



SUKKOT

Sukkot 2

The Mystery of the Missing Tongue: How Sukkah Prevents Strife

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THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING TONGUE: HOW SUKKAH PREVENTS STRIFE

ABSTRACT

How can we achieve unity and harmony? How can we prevent strife and conflict?

Sukkah provides us with the answer. Its very name is glaringly missing one of the five organs of articulation, which produce the different sounds of speech: The four letters of Sukkah (סוכה) are derived from four of the five sounds – the palate, teeth, throat and lips. But not the fifth – the tongue? Why?

A young man once approached the philosopher Socrates and asked, “Can you please teach me the gift of oratory?” He then spoke a continuous stream of words to show off his ability. Socrates finally placed his hand over his mouth and said, “Young man, I will have to charge you a double fee.” He asked why. Socrates replied, “I will have to teach you two arts – first, the art of holding your tongue; only then the art of using it.”

Tracing the root of all strife, an analysis of the nature of the human tongue, the meaning of a cryptic verse in the Book of Psalms, a fascinating insight from the Gaon of Vilna – all help illuminate how to use the power of the Sukkah to unite us, and protect us from divisiveness and discord.

In the Sukkah you never have to bite your tongue because it simply isn't there.

1. Beyond Words

Gut Yom Tov! Chag Samayach. Happy Sukkos.

The Alter Rebbe once said: When you don't have an answer to a question, tell a story. If that doesn't work, sing a song.

Language is certainly one of the powerful tools we humans have to communicate and connect with each other. But often words can be inadequate, and can actually be forces that divide us. This is especially true when it comes to deeper and more intimate bonding, when we are often at loss for words due the inexpressible intensity of the experience.

Indeed, how often do we find that words hurt people? Slander, gossip, *loshon hora*, badmouthing, critique – can often be crueler than actions.

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art of using it.”

Today I want to speak about the power of the Sukkah to bring unity and harmony into our lives, and prevent and fight strife and conflict, especially one that comes from not holding our tongues¹.

2. The Five Sound Sources

The Hebrew alphabet and language is layered with meaning and significance. Every letter and word is an energy force, which can be understood by studying the shapes, numerical values (*gematriot*), permutations, combinations, substitutions and transpositions of these letters. Hence, every Hebrew word and name contains levels and levels of multiple dimensions, offering us a multitude of lessons and insights.

One of the ways of understanding the meaning of these Hebrew letters is explained in Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Formation: The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew Aleph Bet are rooted in five organs of articulation, which produce the different sounds of speech; five phonetic families, each coming from another part of the mouth: the palate, teeth, throat, lips, and tongue.¹

The letters *gimmel*, *yud*, *chof*, *kuf* (ק, כ, י, ג) come from the palate.

The letters *ayin*, *samach*, *tzadik*, *resh*, *shin*, *yud*, *chof*, *kuf* (ש, ר, צ, ט, י, ח) come from the teeth.

The letters *aleph*, *hei*, *chet*, *ayin* (ע, ה, ח, א) come from the throat.

The letters *bet*, *vov*, *mem*, *pei* (פ, מ, ו, ב) come from the lips.

The letters *daled*, *tet*, *lamed*, *nun*, *tof* (ת, נ, ל, ג, ד) come from the tongue.

3. Sukkah: Five Sounds Minus One

Now let's apply this to Sukkah:

When we dissect the Hebrew word Sukkah we find a fascinating fact: the four letters of Sukkah, סוכה, are derived from four of the five organs: the *samach* formed by the teeth; the *vov* formed by the lips; the *chof* formed by the palate; and the *hei* formed by the throat.

However, one organ and phonetic family of sounds is glaringly and conspicuously missing: Sukkah does not include a letter associated with the *loshon*, the tongue?

Why is Sukkah, סוכה, composed of only four of the five sounds?

¹ See Sefer Yetzirah 2:3. Tikkunei Zohar #70 132a

The Vilna Gaon notes² this anomaly and explains this omission with a cryptic verse in the Book of Psalms:

תַּסְתִּירֵם בְּסִתְרֵי פָנֶיךָ מֶרְכְּסֵי אִישׁ תִּצְפְּנֵם בְּסִפָּה מְרִיב לְשׁוֹנוֹת.

*You shall hide them in the secrecy of Your countenance, from bands of men; protect them in a Sukkah from the strife of tongues.*³

The tongue represents strife – which is completely antithetical to the unity of the Sukkah. Therefore, even the very word Sukkah is devoid of sounds associated with the tongue: *protect them in a Sukkah from the strife of tongues.*

4. The Strife of Tongues

Why is the tongue related to strife, to the point that it is called *the strife of tongues*? Why do we need to *protect them in a Sukkah* from this strife, and how does the Sukkah protect us?

What is the source and root of strife and conflict? Why would two people or two communities or cultures not get along, or even go to war? As part of one human race, we share common interests, so wouldn't it make sense that we would cooperate and learn to co-exist? Discord doesn't serve anyone well. Why then are we divisive?

The answer is because we “don't speak the same language.” When people “don't speak the same language” – literally and figuratively – conflict and disunity results.

This division traces its origins back to the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis.

*Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words... And the Lord said, “Lo! One people, and they all have one language, and this is what they have commenced to do. Come, let us descend and confuse their language, so that one will not understand the language of his companion.” Therefore, He named it Babel, for there the Lord confused the language of the entire earth, and from there the Lord scattered them upon the face of the entire earth.*⁴

Originally there was one Holy Tongue, one language that united all of humankind. Then, after the Tower mutiny, G-d confused and mixed up humankind by fragmenting them into many different languages.

What we learn from this account is that though people speaking the same language can also have disagreements, due to their different opinions and viewpoints –⁵ *אין דיעותיהן שוות* – but their ability to understand each other's language also helps them communicate and reconcile their differences. However, if they don't speak the same language – literally or figuratively – then they will be unable to unite, resulting in their scattering and

² Cited in Drashot Nachalat Dovid, a student of R' Chaim Volozhin.

³ Psalms 31:21.

⁴ Genesis 11:1, 6-7, 9.

⁵ Talmud Brochos 58a. Sanhedrin 38a.

ultimate strife and discord.

The aspect of language which divides us is manifest in the tongue – *loshon* in Hebrew. Tongue is synonymous with speech. In Hebrew the word for tongue, *loshon*, is the same word for language.

In this context, the term “language barrier” is a redundancy: language is a barrier. The tongue we speak separates us from one who speaks another language. If my native tongue is Hebrew I cannot speak and communicate with someone whose mother tongue is English.

A verse in the Megillah poignantly articulates this point:

וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל־כָּל־מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה פַּכְתָּבָהּ וְאֶל־עַם וְעַם כְּלָשׁוֹנוֹ לְהִיטֹת כָּל־אִישׁ שִׁבְרָתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמְדַבֵּר כְּלָשׁוֹן עִמּוֹ

And he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to every province according to its script, and to every nationality according to its tongue, that every man dominate in his household and speak according to the tongue of his nationality.⁶

Clearly, tongues, languages, *loshonot*, divide us by nationality, region, and culture.

That is why the psalm calls it the *strife of tongues*. Because human strife and conflict – strife between nations, cultures and communities – originated from our different tongues and languages.

5. Tongue Sandwich With Mustard

To drive this point home, here are some – tongue in cheek (no pun intended) – examples from our language and culture that demonstrate the divisive nature of the tongue.

Consider these terms:

Bite your tongue.

Cat got your tongue?

Speak with a forked tongue.

On the tip of my tongue.

Tongue in cheek.

He's got a sharp tongue and will give you a tongue lashing.

⁶ Esther 1:22.

They say that the tongue has no bones but it is strong enough to break a heart.

Studies show that the average person slips and trips on his tongue more than his feet.

Those same people also say that if you bite your tongue you won't come to eat (or swallow) your words.

We spend the first three years of life learning to use our tongues. And the rest learning to hold it.

Perhaps the looseness of the tongue and the difficulty in holding it was put best in this epitaph found engraved into a worn tombstone upon a windswept hill in a cemetery in the Scottish highlands:

Here rests in silent clay

Mrs. Arabella Young

Who on the 21st of May

Began to hold her tongue.

6. One Family, Many Languages

Imagine one family that lives together in the same house for generations. They all speak to each other. They all communicate. They are all of one tongue.

Then, one day, something happens: every family member in the house wakes up speaking a different language. They all come down to breakfast. A brother turns to his sister and asks her to pass the milk. But suddenly she cannot understand a word he says. A mother asks her child if she would like butter on her toast. The child doesn't understand a word the mother says. Everybody in the family, who've lived together for hundreds of years, suddenly only hears gibberish.

This one unified family who all spoke the same language, suddenly have many different tongues. And, sooner rather than later, when there's many tongues, there's no longer one unified family. When the child can no longer understand the parent, the child gets frustrated and begins yelling at the parent, who in turn yells back.

The parent doesn't realize that the child is yelling "I love you but I cannot understand you." The child doesn't realize that the parent is yelling "I love you but I cannot understand you." And before you know it there's an all-out war.

Different *loshonot*, different tongues, divide.

7. *Loshon* as Tone

On a more personal level, the word *loshon* also means “tone” or “tense.” For instance *loshon zochor* or *loshon nekeiva* refer to the masculine or feminine “tongue” or form of speech. *Loshon avar* or *loshon atid* refer to past or future “tongue,” or tense. *Loshon naki* describes a clean “tongue” or tone, used to describe something with refined subtlety.

Even if we all speak the same language, the *loshon*, the tongue, the tone we use can very easily alienate. Moreover, sometimes the greatest fights and disagreements happen when two people speak exactly the same language. Only, the tone, the tense, the form, the *loshon* they use to convey something causes a rift.

Don’t take that *tone* with me. *Loshon bara*, the wicked tongue, is not speaking illegibly; it is using a tone, a tongue that’s a barb, to hurt.

How often do we speak to someone and our tone cuts deep? How often do we use speech tenses to cause, well, tension? How often does the tongue, even when speaking in the same tongue, slice and stab like a sharp knife?

8. Personalizing the Message

Please reflect for a moment on a disagreeable episode in your life. A fight, an argument, a misunderstanding. I was not there, but one thing is certain: the tongue had a big part in the rift. The tongue either caused the fight, exasperated it, or could have been (and hopefully was) used to transcend the differences and come to peace.

Imagine that babbling family at the breakfast table could suddenly once again speak the same language, the same tongue? Suddenly everyone wouldn’t hear illegible yelling; they’d hear: “I love you but I cannot understand you.”

This is the power, and pain, of the tongue. It has the power to cause division and pain; and it has the power to unite and unify.

9. Sukkah: The Antidote to Strife

So how do we prevent strife and conflict in our lives?

Enter the Sukkah.

The Sukkah has the power to protect us from the *strife of tongues*.

The Sukkah is compared to an embrace – a hug; it literally surrounds and unites all those that enter its domain.

As the sages tell us: “Although they said that a person does not fulfill his obligation on the first day of the Festival with the *Lulav* of another, he fulfills his obligation with the Sukkah of another, as it is written:⁷ “All the homeborn in Israel shall reside in Sukkot.” This teaches that **all of the Jewish people are fit to reside in one Sukkah.**”⁸

The unity of a Sukkah, therefore, is antithetical to the divisive tongue.

This is why King David writes *protect them in a Sukkah from the strife of tongues* and why Sukkah, סוכה, is represented by every phonetic sound save for the tongue:

The Sukkah is the canopy of oneness, the transcendent space where you, I, and we – all of us – are united as one. Where Yiddish, English, Hebrew, French, Arabic, Spanish, Cantonese, tongues, tones, tenses, speech forms – all *loshonot* are null and void.

The tongue is unleashed 358 days a year. But on Sukkot, in the Sukkah, סוכה, the tongue is literally not found. The phonetics represented by the tongue is missing. The power to divide and hurt, or unify and heal, is not found, is not heard. Because in the Sukkah we *cannot* be divided. Indeed, in the Sukkah we also don’t need to *be* united, because we already are one.

And only a rabbi can speak for twenty minutes with his tongue about how there is no room in the Sukkah for a tongue – no room for language barriers of the seventy tongues. There is but the embrace of the Sukkah.

10. Conclusion: Speech vs. Song

Walk into a Sukkah and you will usually find that speech is secondary and song is primary.

The famous *vort* from the Kotzker Rebbe parses the difference between speech and song.

What do we call it when you begin speaking while I’m speaking? We call it interrupting.

But what do we call it when you begin singing while I’m singing? We call it harmony.

⁷ Leviticus 23:42.

⁸ Talmud Sukkah 27b.

I remember spending a year abroad in Europe as part of my rabbinical training. I and a few other 20-year-olds were in a foreign country with a strange language. Our job and mission was to teach and learn, to inspire the community and be inspired by it. Our first week there a *bruchim baboim*, a welcoming party, a *farbrengen* was hosted for our new group. We did not speak the language. They did not speak our tongue. We tried saying a few words. It was awkward.

Suddenly someone began singing a *niggun*, a soft, wordless Chassidic melody. One by one we each joined in, singing not with our tongues but with our souls.

No one called it interrupting. Everyone knew it was harmony.

I was from the United States. A friend was from London. Another was from Israel. And many were from this European city. We spoke different languages. We all sang the same song. We had different tongues. We all harmonized as one soul.

It reminded me of the difference between a speech, a party and a farbrengen:

During a speech, one person is speaking but no one is listening. At a party, everyone is speaking and no one is listening. By a farbrengen, no one is speaking, but everyone is listening...

In every Sukkah speech should be secondary and song primary. A Sukkah does not know different languages. A Sukkah has no place for tongues. A Sukkah only knows the one song of the Jewish people. *All of the Jewish people are fit to reside in one Sukkah.*

In many Sukkahs you will hear people chanting: ושמחת בהגך והיית אך שמח you shall rejoice in your Festival... *and you will only be happy.*⁹

Happiness is found in harmony, not in interruption. A Sukkah, devoid of tongues, has one primary means of communication: song. Speech is irrelevant. So let's end this speech and begin singing.

ושמחת בהגך והיית אך שמח! ושמחת בהגך והיית אך שמח! ושמחת בהגך והיית אך שמח!

Chag Sameach and a Good Yom Tov!

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⁹ Deuteronomy 16:14-15.