



LASHON HAKODESH

History, Holiness, & Hebrew

A Linguistic Journey from Eden to Israel

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

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.³⁶

The Midrash explains that the Jews had been in Egypt for many years, where they had learned the Egyptian language.³⁷ 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...!”³⁸ According to this Midrash, the word “*anochi*” in this context does not denote the Hebrew word for “I”; rather, it refers to the Egyptian³⁹ word *anoch* (אנוך), which means “love” and “endearment.”⁴⁰ One Midrashic source even

36 *Pesikta D’Rav Kahane, Pesikta 12.*

37 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.”)

38 *Exodus 20:2.*

39 Some explain that the word *anochi* came to Egyptian by way of early Semitic languages (maybe even *Lashon HaKodesh*); see Rabbi Aharon Marcus’s work *Barzilai*, pg. 129, and his work *Keses HaSofer* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2016), pgs. 175–176.

40 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.” Actually, the Egyptian hieroglyph known as *ankh* (☥) is the sign for “life.” Accordingly, when God began the Decalogue with this Hebrew word that is reminiscent of

explains that the Jews *forgot Lashon HaKodesh*, which is why God *had to* speak to them in Egyptian.⁴¹

a familiar Egyptian concept, He demonstrated His love of the Jewish People and how dear they are to Him. See M. Kohn-Bistrits, *Biur Tit HaYavein* (Pressburg, 1889), pgs. 90–91. 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). Rabbi Chanoch ben Avraham in responsa *Chinuch Beit Yehuda, Reishit Bikkurim* (Jerusalem: Zichron Aharon, 2014), pg. 40, explains that Hashem purposely used the Egyptian word *anochi* instead of the Hebrew word *ani*, so that the word with which He begins the Decalogue can be a short-hand abbreviation for various declarations of His authorship, like, *אֲנִי נִפְשֵׁי כְתִיבִית יְהוֹבִית*, which means, “I Myself Who wrote it am giving it” (TB *Shabbos* 105a), and others (cited there).

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*. Rabbeinu Chananel (as cited by *Tosafos* to TB *Sotah* 33a) writes that it is obvious that when the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, it was said in *Lashon HaKodesh*. On the other hand, *Tosafos* elsewhere (to TB *Brachos* 13a) write that the Torah was given at Sinai in all seventy languages.

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.

41 This claim is mentioned in *Pesikta D’Rav Kahane*. When relating this account, *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Yisro* §287), *Midrash Aseres HaDibbros* (*Otzar Midrashim* pg. 450), and *Pesikta Rabbasi* §21 only mention that they learned Egyptian in Egypt, but omit the claim that they forgot