LASHON HAKODESH

History, Holiness, & Hebrew

A Linguistic Journey from Eden to Israel

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN
Hakodesh to show His

... can be passed down for

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, וֹאְרִים)." 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 later case Abraham spoke Lashon HaKodesh, so too in the former case the Jews in Egypt spoke Lashon HaKodesh. 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. 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.

210 Exodus 1-20.
211 Exodus 3:18.
212 See Vajikra Rabbaah 652:5; Pesikta Rabbathi 10; Mechilta, Bo, 5; Midrash Socher Tov on Psalms 114.
213 Tanna Dvei Eliyahu Ch. 23.
214 Leviticus 18:3 prohibits a Jew from following in the statutes of idolaters. When Rabbi Moshe of
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 begin by saying, “When the Jews exited Egypt, the House of Jacob, from ‘the foreign nation’ (me’am loez, יوء יומש, יומש יומש).”

Why is Egypt called “the foreign nation”? Rashi explains that in this context “the foreign nation” refers to the foreign language that the Egyptians spoke (in fact, the word *loez*, יומש יומש 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

Couey (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 *Shana Chachanim B’Lashon HaMishnah* (a polemic written against translating the Bible and the Talmud into English) decides in practice in accordance with this prohibition.

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215 Psalms 114:1.
216 To ibid.
217 To ibid.
218 Rabbi Menashe Klein writes in *Shana Chachanim B’Lashon HaMishnah* (a polemic written against translating the Bible and the Talmud into English) that Jewish men in Egypt spoke Egyptian and did not speak Egyptian at all. See his Egyptian Halachoth Gedoloth Institute, 1999.
219 Outside of Midrashic interpretations to *Exodus* 4:10 provide a limitation of how to speak Egyptian because he became Egyptian, despite having left Egypt at odds with each other, when returning to Egypt. Rabbi Menashe Klein in his work *Shana Chachanim B’Lashon HaMishnah* (a polemic written against translating the Bible and the Talmud into English) concludes in accordance with this prohibition.
220 To ibid.

Radak asks: How could the Egyptians remain the Jews “foreigners” because they did not speak Egyptian to the locals outside of Goshen. They stayed in Goshen, where and rarely, if ever, interacted. They went out of Goshen and into Egyptian to the locals out of continuing speaking Lashon HaKodesh, so their language of the land. He answers that if they had lived in Egypt for a long time, they would have intermarried with the Egyptians. They stayed in Goshen, where and rarely, if ever, interacted and went out of Goshen and into Egyptian to the locals out of continuing speaking Lashon HaKodesh, so their language of the land remained the Jews’ language is "foreigners" because they did not speak Egyptian to the locals outside of Goshen.

**THE LANGUAGE OF MOSES AT THE WELL**

As we already mentioned, in *Exodus* 3:19, God requests that he embark on a mission to the Jews by saying, “I am not a man, but a man, you will argue that all the men in Egypt could not. 218 To this, God responds: 219 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 Gedoleh 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. 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 Maase 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."


GOD SPEAKS TO THE JEWS IN EGYPT

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

This Midrash likens the Jews in Egypt to the Egyptians for an extended period of time, exact his revenge on the kidnapper, the king conversed with the kidnappers. Similarly, explains the Midrash how Pharaoh hid the Jewish babies in Egypt, He:

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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.), Machzor D'Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai (Jerusalem: Melize Nirdamim, 1955), pg. 6.


221 Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, Pesikta 12.

222 When manna first fell from the sky and called their food manna (Exodus 16:31), Yosef Bechor-Schor (there) explained: Thus, the Jews were not called the "people of manna." Thus the king conversed with the kidnappers. Similarly, explains the Midrash how Pharaoh hid the Jewish babies in Egypt, He:

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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, "I") 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 Egyptian word "anochi," which means "love" and "endearment." 224 One Midrashic source even mentions that God gave the Decalogue "in Assyrian script, in Hebrew language, in Egyptian language with which they were already familiar. He began to speak to them in Egyptian." 221

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221 Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, 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, Rashba, and Rabbeinu Yosef ben Ephraim comment that the word "manna" (manna, man) 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, vayamim (liturgical poem) written by HaKallir for the second day of Shavuot, see note 226. Some explain that the word "anochi" came to Egyptian by way of early Semitic languages (maybe even Lashon HaKodesh); see Barzilai, pg. 129.

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225 See Pesikta Rabbati §21 that explains "anochi" 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), Ysro 16, writes that "anochi" is the Egyptian equivalent of the Hebrew word "ani" ("me"), and that both words mean "I." See the footnotes from Buber (there and to Pesikta D'Rav Kahana) who writes that this Midrash is the source of a piyyut (liturgical poem) written by Ha'Azir 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 Yadar Zekainim (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 explanation. As the Jews remained in Egypt, while the Egyptians did not maintain the language in which God was giving them the Torah.

**THEY SPOKE LASHON HAKODESH**

Similarly, we can proceed continued to speak Egyptian, masters spoke to them, but God was giving them the language in which the actual language was not associated with any one nation in particular, but rather with all nations in general.

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227 Elitz Yosef (to Shemot 8:21), Lashon HaKodesh among Egyptian locals.

228 Rabbi Chananya Binyamin.
DOES OR EGYPTIAN?

There seems to be a contradiction between these sources. While the latter sources maintain that the Jews exclusively spoke Lashon HaKodesh in Egypt, the former sources often state that the Jews spoke Egyptian when communicating with the Egyptians.

To resolve this contradiction, one could argue that the Jews heard the Decalogue in Lashon HaKodesh at Mount Sinai, but when they were in Egypt, they spoke Egyptian with the locals. Thus, according to Radak, the Jews spoke Lashon HaKodesh exclusively among themselves, but when communicating with the Egyptians, they spoke Egyptian.

THEY SPOKE LASHON HAKODESH, BUT TOOK ORDERS IN EGYPTIAN

Similarly, we can posit that even when exiled to Egypt, the Jews 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, when God gave the Jews the Decalogue at Mount Sinai, He spoke to them in Egyptian, the language in which they were accustomed to taking orders.

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 Rabba 64:24) 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 the and they spoke Lashon HaKodesh, yet God presented the Torah in Egyptian with their Egyptian brethren spoke Lashon HaKodesh.
- Alternatively, it is Egyptian because they were Egyptian, yet God presented the literal language Lashon HaKodesh—The Holy remained holy.
- A third possibility is that it is its embodiment of Egypt got the literal language Lashon HaKodesh.

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  language.

• A third possibility is that since the hallmark of Lashon HaKodesh
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