



LASHON HAKODESH

History, Holiness, & Hebrew

A Linguistic Journey from Eden to Israel

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

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on her deathbed, she called him Ben Oni (בן אוןי), while Jacob called him Benjamin (בנימין).³⁹ In delineating the difference between these two names, the Midrash⁴⁰ remarks that the name that Rachel called him was in Aramaic, while the name that Jacob chose was in *Lashon HaKodesh*. In fact, according to one explanation of the name's meaning, Jacob called him so because he was the only son born in the "Land of the Right (i.e., South⁴¹—the Land of Israel,— as opposed to Aram in the North)."⁴² Thus, Jacob not only named his youngest son in *Lashon HaKodesh*, but he also alluded to his son's connection to the Land of Israel in that name. Based on this idea, one can explain that Rachel did not merit to live in the Land of Israel (she died almost immediately upon entering) because she deviated from *Lashon HaKodesh* and named her child in Aramaic, thereby distancing herself from the Holy Land.

ANSWER #5: BEFORE SINNING, ADAM SPOKE ARAMAIC; AFTERWARDS, LASHON HAKODESH

Rabbi Alexander Sender Schor (1673–1737) explains Adam's linguistic habits differently. He writes that Adam originally spoke Aramaic, but after he sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*.⁴³ As the Talmud states, God originally created Adam to be a creation halfway between animals and angels.⁴⁴ He made Adam's characteristics resemble both in order to maintain peace and harmony between them.⁴⁵ That is, Adam resembled angels in two ways and animals in two ways. He resembled angels because he possessed intelligence and

39 *Genesis* 35:17.

40 *Bereishis Rabbah* §82:9.

41 See *Targum Onkelos* and *Targum Jonathan* (to *Genesis* 13:9) and *Targum Jonathan* (to *Genesis* 24:49) who translate the direction "right" as "south." Interestingly, in Arabic, north is *shimal* (شمال) which is related to the Hebrew word *smol* (שמאל, left).

42 *Sefer HaYashar* (Bene Barak: Mishor Publishing, 2005), pg. 129.

43 *Bechor-Schor* to TB *Sanhedrin* 38b.

44 See TB *Chagigah* 16a with Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto's commentary *Pirush HaRif* to Rabbi Yaakov ibn Chaviv's *Ein Yaakov*.

45 See Rashi (to *Genesis* 2:7) who writes that God specifically created Adam with elements from the Heavens and elements from the earth in order to avoid causing jealousy between the two realms.



CHAPTER 3:

Abraham the Hebrew

ABRAHAM AND NIMROD'S EARLY ENCOUNTERS

The rebellion at the Tower of Babel was not the first time that Abraham and Nimrod locked horns, nor was it the last. Abraham was born in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia, within the sphere of Nimrod's influence. He and his minions had sought to kill Abraham as a newborn baby.⁹⁶ As a result, Abraham was hidden in a cave, where he lived alone for the first thirteen years of his life. The Midrash describes Abraham when he finally emerged from his underground hideaway. It mentions, *inter alia*, that he spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*.

Many years later, Abraham hid himself again to avoid participating in Nimrod's plot to rebel against God with the Tower of Babel. After the Tower of Babel, Abraham gained a reputation for his iconoclastic stance against idolatry. For this "offense," Nimrod—civilization's biggest

A SUPERNATURAL PROPERTY OF LASHON HAKODESH RELATED TO ITS ASSOCIATION WITH PURITY

Based on the understanding of Rambam, Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762–1839) offers a novel interpretation of the exchange between Joseph and his brothers.

He begins by noting an interesting historical phenomenon. Although the local inhabitants of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia did not speak German at all, it was the main language of the Jews found in those areas. In other words, the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe spoke German (i.e., Yiddish, which is a form of Judeo-German) even though the local populations there did not. Rabbi Sofer explains that most Jews of this region descended from the Jews who had previously lived in Germany (thus they are called *Ashkenazim* which literally means “Germans”) and, after being ousted from there, migrated eastwards. Nonetheless, even after many generations they had still preserved this dialect of German as their principal language. He posits that this occurred because each Jewish family raised their children to speak it and had been doing so for hundreds of years.²⁰⁴

In view of that, Rabbi Sofer notes that it is quite remarkable that after a mere seventy-year exile to Babylon, the Jews very quickly forgot *Lashon HaKodesh*. The Bible attests to the fact that only half the Jews returning from the Babylonian exile spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*²⁰⁵ (as we shall discuss in the next chapter), which begs the question: Why was *Lashon HaKodesh* forgotten so quickly, yet German continued to exist in the homes of Jewish families for many generations after they left Germany?

Rabbi Sofer answers that *Lashon HaKodesh* is different from all other languages because only one who maintains a certain degree of holiness can preserve it.²⁰⁶ Consequently, it can be easily forgotten due to a lapse

204 See Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986) in his responsa *Iggros Moshe* (*Orach Chaim*, vol. 5 §10) who offers a brief overview of the history of Yiddish. See the next chapter for a more in-depth discussion on the history of Yiddish.

205 *Nehemiah* 13:24.

206 Rabbi Sofer maintains that for this reason *Lashon HaKodesh* is called “holy.” He supports this justification by noting that in the entire Bible, *Lashon HaKodesh* is not referred to as such, rather it is known as *Lashon Yehudim*, “The Jewish Language.” Only in rabbinic literature is the

KABBALISTS FOR LASHON HAKODESH

Even as usage of *Lashon HaKodesh* had significantly waned over the centuries, many of the leading Kabbalists sought to strengthen their connection to the language so significant to Judaism.

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570) is reputed to have been careful to speak only *Lashon HaKodesh* within his inner circle during the week, and with any Torah scholar on the Sabbath (provided there were no strangers present).³²⁶

His slightly younger colleague, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (1534–1572), also known as Arizal, is said to have been careful to exclusively speak *Lashon HaKodesh* on the Sabbath, and only use foreign languages as needed to clarify elaborate Torah-related complexities.³²⁷

Rabbi Yishaya Horowitz advocated that the masses speak *Lashon HaKodesh*. He writes that it is praiseworthy for one to accustom oneself to speak *Lashon HaKodesh* even on weekdays.³²⁸

Despite such rabbinic approval, *Lashon HaKodesh* remained a rarity amongst the general populace. In fact, there was even some rabbinic opposition to speaking *Lashon HaKodesh*, as we shall discuss below.

REB ELIYAHU BAAL LASHON HAKODESH

In 1809, Rabbi Hillel Rivlin (1758–1838), a student of Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer of Vilna (1720–1797), led a group of Rabbi Kramer’s students in establishing the first non-Hassidic Ashkenazic settlement in Jerusalem. This Jerusalemite community is known today as the *Perushim*. Rabbi Hillel Rivlin’s son, Rabbi Eliyahu Rivlin (1821–1865), served as registrar and secretary of the fledgling community. He was known within the Jerusalem community as *Reb Eliyahu Baal Lashon HaKodesh* because of his peculiar routine of speaking only *Lashon HaKodesh* and demanding that others answer him only in that language. Reb Eliyahu actively sought

326 Y. M. Toledano (ed.), *Otzar Genazim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1960), pg. 49.

327 *Pri Eitz Chaim, Sha’ar HaShabbos* (end of Ch. 21). A later account of Arizal’s behavior mentions that he was particular not to speak to anyone—even his wife—in a language other than *Lashon HaKodesh*. See S. Ashkenazi, *Doros B’Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Don Publishing House, 1975), pg. 165.

328 *Shelah (Shabbos, Ner Mitzvah §60)*.