



"Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." Genesis 11.9

OH GO ON! READ THIS – DAVKA MICHAEL GILLIS

Hebrew can be beautifully imprecise. Some words can mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean. A bit like *nu* in Yiddish. One of these enigmatic words is *davka* which you can look up in the Biblical Hebrew Lexicon and it's *davka* not there! *Davka* is used frequently in Modern Hebrew but don't expect to learn it in the Ulpan. You may be walking down Golders Green Road and hear two Jewish matriarchs discussing the relative merits of Kosher restaurants, "Rivky, you know what, I'll never go there again – they *davka* charged me for a glass of water!" Here the translation is perhaps 'out of sheer spite.' The next topic of conversation may be unmarried daughters, "would you credit it, Bluma, she went all the way to Israel to look for a guy and she *davka* ends up going out with Mendel from next door!" Translation may be, 'she makes a point by...' The yiddishised noun is *davkanik*. As a school-teacher I use this term frequently in a pedagogic context, for example, "you're such a *davkanik*, Aron, the whole class is working diligently but you are intent on wasting your time." So a *davkanik* is a purveyor of *davka* behaviour – for him black

is white. He will argue that Togo will win the World Cup simply because everyone else agrees that they are complete no-hopers.

The root of the word is DKK in Hebrew and DYK in Aramaic. The Hebrew version means to crush or pulverise; the Aramaic version meaning to be exact and gives rise to words like *dak* meaning 'fine' or 'thin' (the result of crushing) and *dikduk*, the exact study of the fine points of Hebrew grammar. The rabbinical student would be familiar with *davka* as it is a frequently used term in Talmud. In a discussion about the sale of slaves in Tractate Gittin 44a, the Gemara states '*Davka o lav davka*'. The statement is made there that a slave may be ransomed for up to 100 times his value. The Gemara asks, "Is the expression 'a hundred' to be taken 'exactly' (*davka*) or 'loosely' (*lav davka*).

So the next time you hear the word used in conversation, contain your excitement and tell them that you *davka* know what it means.

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