

## The Army of Letters: How Speech Creates Reality

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller  
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A couple weeks ago at Shabbat lunch, David Sutin asked me a question: What does the term "*Adonai Tz'vaot*" mean?

This phrase is probably familiar to you from the prayer book, where we encounter it several times.

One example is in the K'dushah part of the Amidah, the famous words: "*kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai Tz'vaot, m'lo chol ha-aretz k'vodo*—holy, holy, holy is *Adonai Tz'vaot*, the fullness of the whole earth is God's glory."

It also occurs numerous times in the Tanakh, including in this week's haftarah, which says: "Had not *Adonai Tz'vaot* left some survivors, we would be like Sodom, another Gomorrah" (*Isaiah* 1:9).

As you might infer from the context, "*Adonai Tz'vaot*" is one of God's names. It's usually translated "Lord of Hosts."

Which begs the question: What is a "Host"?

Hint: It doesn't have anything to do with the hospitality business. Although "Lord of Hosts" would be a great title for a *maitre d'*.

But in biblical speak, "host" is a fancy way of saying "army." So, "*Adonai Tz'vaot*" would mean "Lord of armies." It's basically a way of saying that God is a military commander.

This makes sense because God leads the Israelite troops to victory in battle numerous times. In fact, back in *Exodus*, when God splits the sea so we can pass safely to the other side, drowning Pharaoh's chariots in our wake, the people acclaim God as "*ish milchamah*—a man of war" (*Ex.* 15:3).

But Rabbi Marc-Alain Ouaknin explains that the word "*tz'vaot*" can also be understood another way.

The Hebrew word "*tzeva*" means "army." "*Tz'vaot*" could simply be the plural: "armies."

But Rabbi Ouaknin proposes reading it differently by breaking the word into two parts: "*tzeva*" and "*ot*." "*Ot*" means "letter." So, he says "*Adonai Tz'vaot*" can also mean "Lord of the Army of Letters."<sup>1</sup>

This makes sense, too; because, according to the Torah, God created the world by saying things like "let there be light," etc.—and the foundation of speech is words, and the foundation of words is letters.

So, God, the commander of the army of letters, marshaled His troops, the 22 letters of the aleph-bet, and used them to create the world. Meaning that words are the very substance of all existence.

And even more than that: Words are the primary means by which we know and experience God.

Kabbalah and Hasidism teach that when God created the world, God contracted Himself into the letters of the Torah.<sup>2</sup>

This means that when we study Torah, we are engaging not only with God's Word, but, more importantly, with *God Himself*, who, as it were, *is* Word and creates Reality through speech.

As we say in the Ma'ariv Aravim prayer, "*Adonai Tz'vaot sh'mo*—the Lord of the Army of Letters is God's name."

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This is one meaning of the biblical statement that God created human beings in God's image: that we, alone among all living things, have the capacity for speech; and like God, we use it to create reality.

This has been true, if not since the mythical time of Adam and Eve, then at least since what the historian Yuval Harari calls the "Cognitive Revolution."

About 70,000 years ago, our species, *Homo Sapiens*, evolved the ability to use language not only for rudimentary communication but to articulate abstract concepts, tell stories, and envision realities that did not exist.<sup>3</sup>

This new cognitive capacity enabled us to be like God by *speaking* reality into being.

For example, we're sitting here tonight at Temple Beth-El of Great Neck: Great Neck is not inherent in the cosmos; it exists only because we human beings declared that this particular spot on the globe is called "Great Neck." Its boundaries with Thomaston and Kings Point are similarly not facts of nature but, rather, facts of human speech.

And what is Temple Beth-El? A nonprofit religious organization with the mission of promoting Reform Judaism? These things, too, are human innovations that came about—and could *only* come about—through the act of speech.

And just as the political boundaries in which we live and the organizations in which we gather are creations of speech, so too are the ordinary, day-to-day stuff of our lives, including our relationships with other people.

With the words we say—whether we say them face-to-face or in a text message or on social media to no one in particular—we shape the contours of our world.

As President Obama famously said, "words matter."

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I worry about this coming off as trite, like a message to preschoolers. But it's not. It's not just about speaking kindly and using nice words, though that is surely important.

It's also more complicated than that. The enterprise of speaking is fraught with many complex dynamics.

Sometimes, we think we're using nice words and speaking kindly, and yet we still find ourselves in conflict with others or causing harm when our intentions were only good. Why is that?

The anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu says that words only have meaning in the context of the social structure in which they are spoken.<sup>4</sup>

In layman's terms, the meaning and impact of what you say depends on the social dynamic between you and the person you're speaking to.

That social dynamic is defined by things like power and culture.

For example, the social dynamic between an employer and an employee is different from the dynamic between two peers. The dynamic between a parent and a child—even a grown one—is different from the dynamic between two siblings or two friends.

So, a sentence spoken by a parent to a child will mean something different than the *very same* sentence spoken by one friend to another.

Imagine that I say to my friend: "I'm proud of you." That's a nice thing to say, and it will probably make her smile and feel good.

But now, imagine that I say to my 9-year-old son: "I'm proud of you." That's something that's likely to do more than elicit a fleeting smile. It will probably impact his emotional development and self-esteem throughout his life because the psychological force of those words in that social relation is so great. How many people strive their whole life to hear those words from their parent?

Now imagine your coworker says to you: "Wow, that vacation must have cost you a fortune!" How would that make you feel? Maybe you'd blow it off—or secretly feel proud of yourself that you were able to afford it.

Would it affect you differently if your boss said the same thing to you? Or if your mom said it?

In those cases, you might feel judged. You might feel like your boss thinks she's paying you too much or that you're not working hard enough. You might feel like your mom is offering unwanted commentary about how you spend your money, even if in her mind she was just making conversation.

Words matter, yes, but it's also more than that: It matters *who* you're talking to and what the particular dynamics of your relationship are, because *all* those things will impact the way your words are interpreted.

That's why something you might say as an offhand comment or even as a compliment can be misinterpreted and cause conflict when that's not what you meant to do at all.

If we want to create and live in a world of peace and harmony, it is essential that we learn to be aware of these nuances of speech.

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You may know that the Kabbalah imagines 10 aspects of God called the "*s'firot*." Each *s'firah*, or individual aspect, is associated with one of the names of God.

The name *Adonai Tz'vaot* is connected to the *s'firah* called "*Netzach*."5 *Netzach* is what Rabbi Art Green calls one of "the channels through which the higher energies pass on their way"6 down to us.

Or, as another writer calls it: a "tactical" *s'firah*.7

It is the aspect of God's personality, and our own, that helps us find the *most effective* way to communicate the message we want to convey.

This kind of tact is critical because just saying whatever is on your mind with no filter can backfire and cause hurt. The way we speak to others *creates* the world we will inhabit, for better or for worse.

As we remember the destruction of Tisha B'Av next week and begin tonight the Book of D'varim, which is all about words, this is a lesson we ought to keep in mind:

How important it is, when we have something to say, to pause and channel our inner *Adonai Tz'vaot*, Lord of the Army of Letters, and choose our words tactfully and with sensitivity to the kind of relationships we want and the kind of world we hope to create.

1 Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Mystery of Numbers*, 276

2 See, e.g., various teachings by Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl in *Sefer Me'or Einayim*.

3 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*, ix

4 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*

5 Jewish Virtual Library, "The Ten Sefirot: Netzah," <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ten-sefirot-netzah>

6 Rabbi Arthur Green, "Introduction," in: Daniel Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. I*, LI

7 Rabbi Shimon Lieberman, Aish.com, "Kabbalah #20: Netzach and Hod: Means to an End," [https://aish.com/kabbala\\_20\\_netzach\\_and\\_hod\\_means\\_to\\_an\\_end/](https://aish.com/kabbala_20_netzach_and_hod_means_to_an_end/)