Praying in English or in Hebrew?

Previously, we discussed the importance of understanding what we are saying when we pray. I explained that the words of the Tefila (Jewish prayer) were not formulated to be “pronounced” as if they were magic words, but to be “assimilated” by our intellect and our heart, and thus molding our personality, helping us to be closer to HaShem, feeling His Presence, trusting more in Him, etc.

Obviously, for this to happen, it is essential to understand what we are saying.

Now, many people wonder: if all the spiritual effect of prayers depends on understanding what we say, why do we recite the Tefila in Hebrew? Why not saying it better in the language that one understands?

The answer to this important question requires a more elaborate explanation than usual.

THE RABBIS ALLOWED IT. The Sages of the Talmud allowed, and even suggested, that a person should pray in the language that he or she understands. And do you know where they learned this idea from? From the first word of the Shema Israel. In Hebrew, as in English, there are two words with a very similar meaning, that describe the auditory activity. One is lishmoa (listening) and the other is leha-azin (hearing). The difference between “hearing” and “listening” is attention. “Listening” implies paying attention. “Hearing” does not require attention and may even be involuntary. I can be listening to music, and involuntarily, hearing annoying noises.

In Hebrew it is very similar: lishmoa (to listen) besides “attention” also includes “understanding” (and “obedience”, but that is for another day …). A good non-literal translation of the first word of the Shema Israel would be: “We must know / understand that … HaShem is our God, HaShem is one.” The sages of the Gemara said that by using the word “Shema'” the Tora is indicating that we should understand the words we say. □□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□ ,□□□’ I should say this text, and by extension all the text of the prayers, in a language that I

understand.
THE TRADITION: In any case, the idea of □□saying Tefila in the local language was always applied individually and not publicly. That is, traditional Jewish communities never (to my knowledge) recited the public prayers in the local language. However, people individually do read and recite different parts of Tefila in the language they understand. I think the main reason for this custom has to do with the need to preserve Hebrew language "nationally" , as a fundamental element of our Jewish identity. I explain. Imagine if every Jewish community in the world would recite their prayers in the local language. What would happen when a Jew from New York travels to Europe? How would he feel in a Synagogue in France, Russia or Germany? Unfortunately, we are already divided into Sefaradim, Ashkenazim, Hassidim, and many, many more groups and sub-groups. The Hebrew language, the language of the Tora, is one of the fundamental elements that unites all of us, and helps us (or forces us!) to forge a national Jewish identity. We can see this today, when we travel so much, much better than in the past. Thanks to the fact that we keep the Hebrew language in community prayers, it does not matter which synagogue of the world you go, if you know Hebrew you will always feel as if you were in your own synagogue! And if you know Hebrew you can actively participate in their religious community activity. Keeping the same language, Hebrew, to recite Tefila has probably helped us more than we think, to keep us united as one people.
MY RECOMMENDATION: Although, as we said, it is fine to recite the Tefila individually in the language one understands, I think that this should be only a temporary situation.
If you do not know how to read Hebrew, you should read in English while learning to read Hebrew. And once you learn reading Hebrew, I think it would be best to use a Siddur (prayer book) with linear translation (and or transliteration. Ask your Rabbi!). This type of text will allow you to recite the Tefia in Hebrew, and to read –silently and virtually at the same time–the translation of the text you are saying.
B'H tomorrow I will present one more reason why I think we should make every effort to pray, even individually, in Hebrew, the language of Abraham, Itshaq and Yaaqob.
(To be continued….)