A number of years ago I was struck by an element of the study of Torah that was truly hidden in plain sight. The Hebrew names conventionally assigned to the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy—B’midbar and D’varim—were etymologically equivalent. They are both derived from the same root letters ̀ד-בר [d-b-r]. What could connect the two? And while thinking about that, we could also add devir and d’vorah. What ties together wilderness, word (thing, matter), the inner sanctuary of Solomon’s Temple, and bee?

An old friend and a scholar of ancient Semitic and cognate languages once told me that the tri-literal root can be associated with a term for herding sheep out to pasture. The action of d-b-r is one of driving away. This notion makes sense. Midbar and d’vorah both clearly connect to being driven out or away. Devir reverses the direction; it is not out but rather in, yet also away. As for davar, the root itself, what distinguishes a word or a thing is its articulation; the quality that separates out from other words and things.

Words, in particular, are communicated principally through the means of speaking and hearing, and of reading and writing. As Robert Gibbs notes in his Talmud-like analysis of modern thought, Why Ethics?, the former is a synchronic activity that acknowledges the existence of an ‘other’, and the latter is fundamentally a reach across time. What I am writing right now will not be read by you for another few months. Words are indeed a mode of connection, but first they divide.

Sometimes words connect, sometimes they alienate, and sometimes they simply fail. This issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly is especially attentive to the variety of purposes to which words are put. We begin with the papers delivered at a symposium on “Poetry after Auschwitz,” organized by our colleague Bruce Kadden at Pacific Lutheran University. Most of us are familiar with Theodor Adorno’s disparagement of writing poetry in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Words, we are reminded, are not merely a means of communication, but also carriers of aesthetic value. Yet poetry persists. Rabbi Kadden joins with four faculty colleagues...
to explore and analyze those who insisted on continuing to write poetry even in the face of suffering.

Three more contributions also touch upon the force—and the limit—of words. Amy Scheinerman (“The Human God and the Divine Human: ‘And’ or ‘Or’?”) tackles what can be said about that which appears to be unsayable, namely descriptions of God. She focuses on the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic assertions of Rabbinic literature in order to ask just what is being communicated.

Elliot Gertel’s review essay (“Behind Heschel’s Theology”) examines three books that illuminate the life and thought of the rabbi, scholar, theologian, and activist Abraham J. Heschel. Over a relatively short life (he died in 1973 at the age of 66), Heschel wrote with fluidity and literacy in four languages. The subject matter was dense and complex, but the style tended toward the poetic. Words, Heschel knew, could not merely point—toward a thing, an idea, or an emotion—they must also transcend. Gertel weaves together three recent books: one by a Jewish scholar, one by a Christian, and the third focusing on the thought of one of Heschel’s mentors, David Koigen.

David Whiman (“Making the Undiscussable Discussable”) examines the practical and organization issues when people choose not to disclose. Words occasionally create their own self-fulfilling prophecies. Envisioning future problems, anxiety, or embarrassment, we sometimes simply do not speak. Refraining from disclosing is rarely a successful long-run strategy, and Rabbi Whiman discusses ways of avoiding falling into silence.

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Beyond examination of the use and limits of words, this issue covers fields of study from biblical studies to modern literature: Bernard Mehlman and Gabriel Padawar’s Maayanot offering “Selections from Arnold B. Ehrlich’s Die Psalmen (The Psalms)”; David Zucker’s “Of Mice and Men, ‘Idiots First,’ and Genesis 22”; and Wendy Zieler’s “(Re-)Naming the Tradition: Jo Sinclair’s Waste-land as Lesbian Jewish Novel.” Stanley Ringler (“The Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel”) provides a thoughtful and provocative discussion of one of Israel’s more persistent civil rights challenges. As does Nicole Roberts (“It’s Time to End Our Silence on Syria”) in speaking about a Jewish response to the humanitarian disaster in Syria. Finally, Daniel Utley (“‘For I Have Given You Good Counselors, You Shall Not Forsake Them’”) takes up an important
question with the respect to the role of faculty at the URJ camps: who are the principal concern of rabbis, cantors, and educators when they serve at these camps, the campers or the counselors?

Many of you recognize the color of the cover of the *Journal* has changed. In Jewish terms, January 2015 is just another month in a civic calendar. It remains the Hebrew year 5775. With this issue, however, we are in the middle of what is for most of us the programmatic and academic year. A leaf has been turned, so to speak, as we move toward the largesse of spring. I do hope that the articles and poetry offered here provide both light and warmth until then.

Paul Golomb, Editor

**Note**

1. Princeton University Press, 2000. Dr. Gibbs, who teaches at the University of Toronto, grew up in the Reform Movement and has been a member of Holy Blossom Temple.