



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Bereshit 5771

By Shira Fischer

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In the beginning, *Bereshit*, the world was created through speech. God spoke and there was light. God spoke and the waters were gathered. God spoke and the land produced grass.

The world was created through speech. The midrash counts ten separate instances of God speaking things into creation—light, dry land, grass and plants, heavenly lights.<sup>1</sup> But in the barely nascent world, God was alone. So to whom was God speaking?

Chizkuni, a thirteenth century French commentator, answers: “God spoke to His heart and to His own thoughts.”<sup>2</sup> God spoke to God’s own thoughts. And research has shown that we, in fact, can do the same thing. We can affect our thoughts through our own words.

Because language is so powerful, choices in the language we use can have profound impacts. Our statements, as we speak to others and even to ourselves, influence our perception of the world.

In fact, there is an ongoing debate in the field of linguistics as to whether our native language can actually affect our thoughts. If a language has fewer words for color or time or number, does that have some bearing on a speaker’s ability to conceive of those concepts? Does it impact the way we present ideas? For example, an Israeli cannot hide behind the statement, “I spent the evening with a neighbor,” but rather must identify the gender of that neighbor, since Hebrew, as with many European languages, has genders for all nouns. “New research has revealed that when we learn our mother tongue, we do after all acquire certain habits of thought that shape our experience in significant and often surprising ways,” concluded a recent *New York Times Magazine* article.<sup>3</sup>

What perceptions and attitudes do we reinforce through the language we use to refer to people around the world? When we speak about the “other,” the “Third World,” the “needy,” the language we use colors our vision of them in our mind’s eye, and motivates a particular type of response. When we portray Africa, for example, as a monolithic primitive region, we respond differently than if we use specific language that emphasizes the uniqueness and complexity of the challenges faced by different people in different locations. Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina offers this tongue-in-cheek advice about how to portray his native continent:

Always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title. ... Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. ... In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people

<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot 5:1, Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 32a and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Chizkuni, Genesis 1:3.

<sup>3</sup> Deutscher, Guy. “Does Your Language Shape How You Think?” *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 August 2010: MM42. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/magazine/29language-t.html>

who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions.<sup>4</sup>

As Wainaina illustrates, even when ostensibly writing sympathetically, language can lead us to pity. Pity may in turn lead to a response that does not take into account the knowledge and experience of those we are trying to assist. It may cause us instead to offer simple answers without respect or understanding, or to provide needed resources but not the more greatly needed support for people's efforts to provide for themselves.

Language that invokes respect and solidarity, however, is more likely to lead us to solutions to global poverty that focus on human rights and support grassroots organizations—those best placed to envision, articulate and implement their own plans for the development of their communities and countries. AJWS's grantmaking model exemplifies this approach, "echo[ing] the belief that empowerment is the highest level of *tzedakah*. Our goal is to help our grantees succeed on their own, enabling them to develop, support and sustain their own strategies for transformation."<sup>5</sup>

Language can powerfully affect both thought and action, evoking either pity and paternalism or solidarity and respect. Careful use of words is sometimes derided as meaningless "political correctness" that takes energy away from actual action and, certainly, changing the way one describes someone disadvantaged, for example, does not provide that person with needed support and resources. But language can restore dignity, and thus increase the chance that listeners—including the speaker—might then take the best possible action to support those who are working to better their own lives and to create the kind of world in which they hope to live.

In the *shacharit* service every morning, we praise God with the words, 'Blessed is the One who spoke, bringing the world into being.' Let this prayer remind us of the power of language and inspire us to use our words to create just worlds.



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<sup>4</sup> Wainaina, Binyavanga. "How to Write about Africa." *Granta* 92, Winter 2005: 91–95.

<sup>5</sup> American Jewish World Service. Annual Report 2009. New York: AJWS, June 2010. [http://ajws.org/who\\_we\\_are/publications/annual\\_reports/2009/](http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/annual_reports/2009/).

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