

## Vayigash: Do You Speak Hebrew?

Moshe Taragin

They couldn't believe their eyes- having assumed for twenty-two years that Yosef was lost to slavery or even murdered, they could hardly imagine that he currently stood before them as the second most powerful man on Earth. Flabbergasted and speechless they wondered about the identity of this intimidating accuse turned "loving brother". Could this really be Yosef? Maybe he was an impostor or perhaps this was just another stage of his crafty manipulation.

Looks can be deceiving but language is very reliable. The midrash reports that by speaking directly to his brothers in Hebrew, Yosef convinced them of his true identity. Prior to the great reveal, he communicated with them through a translator, pretending to be Hebrew-illiterate. Hearing him speak Hebrew convinced the skeptical that this foreign looking man was their long-lost brother. Language is that powerful.

Our return to our homeland and to historical relevancy has awakened a language which had been left for dead. For centuries, Hebrew was spoken in the rooms of study and the halls of prayer, but hadn't been used colloquially. Suddenly, lost language was resurrected thereby refreshing Jewish identity. In our new world speaking Hebrew is essential for religious identity for several reasons:

Is it a Mitzvah?

Hebrew is termed "lashon hakodesh" or a sacred language. Generally, language has no objective or absolute meaning. All language is merely a convention- words and meanings agreed

upon by communities, countries or ethnicities. Language, by definition cannot be holy and certainly can't be holier than other languages.

Hebrew is different. It is the language of Hashem, the language He employed to create His world and to reveal His will to humanity. Some- including the Rambam- asserted that there is a formal mitzvah to know or even to speak Hebrew. Likewise, many applied halachik guidelines to any texts written in Hebrew- even without Torah content. For example, some debate the permissibility of bringing any Hebrew text into an unclean environment such as a bathroom.

Even if there is no formal mitzvah to speak Hebrew, this language is a gateway to greater access of Torah. Over the past forty years we have experienced a literary revolution, as enormous volumes of Torah have been translated into English. This has transformed Torah study, making it accessible to countless non-Hebrew speakers. However, as valuable as this shift has been, direct and frontal encounter of Torah in its original language is far superior-intellectually and spiritually- to studying translations. Additionally, from a purely practical standpoint, in the internet age, Hebrew facility provides access to a vast world of Torah information written only in Hebrew.

### Language and Identity

The midrash depicts the Jewish slaves in Egypt as completely abdicating religious practices and sinking into the surrounding pagan culture. The weight of two centuries of bondage was too difficult to bear. Yet, to their credit, by speaking and naming children in, Hebrew they preserved their basic Jewish identity. Their core of Jewish identity was safeguarded and ultimately served as the platform for a national religious rejuvenation.

Religion is built on national identity which forms around cultural factors such as food, art, music and of course language. Hebrew language familiarity reinforces Jewish identity, which in turn enables religious development.

By contrast to the Jews in Egypt, after the destruction of the first Mikdash, the exiled Jews in Babylonia discarded Hebrew language, while deeply assimilating into the local cultures. This abandonment of Hebrew, made it extraordinarily difficult to disengage from Babylonian culture. Ezra is distressed by his unsuccessful attempts to separate Jews from their Gentile wives. If only they had spoken Hebrew, it is unlikely that many would have intermarried to begin with.

Throughout our exile we erected language barriers to defend against cultural encroachment. The Ladino language preserved Jewish identity among many of Jews expelled from Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise, for hundreds of years, Yiddish served to blockade Central and Eastern European Jewry from cultural assimilation. Today, in many insular Hasidic circles, Yiddish is employed in a similar strategy of ethnic preservation. Our language has always been a tool for upholding Jewish identity in a foreign, and oftentimes, hostile environment.

### A Common Denominator

The Jewish world is badly divided along ideological, religious cultural and even political lines. Across the Jewish world, the seismic events of the past two centuries have elicited differing responses leaving our people badly splintered. Sometimes it feels as if what divides us is greater than what unites us. Even opinions about our "common" state of Israel sharply differ. There are very few broad-spectrumed unifiers of all Jews. By definition, language is a great unifier as it enables

communication. Two Jews can communicate in Hebrew no matter how many "points of difference" separate them. Often, by speaking common language we are able to discover "common language". Yosef was separated from his brothers for over two decades and, undoubtedly, looked and acted very differently from them. Yet, language melted all the barriers and bridged across all the lost years.

Unfortunately, many parts of the Jewish world are still resistant to Hebrew. For some, the shift has proven too technically challenging. Even in Israel "pocket communities" of olim, have continually resisted broad-scale Hebrew adaptation, creating bubbles of English language and culture within the Hebrew state. Relocation to a foreign country is difficult enough. Switching to a different language, for many, can be professionally and emotionally handicapping.

Traditionally, some opposed the adaptation of Hebrew on ideological grounds. As this linguistic revival was largely driven by secular Zionists, many feared that the language had been ideologically weaponized. Speaking Hebrew would legitimate anti-religious agendas. Gradually, as Hebrew language has expanded this concern has faded. Modern Hebrew is no longer the province of secular Jews aiming to modernize or debunk tradition. Of course, in his sefer, Va'yo'el Moshe, the Satmar Rebbe registered numerous ideological oppositions to speaking Hebrew. By and large, these objections are in sync and reflective of his strong prejudice against the state of Israel.

Others wonder whether modernized Hebrew has been so radically altered that it bears little resemblance to original Hebrew. It is difficult to jump-start languages which have been dormant while human experience has evolved. Suspended

languages cannot coin words for newly developed technologies, inventions or ideas. This has forced the introduction of many foreign words into Hebrew, diluting it from its original Biblical version. In truth, incorporation of foreign words is natural for any language and certainly necessary for a revived language. The Torah itself contains numerous "foreign" words and, likewise, Rabbinic language blends words from many different languages. In part, Hebrew is such a rich language precisely because it is multi-layered. It draws from Biblical Hebrew to Talmudic Hebrew to Medieval Hebrew and even includes several Yiddishisms. Modern Hebrew is a kaleidoscope whose changing colors represent the changing tides of Jewish history.

Ironically, access to Hebrew familiarity is easier and more enjoyable than in the past. Traditionally, Hebrew was taught in classroom settings emphasizing formal rules of grammar. This very technical training was off-putting to many, and smothered interest in speaking Hebrew. Today, through the internet and social media, exposure to casual Hebrew is readily available. It is more effortless and certainly more enjoyable to "speak" Hebrew than ever before.

We have opened the door onto the final stage of history. Will the end of history resemble the arch of the original Egypt redemption? Will Hebrew language form the "identity platform" upon which widespread religious revival will occur? As we speak Hebrew we rebuild Jewish identity, throw open new gates of Torah study and bond with Jews across the world.

The midrash asserts that when the world is finally redeemed, all of humanity will speak the common language of Hebrew. It pays to speak Hebrew. It pays to get a head start on the future.