

## “Word Games”

A rabbi colleague turned me on to the smart phone screen game Wordle a few weeks ago. Once I was hooked, he told me about Vordle (the Hebrew version). Then our educational director let me know about Jewdle. Today I discovered Verdel (the Yiddish version – in the Forverts, vo denn!).

As you can see, I now spend way too much time on these verbal games, ostensibly to keep my mind from atrophying, and in the case of the Hebrew and Yiddish, to build up my paltry vocabulary.

Every time I play, I feel a smug satisfaction when I win, combined with a withering humility for not seeing the answer sooner. So I suppose there’s a psychotherapeutic aspect to it as well. Maybe even a moral one, *halvai!*

Digging into my synapses for those words makes me realize how grateful I am for the luxury of a lifetime of learning. As much as I’ve forgotten or neglected, I worked hard to learn whatever I’ve managed to learn. So have we all.

Those English words are my lifeblood, my parlance with the people of this great country and community. The Hebrew and Yiddish, however, are my *life*. They are the vessels that contain the history, hopes, dreams, values, beliefs, and even the skepticisms of my existence. Without them, I am empty. With them, I am whole and content. I am the Jewish person I hoped to become. Or at least I am getting there.

One of the Hebrew words for “word” is *teiva*. It is the same word the Torah uses to name the boat that God commands Noach to build in order to contain the

future of all life after it is nearly destroyed. It is the same word used to name the basket that floats Moses down the Nile toward survival, and ultimately toward his role as savior of our people and our dream of receiving Torah. So a word is a container, a basket, an ark. A life-saving vessel.

As those *teivot* reveal themselves on my little screen, I think about how much of this learning I have neglected to convey to those in my charge. I haven't taught them enough of the vocabulary of Jewish life to give them the facility of living a full Jewish life. I haven't done enough to give them *Jewish fluency*, or the confidence that comes with that fluency.

Ask anyone who has lacked it and then worked to achieve it. They will attest to the difference it makes. A Passover seder is completely different. Yom Kippur is completely different. Shabbat dinner is completely different. A trip to Israel is completely different. Reading books and articles about serious Jewish issues is completely different. A heated conversation with a fellow Jew over theology, practice, or politics is completely different. Even sitting through the Purimspiel is different. It's *all* different – and light years better.

In the time I have left in this office, I want to redouble my efforts to make our Jews more whole, verbally and otherwise. I want to find more ways to create access to the vast intelligence that allows us to carry ourselves along through the floodwaters of our turbulent history.

I want all of us – from toddlers to the very old – to keep learning the Torah of Jewish words and the great ideas they contain. I want us all to deepen our practice of Torah learning, spiritual awareness, deeds of lovingkindness, and

advocacy for our people, all of which we can do more thoroughly and meaningfully through the tools of our sacred vocabulary.

And now a few five-letter seasonal Jewish *teivot* for your edification and entertainment:

Purim; Haman; Masks; Pesah; Matza; Maror; Magid; Dayenu (it's only five letters in Hebrew).

May your Purim and Pesach be joyous, hilarious, captivating, and memorable.

And don't waste too much time playing Wordle, Jewdle, Vordle, Verdel, etc.

Maybe find a good book about Jewish holidays instead?

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