

Getting the Point Across

וַיִּגַשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי יְדָבָר נָא עֲבֹדֶךָ דָּבָר בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי וְאַל יַחַר אַפְּךָ בְּעַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְמוֹד
כְּפָרְעָה: (בראשית מ"ד:י"ח)

ויגש אליו, דבר באזני אדוני. יכנסו דברי באזניך (ב"ר צ"ג:ו'): (רש"י שם)

Yehuda approached him and said, "Please, my master, may your servant now speak a word in the ears of my master. And do not be angry with your servant, for you are comparable to Pharaoh. (Bereishis 44:18)

"...approached him... a word in the ears of my master" – Let my words enter your ears. (Rashi, ad loc.)

Here is where Yehuda finally stands up to Yosef. After Binyamin was apprehended for "stealing" the goblet and they return to Egypt, Yehuda walks right up to Yosef and says to him, so to speak: "Now I want you to listen to what I have to say!!" But just a second. Every time Yehuda had spoken to Yosef until now there was an interpreter between them. If Yehuda now talks straight to Yosef, what's going to happen? Yehuda is not going to get his point across. His words will not have any impact because he is speaking in Biblical Hebrew, which Yosef ostensibly doesn't understand at all. How is this going to work?

Imagine someone wants desperately to communicate with you. So he starts screaming at you and crying to you in Chinese. You turn to someone and say, "Did you get what this fellow wants?"

This being so, what was the point of Yehuda speaking into Yosef's ear?

דהא לא היו מדברים עם יוסף אלא על ידי מליץ ולא היו יודעים שמבין לשון עברי וא"כ איך
יוכל לדבר עם יוסף בעצמו וק"ל. (שפתי חכמים שם):

They would speak to Yosef only by means of an interpreter, and they did not know that Yosef understands Hebrew. If so, how could Yehuda speak directly to Yosef? (*Sifsei Chachamim, ad loc.*)

The Sifsei Chachamim is attempting to explain why Rashi interprets the verse as "Let my words enter your ears." Yet, his explanation seems only to compound the question. If they had been speaking to Yosef until now through an interpreter, not knowing that Yosef understood Hebrew, why would Yehuda want

his words to enter Yosef's ears? Wouldn't it make more sense for the *posuk* to say that Yehuda wanted his words to enter Yosef's *heart*, i.e., be understood, rather than enter his *ears* and not be understood?

However, our entire question is based on the assumption that Yehuda didn't speak Egyptian. Is this a valid assumption? We know that for a sage to be accepted to the Sanhedrin he had to know all seventy languages. And in ancient times, a king was expected to know all seventy languages, as we shall soon see.

Yosef left his brothers when he was seventeen. How did Yosef know Egyptian? Did Yosef know all the languages?

א"ר חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן, בשעה שאמר לו פרעה ליוסף: ובלעדך לא ירים איש את ידו וגו' (בראשית מ"א), אמרו איצטגניני פרעה: עבד שלקחו רבו בעשרים כסף תמשילהו עלינו? אמר להן: גנוני מלכות אני רואה בו: אמרו לו: א"כ, יהא יודע בשבעים לשון! בא גבריאלי ולימדו שבעים לשון, לא הוה קגמר, הוסיף לו אות אחת משמו של הקב"ה ולמד, שנאמר: עדות ביהוסף שמו בצאתו על ארץ מצרים (שפת לא ידעתי אשמע) (תהלים פ"א). ולמחר, כל לישנא דאישתעי פרעה בהדיה אהדר ליה. אישתעי איהו בלשון הקדש, לא הוה קא ידע מאי הוה אמר, א"ל: אגמרי! אגמריה ולא גמר, אמר ליה: אישתבע לי דלא מגלית, אישתבע לו. כי א"ל: אבי השביעני לאמור (בראשית נ'), א"ל: זיל איתשיל אשבועתך, אמר ליה: ואיתשלי נמי אדידך! ואע"ג דלא ניחא ליה, א"ל: עלה וקבור את אביך כאשר השביעך. (סוטה ל"ו ע"ב)

Said R. Chiya bar Abba, said R. Yochanan: When Pharaoh said to Yosef (*Bereishis* 41:44), "*Without you, no man shall lift his hand or his foot in all the land of Egypt,*" Pharaoh's astrologers said, "Shall you take a slave, bought by his master for twenty silver pieces, and make him rule over us?" Pharaoh answered, "I see in him a royal manner." They replied, "If so, he should know the seventy languages."

The angel Gavriel came and taught him seventy languages, but he could not learn them. Gavriel added to Yosef's name a letter from the Name of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, and Yosef was able to learn them. As it says (*Tehillim* 81:6), "*He placed a testimony for Yehosef, I understood a language that I did not know.*"

The next day, whatever language Pharaoh spoke with him, Yosef answered him. Yosef spoke the Holy Tongue, and Pharaoh did not know what he was saying. Pharaoh said to him, “Teach it to me!” Yosef taught him, but Pharaoh could not learn it. Pharaoh said to him, “Swear to me that you will not reveal this,” and Yosef swore to him.

When Yosef later said to him (*Bereishis* 50:5), “*My father had me swear, saying...*,” Pharaoh replied, “Go have your oath annulled.” Yosef said, “If so, shall I have yours annulled, too?” Pharaoh then begrudgingly said to Yosef (*ibid.*, v. 6), “*Ascend and bury your father, as he had you swear.*” (*Sotah* 36b)

They took Yosef out of the dungeon on the night of Rosh Hashanah, and he was brought before Pharaoh the following morning. As *Chazal* learn from the chapter of *Tehillim* that is the *shir shel yom* for Thursday and Rosh Hashanah (*Rosh HaShanah* 30b), the angel Gavriel came that night and taught Yosef all the languages. Yosef needed to know them because Pharaoh knew them, and if Yosef was to be a ruler, he was expected to know them, too.

This explains the whole story here in *Parshas Vayigash*.

Yehuda, whose status among the Twelve Tribes was that of king, must have been familiar with the languages—surely he knew such an important language as Egyptian. But when he came down to Egypt to buy grain he did not publicize this fact, for a simple reason. Yosef had accused them of spying. Should Yehuda start defending himself in fluent Egyptian, he would just strengthen the case against himself. Yosef would accuse Yehuda of studying Egyptian in order to walk around in Egypt and monitor private conversations while unnoticed. What business does a simple shepherd from Canaan have knowing Egyptian? He must be up to no good!

But now Yehuda cannot afford to equivocate any longer. He says, “Excuse me, Your Royal Viceroy, but I’m going to have to talk to you directly. I will speak in Egyptian, your own language, because I have something very important to tell you. Please let my words enter your ears.”

This solves all the problems. Yehuda indeed chose the best way possible to get his point across.