

Momma Lashon

Horav Ben Tzion Yodler, zl, relates an incident that took place in Eretz Yisrael during the early part of the twentieth century. A group of rabbanim-- among them Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Horav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Horav Yonasan Binyamin Horowitz, Horav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, and Horav Ben Tzion Yodler-- traveled to the Galil to visit the new moshavim that were being established. Their goal was to impress upon the residents the importance of religious observance. The decision to send such a large contingent was based upon the enormity of the challenge. What they saw was disheartening. There was really no intention on the part of the pioneers to observe any aspect of the Torah. They were establishing physical homes for themselves and building the country for the future. Religion was simply not part of their architectural strategy. They had long ago left religion in Europe. The rabbanim were well aware of their challenges, and they set about preparing a religious offensive to save these Jews lost by total alienation. Rav Ben Tzion asked for an appointment to meet with the director of the primary organization in charge of developing the land and the settlements. The director agreed to meet under the condition that the conversation would take place in Ivrit, Hebrew. This was at a time when Hebrew was a religion and represented one's level of Jewishness.

Rav Ben Tzion began the meeting by telling one of his famous stories. "It happened in Russia a number of years ago. A young Jewish couple began their life together with the usual poverty, but with great aspirations for the future. Their mama lashon, mother tongue, was Yiddish - for the time being. As the young man succeeded in commerce, developing contacts and affiliations with others who had long ago rejected the mother tongue for the voguish Russian language, it became their new vernacular of communication. It reached a point where they hardly ever uttered a Yiddish word. It was always Russian.

The time came for their first child to be born, and the young man rushed to call the doctor. He came quickly, but did nothing. The young woman was in great pain, but the doctor said it was not yet time for him to get involved. She screamed, and the doctor remained adamant; it was not yet time. "Why are you making my wife go through this agony?" the man asked the doctor. "Do something to ease the pain," he demanded.

"It is not yet time," the doctor replied. "Do not worry. When it will be the 'real thing,' I will do what is necessary." This went on for another hour until the woman screamed in Yiddish, Momma, helf mir! "Mother, help me!"

"Now," exclaimed the doctor, "she is ready. Once she began to shriek in her mother tongue, I knew it was sincere. She is crying out from the heart. The time has come."

Rav Ben Tzion concluded, "My dear director. You asked that we converse in Hebrew. I am sorry, but I must speak to you from the inner recesses of my heart. For that I must speak in momma lashon, the language that has been with our people for generations. It is the dialect that conveys my innermost feelings. It is the expression of sincerity. It is the symbol of my integrity and emotion."