

# “Speeeeeeak”: Musings on Language in Jewish Thought

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## The Divine Origins of Speech

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### Genesis 2:7

**Hebrew:** חָיָה. לְנִפְשׁ הָאָדָם וַיְהִי חַיִּים; נִשְׁמַת בְּאַפָּיו וַיִּפַּח הָאֱלֹהִים מִן עֹפָר הָאֲדָמָה, מִן עֹפָר הָאֲדָמָה אֶת אָדָם ה' וַיִּצְרֶה

**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:** מִמְּלָלָא לְרוּחַ בְּאָדָם וַהֲוֵת דְּחַיִּי; נִשְׁמַתָּא בְּאַפּוּהִי וַנִּפַּח

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

### Qur'an 2:31

**Arabic:** الْمَلَائِكَةَ... عَلَى عَرَضَهُمْ ثُمَّ كُلَّهَا الْأَسْمَاءَ آتَمَ وَعَلَّمَ

**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:** הַשָּׂדֶה חַיִּית וְכָל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלַעֹף הַבְּהֵמָה לְכָל שְׁמוֹת הָאָדָם וַיִּקְרָא

**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

לוֹ הָרָאִי שֵׁם וְאֶחָד אֶחָד לְכָל שְׁקֵרָא — he called each by a name that suited it.

## Theories of Language

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### Maimonides, Guide 3:8

**Hebrew:**

הַלְשׁוֹנוֹת הַסְכְּמִיּוֹת, לֹא טְבִיעוֹת

**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 אֵינָה 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.

