# "Speeeeeak": Musings on Language in Jewish Thought

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## The Divine Origins of Speech

### Genesis 2:7

**Hebrew:** וַיִּיצֶר ה׳ אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת 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:** וּנְפַח בְּאַפּוֹהִי נִשְׁמְתָא דְחַיֵּי; וַהֲוַת בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָא

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

### Qur'an 2:31

**Arabic:** وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى ...الْمَلَائِكَةِ

**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

### Genesis 2:20

**Hebrew:** וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁמוֹת לְכָל הַבְּהֵמָה וּלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכֹל 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

> לו הראוי שם ואחד אחד לכל שקרא — *he called each by a name that suited it.*

## Theories of Language

### Maimonides, *Guide 3:8*

**Hebrew:**

הלשונות הסכמיות, לא טביעות

**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.*

### Saadiah Gaon

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

## Speech and Intention

### Rambam, Laws of Prayer 4:15

כָּל תְּפִלָּה שֶׁאֵינָה בְּכַוָּנָה 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

### 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.*