

With gratitude to the brilliant Agnes Borisnky, my hevrotah this week, whose questions and insights shaped the ideas I offer here today.

In the words of bell hooks, “Language is also a place of struggle. We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will take us away from the boundaries of domination, a language that will not fence you in, bind you, or hold you? Language is also a place of struggle.”

This week, I encountered a new question, the product of the substitution of one word for another. Not just “who” was subjugated in Egypt? But also, “what” was subjugated in Egypt? *What* crumbled under the weight of forced labor? What freedom, what faculties were stolen from an enslaved people? What was taken from them, through cruelty and control?

The Zohar, in its cryptic prose offers an answer:

מִשֶּׁה קָלָא, וְדַבּוּר דְּאִיהוּ מִלָּה דִּילִיָּה, הָיָה בְּגָלוּתָא

Moshe, and by extension the Israelites, had their voice, but speech was in exile. *Dibbur b'galut*

What is the Zohar saying?

400 years of slavery robbed the Israelites of language. They could produce sounds, but not words. In the Zohar's formulation, *kol*, voice is a pre-linguistic mode of communication. It's the sounds of crying and laughing, without the ability to find the words for what hurts or what delights. It was, after all, the groaning and crying out of the Israelites— not words— that at last reached God, setting the liberation story in motion.

וַיִּאֲנֻחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ

They had no language— just the rumbling of pain to shake the heavens. We learn that the toll of heavy labor was shortness of breath, *kotzer ruach*. For a people who can barely catch their breath, what space is there for language?

But, to strip a people of their capacity for language isn't just a byproduct of bodily torment. It's a tactic in its own right, a tool of suppression and control. Describing the

violence of colonialism in Africa, the Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o wrote, "The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation."

Speech is the ultimate act of creativity; it's the translation of our inner world. It's through speech that we more fully grasp who we are, where we come from, and where we hope to go. Freedom of speech is the ability to name the world within and around us as we see it— not as the master or the state or the oppressor sees it. Subjugation destroys language by denying the enslaved the freedom to follow their thoughts wherever they might lead, by bending the will of the speaker to the will of the one with the whip. The slave cannot say "no." When speech is in exile, it is under the control of another force, determined to prevent the articulation of liberatory possibilities.

And liberation takes time. It's a process, not a one time event. The residue of subjugation sticks to the battered bodies and manipulated minds of the newly freed Israelite slaves. You might expect the Zohar to teach that language ceased to be in exile when the Israelites crossed the sea, a liberated people emerging on dry ground. But, their words have not yet returned. *Az yashir Moshe u'vnei yisrael*. The Song of the Sea, the first words uttered in freedom, Rashi teaches, was a "repeat after me" song.

הוא אומר והם עונין אחריו

Moshe sang, and the people repeated after him.

A people still unable to recover the creative possibilities of their own language.

It isn't, the Zohar teaches, until the revelation at Mt. Sinai that language returns from exile. That voice and language reunite. That the people can speak again.

So, what is it that they heard that brought back the power to dream out loud?

Anokhi Ha'shem Elokecha. I am the Lord your God.

But, it isn't the theology of this statement that makes the difference— it's the language. Listen to this midrash from Tanchuma— a text that has brought me to my knees again and again this week.

R. Nehemiah said: What is *anokhi*? *Mahu Anokhi*. R' Nehemia is surprised by the word choice. We have a different word for "I"— *ani* that you would expect here, that's far more common in the Torah. So why is God using "anokhi" instead? His answer: It's an Egyptian word. *Lashon Mitzri hu*.

The first word of the 10 commandments is Egyptian. The first word of the most important message God wants to deliver to the Israelites is in the language of their oppressors. The first word rewinds the people back through the wilderness, back through the sea, back onto the troubled ground of their affliction. The site of their trauma. Why?

The Midrash offers a poignant and painful answer, all the more so given the 603 days our hostages have been trapped in the dark tunnels of Gaza.

Li'mah ha'davar domeh? To what is the matter similar? To a king whose son was captured and spent much time with his captors and learned their language. When the king conquered his enemies and brought back his son, he attempted to speak with him in his language, but the son didn't understand. What did he do? He began to speak to him in the language of the captors. So the Holy Blessed One did with Israel. All of the years that Israel was in Egypt, they learned the language of Egypt. When God redeemed them and came to give them the Torah, they couldn't understand it. God said, I will speak to them in Egyptian, *anokh*. As one who wants to say "I" to his friend in Egyptian says, *anokh*. So too God began by saying *Anokhi*.

I've moved back and forth this week between being comforted and troubled by this midrash. I wonder how you hear it? I'm comforted because it depicts a God who meets the Israelites where they are, whose utmost desire is to communicate with a people shut off from their own language. To use the Egyptian language here, in this critical moment, is a gesture of sensitivity, of God's proximity to the people's experience.

But, I'm also troubled because the language of the oppressor reopens the wounds of oppression. I think of my own body's reaction- how it tenses- when I hear German in a raised voice, no matter what is being said. How trauma can live within words, within language, transporting us to the most difficult memories.

But perhaps, it is precisely the acknowledgement of trauma that God wishes to convey in this crucial moment. By speaking in the language they understand, God is saying, "I know what you've been through. I know how you've suffered. I know what you've lost. And, I know that nothing new can be built, no new future can be dreamed of, unless we start with your pain."

Anokhi- Egypt will always be a part of you; it will always live within you, but there's a world to build outside that narrow place. You see, with the acknowledgement of *anokhi*, the text shifts from Egyptian to Hebrew. Every word that follows is Hebrew. Language returns from exile and with it, expansive possibility.

When trauma is acknowledged, not denied, not justified, not dismissed through comparison, only then can something new and hopeful be imagined.

My friends, we are on the precipice of Shavuot, preparing ourselves to hear these very words chanted. Linger, please, for a moment on *anokhi*. To all those who are not yet listening, here's what I need you to know about the trauma of my people before we can talk about anything else, before we imagine anything different.

More than a third of our family tree was obliterated in 6 years.

My family lived in Baghdad for centuries until they were expelled, like so many other families from so many other countries that welcomed us until they didn't.

Until some pernicious conspiracy about who we are was concocted and spread to justify violence against us.

We don't know where we're safe, and that includes here in this country, right now.

We call the wars by the year they started, but it's really been one long war. Has there ever truly been peace in the land of our ancestors?

We used to group all of our tragedies onto one day, the 9th of Av, but now we chillingly understand what truth that conceals. Will 10/7 one day be moved to the 9th of Av?

Our practice of counting ought to be only for the omer, not printed on masking tape, affixed to our broken hearts. This is my story of our trauma, and I suspect you have one too.

To those who have no space for this story, I understand, *and* I need you to hear it, to recognize what we carry with us, what we carry within us. I need you to hear it, to acknowledge it, because I want to dream with you about how to build a future that's different. I want to create with you a vision of a life together where this trauma can fade into memory, not breed new nightmares. But to get to *that* conversation, we have to start here— the *anokhi* before the rest of the words.

And, crucially, every person, every people has their *anokhi*. Their trauma that must be witnessed. I cannot expect you to hear the trauma of my people, if I will not listen to the trauma of yours. How hard and how necessary it is, especially as we've afflicted so much pain upon each other.

And so I ask you, my Palestinian cousin, and I stretch my heart open to listen. When was the last time you felt safe?

Is your home still standing? The home before that? Or, the home before that? When you left, did you know you'd never return?

Tell me about your family, yes the living and the deceased. Tell me about your dreams, yes the living and the deceased.

Who eats when there isn't enough food?

What does the sound of Hebrew do to your body?

What lies beneath the rubble? What lies are beneath everything you've been told?

What do you see when you look at the sky? What do you hear when you put your ear to the ground? What do you feel when you close your eyes at night?

To those who have no space for this story, I understand, *and* I need you to hear it. I need us to hear it. We cannot dismiss the trauma that is hard for us to hear. We cannot expect our trauma to be acknowledged if we refuse to do the same for another people. When I see you in your pain, and only then, can I imagine with you your healing. Imagine with you *our* healing.

The broken heart hardens when it is not seen. It grows armor, shielding it from the pain of another. And worse, it can break the heart of another, violence begetting violence. But, the broken heart softens when its woundedness is acknowledged. It grows from the light of another. And then, the language of possibility can emerge.

And so I ask us, on this eve of revelation: What needs to be said, what needs to be heard so we can dream together of a different future?