preserve as much of the Torah's depth and meaning as humanly possible.<sup>53</sup>

This is no simple task. As the Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin 49a; Tosefta Megillah 3:21) states, "One who translates a verse literally is misrepresenting the text. But one who adds anything of his own is a blasphemer."

This highlights the Jews' existential challenge of translating the word of God. They can either be faithful to the source or pretty; the ability to be both simultaneously requires outstanding skill, and ultimately would require a revelation of God, to enable people to see that the original – and therefore being faithful to the original – is beautiful in itself.

Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 81) notes that

One of the most profound aspects of our exile is the discarding of Hebrew by those who should have known better. When certain communities decided to learn and pray in translation, they virtually sealed their fate.... When the decision was taken to change to a translation for the purpose of making Judaism accessible, within that action lay two consequences: it became accessible, but it was no longer Judaism....<sup>54</sup>

We can now understand Gross' (2004, 164, translation mine) assertion that "All translation constitutes a messianic act that brings redemption nearer." All speech is, in effect, interpretation – representing objects or concepts in a particular way to the exclusion of others. Thus, all speech is at a remove from what it really should be. But the more removed something is from the original, the more potential there is for the distance to be made knowable and the more man can understand just what that original is – or, at least, how far we are from it, namely, what has been lost.

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<sup>53</sup> Kaplan notes, further, the imperative of translating the wholeness of the Torah – the Oral Torah and the Written Torah being inseparable. Traditional translations (e.g., the King James Version), not being based on Jewish sources, divide between the Written and the Oral thus rendering many expressions literally (the classic example being "an eye for an eye" (Leviticus 24:20) which, as I explained in the previous chapter, the Talmud explains is not meant literally.

<sup>54</sup> Note Tatz's caveat (ibid.): "I am not talking about translation as *explanation*, as a medium of commentary alongside the original; that is fine, even necessary. I am talking about *exchanging* the original for a translation; when you do that you lose what you are trying to translate."

We can now also understand the statement of the Talmud (Tractate Megillah 16a) that “One who correctly attributes a saying to the one who said it brings redemption to the world.” By quoting something in the original, or at least linking it back to its source, it grounds it in authenticity, bringing it – and its hearers – that much closer to the focal point of truth.

If, as we have stated, language influences thought, and if, as we have stated, language and culture are intimately bound, then Jews, as speakers of the language of the Bible – the original language that gave the world ethical monotheism – have a responsibility toward humanity: to share not only the wisdom given by means of that language, but *the wisdom inherent in the very language itself*.

The study of the Aleph-Beis [Hebrew alphabet] can serve as our inspiration to return to the roots of our mission on earth. We were created with primal forces of sanctity and we are called upon to preserve them in their pure form. We fall short, as people always do, but we dare not give up the struggle...

(Munk 2003, 30)

And internally, in speaking a language that is not only designative *and* constitutive, *Lashon HaKodesh* speakers live with a constant actualisation of the transcendent. Let us at least begin with informing secular Jews about the rich heritage of their language – not the corrupted, modern-day Hebrew but its origins – the “treasure trove” (as Scholem put it) from long ago; to unearth the Divine roots of language and what this means (or should) mean; to foster an identity that is at peace with the internal truths that have kept the Jewish people alive till this day, and can truly be a light unto the nations.

That is not easy. It requires a core sense of identity and at the same time a core sense of humility; or, put differently, a sense of universalism and at the same time, a sense of inescapable particularism.

While the general trend is to blur the boundaries between nations and states, the State of Israel struggles desperately to establish secure and recognised borders. In order to ensure its continued existence... the substance of its cultural autonomy must be defined. As Rabbi Kook recognised long before the establishment of the State of Israel, that will depend to a large extent on the relationship that will be created between the political and the religious.

(Gross 2012, 21, translation mine)

Peter Sokolowski, editor at Merriam-Webster, once said that “A definition can be the beginning of reflection.” Israel is rife with issues of separation between church and state. Regardless of where one stands on the issue – that separation between church and state is better for religion and better for the state, or, as the religious Zionists would have it, that the two should be merged for the sake of religion *and* the State – one thing is clear: Israel must first have a clear understanding of *what its religious basis is* before it can begin to negotiate its political relationship with it. Thorough knowledge of their language – the language itself, and how it has been revived (or has survived) would be a good starting point. It *is* possible to avoid the abyss and the volcano, by waking up to language naturally, gradually, before the abyss opens up or the volcano erupts.

#### **7.4.2. Application to the world at large**

To the world at large, the Judaic perspective has a different view to offer of language, history, identity and truth as a not-yet-revealed reality. The first step would be to be aware of how our language does, in fact, impact on our thoughts, and that it is never arbitrary. Concomitantly, the fact that what has been uttered may take on a life of its own (and possibly be far removed from that which was originally intended) cannot be understood as being synonymous with it being “arbitrary” or as the speaker/author not being accountable for what he has produced (Barth’s “death of the author,” or Derrida’s concept of there being no original). Language is not only a tool for human use; it uses us as its tools.

Secondly, it is only by noting the differences between languages and cultures that we can come to truly appreciate our and others’ uniqueness, making for a synergistic rather than a merely tolerant coexistence. As Fishman (1982, 7) put Herder’s universalism and concurrent particularism,

Within any authentic tradition...the authentic language... constitute[es] the very center on which all else depended. Furthermore, the rewards of fidelity to language and way of life...[are] available not only to the community in which these originated but to all of mankind. For Herder, and for genuine pluralists since Herder, the great creative forces that inspire all humanity do not emerge out of universal civilization but out of the individuality of separate ethnic collectivities – most particularly,

out of their very own authentic languages. Only if each collectivity contributes its own thread to the tapestry of world history, and only if each is accepted and respected for making its own contribution, can nationalities finally also be ruled by a sense of reciprocity, learning and benefiting from each other's contributions as well.<sup>55</sup>

Thirdly, and in even broader terms, in the Romanticist view, language connect[s] us to the deep nature of the cosmos. Either you see reality as made up of signs, waiting to be properly read; or you think of the world as modelled on the words of the Torah (Kabbalah). In either case, you see the world as the realization of a Plan; to grasp the Plan is to see the interconnections, how things relate to each other. To see this is to connect to the cosmos, and this in turn empowers us...

(Taylor 2016, 343-344)

Whorf (1956, 26) said that "Linguistics is essentially the quest for meaning" Whorf further said that "Meaning will be found to be intimately connected with the linguistic: its principle is symbolism, but language is the great symbolism from which other symbolisms take their cue" (42). What language essentially means, then, is that human beings have the ability to comprehend that what they see before them is only a minimal picture of what really *is* (and certainly of what can be). Language is proof of the unknown. It is not only the vehicle through which the discussion of metaphysics can take place but *the very proof* of metaphysics.

Bodhi (2010) notes that in the wake of the Enlightenment,

Once sense perception was hailed as the key to knowledge and quantification came to be regarded as the criterion of actuality, the logical next step was to suspend entirely the belief in a supernatural order and all it implied. Hence finally an uncompromising version of mechanistic materialism prevailed, whose axioms became the pillars of the new world view. Matter is now the only ultimate reality, and divine principle of any sort dismissed as sheer imagination.

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<sup>55</sup>Note Fishman's (1982, 9) further remarks: "Like Herder, [Whorf] believes that the world's little languages and peoples are a treasure trove of wisdom and refinement. Only if this human treasure is valued and shared can biases be set aside and a genuine (rather than a self-serving imperialistic) universal perspective be attained."

Perhaps Whorf's ideas are ridiculed or dismissed out of hand because the world is inconvenienced by the idea that we wield power over language and fears the idea of what language can do to us. Equally, perhaps the revival of Hebrew is downplayed, ignored or goes unheard of for the same reasons that ethical monotheism has been downplayed, ignored, or hated so for millennia (as we saw in chapter 6). For some, the (re)birth of the modern State of Israel and the uncanny revival of the Hebrew language is a glaring theological enigma.<sup>56</sup> It certainly would be more convenient to ignore it. But perhaps the revival has a universalistic purpose?

The verse (Deuteronomy 1:5) states that shortly before Moses' death, just prior to the Jewish people entering the Promised Land, he explained the whole Torah to them. Rashi (ad loc.) quotes the Midrash (Tanhuma, 2) which says that Moses translated it into seventy languages. This begs the question: why? If the Jewish people all spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*, and the Torah had been given to them in *Lashon HaKodesh*, why did Moses have to explain it to them in every other language?

As mentioned earlier, "seventy languages" parallel "seventy nations," representing all the languages and peoples of the world. Commentators (notably Rabbi Moshe Alshich [ad loc.] and Rabbi Barukh Epstein in his monograph *Safa LeNe'emanim*) note that Moses did so to convey the idea of the Torah's universal principles. Non-Jews are not bound by its specific laws, but its universalistic moral order is equally applicable. The Jewish people would have to realise that their particularism cannot be self-serving but must serve a higher purpose – as the basis of a universalistic moral order – and that is why Moses translated it.

Going back to DeGraff's (2017) last question to be asked in assessing the merits on an idea, there *are* alternatives to the ideas presented herein, obviously, but they are static and present-focused. I do not expound on these ideas, because a) they are not in the realm of my study and b) (perhaps the reason for a) they are currently widespread enough in academia that doing so would not contribute anything new to the discussion. The ideas presented herein allow for a view of the human being as more than simply an animal + language and that our ability to language is *precisely* that which makes us Divine. But with this Divine element within each of us comes

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<sup>56</sup>This is true for many Jews as well, even secular ones. Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (in Greenberg and Yedidya [2016]) notes that one of the results of the establishment of the modern State of Israel is that it forced unaffiliated Jews around the world to contend with questions of identity. With Israel being singled out in the media (for better or, more likely, for worse), Jews around the world could no longer ignore their Jewish roots and sense of peoplehood. Whatever issues come up in the State of Israel, Diaspora Jews are held as its affiliates.

responsibility – and specifically in language, to use it to better the world, change ourselves and chart the course of history.

Thus, I would add one other question to DeGraff’s questions posed above, and that is, where does the idea lead us in terms of bettering ourselves and the world? On the view that for the proper governing of society it is necessary to first have a proper governing of self, the question of whether language is innate, unlearned, unstructured, primal or instinctual is, essentially, past-oriented. If the question is to have any benefit, it ought to be a future-oriented one: knowing what we know, what do we do with language now? How do we use it – and its study – to make the world a better place?

The Judaic view posits that nothing happens in a vacuum; every phenomenon takes place within the context of its time, space and role in history. As such, if Chomsky’s ideas have taken such hold, and yet now Whorf’s ideas are making a comeback, it has got to tell us *something*.

In the 1980s, Fishman wrote that

the rise (or return) during the past decade of ethnography, holism, linguistics of intent, and anthropology of meaning has resulted in a new view of Whorf’s work and in new hope among those who are intuitively or philosophically ‘attuned’ to him, not to mention those few who stood by him during the long dry spell from the 1950s through the late 1970s.

(1982, 4)

Three decades later, his words are all the more true. And this is only natural, as a sort of backlash to post-identarian sentiments<sup>57</sup> (which in themselves are reactions to so-called ethnocentrism, apropos our discussion of the spiral of ideas through time). If only Whorf could hear the debates generated by the work he left behind, surely he would be turning over in his grave – with glee. As Cameron (1999, 156) has noted more recently,

Orthodox linguists believe that Whorf got it wrong. It is possible they are right. But that will not make his Big Idea go away. Whorf raised a

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<sup>57</sup> As Bernard Poignant, mayor of Quimper, France, put it in reference to the recent surge in Breton pride and revival of the language, “The more everything goes global, the more people will hang on to what is local. It’s an animal reflex, to seek out what is closest to you and most stable.” (<https://www.csmonitor.com/2000/0523/p8s1.html>).

question which resonated, and still resonates, with significant contemporary concerns. For that contribution to our cultural conversation it seems likely he will be remembered, long after most of his critics have been forgotten.

The revival (or refusal to die) of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its interface with innateness and empiricism as well as with particularism and universalism at this point in time, not long after the revival of the Hebrew language, comes as no coincidence.

The Judaic approach to language and its interface with communication, history and individual and collective identity, which I have tried to sketch, might offer a counterbalance to language in the grips of postmodernism and the void left by post-identarian radical secularism – which, as I have said earlier, we are seeing is rapidly filling with *über*-identities and religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism dichotomises, while secularism equalises; neither has any regard for uniqueness, individually or collectively. Fundamentalists believe they are right and everyone else is wrong and therefore has no place (or even a right to exist). Secularists maintain that *no* one is right or can ever be right, and therefore no one is wrong. If truth is what we make it, we deify ourselves to the exclusion of others. If truth is remote, residing solely with a vengeful God, it is never attainable (and worse still, evil is legitimised in said God’s name). What is needed, then, when societies are committing the most heinous atrocities “in the name of God” (or losing the will to live, on the grounds that there is no God), is the sane, full force reaction to fill the void not with secularism but with a normative theism.

On the Judaic view, there is in fact an objective truth that stands outside of us, with an absolute God alone, *but which is not yet revealed*. Everything has its place – though we will only see how so in future times, with the implementation of a *safa berura*, a “pure speech” that is not open to misinterpretation. In speaking a language that houses far more than the revealed – a language which is the original but which has strayed so far from it and yet paradoxically has been successfully revived – the Jew embodies and brings to the world the idea of there being more than meets the eye; that the metaphysical is just as real as – if not more than – the physical.

#### ***7.4.2.1. Silence as a counterforce to the postmodern cacophony***

To bring this somewhat esoteric discussion down to practical terms, I turn now to a possible means of balancing out the raging cacophony of our times. Although in the

Judaic view one should not seek to impose the End of Days artificially – and *definitely* not with force – one need not wait for the still, small voice of Divine revelation to calm the noise: we can begin to lay the groundwork for it within ourselves, by cultivating silence.

By “silence” I do not mean the type that suppresses but the type that illumines by allowing space and time for contemplating the full meaning of things rather than the mere fragments represented in words. The Midrash (Sifra, Vayikra 1:9) states that the reason breaks were inserted between paragraphs of the Torah was to give Moses “space” to process the information he had received. When there is so much information being transmitted, the only way to handle it and not get swallowed in the process is to take a step back into the realm of silence, the blank space.

This “stepping back” requires not a zoning out but a tuning in – a *super-consciousness* of things fostered by delving into them – to combat the nihilistic escapism drowning out our thoughts with noise. (Perhaps this is why silence makes most people uncomfortable – the “awkward silence.”<sup>58</sup>) Earlier I mentioned how we don’t often speak of speech; about silence, we speak even less. And one can understand why: As Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 260) puts the question, “if it is beyond words, how do you teach it?”<sup>59</sup> And yet, it should be thought of, taught and exercised, because

In Torah thinking, silence is an essential exercise for developing inner knowledge. We aim to enter the area of inner knowledge and to *stay there*, that is, to come down into life and its daily activities with that level of pure consciousness intact and functioning. The mode that trains this faculty is silence.

(ibid.)

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<sup>58</sup> On the flipside, one way to gauge whether a relationship has reached a certain level of maturity is if the two parties feel comfortable not only to speak with each other but to be in each other’s presence in mutual silence.

<sup>59</sup> Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 260-261) notes that “The Talmud says that the master may give the disciple only general guidance in this zone, he may not teach its details. The correct understanding of this warning is not simply that there is a prohibition in teaching the esoteric wisdom of Torah explicitly (although that may be true, too); the depth is that the master may not say these things because he *cannot* – this is the area beyond words, and any words said here could only be false.” In a statement somewhat reminiscent of Scholem’s abyss, Tatz notes, “The master must ‘push the disciple over the edge’; when he ‘falls in’ he will understand. The mystics say that when you learn something spiritually true, you do not have a sense of learning that thing, you have a sense of *recognizing* it” (ibid.)

Silence is not just about pure super-consciousness that enables inner knowledge. On a far broader scale, it is about emulating the Divine. In creation, God constricted Himself in order to allow space for human beings to exist and to exercise free will in the world, to enable man to create with his words. He functions as the Silent Conductor, enabling humanity to make the sounds that together cohere to music. But He Himself is not heard in the noise;<sup>60</sup> if He were to make Himself heard, the sound would be so deafening it would crowd out everything else.

Thus, we emulate the Divine not only in creative speech but in silence as well – and perhaps more profoundly so, since silence enables a much bigger picture to emerge. This is because words – any word, even if it is the “perfect” word to describe a thing – is only a fragment of the thing’s ultimate, whole meaning.<sup>61</sup> Hence,

The most significant moments demand silence; words would intrude them, reduce the moment to a parody of itself. Real communication is possible only with one who has his or her own inner knowledge.

(266)

Earlier I mentioned the *aleph* being the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and that the Torah begins not with the *aleph* but with the *bet*, representing the idea that there is always an “unknown” beyond human grasp. This is also represented by the fact that the letter *aleph* itself can function as a silent letter: “The idea is that it is not yet in the world, or rather, it stands between the higher world of potential and the lower world of the actual” (89).

Genuine wisdom is in the realm of the silent. “[R]eal knowledge,” notes Tatz, “has no finite sound, it is intangible, inexpressible, transcendent” (90). That is why, he explains, the three letters following the *aleph* – the *bet*, *gimmel* and *daled*, which represent the transitioning into this world from the transcendent one of beyond – spell out *be ged*, the Hebrew word for clothing (as we saw in chapter 6, concerning the three things the Jewish people did not alter despite their slavery in Egypt) and the root of the words meaning “to cover,” “present an outer appearance” or “betray” (see Clark

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<sup>60</sup> See Kings I, 19:11-12.

<sup>61</sup> Earlier (chapter 5, fn. 10 and 75) I mentioned Moses’ speech impediment. Tatz (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004) notes that his speech impediment was not a speech *defect* in the conventional understanding, rather Moses could not speak the words precisely because he had a perfect wisdom of them; to put the mind-perfect concepts into words would be to dilute their content. Tatz further states that this was the real miracle at Sinai – the “condensing of the Divine word, somehow, miraculously, into the words of Torah” (266). Hence after the miraculous events at Sinai, Moses spoke normally; as we see (Deuteronomy 1:1), “These are the words which Moses spoke...”

[1999, 20]). “The garments may lie, they may cover an identity instead of reveal it, that is their nature. The silent center cannot lie, but its outer layers, those layers that speak, may speak treachery” (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, *ibid.*).<sup>62</sup> The “real thing” is not in words; words are merely *representative* of a much larger concept on high.<sup>63</sup>

If this is the gap between the “thing” and its “word-representation,” we can now better appreciate the distance between original and copy in *translation*. I mentioned earlier Benjamin’s (1997) assertion that all artistic forms are a form of translation. All things – not just language – are, in essence, interpretation and translation: interpretation of their intangible thought-existence and translation of it into tangible reality.

The language of art can be understood only in the deepest relation to the doctrine of signs. Without the latter any linguistic philosophy remains entirely fragmentary, because the relation between language and sign (of which that between human language and writing offers only a very particular example) is original and fundamental.

(Benjamin 1997, 73)

Any translation (literal or in artistic form) necessarily involves a three-step loop: mind-interpretation/perception, translation, and creation.<sup>64</sup> We interpret reality, then translate it into another medium – be it a painting, a sculpture, music, mathematical formula, a poem, a literary work – or into another language. We thus create a new entity. This creation, in turn, constitutes a new reality and can bring about new interpretation and translation, and so on. The task, then, is extremely creative (in the sense of “to create”); but it is fraught with danger: the new creation may have no

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<sup>62</sup>Tatz (*ibid.*) notes that “The Hebrew word for an outer garment, a coat, *me’il*, has a similar quality; the same root spells a profaning, a betrayal, of the holy.”

<sup>63</sup>In a similar vein, Tatz (267) notes, “The reason that [Holocaust survivors] remain silent about their experience is *because it cannot be put into words* – it is too deep for words... beyond human ability to express. The horror transcends human grasp, therefore it cannot be expressed. Those people are not silent because they do not wish to talk about what happened, they are silent because *they cannot talk about it*. Any amount of talking would shrink the experience to the proportions of the words used to describe it, and that would be a gross misrepresentation of the depth of the experience itself. Only silence is appropriate; only silence can begin to be an appropriate vessel for things that are inexpressible.” (Tatz notes that this works in the opposite direction, too, as in talk therapy: when something is so enormous, by “shrinking” it to definable words the experience might be made more manageable to process.)

Yehiel Dinur, also known by his pseudonym Ka-Tsetnik, an Auschwitz survivor and author of several books on the Holocaust, once told a visitor in his home who wished to take a photo of him not to do so, on grounds that if he were to photograph an Auschwitz survivor, the photo would be all that he had to encapsulate Auschwitz and a mere photo could never do it justice. (Heard from the visitor.)

<sup>64</sup>This is Hamann’s idea of *Reden ist übersetzen*, “to speak is to translate” – namely, the signs in the world aren’t just there for us to notice them or “read” them but for the purpose of translating them.

relation to its predecessor – or worse, be similar enough so as to be thought of as the original, perhaps even better than the original.<sup>65</sup> Silence, when applied in measure, offers a counterbalance to language’s potentially destructive force. “In a culture that spews out words constantly, the only way to develop depth is by learning how to be silent [...] Human essence lies in the unrevealed dimension; one who lives entirely in the revealed, within the confines of words, has forgotten this basic idea” (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 265; 269). Or, as Kosman (2014) succinctly put it, “Publicity is the enemy of depth.”

To conclude this discussion on silence, if there is one thing the cacophony of the twenty-first century has taught us, it’s that the Judaic ethos of “life and death are in the hands of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21) is no exaggeration. It has been this way since the beginning, going back to the Biblical narrative of Cain and Abel. The verse (Genesis 4:8) relates how “Cain said to his brother Abel, and it happened when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” Note that the verse does not say *what* Cain actually *said* (which is why some translators, notably Kaplan [1985], render the verse “Cain said [something] to his brother Abel”).<sup>66</sup> Though the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 22:7) expounds upon what words the two exchanged prior to the ensuing violence, the literal reading of the verse is that there were, in fact, no words; there was a breakdown in communication, and that is what led to Cain’s killing of Abel. When words fail, death ensues.

The very first murder in the world – doubly tragic since it was the very first instance of *death* in the world – was the result of language’s failure. Without the ability to communicate one’s worldview with another, which necessarily entails having an independent worldview and the means to communicate it, one loses the ability to see the other as a separate entity, with its own, valid worldview. The result, inevitably, is violence.

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<sup>65</sup> We can now better understand the Judaic prohibition of making representations of God in statues or picture form (Exodus 20:4). The ultimate expression of the Divine is the pre-Named, in pre-language. By naming something, it concretises it and makes it “real,” but that much more removed from its original spiritual dimension. The more concrete something is, the more distant it is from its abstract – and perfect – conception. In a similar vein, other forms of expression (dance, art) have the potential to be beautiful in bringing words or a concept to life and making them more “graspable.” However they carry a grave potential danger in coming to be regarded as the original rather than as an expression thereof which is at a remove from the original.

<sup>66</sup> Note what was mentioned earlier (chapter 5) about the difference between *dibbur* which means “to speak” and *amira* which means “to say.” Given that in this verse it says *vayomer* (from *amira*, “to say”), we would expect the verse to state what Cain actually said, but it doesn’t.

### 7.4.3. Coming full circle

Taylor (2016, 341) put it best at the conclusion of his work, that “Language remains in many ways a mysterious thing.” This is all the more true on a macro, meta-historical scale viz. language at the End of Days.

As we saw in chapter 4, the people at the Tower of Babel erred in undermining a single, unified truth. Our multiplicitous, “narrative”-based society has fared no better; we are headed in the same direction as the people at the Tower of Babel, only in reverse: our multi-truth society will inevitably lead to a uniform, Orwellian “truth” – as far from the truth as possible, because it is not the all-inclusive original truth, rather a “my-way-or-the-highway” sort of truth at the expense and to the exclusion of everything else dissimilar.

The stage for our present fragmentation was set already at Creation which, as stated earlier, God carried out with ten utterances. In chapter 4 I discussed the significance of God having created the world with speech. But the question remains, why so many utterances (10), when He could have created the world with just one?

The Kabbalistic significance of the number ten specifically is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that the numerical value of the *yud* – the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet – is ten; this signifies God’s essential and indivisible power in concentrated form. In other words, ten – the *yud* – represents a concentrated wholeness. But let us discuss more generally why Creation had to be achieved by multiple utterances.

There are two ways of viewing the world: viewing what is known as the *prat*, the individual components comprising the world, or the *klal* – seeing the whole picture. (Perhaps a good analogy would be to a Pointillist painting, where one can focus on any single tiny dot or stand back and see the whole picture.) Although the world was fashioned out of a coherent unity, it necessarily had to be fragmented into multiple utterances to enable different perspectives. Had God created the world with *one* utterance, things would have been so clear in their unification and the world would have been one of total harmony and clarity of purpose such that no person would ever be able to sin. In such a world of Divine clarity, there could be no such concepts as evil and good, and therefore no free will – and ultimately no reward. Thus, in order to enable free will and its consequent reward, and in recognition of man’s fallibility, God

created the world with multiple utterances, to enable multiple perspectives.<sup>67</sup> Ideally it should all be unified, but that is not our present reality. Yet in the “default” reality lays the ultimate ideal: God does not want a perfect world (had he wanted it, He would have created it); he wants humanity *striving toward perfection*.

As we draw nearer toward the time period designated as the End of Days, a genuine Oneness will be restored. As the prophet Zachariah (14:9) envisioned, “On that day God will be One and His Name will be One.” In the Judaic cosmology, when Name and Essence are harmonised there will no longer be any disparity; representation of Name will be replaced by *being* of Name, as humanity will have rectified its downfall at the Tower of Babel (and its prior sin, with the Tree of Knowledge). This unity between Name and Named will constitute a recovery from the inflation of language. God’s revelation will come as a still, small voice – a murmur, a whisper. Revelation does not require an earthquake or fiery eruption (as Scholem would have it), no ear-splitting roar or earth-shattering wind,<sup>68</sup> but will come about in silence, when language will have burnt itself out. Language will be consolidated back to that one singular point where meaning was universal, countering and rectifying the multiplicity that has ripped humanity apart; “Compressed in all beginnings is totality... source contains all, source is compressed essence” (Tatz and Gottlieb 2004, 75).

Finally, the Talmud (Tractate Ta’anit 31a) states that at the End of Days, God will assemble a dance for the righteous and sit among them in the Garden of Eden, and

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<sup>67</sup> This explains the Mishnah (Ethics of the fathers 5:1), which says that the reason God created the world with ten utterances was “in order to punish the wicked who destroy the world that was created with ten utterances and to give reward to the righteous who sustain the world that was created with ten utterances.” The whole concept of free will – and consequently, reward and punishment – could only be realised in a fragmented, *unclear* world.

This also explains a puzzling passage in the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 41:1) which relates that when Moses was distressed over the first set of Tablets, which he had felt compelled to shatter upon seeing the Jewish people worshipping the Golden Calf, God comforted him by saying that the first set of Tablets had only the Ten Commandments, while the second set He is going to give him contains all the halakhot as well as Midrashic and Aggadic content (i.e., the second set is preferable).

It would seem illogical to give the Jewish people the greater second set, when the reason Moses shattered the first set in the first place was because they had sinned with the Golden Calf. Were the Jewish people getting rewarded for their egregious sin of idolatry, barely forty days after the Revelation at Mount Sinai? Rather, Moses shattering the Tablets represented a shift in reality – a shift rooted in Creation which, by Divine pre-emption, was accomplished with multiple utterances. The world went from a unified indivisibility to disjointedness. Really, what was contained in the latter set was all contained in the former. But the message inherent in the second set of Tablets being preferred to the first set is that, following the sin of the Golden Calf, the people’s view of the world would be fragmented and they would have to bring the fragments together to form a unified whole once again.

<sup>68</sup> See Kings I 19:11-12

every righteous person will be able to point to God, saying “*This* is our God,”<sup>69</sup> attesting to total revelation. The dance takes place specifically in a circle, where all points on the circumference are equidistant from the Centre.<sup>70</sup> At that final end point, all ideas, all events, all those things we didn’t understand historically or we thought were opposing forces – synchronically and diachronically – will be seen in unity, on the same plane. The spiral will have collapsed into an eternal, unified circle that has no beginning and no end. We will have made sense of history.

In contrast to Camus’ view of life as the ultimate theatre of the absurd, the Judaic view is that it is precisely the absurd – necessarily a consequence of God’s hiddenness and silence – that enables humanity to find meaning by *creating* meaning independently.<sup>71</sup> While philosophers view the absurd as a direct consequence of God not being present, in Judaism it is precisely this absurdity which invites man to make sense of it and actually find the Divine within it. One can only “find” something if one presupposes its absence, which necessarily presupposes its *existence*. The absurdity itself points to our intuition that there *should* be order and justice in the world (hopefully motivating us to work toward their implementation), and that surely the world is moving toward that direction.

That is why revelation can only take place at the End of Time, once we have seen it all. This is the collapsing of the spiral in time to form a flat circle equidistant from a focal point of truth.<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for a dance that takes place in a circle is *mahol* – the same root as *mehila*, forgiveness; at the end of time, everything literally “comes full circle.” History does repeat itself (a la Nietzsche’s and Schopenhauer’s “eternal

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<sup>69</sup> “*This* is our God; we trusted in Him and He has delivered us. This is our Lord, in Whom we trusted; let us rejoice and exult in His deliverance” (Isaiah 25:9).

<sup>70</sup> Not coincidentally, the word תִּקְוָה, *tikvah*, hope, is derived from the same root as קָו, a [connecting] line. The hope is borne by an unbroken line to God, where every thing and every person has its place in relation to God at the epicentre of the circle (the circle – pi – representing infinity, as we saw in chapter 2).

<sup>71</sup> In practical terms, this is why the question of why bad things happen to good people remains a mystery. As stated previously, if we knew the rationale behind people’s suffering, we would not be moved to alleviate it. All human interaction would be coldly mathematical, without any compassion. In the Judaic view, God does not desire geniuses who know Him but compassionate people who emulate Him.

<sup>72</sup> I encourage the reader to explore Kosman’s (2014) thesis on the male paradigm (represented by an arrow) and the female paradigm (represented by a circle) as combining in a spiral flux. “Judaically, a marriage between these two forces [the circle and the arrow] would look like a spiral. The spiral moves upwards, but unlike an arrow, it is round, whole, and inclusive. Each ascending unit of the spiral moves upwards at the same time that it maintains the wholeness of its circle” (15). This work also touches upon the rectification and union of the arrow and circle in the End of Days.

return”), but only till we get it right. Thus, one can view historical events as set, or predictable, and therefore regard trying to alter the course of history as futile. Or one can take the present as an indicator of what must change for the future. The former is past-oriented, the latter future-oriented; the former static and nihilistic, the latter dynamic and practicably optimistic.

History will culminate with the revelation that sets the noise at ease. Just as God created the world in six days, by His word, and rested on the seventh, the 6000 years of *human* creation will culminate with the quiet “being” of the seventh millennium. We are now experiencing the final surge of noise, the last gush of human creation before the silence of a post-history existence (in turn following a “hyperhistory” existence), where history converges on one central point of truth. Just as all the colours merge to form white light, so too will the noise merge to form a resounding silence – the still, small voice.

The Original Language “embodied a crucial deed: the invention of an ordered world” (Olender 1997). In the Judaic view, the same applies to the End of Days, at which point language will come to signify an ordered, rectified world. Language will be “pure,” devoid of convolutedness, truthiness or vacuity. “For then I will make the people of pure speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve him with one accord” (Zephaniah 3:9). When language is unified and whole, so is the world.

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