

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

Speaking Lashon Hakodesh

וְהִנֵּה עֵינֶיכֶם רְאוּת וְעֵינַי אָחִי בְנִימִין כִּי פִי הַמְדַבֵּר אֵלֵיכֶם

Behold, your eyes see... that it is my mouth that is speaking to you¹

Rashi explains the phrase “that it is my mouth speaking to you” as saying that Yosef was speaking to his brothers in lashon hakodesh. This is also the approach of Onkelos, who translates: “ארי בלישנכון אנא ממלל” – *for I am speaking to you in your language.*” Through this, Yosef was seeking to verify that it was indeed him who was speaking to them.

WHEREFORE THE PROOF?

It is amazing to consider that even though Yosef had already revealed himself to his brothers, saying “I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold to Mitzrayim,” he still needed to prove that it was indeed him. The commentators explain that the reason the brothers did not respond when he said he was Yosef is partly because they were not sure if they could believe him! All they knew about this individual is that he had been confounding and tormenting them since they first met him. Perhaps he had met Yosef some years back, heard his story of how his brothers had sold him, and decided to further torment them by impersonating their long-lost brother. As such, Yosef needed to provide proof that it was actually him.

RAMBAN’S QUESTION: WHAT WAS THE PROOF?

The Ramban raises the question of how Yosef speaking in their language constituted any proof as to his identity. After all, it was surely quite common for the ruler of a country to be conversant in the languages of nearby regions!

Interestingly, according to some commentators, the proof came not from the fact that Yosef knew how to speak their language, but from what happened when he did. Having grown up with Yosef, all the brothers really needed to hear was the sound of his voice, for each person speak in a distinctive way that is recognizable to those who are familiar with them. However, as long as Yosef was speaking Egyptian, a language with which the brothers did not understand, they could not recognize that it was him speaking.

¹ Bereishis 45:12.

However, as soon as he reverted to Hebrew, his mother tongue, the brothers were able to recognize that it was him.²

HEBREW AND LASHON HAKODESH

Others, however, understand that the proof did in fact come from the fact that Yosef knew their language. The premise behind the Ramban's question, which he states explicitly, is that lashon hakodesh was the language spoken by the people of Canaan, i.e. Hebrew. Hence, he asks, the fact alone that he knew Hebrew was no proof as to his identity. Indeed, we may add that the interpreter mentioned in last week's parsha,³ who ferried their words to Yosef, clearly spoke their language, yet they did not conclude that he must be related to them! However, one of the classic commentators on Rashi, the Nachalas Yaakov, points out that sources in Chazal seem to indicate otherwise.

The Gemara⁴ relates how, as part of Yosef's meeting with Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, Pharaoh began conversing with Yosef in each of the seventy languages known at that time. Yosef, who had been taught these languages by the angel Gavriel the previous night, was able to respond in all these languages, whereupon he began speaking to Pharaoh in Lashon Hakodesh, which Pharaoh did not understand. This resulted in Pharaoh making Yosef take an oath that he would never reveal that was a language that Pharaoh did not speak. This clearly indicates that Lashon hakodesh is distinct from the language that was spoken in the neighboring country of Canaan, and was known only to Yaakov and his family. Hence, when Yosef spoke to his brothers in lashon hakodesh, it was indeed proof that it was him.

It is most noteworthy in this regard that when Rashi describes the role of the translator between Yosef and the brothers,⁵ he says that the brothers spoke to him in “לשון עברי – *Hebrew*”, which he then translated to Yosef into Egyptian. It is only when Yosef seeks to verify his identity to his brothers does Rashi say that he spoke to them in “לשון הקודש – *the Holy Tongue*.” This further confirms that Rashi sees Hebrew and Lashon Hakodesh as two separate languages.

This now leaves us with the interesting question as to the relationship between these two languages. Are they simply two completely different languages? If so, then the language we call Hebrew, which is clearly associated with lashon hakodesh of the Torah, has no connection to the lashon ivri to which Rashi is referring.

WHO CAN SPEAK LASHON HAKODESH?

What makes the situation more mystifying, however, is that the Gemara states that not only did Pharaoh not understand Yosef when he spoke to him in Lashon Hakodesh, he was unable to learn it from Yosef, hence, he resorted to swearing Yosef to secrecy. Having mastered the seventy main languages of the world, why would Pharaoh be unable to learn lashon hakodesh? Surely, it would be worth the effort than to remain beholden to Yosef! To this, the Chasam Sofer responds⁶ that in order to speak lashon hakodesh, the person himself needs to possess kedushah. As such, pharaoh, who was bereft of kedushah, could not learn how to speak it.

This answer itself is equally mystifying. If lashon hakodesh is simply another language – essentially synonymous with what we refer to as Hebrew – why can one not speak it without kedushah? Has no-one ever learned to speak Hebrew without first attaining a state of sanctity?

Apparently, lashon hakodesh is more than a set of words and accompanying grammatical rules. It is the

2 See commentary of Radak and Tiferes Yehonasan of R'Yehonasan Eybeshutz to Bereishis ibid.

3 See Bereishis 42:23.

4 Sotah 36b.

5 Bereishis 42:23 s.v. *ki*.

6 Derashos Chasam Sofer, derashah for the eighth of Teves.

ability to use words in a way that compacts layers of meaning into a minimum of expression, to a degree, the way the Torah does. That is something one cannot do without kedushah; something which Pharaoh knew enough to realize. According to this, the words themselves which lashon hakodesh uses in this special way may well be words from lashon ivri, and using them in a more mundane form may simply be what we call speaking Hebrew.

WHAT WAS YOSEF PROVING?

Looked at in this regard, it is possible that by speaking lashon hakodesh to his brothers, Yosef was looking not just to prove his identity, but also that he had not lost the sanctity required to speak in that way. Indeed, in a classic observation, the Meshech Chochmah notes that this whole element of Yosef making a point by speaking lashon hakodesh seems to appear somewhat late in the proceedings. The verses in the beginning of perek 45 discussing Yosef's revelation can be divided into three sections:

1. Verses 1-4: Yosef revealing his identity, and the brothers' shock upon hearing this.
2. Verses 5-8: Yosef comforting and reassuring the brothers that everything that had happened had been guided by Hashem toward a positive outcome.
3. Verses 9-13: Discussing sharing the news with Yaakov and bringing him down to live in Mitzrayim, where Yosef would take care of him.

In light of this, we proceed to note that Yosef's words concerning him speaking Lashon Hakodesh appear in verse 12 – the third section! If his intent in doing so was to verify that it was actually him, this should have taken place someplace within the first four verses where he dealt with that issue! Rather, says the Meshech Chochmah, Yosef speaking lashon hakodesh was part of the discussion of bring Yaakov down to Egypt.

For Yaakov to come to Egypt was no simple matter. Aside from the basic reluctance he would have to leaving Eretz Canaan, there was another critical issue. A central component of Yaakov's spiritual level, and of his relationship with Hashem, was his Ruach Hakodesh, which translates as Divine Inspiration and is a form of prophecy. Chazal inform us that Yaakov had been without Ruach Hakodesh for the past twenty-two years, due to his being in mourning over Yosef, for Ruach Hakodesh only rests upon a person who is in a state of joy. Now, upon hearing that Yosef was alive, he could once again enjoy that exalted level,⁷ and would surely not wish to lose it again. Part of this means that Yaakov would not want to leave Eretz Canaan, a land conducive to this state, and he would certainly not wish to relocate himself in the impure and godless environment of Mitzrayim of all places, where he would surely forfeit any significant spiritual level!

It is in the interests of alleviating this concern that Yosef speaks to the brothers in Lashon Hakodesh. He was saying, "When suggesting to our father that he come to live in Mitzrayim, tell him that he will not need to abdicate the Ruach Hakodesh he attained in Canaan by living here. The proof of this is the fact that I have been here for twenty two years and yet, I am still speaking Lashon Hakodesh – the language of Ruach Hakodesh!"

All of this should serve to give us a deeper appreciation of lashon hakodesh and what it means to speak it in the full sense of the word.

⁷ See pasuk 27 with Rashi's comments.