

# “Speeeeeeak”: Musings on Language in Jewish Thought

Matthew Miller

## The Divine Origins of Speech

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### Genesis 2:7

Hebrew:

וַיִּצְרֶה ה' אֱתָ הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּנְפַח בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

**Translation:** *And the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*

### Targum Onkelos

Aramaic:

וַיִּנְפַח בְּאַפּוּהִי נְשָׁמָתָא דְחַיִּי; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָא

**Translation:** *...and the man became a speaking spirit.*

### Qur'an 2:31

**Translation:** *And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: “Tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful.”*

## Naming and Meaning

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### Genesis 2:20

Hebrew:

וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל הַבְּהֵמָה וְלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה

**Translation:** *And the man called names for every animal, bird of the heavens, and beast of the field.*

### Ibn Ezra

■ *Adam had great knowledge... he named each creature according to its nature.*

### Midrash HaGadol

Hebrew:

שִׁקְרָא לְכָל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד שֵׁם הָרְאוּי לוֹ

**Translation:** *he called each by a name that suited it.*



## Theories of Language

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### Maimonides, *Guide* 3:8

Hebrew:

הלשונות הסכמיות, לא טביות

**Translation:** *Languages are conventional, not innate.*

### Aristotle, *On Interpretation* 2

■ *Nothing is by nature a name—it is only so when it becomes a symbol by convention.*

### Saadia Gaon

■ *Names were assigned not by nature, but by communal consensus.*

## Speech and Intention

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### Rambam, *Laws of Prayer* 4:15

כָּל תְּפִלָּה שֶׁאֵינָהּ בְּכוּנָה אֵינָהּ תְּפִלָּה

**Translation:** *Any prayer lacking intention is not prayer. One must repeat it with focus.*

### Rabbenu Yonah

■ *For mitzvot that depend solely on speech, intention is required. Without it, it is as if nothing was done.*

## Modern Reflections

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### Soloveitchik, *Emergence of Ethical Man*

■ *Kedushah, under halakhic thought, is man-made... Objective kedushah smacks of fetishism.*

### Benno Jacob

■ *Avoid any idea that sacred formulas operate like magic. Words gain force through meaning, not mechanics.*

### Isadore Twersky

■ *Maimonides' desacralization of language reflects his opposition to entities vested with intrinsic sanctity.*

### George Meredith

■ *Speech is the small change of silence.*

### Abhijit Tomar

■ *"Manufacture" once meant "made by hand"; now it often means "made by machine." Words shift meaning over time.*

