

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vaeschanan

The Meaning of the Word “Totafos”

Concept: Words from Foreign Languages in the Chumash

וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ

Bind them as a sign upon your arm, and they shall be as totafos between your eyes.¹

INTRODUCTION: THE FOUR COMPARTMENTS OF THE TEFILLIN

The Gemara in Maseches Sanhedrin² discusses the source for the idea the tefillin shel rosh (tefillin worn on the head) are divided into four separate compartments. A most surprising answer is cited in the name of R' Akiva:

”טט” בכתפי שנים, ”פת” באפריקי שנים

The word “tat” in Katfei means two, and the word “pat” in Afrikei means two.

According to R' Akiva, the total of four compartments comes from combining the two parts of the word “טט-פת”, each meaning two in a different foreign language. Needless to say, this explanation itself requires some explanation. As far as we know, the Torah is written in Lashon Hakodesh, not Katfian or African! What is the meaning of us adducing interpretations regarding a word in the Chumash from non-Hebrew words?³

¹ Devarim 6:8.

² 4b.

³ There is one case where a very obviously non-Hebrew phrase appears in the Chumash, namely, the words “גַּר שְׁהוֹדוּתָא” in the end of Parshas Vayetzei (Bereishis 31:47), with reference to the pile of stones set up by Yaakov and Lavan upon taking leave of one another. However, there, the verse informs us that this is what Lavan called it in his native Aramean tongue, while Yaakov called it “גִּלְעָד” in Hebrew (ibid. See also Rabbeinu Bachye to Devarim 33:25). In our case, however, the word “totafos” is being used by the Torah itself.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

This phenomenon can be seen elsewhere in the Talmud as well. For example:

- ▷ The Gemara in Shabbos⁴ states that fear of heaven is the singular most important trait a person can acquire, and against which all others are secondary. To this, R' Yishmael cites the verse from Iyov⁵ which states: “הֵן יִרְאַת ה' הִיא הַחֵמָה” – *Indeed, fear of Hashem is [the quintessential] wisdom,*” noting that the word “*hen*” in Greek means one.⁶
- ▷ In Maseches Sukkah,⁷ the Gemara seeks to derive from the verse that the “*pri etz hadar*” mentioned in the Torah⁸ regarding the four species on Sukkos is an esrog. One of the proofs comes from the fact that the esrog requires a large amount of water in order to grow. What does this have to do with the words “*pri etz hadar*”? Ben Azai explains that the word “*hadar*” relates to the Greek word for water – *hydra*; hence, the verse is indicating that this fruit requires a lot of water for its growth.
- ▷ In Maseches Rosh Hashanah, the Gemara discusses the meaning of Hashem’s words to Moshe at Har Sinai, that “*when the Yovel will sound, the people will [again] be permitted to ascend the mountain.*”⁹ The Gemara explains that Yovel means a ram’s horn, for in Arabia, they call a ram a “*yovla*”.¹⁰

In all these instances, we likewise ask: How is the meaning of a word in a non-Hebrew language relevant to explaining a word in the Chumash? Additionally, there are established words in Hebrew for the numbers one and two, as well as the word water! Why would the Torah not simply use those words?

IBN SHUWIB: LASHON HAKODESH – THE MOTHER OF ALL TONGUES

A most fascinating and profound explanation of this matter is found in the writings of one of the Rishonim, a student of the Rashba, Rabbeinu Yehoshua ibn Shuwib.¹¹

Before the nations of the world became dispersed, the verse describes them as having one language.¹² According to Chazal, that language was *Lashon Hakodesh*.¹³ Hence, when the people were subsequently dispersed and divided into seventy separate nations and languages, *Lashon Hakodesh* likewise fragmented, with the bulk of it remaining as *Lashon Hakodesh*, but with each of the seventy languages retaining some vestige of it, as expressed in some of their words. As such, there are times when the Sages seek to demonstrate the meaning of a word in *Lashon Hakodesh* by using a foreign language, as they discern that this word retained its original *Lashon*

4 31b.

5 28:28.

6 See also Sanhedrin 76b, cited in Rashi to Vayikra 20:14, regarding the meaning of the word “*אתהן*” in that verse.

7 35a.

8 Vayikra 23:40

9 Shemos 19:

10 Rosh Hashanah 26a, see there for numerous other examples of this idea.

11 Derashos Ri Ibn Shuwib, Drush for Parshas Noach.

12 Bereishis 11:1.

13 Midrash, cited in Rashi to Bereishis ibid.

Hakodesh meaning even as it became part of a different language.¹⁴

Perhaps it is in place to add that in the above-mentioned cases, the point of the Gemara is not that the basic meaning of the word the Chumash uses is unknown and can only be accessed by referring to a different language. After all, the Hebrew word “*hadar*” means beautiful, just as the word “*hen*” means indeed, and this is the primary meaning of these words in those verses as well. Likewise, the word “*totafos*” has a basic meaning beyond simply indicating how many compartments there are.¹⁵ Rather, the point is that there are additional messages that can be gleaned from those words by considering their residual meanings in other languages.

BLESSING THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WITH LOVE

Let us conclude our discussion with a fascinating example of the above idea, as found in the words of later commentators. As we know the text of the blessing recited by the kohanim before blessing the people concludes by saying:

וְצוּנו לְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה

[Hashem] commanded us to bless His people, Israel, with love.

Many have wondered about this blessing. While it is true that Hashem commanded the kohanim to bless the people, where do we see that He commanded them to do so “with love”?

When we look at the verse that introduces this mitzvah in the Torah, perhaps we will find the answer. The verse reads:

דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם

Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying, “So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them.”¹⁶

In other instances, when one is told to say something, the word used is “*Emor*”.¹⁷ Here, however, the Torah used the word “*Amor*”. Why the change? As we know, in numerous languages, the word “*amore*” or “*amour*” means love. This too, derives from *Lashon Hakodesh*, so that when Hashem tells the kohanim “*amor lahem*,” He is saying, “bless them with love”!¹⁸

14 The Shelah Hakadosh, in Derashah 3 for Shabbos Hagadol, sec. 8, expresses a similar approach. See also commentary *Haboneh* to Ein Yaakov, Rosh Hashanah 26b and R’ Reuven Margolios, *Margolios Hayam* to Sanhedrin 4b sec. 6-7.

15 See e.g. Rashi to Shemos loc. cit.

16 Bamidbar 6:23.

17 See e.g. Vayikra 21:1.

18 R’ Moshe David Valle, commentary to Bamidbar loc. cit. and R’ Eliezer Papo (author of *Pele Yoetz*) in his work *Elef Hamagen*. For further discussion of Lashon Hakodesh and other languages, see Sefer Habachur by R’ Eliyahu Habachur maamar 4, cited by Malbim to Vayikra chap. 2 sec. 152, and Torah Temimah to Bereishis 15:2.