

LASHON HAKODESH

History, Holiness, & Hebrew

A Linguistic Journey from Eden to Israel

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

stowed the Torah upon them, thus eternally cementing their privileged status as His Chosen Nation.²¹⁰



After examining the significance of Joseph retaining his identity through *Lashon HaKodesh*, we shall now examine the behavior of all the Jews in Egypt and whether or not they too preserved the holy language when exiled to Egypt.

Did Joseph's early descent to Egypt foreshadow the Jews' stay there or did they act differently than he did?

THE JEWS IN EGYPT RETAINED LASHON HAKODESH

The Midrash says that the Jews merited redemption from their exile in Egypt because they did not deviate from their language while in Egypt. The Midrash proves that the Jews spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* from a biblical verse in which Pharaoh's advisors refer to God as "the God of the Hebrews (*Ivriim*, עבריים)."²¹¹ As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the Torah refers to Abraham as a "Hebrew" (*Ivri*) in allusion to his mastery of *Lashon HaKodesh*. Thus, the Midrash deduces that just as in the latter case Abraham spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*, so too in the former case the Jews in Egypt spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*.²¹² Indeed, in his introduction to *Meturgaman*, HaBachur cites this Midrash as his source for the contention that the Jews never abandoned the language of *Lashon HaKodesh*—even when exiled to Egypt.

The Midrash relates that when the Jews were in Egypt they banded together and made a pact: They agreed to uphold the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to act with kindness to one another.²¹³ They also agreed to worship only their Father in Heaven, to not forsake the language of the House of Jacob (i.e., *Lashon HaKodesh*), and to not teach their children the Egyptian language because it is the path of idolatry.²¹⁴

210 *Exodus* 1–20.

211 *Exodus* 3:18.

212 See *Vayikra Rabbah* §32:5; *Pesikta Rabbasi* 10; *Mechilta, Bo*, 5; *Midrash Socher Tov* on *Psalms* 114.

213 *Tanna Dvei Elyahu* Ch. 23.

214 *Leviticus* 18:3 prohibits a Jew from following in the statutes of idolaters. When Rabbi Moshe of

מִתּוּרְגָמָן

LEXICON CHALDAICVM AVTHORE ELIIA LEVITA,
 QVO NVLLVM HACTENVS A QVO QVAM ABSOLUTius additum est, omnibus Hebraeae linguae studiosis, imprimis & utile & necessarium.

Executum Intra An. M. D. XXXXI. Mense Augusto.

CVM GRATIA ET PRIVILEGIO CAESAREO AD DECENNIVM.

סֵפֶר מִתּוּרְגָמָן

מַעֲשֵׂה יְהוָה אִמּוֹן • כִּבְיָאוּר כָּל מַלְוֹת • הַמְחֻדָּה
 אֵם קִלְוֹת • הַגְּמֻרְמָאוֹת בְּלִשׁוֹן אַרְבֻּמִי • בְּתַרְגָּמִים
 אֲרַבְּהָלוֹס וְדִבְחוֹן וְרוֹשְׁלִימִי • וְהַרְטִיב
 אֵת כָּל אֲשֵׁר דִּבְרִי • בְּפִרְשֵׁי
 אֱלֹהֵי הַמְּחֻדָּבִי •

בְּשֵׁם שֵׁה בְּעִיר אִזְנֵה עַל יְדֵי מַאֲלֵטִים בְּנֵי חַיִּים • שֵׁם מַגֵּר קִיִּים
 הַתְּיָדָר בְּנֵי חַיִּים מִתְּיָדָרִים כִּיבֵּן וְהָעֵס מִדֵּי רִאשִׁים
 הַקִּיִּים יִהְיֶה מִלֵּא וְהִיָּה שֵׁם אֵלִים מְדֻשָּׁמָה וְהָיָה
 מִנְּעֵן עֲבָר נִמְסֵם וְהָיָה חֵם אֵל
 כִּי קִיִּים לְהִדְגֵם וְכִי מֵאֵל



The *Shaar Blatt* (title page) of the Latin and Hebrew editions of HaBachur's work *Meturgaman* (Isna, 1541).

In a similar vein, *Mechilta* (to *Exodus* 19:3) says that when God originally commanded Moses to tell the Jews about the Torah, he told Moses to speak to them in *Lashon HaKodesh*. Similarly, *Mechilta* (to *Exodus* 20:1) explains that when the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) was finally delivered to the Jews, it was given in *Lashon HaKodesh*.

THE EGYPTIANS AS FOREIGNERS

In one Psalm, when singing God's praises for the Jews' exodus from Egypt, the Psalmists begins by saying, "When the Jews exited Egypt, the House of Jacob, from 'the foreign nation' (*me'am loez*, מַעַם לֹעֵז)."²¹⁵ Why is Egypt called "the foreign nation"? Rashi²¹⁶ explains that in this context "the foreign nation" refers to the foreign *language* that the Egyptians spoke (in fact, the word *loez*, לֹעֵז is commonly used to refer to a foreign *language*, usually Old French or Latin). Radak adds that the Jews looked at the Egyptians as foreigners because they did not speak

Coucy (a thirteenth century French scholar) codifies this prohibition of not joining idolatrous practices (in his work *Smag*, Negative Commandment #50), he writes that it includes speaking the language of idolaters. Although this point only appears in some versions of *Smag*, Rabbi Menashe Klein in his work *Shanu Chachamim B'Lashon HaMishnah* (a polemic written against translating the Bible and the Talmud into English) decides in practice in accordance with this prohibition.

215 *Psalms* 114:1.

216 To *ibid*.

Lashon HaKodesh, so their utterances were unintelligible and foreign to the Jews.²¹⁷

Radak asks: How could the Jews view the Egyptians as unintelligible if they had lived in Egypt for many years and presumably spoke the language of the land? He answers by explaining that while the Egyptians enslaved most of the Jews, nonetheless some Jews remained unenslaved. They stayed in Goshen, where they spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* exclusively, and rarely, if ever, interacted with the Egyptians.²¹⁸ Even those Jews who went out of Goshen and interacted with the local Egyptians only spoke Egyptian to the locals out of necessity; with their fellow Jews they continued speaking *Lashon HaKodesh*. Thus, Radak argues, *Lashon HaKodesh* remained the Jews' language in Egypt and the Egyptians were viewed as "foreigners" because they did not speak that language.

THE LANGUAGE OF MOSES AND AARON

As we already mentioned (in Chapter 1), Moses initially responded to God's request that he embark on a mission to ask Pharaoh to release the enslaved Jews by saying, "I am not a man of words." The Midrash explains that Moses argued that all the men in Pharaoh's court spoke seventy languages, yet he could not.²¹⁹ To this, God responded: "Just as Adam did not learn the seventy

217 To *ibid.*

218 Rabbi Menashe Klein writes in his commentary to *Haggadah Shel Pesach* that even if the Jewish men in Egypt spoke Egyptian as necessary for their work, the Jewish women there did not speak Egyptian at all. See his *Haggadah Shel Pesach Im Maggid Mishnah* (New York: Mishne Halachoth Gedoloth Institute, 1999), pgs. 135–136.

219 Outside of Midrashic interpretation, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra (in their respective commentaries to *Exodus* 4:10) provide a different explanation: Moses responded that he no longer knew how to speak Egyptian because he had fled from Egypt decades ago as a young adult, and was now returning to Egypt decades later. However, many commentators (to *Exodus* 2:19) write that Jethro's daughters assumed that Moses was an Egyptian because he spoke to them in Egyptian. Rabbeinu Chaim Paltiel and *Moshav Zekeinim* (to *Genesis* 50:25) add that because Moses spoke to them in Egyptian instead of in *Lashon HaKodesh*, he did not merit burial in the Land of Israel; as opposed to Joseph who did speak *Lashon HaKodesh* in Egypt and merited to be buried in Israel. These sources seem to assume that Moses did indeed know how to speak Egyptian, despite having left Egypt at a young age. It seems that these two explanations are at odds with each other, yet, interestingly, *Pirush HaRokeach* (to *Exodus* 2:19) explains that Jethro's daughters thought Moses was Egyptian because of the way he spoke and also (to *Exodus* 3:10) explains that Moses told God that he forgot how to speak Egyptian. Barring the ridiculous notion that Moses lied to God, there are two possible ways to answer this contradiction.

languages from anyone, yet he was still able to name each creature in all seventy languages, so too, you, Moses, will be fluent in all seventy languages and will be able to converse properly with Pharaoh and the men of his court.”

In practice, Moses insisted on Aaron taking a more prominent role in the divine mission and in fact, the Midrash says in their audiences with Pharaoh, Moses told Aaron what to say in *Lashon HaKodesh*, and Aaron relayed the message to Pharaoh in Egyptian.²²⁰ This discussion also shows that the Jews in Egypt were more inclined toward speaking *Lashon HaKodesh* than to Egyptian.

Did Pharaoh speak Latin?

Rabbi Eliezer ben Eliyahu Ashkenazi (1515–1585) claims in his work *Ma'ase Hashem* (Venice, 1583), pgs. 95b; 134a, that the Egyptians spoke Latin/Italian. He uses that notion to explain the meaning of the names Pharaoh and Potiphar. He explains that the name “Pharaoh” means “master” in Italian (after consulting with experts, we remain unable to confirm this), and the name Potiphar is derived from the Italian phrase *pote fare*, which means “could do,” and refers to Potiphar’s administrative responsibilities in the court of Pharaoh.

Unless this stance is better clarified, it seems that this idea is little more than a fanciful attempt at homiletic explication. It is all but unanimously clear that the Egyptians spoke Egyptian and not Latin. Academia has offered other explanations of the names Pharaoh and Potiphar. They explain that Pharaoh means “the great house” and Potiphar means “he who is devoted to the house” or “the servant of the house.”

Source: S. Leathes, “Foreign Words in the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, New Series, vol. 18:4 (1886), pg. 530.

GOD SPEAKS TO THE JEWS IN EGYPTIAN

While the above sources point to the notion that the Jews in Egypt did not speak Egyptian, there is another Midrash that implies otherwise.

When Moses met Jethro’s daughters, he knew the language well enough to speak it in a way that they thought he was Egyptian. However, he had forgotten some of the intricacies of its grammar, syntax, etc., which made him unwilling to speak that language in front of Pharaoh. Alternatively, he forgot the language in the years between first meeting Jethro’s daughters and his subsequent mission to Egypt. One also sees from the above sources that there is a connection between *Lashon HaKodesh* and the Land of Israel, an idea already discussed in Chapter 1.

220 See Y. N. Epstein (ed.), *Mechilta D’Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1955), pg. 6.

This Midrash likens the Jews in Egypt to a prince who was kidnapped for an extended period of time. Finally, his father the king decided to exact his revenge on the kidnappers and release his son. Upon saving his son, the king conversed with the child in the language spoken to him by the kidnappers. Similarly, explains the Midrash, after God redeemed the Jews from exile in Egypt, He spoke to them in Egyptian.²²¹

The Midrash explains that the Jews had been in Egypt for many years, where they had learned the Egyptian language.²²² Therefore, when God wanted to give them the Torah, He began to speak with them in the Egyptian language with which they were already familiar. He began by proclaiming, "I (*anochi*, אנכי) am Hashem, your God...!"²²³ According to this Midrash, the word "*anochi*" in this context does not denote the Hebrew word for "I"; rather, it refers to the Egyptian²²⁴ word *anoch* (אנוך), which means "love" and "endearment."²²⁵ One Midrashic source even

221 *Pesikta D'Rav Kahane*, *Pesikta* 12.

222 When manna first fell from the sky to nourish the newly freed Jews, they exclaimed, "It is manna" and called their food manna (*Exodus* 16:15). *Pesikta Zutrasa*, *Chizkuni*, Rashbam, and Rabbeinu Yosef Bechor-Schor (there) explain that the word "manna" (*mann*, מן) means "what" in Egyptian. Thus, the Jews were not exclaiming, "It is manna"; rather, they were asking, "What is it?" and called the food "what." From here one sees again that the Jews who exited Egypt spoke Egyptian as their primary language, for it was in that language that they had expressed their curiosity concerning the miraculous food. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that elsewhere in his commentary, *Chizkuni* (to *Exodus* 16:31) writes that the word "manna" is derived from a Hebrew word meaning to provide food, *vayamen* (וימן).

Building on Rashbam's explanation, *Barzilai* (pg. 59) points out that the word "what" is also related to another major source of sustenance: water. The first syllable of the word *mayim* (מים, water) is *ma* (מה), which means "what." Interestingly, the same phenomenon is found in German, where the first syllable of the word for water, *wasser*, is *was*, which means "what." (The same is also true in English where the first syllable of "water" is "what.")

223 *Exodus* 20:2.

224 Some explain that the word *anochi* came to Egyptian by way of early Semitic languages (maybe even *Lashon HaKodesh*); see *Barzilai*, pg. 129.

225 See *Pesikta Rabbasi* §21 that explains *anoch* in such a fashion. *Pesikta Zutrasa* (to *Exodus* 20:2) mentions that *anochi* is Egyptian, and refers to the Egyptian word *anoch*, but does not explain what *anoch* means in Egyptian. The *Old Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber), *Yisro* §16, writes that *anoch* is the Egyptian equivalent of the Hebrew word *ani* (אני), and that both words mean "I." See the footnotes from Buber (there and to *Pesikta D'Rav Kahane*) who writes that this Midrash is the source of a *piyyut* (liturgical poem) written by HaKallir for the second day of Shavuot, which states that God gave the Decalogue "in Assyrian script, in Hebrew language, in Egyptian speech." This implies that the entire Decalogue was uttered in Egyptian, a claim also repeated by *Hadar Zekeinim* (to *Exodus* 20:1).

explains that the Jews *forgot Lashon HaKodesh*, which is why God *had to* speak to them in Egyptian.²²⁶

DID THE JEWS SPEAK LASHON HAKODESH OR EGYPTIAN?

In view of the above, there seems to be a contradiction between these two Midrashic sources. The former sources maintain that the Jews continued to speak *Lashon HaKodesh* in Egypt, while the latter sources maintain that during their exile they spoke Egyptian.

There are several ways to resolve this difficulty.

SOME JEWS WERE BILINGUAL

We can easily resolve this apparent contradiction in light of Radak's

This contradicts Abarbanel (*Genesis* 2:19–20), who mentions that the Jews heard the Decalogue in *Lashon HaKodesh*. Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer of Vilna also understood that the Decalogue was spoken in *Lashon HaKodesh*, because he explains (in *Aderes Eliyahu to Deuteronomy* 11:29) that the language is called the “Holy Language” because it was in that language that the Holy One spoke to His nation. Since Rabbi Kramer implies that this occurred at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, he must also understand that the Decalogue was related to the Jews in *Lashon HaKodesh*. (However, one could still argue that while most of the Decalogue was delivered in *Lashon HaKodesh*, even Abarbanel and Rabbi Kramer could agree that the first word was said in Egyptian, or at least in a Hebrew word that also has a different connotation in Egyptian.) Furthermore, Ritva (to *TB Megillah* 2b) writes that the language is called *Lashon HaKodesh* because the tablets of the Decalogue were *written* in that language, he does not mention in which language they were *said*.

Interestingly, the *Sifrei* (to *Deuteronomy* 32:2) says that when God revealed Himself when giving the Torah to the Jews, He did not reveal Himself in only one language. Rather, He revealed Himself in four languages: *Lashon HaKodesh*, Arabic, Latin, and Aramaic. See Raavad there for an explanation of how each of these is derived from that verse; cf. M. Kasher, *Torah Shleimah*, vol. 17 (Jerusalem, 1927–1992), pg. 315. This passage seems to imply that God did not speak to the Jews in Egyptian, but He did speak to them in four other languages. However, see *Sifrei Devei Rav* there, who explains that the passage does not only refer to God revealing Himself to the Jews when He gave them the Torah, it refers to Him offering the Torah to other nations (an offer that they refused). According to this Midrash, He revealed Himself to the Edomites in Latin, to the Ishmaelites in Arabic, and to all other nations in Aramaic. See Appendix D “Maharal on Aramaic and *Lashon HaKodesh*,” where we discuss the notion that Aramaic is a language not associated with any one nation in particular, but rather with all nations in general.

226 This claim is mentioned in *Pesikta D'Rav Kahane*. When relating this account, *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Yisro* §287), *Midrash Aseres HaDibros* (*Otzar Midrashim* pg. 450), and *Pesikta Rabbasi* §21 only mention that they learned Egyptian in Egypt, but omit the claim that they forgot *Lashon HaKodesh* there. There is a serious difficulty with *Pesikta D'Rav Kahane* because if the Jews did not understand *Lashon HaKodesh* and only the first word was said in Egyptian, then how did they understand the rest of the Decalogue?

explanation. As already mentioned, Radak explains that some Jews in Egypt remained isolated in Goshen, where they spoke only *Lashon HaKodesh*, while the Jews who were subjected to slave labor were forced to speak Egyptian with the locals. Thus, according to Radak, some of the Jews in Egypt spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* exclusively, while others were bilingual, speaking *Lashon HaKodesh* to their fellow Jews and Egyptian to the Egyptian locals, when necessary.²²⁷

THEY SPOKE LASHON HAKODESH, BUT TOOK ORDERS IN EGYPTIAN

Similarly, we can posit that even when exiled to Egypt, the Jews indeed continued to speak *Lashon HaKodesh*. However, they were not accustomed to accepting orders in *Lashon HaKodesh*; their Egyptian taskmasters spoke to them only in Egyptian. Therefore, at Mount Sinai, when God was giving the Jews the Decalogue, He spoke to them in Egyptian, the language in which they were accustomed to “taking orders.”²²⁸

THEY MAINTAINED THE ESSENCE OF LASHON HAKODESH, IF NOT THE ACTUAL LANGUAGE

Even if we assume that the Jews completely forgot *Lashon HaKodesh*, we can still reconcile the contradiction based on a previously mentioned concept set forth by Rambam. Rambam, as we already mentioned, writes that *Lashon HaKodesh* is called so because it lacks the explicitness found in other languages, making it a chaste and holy language. Therefore, one can explain that although the Jews in Egypt spoke the Egyptian language, they did not deviate from the moral standards manifested by *Lashon HaKodesh*. God had to speak to them in Egyptian since that was the only language with which they were familiar. However, they did not change their *manner* of speaking; that is, they internalized the refined and moral linguistic style of *Lashon HaKodesh*, which they maintained even when speaking Egyptian.

227 Eitz Yosef (to *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* §4:24) also writes that while in Egypt, the Jews spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* amongst themselves and spoke Egyptian when communicating with the Egyptian locals.

228 Rabbi Chananya Jacobson of Los Angeles suggested this explanation to the author.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed two important points regarding the history of *Lashon HaKodesh* in the Egyptian exile: what did Joseph speak there and what did all the Jews later speak there.

In short, Joseph was fluent in many languages. In addition to his native tongue of *Lashon HaKodesh*, the angel Gabriel taught him the seventy languages so that he would be qualified to serve as the viceroy of Egypt. When Joseph's brothers appeared before him in the Egyptian court, he spoke Egyptian and made use of a translator to convey his words to the brothers in *Lashon HaKodesh*. After he revealed his identity to them, he switched to speaking to them directly—in *Lashon HaKodesh*. We presented three reasons why Joseph did this:

- Rashi says that he did so in order to prove that he was, in fact, their long-lost brother Joseph.
- However, Ramban counters that since *Lashon HaKodesh* was spoken in the neighboring country of Canaan, Joseph's use of the language would not prove his identity. Rather, he spoke the language simply to put his brothers at ease.
- Rabbi Sofer points out that *Lashon HaKodesh* is linked to purity. Thus, Joseph spoke to his brothers in *Lashon HaKodesh* to show them that although he had been living among the morally degenerate Egyptians and had risen to prominence among them, he had still maintained his purity and could continue to speak the holy language.

After discussing Joseph's personal exile to Egypt, we segued into discussing the Jews' collective exile to Egypt. A well-known Midrash states that the Jews in Egypt did not change their language, meaning that they continued to speak *Lashon HaKodesh*. However, another Midrash states that God began presenting the Torah to them in Egyptian, because that was the language that they spoke in Egypt. While these two Midrashim seem at odds with each other, we presented several approaches to reconcile them and give a more concrete answer as to whether the Jews in Egypt spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* or Egyptian:

- Radak explains that there were some Jews who were not enslaved, and they spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* exclusively. Their not-so-fortunate brethren spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* between themselves, and Egyptian with their Egyptian overlords.
- Alternatively, it is possible that all the Jews spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*, yet God presented them the Torah in Egyptian because they were acclimated to accepting orders in that language.
- A third possibility is that since the hallmark of *Lashon HaKodesh* is its embodiment of holiness and purity, even if the Jews forgot the literal language, they could still be said to speak *Lashon HaKodesh*—The Holy Language—if their manner of speech remained holy.

After the Jews exited Egypt and eventually arrived in the Land of Israel, establishing their own rule, it is clear that *Lashon HaKodesh* alone served as their spoken language. This arrangement lasted for several centuries until the language began receding under Babylonian influence, toward the end of the First Temple period.