

How many languages are there? According to the [Linguistic Society of America](#), there are around 7,000 distinct languages in the world today. Of that English and Mandarin usually take the lead of being the most widely spoken. That means, if I can make this assumption, that all of us in this room are in the majority of the world of having a common language. What an amazing experience it is for us to speak, and simply be understood.

In this week's Torah portion, Noach, the parasha concludes with a story of language. In genesis 11:1, it is stated that

וַיְהִי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים:

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words.

How easy life must have been! While this translation is the same language, the Hebrew in this verse specifically uses the word one, *echad* or *achadim*, rather than the actual word for same. Rashi points this out by saying that the one language is none other than the holy language, but the end of the sentence, *udevarim achadim*, the same words, Rashi explains a bit deeper, saying: “They came with one plan, saying: “[God] has no right to select the heavenly regions exclusively for [God's self]; let us ascend to the skies and make war upon [God]”. This, of course, gives way to the story that takes place over the next few verses: the story of the tower of Babel. The people of the world gather to build a tower as tall as the heavens to reach God and this angers God. Thus, the story concludes with statements:

And Adonai said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out

of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." (Genesis 11:6-7)

The punishment for angering God, is confounded language- making sure that people could not communicate clearly with one another any more. This emphasizes how important a common language and clear communication is. In today's world, while so many of us are able to share a language and communicate clearly, it could be argued that we communicate too clearly.

Last week, I took a road trip to Montgomery, Alabama with a friend and classmate. We went down to visit the Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. While these are beautiful names, the Legacy Museum follows the history of Black America from slavery to the current state of mass incarceration. The memorial is actually a memorial to the over 4,000 recorded lynchings that have occurred throughout US history. We spent nearly three hours in the museum and it wasn't enough. We had an 8 hour car ride together to process and discuss, and it wasn't enough. Each individual story throughout the museum, each innocent life that has been lost in this country merely due to skin color is much too many. While the last lynching was in 1981, we have progressed in many ways, and in others, not so much.

In Robin Diangelo's book *White Fragility*, she discusses implicit bias. She describes it as "classic white fragility because it protects our racial bias while simultaneously affirming our identities as open minded. Yes, [she continues] it's uncomfortable to be confronted with an aspect of ourselves that we don't like, but we can't change what we refuse to see" (42). She goes on to explain the implicit biases that are embedded in descriptions that I know I have used- calling places a *bad* neighborhood, a *good* school district, or simply using words like "urban,

underprivileged, diverse, or sketchy.” Now I, nor Diangelo are not necessarily saying we need to eliminate these words from our vocabulary, but rather to be aware and to call out each other when we say something is diverse. Sometimes we say diverse to describe a variety of opinions and unique backgrounds, other times it simply describes a non-white group of people. None of us are perfect, but the words and language we use to indirectly talk about race in this country, contributes to a greater problem.

Just like the people of Babel, with one language, we can become more dangerous of a people. In the story of babel, no one person is recorded as stating the plan to build, no one person made the rules about which stones to use or how tall heaven was. God was not angry with one person. And in the same way, as a white person I carry the history of the United States on my shoulders, I carry the weight that while my words have not caused mass incarnation...my silence, my choices, and my language can and do add to the daily distress of Black Americans and to continued issues of racial injustice.

I cannot change everything by simply carrying this weight nor being aware of my language, but it is a start. Educating ourselves by reading books like *White Fragility*, or *So You Want to Talk about Race*, watching films like *13th* and following people of color on our social media and visiting museums and memorials is start. Change starts with our own education, and change continues with the work we can partake in with organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative and more locally, RAC-OH, BREAD, or Worthington Resource Pantry.

Our tradition teaches us that language is how creation began. Language is how the world split into a variety of peoples and nations. Language is how we communicate that we share similarities with one another, but also how we are different. Language is powerful. The story of Babel reminds us this but Pirkei Avot

2:6 reminds us “[we] are not required to finish the work, but neither are [we] permitted to desist from it.”