

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

This is what everyone who passes by the census taker shall give: half a shekel by the holy shekel. (30:13)

The Ramban explains that the shekel coin is called "holy" because it is the monetary unit for all payments in the Torah: erechin, pidyon haben, and the donations to the Mishkan. Every time the Torah gives a number as an amount of money, it means shekalim. For the same reason, says the Ramban, Chazal call the language of the Torah "Lashon Hakodesh" - the Holy Tongue - because it is the language in which Hashem created the world and spoke to His prophets. All the names of Hashem are in Lashon Hakodesh, as well as the names of the angels, and people like Avraham and Yitzchak who were named by Hashem Himself.

The Ramban then cites a second opinion as to why the language is called "Lashon Hakodesh", the opinion of the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim. The Rambam says that it is called holy because it contains no explicit words for matters of immodesty or human refuse. The Ramban counters firstly that there are such words, and secondly, the proper term for the avoidance of such words is "lashon nekiyah" - clean speech - rather than holy speech.

It would seem that the Rambam means to make a more general point about language. A language is an expression of how its speakers think and what kind of lives they lead. If a language contains an abundance of immodest words, one can be sure that its speakers lead immoral lives; if a language is modest, then its speakers must be moral. But that is just one example. The Rambam's point is that a language shows us the mindset

and world view of its speakers, because they invented the language in accordance with the concepts they felt a need to express. In the case of Lashon Hakodesh, it is not the speakers who shaped the language; it is the language that shaped the speakers. Lashon Hakodesh is nothing but the words Hashem Himself used in the Torah and other prophetic books. When a Jew speaks, writes and thinks in Lashon Hakodesh, he is deliberately confining himself to the concepts it expresses, which are the thoughts of Hashem. He trains his mind to think like Hashem, as close as is humanly possible. That is why the language is called holy. Thus the Rambam is saying basically the same idea as the Ramban - that the language is holy because it originates from Hashem. He is only adding that that holiness manifests itself in the language's structure and vocabulary.

The Jewish people spoke Lashon Hakodesh only until the beginning of the Second Temple era; from then on, they spoke Aramaic (Shulchan Aruch Harav, Talmud Torah 1:1). During the Babylonian exile, when Jews lived in a land full of idolatry, the Sages decided that it would be disrespectful to the Holy Tongue to continue speaking it in such a defiled environment (Chasam Sofer on Orach Chaim 85). Additionally, they realized that the people were no longer on a high enough level to use such a holy tongue as their everyday language, for sinful speech is much worse when spoken in Lashon Hakodesh than when spoken in another language (Vayael Moshe 3:8). The Aramaic they used was not the same as that spoken by the gentiles;

it was a special Jewish dialect, written with Hebrew letters. Thus they continued to uphold the principle of keeping a separate language, a principle which the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 32:5) says the Jewish people maintained in Egypt. Later, Yiddish fulfilled the same function for European Jews, Judeo-Arabic for Jews in Arab lands and Ladino for Sephardic Jews.

The Modern Hebrew language invented by the Zionists would be forbidden to speak even if they had changed nothing at all of the original Lashon Hakodesh, since it was the Zionist heretics who started the practice of speaking it. Even a Sefer Torah written perfectly by a heretic must be burnt (Gittin 45b). All the more so now that they have made tremendous changes in the vocabulary, grammar and style of the language. Modern Hebrew was invented to make it easy to translate word-for-word from European languages into Hebrew and vice versa. The Jew who writes in true Lashon Hakodesh expresses pure Jewish thought and pure Torah views on life, but the Zionist speaks like a gentile under the thin disguise of a new language. Zionist Hebrew is nothing but English in translation.

In fact, it is much worse than English. When Bais Yaakov of Borough Park began teaching classes in Ivrit B'Ivrit (that is, translating the holy words of Chumash into Modern Hebrew), a group of parents complained, until the school staff agreed to present the question to Rabbi Aharon Kotler. The staff and a group of parents (among them the Debretziner Rav) came before Reb

Aharon. The staff argued that they had no textbooks besides those produced in Eretz Yisroel, which were written in Ivrit. The parents argued that the purpose of teaching in Ivrit was to inculcate the students with the Zionist ideology. They demanded that the school teach in Yiddish, or at least arrange for separate Yiddish classes. As he listened, Reb Aharon's face grew stormy. He stood up and said fervently, "There is no doubt that teaching in Ivrit is completely forbidden. It is an assimilation worse than all other assimilations in the world. For the goal of Zionism is to uproot the holy Torah from its source. Assimilation with gentiles is like a gentile idol, which can be nullified; but assimilation with Ivrit is a Jewish idol, which can never be nullified! (See Avodah Zarah 52a.) If you teach in English, that is the language of the country and we have no choice, because we need to know the language to earn a living and so on. This is like teaching one's child a trade. But if we teach in Ivrit here in America, it serves no constructive purpose; it is only to bring the children closer to Zionism. Therefore it is definitely forbidden."

But the staff threatened that if Reb Aharon ruled this way, they would resign in protest and Bais Yaakov would have to close down. The Debretziner Rav commented, "Who ever heard of one of the parties in a Din Torah threatening the dayan?" In the end, Bais Yaakov arranged for separate classes in Ivrit and Yiddish. (Botzina Kadisha v. 1 pp. 263-264; Shailos Utshuvos Be'er Moshe v. 4, 140:6)



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