

We start our story of words with the story of the word “word” — דָּבָר [davar] — and with its long and curious history. The root ד.ב.ר [d.v.r], which gives us דָּבָר [davar], may originally have been an imitative root meaning “buzzing” — giving us דְּבוּרָה [d’vorah] “bee” — before coming to mean “communicate” and then “speak.” (A different root with the same letters progressed in meaning from “be behind” to “drive from behind” to “lead” to “subjugate” to “destroy,” and shows up in the idiom יַדְבֵּר עַמִּים [yadber anim] “[God] will subjugate nations” seen in Psalms 18:47 and 47:4; in II Chronicles 22:10, where וַתְּדַבֵּר [vat’daber] means “she led”; and in the Modern Hebrew מְדַבֵּיר [madbir] “exterminator.” It is probably this second root that gives us מִדְּבָר [midbar] “desert” and דֶּבֶר [dever] “blight,” and it may even be behind דְּבוֹרוֹת [dovrot] “rafts,” that is, things behind the ship, in I Kings 5:23, and דְּבִיר [dvir], the hindmost or innermost sanctum of the Temple. All of these roots might even have something in common, bridged by a connection between “spokesperson” and “leader.”)

At any rate, דִּבֵּר [diber] means “spoke,” and so a דָּבָר [davar] is that which is spoken, “a word,” and also that which is spoken about, “a thing.” (Speaking of things, our English word “thing” similarly comes from a word meaning “discussion.”)

Among the most famous sets of words are the Ten Commandments, collectively called דְּבָרִים

[*d'varim*] in Exodus, and עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים [*aseret had'varaim*] in Mishnah Tamid 5:1. (When these 10 words became the foundation of our law, they followed backwards the path of the English word “word”: “word” comes from the Sanskrit “vratam” meaning “law.”) The common appellation עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים [*aseret hadibrot*] contains not the plural of דָּבָר [*davar*] but comes from the plural of a similar word, דִּבֵּר [*diber*], first found in Jeremiah 5:13 but not commonly used until much later. At first it too meant “word,” and then later came to mean “commandment.”

Among the most famous “things” are the mysterious ones after which the story of the Binding of Isaac takes place. Though we are told that it was “After these things...” — דְּבָרִים [*d'varim*] — we do not know which things they might be. But surely God knows, for a few verses earlier we read that no thing — דָּבָר [*davar*] — is beyond Adonai.

Proverbs 10:19 warns us that too many דְּבָרִים [*d'varim*] cause offense, while Proverbs 24:26 counters that the one who responds with the right דְּבָרִים [*d'varim*] gets a kiss.

And let us not forget Hosea’s plea — קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל־ה' [*k'chu imachem d'varim v'shuvu el adonai*] — “take words with you and return to God.”

And so דָּבָר [*davar*], reminiscent of a buzzing bee, is a word and a thing, a condemnation and a consolation, a mystery and a path to God. And that’s quite a thing for a word to be.