

Meaningful Any Way You Say It

PARSHA INSIGHTS - DEVARIM (5757)

WHY SEVENTY LANGUAGES? (Let's Do Some Neat Calculations)

“On the (east) side of the Jordan River, in the land of Moav, Moshe began explaining this Torah...” (*Perek Alef, Pasuk Hey* [chapter 1, verse 5]). *Rashi* brings from the end of *Midrash Tanchuma* paragraph *Bais* [2] that Moshe expounded the Torah for the Jewish people in seventy languages. How is this derived from the *pasuk*? Furthermore, what was the purpose of teaching us so many versions of the Torah?

Regarding the source for this statement, the *Sifsai Chachamim* mentions a possible approach. Our *pasuk* says “*bai'air es hatorah hazot*” [to explain this Torah]. The word “*bai'air*” is used. In *Parshas Ki Savo, Perek Chof Zayin, Pasuk Ches* [27:8], the *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] were told to write the entire Torah on the enormous stones they would set up, “*ba'air haitaiv*” [explain thoroughly]. The common word “*ba'air*”, in our *parsha* [portion] and in *Ki Savo*, hints that there is something similar in both places. Since it says an additional word in *Ki Savo*, “*haitaiv*”, which hints to seventy, we learn that *haitaiv* applies in both places. Just as *ba'air haitaiv* in *Ki Savo* means the Torah must be written on the stones in seventy languages (so the nations of the world can come and learn them - *Sotah* 35B), it must be that in our *pasuk*, Moshe taught the Torah in seventy languages.

To clarify this, the word “*haitaiv*” itself contains seventy in it. How so? It is spelled “*hey, yud, tes, vais*”. A special type of *gematria* [numerical computation], will yield seventy. Add ה hey (5) to יה hey yud (15) to יהיט hey yud tes (24) to יהיטב hey yud tes vais (26), and you get seventy. $5 + 15 + 24 + 26 = 70$. Thus, the word יהיטב “*haitaiv*”, in *Parshas Ki Savo*, sums up to seventy. Since it is with the word “*ba'air*” over there, and our *parsha* also says “*bai'air*”, we can derive that just like there the Torah was **written** on the stones in seventy languages, Moshe **taught** it to the Jews in seventy languages in our *parsha*. One cannot help but marvel at the profound secrets waiting to be discovered in the actual words of the *Torah*.

So far, we have used the *Sifsai Chachamim* to explain the *Midrash Tanchuma* brought by *Rashi*, telling the source for the fact that Moshe said the Torah in all those languages. But WHY did he do that?

Many answers exist for this; let us explore only two, found in *acharonim* [later commentators]. The truth is that there might even be seventy answers to this question! Along these lines, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin phrases his question as follows. For what need did Moshe explain to them the Torah in languages they did not know and never heard? I can understand that on the stones in *Parshas Ki Savo*, they wrote in seventy languages, so the nations of the world would come and copy the Torah in their own tongues, as in the *Gemara Sotah* 35B. But to verbally expound the Torah to *Bnai Yisroel* in strange languages, there does not seem to be any benefit from this. So, the *Oznaim L'Torah* favors what he saw in some other commentaries. The real intention here is that “*shiv'im loshon*” [seventy languages or expressions] really means something else. Its true meaning is “*shiv'im panim latorah*” [the seventy approaches, “faces”, interpretations that can be applied in elucidating and interpreting the Torah]. These varying approaches were presented to the Jews by their *rebbe* [rabbi/teacher], Moshe [*Rabeinu* Moses our teacher]. That could be the meaning of “*shiv'im lashon*”.

But the *Ksav Sofer* maintains that the words are to be taken literally. He asks the question in the following terms. Why did he explain the Torah in seventy languages specifically upon their entry into *Eretz* [the land of] Canaan? What was the purpose of telling it to them in seventy languages? The intention was to prevent them from adopting the attitude of certain *apikorsim* [heretics]. These individuals, who deny the universal and eternal relevance of Torah, claim that the Torah was only given to be observed in the *midbar* [wilderness] and in the land of Israel. Why do they admit that the *midbar*, the wilderness, is an appropriate location for Torah observance? The *Bnai Yisroel* dwelt in tranquility in the *midbar*, lacking mundane distractions of the physical world. SUCH is a fitting place to keep Torah. And in *Eretz Yisroel* [the Land of Israel], it goes without saying that Hashem must have intended the Torah be kept. There, the Jews live separate from the gentile world, immersed in spirituality with no intrusions. Indeed, say these *apikorsim*, the *midbar* and *Eretz Yisroel* are the only places G-d intended the Torah be followed.

However, when *Bnai Yisroel* find themselves among the nations, NOT in the *midbar* or in the land of Israel, there was never any intention that we keep the *mitzvos* [commandments]! In short, these heretics feel that Torah

observance depends on the location of the Jewish people. In the *Diaspora* [outside the land of Israel], we are totally exempt from all the obligations of Torah.

To dispel this rumor and dangerous attitude, says the *Ksav Sofer*, Moshe immediately expounded the Torah for the Jews in seventy languages upon their entry into *Eretz Yisroel*. This was to indicate that among any nation and foreign language, in every geographic location, this Torah needs to be kept. Nothing about the Torah will be altered, and we are never to forsake it. No one should be under the false impression that it is only applicable in the *midbar* and in *Eretz Yisroel*.

We now understand the source and two interpretations for Moshe having explained the Torah to us in “*shiv'im lashon*”. Whichever approach you might prefer, there are certainly lessons to be gained. Rav Sorotzkin favors the attitude that it really means “seventy interpretations”. This is not baffling, because the word “*loshon*” [tongue/speech/wording] often means an approach or explanation; it does not have to be an actual language. The *Ksav Sofer's pshat* [plain meaning] tolerates the simple meaning of the word “*loshon*”, that Moshe truly taught us the Torah in seventy languages. May Hashem aid us in comprehending the Torah, in all its wondrous complexities. Hopefully, the *zechus* [merit] of *limud* [learning] Torah will hasten the redemption and change *Tisha B'av* [historically, a date of Jewish mourning] into a *moed* [holiday], a day of genuine celebration.

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