



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Ha'azinu 5772

By Dani Passow

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*Parshat Ha'azinu* consists primarily of a beautiful poem recited by Moshe to the Children of Israel. In it, Moshe recounts the ups and downs of the people's relationship to God, from moments of connection and revelation to times when the people turned away in rebellion. Before concluding with words of consolation, Moshe refers to the Israelites as a "generation of reversals" — *Ki dor tahapuchot hema*.<sup>1</sup> The Talmud alludes to this phrase, which essentially gives a name to the people's fickle nature, in a story in tractate Yoma which reflects on the power of names:

Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yossi were traveling on the road. Rabbi Meir would examine the name [of their host in order to determine whether he was trustworthy]; Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yossi would not. When they came to a certain place, they asked for and were given lodging. They asked [the innkeeper] "What is your name?" He said to them, "Kidor." [Rabbi Meir] said "We can learn from this that he is a wicked man, since it is stated 'They are a generation (*Ki dor* in Hebrew) [of reversals].'" Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yossi entrusted their purses to him; Rabbi Meir did not... The next day, [Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yossi] said to him, "give us our purses." He said to them, "You never gave them to me." Rabbi Meir said to them, "Why do you not examine names?"... Afterwards, [Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yossi] would examine names.<sup>2</sup>

According to this story, one's name reveals elements of one's essence. While Rabbi Meir may take this to an extreme, there is a school of thought in linguistics that supports, to some extent, his theory. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of thinkers argued for what became known as Linguistic Relativity—the idea that language influences how we conceptualize the world. According to this theory, words are so important in helping us categorize and define our experiences that our perception of reality is influenced by the language we use.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this extraordinary power of language, it is deeply important that we are intentional in how we describe others, making sure to do so in ways that don't negatively impact how we perceive them. I remember when I first encountered the term "Global South" used to refer to countries that, on the whole, are suffering from extreme poverty. Most of these countries are located in the southern hemisphere—hence the name. I was told that the phrase "The Third World" was now understood to be condescending, and the term "Developing World"—while an improvement—is a misnomer, as many wealthy countries are also developing. I originally thought these distinctions were silly, that these were simply interchangeable labels that enabled us to discuss the issue of global poverty. Bending over backwards to be politically correct seemed to be a waste of time.

But if there is some truth to Rabbi Meir's approach and the theory of Linguistic Relativity—if the way we describe something can impact how we understand and relate to it—then it is actually crucial for us to be mindful of the

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 32:20.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 83b.

<sup>3</sup> Swoyer, Chris, "Relativism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/supplement2.html>

language we use in our social justice work. Our terminology is not irrelevant; words that affirm hierarchy and oppression and make value judgments can have a serious impact.

For example, using the term “homeless” may be helpful in identifying a particular societal problem, but labeling a person with this term could also be severely harmful. With one phrase, we can reduce a multi-faceted human being to this single label—one that may be very difficult for the person and others to see beyond. The same is true on the global level. Do we choose to see the people on whose behalf we work as “the poor,” or as human beings “facing poverty”? Do we speak of “us” and “them”—language which promotes clearly defined distinctions between those who need and those who give?

Thinking about the language we use can be frustrating, since there aren’t often perfect solutions. Nevertheless, it is important to constantly seek the terms that best allow us to express ourselves while remaining sensitive to the impact our language may have on others.

This sensitivity can be inferred from *Parshat Ha’azinu* as well. Even as Moshe names the Israelites “a generation of reversals,” he is describing their circumstance, rather than their core identity. He could have used any number of derogatory labels for those who change allegiances or are not consistent in their devotion to their cause; instead, he describes the Israelites’ situation at a particular juncture in time. Unlike Kidor, whose personality was predicted by his name, there is room left for the Israelites to define themselves.

The celebration of Rosh Hashanah this week is a time when words—through prayer and petitions for forgiveness from friends and family members—have traditionally been the primary mode in which we engage in the process of repentance. May we remember that amongst all the commandments and responsibilities recorded in Torah, speech may be the realm in which we can have the greatest impact. Let us commit to being mindful of the language we use and bringing Moshe’s deliberateness in his choice of words into our justice work and our everyday lives.



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