How to Talk Your Way into a Community

By David Nelson

I'm at a party, mingling, enjoying the people and the food, when suddenly I stumble into a group whose members are speaking a language I don't understand. I'm confused. I know they are English speakers. I was just chatting with that person a few minutes ago about the latest news from the Middle East. And those two were at a committee meeting with me not long ago and I distinctly remember that they both spoke English there.

What's going on? Then it dawns on me that the little knot of folks into whose midst I have come are all doctors, or all lawyers, or all CPAs, or whatever, and they've started talking shop. I realize that it is English - sort of - but it's a special kind of language, a professional jargon, known only to the initiated. I drift off to find another group, my only hope for revenge being that some day one of them will come along while I'm talking with a bunch of rabbis. I'll show them!

The primary function of language is to communicate, to allow one human being to exchange thoughts, ideas or feelings with another. But a second function, closely related to the first, is to create relationships and communities. This happens in two ways. The first is that the content of language can be the basis for relationships: "Hi, my name's David. You look like you're new here. Can I show you around?" This would facilitate the start of a relationship.

The second way is that the form of language, the vocabulary, the expressions, or countless little pieces of linguistic code can be a subtle way of saying, "I think we have something in common." You sit down on an airplane, and the person sitting next to you says, "How 'bout those Yankees!" This may be a comment about baseball, but it is also probably code for "I am a proud New Yorker. Are you? Do we have something in common?"

Professional jargon of any kind also serves two functions. It streamlines the highly specialized communication that occurs among members of a profession, allowing them to communicate more information, with greater precision, in fewer words. And it fosters a sense of group identity and cohesion among those who share the "secret language."

Among Jews, whether at a party, on a plane, or even in shul, the same functions are served by language. We throw in an occasional Yiddish word, even if we know virtually no Yiddish, or we use other language signals. On a recent Friday morning, I called an electrician to come fix a short circuit. I asked that someone show up any time after 2:00 p.m. "But it can't be too much later than that," I said to the man on the phone, "because we observe the Sabbath and so the work will

have to be done by 4:30 p.m. at the latest." "OK," he mumbled only half to himself as he jotted a note on the work order, "shomer Shabbos." I laughed, as did he, for we both understood the code that had been exchanged.

One caveat: As language can be used to foster relationships and community, it can be used just as effectively to cut people out of a group, making them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Doctors and lawyers have tried in recent years to be sensitive to this, explaining things in "regular English" to patients and clients. As Jews, we would do well to adopt a similar sensitivity, always being aware of words or phrases we might use that could alienate another Jew who happens not to understand them. If we are really interested in forging bonds of community with other Jews, we must take care to speak in ways that draw them closer rather than in ways that push them away.