

## The Tora's Multiple Possibilities

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### ***Interpreting a curious phrase that serves as an introduction to Sefer Devarim.***

RaShI<sup>1</sup> interprets the phrase at the beginning of Parashat Devarim (1:5) "Ho'ihl Moshe Bei'eir Et HaTora HaZot" (Moshe began to explain this Tora), in accordance with the Mishna in Sotah 32a<sup>2</sup> and Midrash Tanchuma Devarim #2,<sup>3</sup> i.e., that Moshe at this point began to present

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<sup>1</sup> D.h. Bei'eir Et HaTora

In seventy languages he explained it (the Tora) to them.

<sup>2</sup> ...And afterwards (after the completion of the recitation and ratification of the blessings and curses that took place on the far side of the Jordan, described in Devarim 27:10 ff.) they brought the stones and built the altar (see Ibid. 1-8), and plastered them (the stones) with plaster, and wrote upon them all of the words of the Tora in seventy languages, as it is said, "Bei'eir Haitav". And they took the stones and came and spent the night in their place. → *Just as the Tora was written in seventy languages on these stones, it was explained by Moshe in seventy languages at the outset of Devarim.*

<sup>3</sup> "These are the words that Moshe spoke etc". The Jewish people said, "Earlier you said you were not a man of words (Shemot 4:10) and now you are speaking so much!"

Said R. Yitzchak: If you, by your life, taught the Tora, Moshe was healed (does this assume that his difficulty in speaking was a physical impairment that has now been cured, or a psychological difficulty which he has overcome?) and had already taught the entire Tora, (Devarim 1:1) '...in the desert, on the plain, opposite Su'f'. This is what is meant by the verse (Yeshayahu 35:6) 'Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.' Come and see: When the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Said to Moshe: Go and I will Send you to Pharaoh, Moshe said to Him: You are Causing me to be humiliated. I am not a man of words. He (Moshe) said to Him (HaShem): Seventy languages are spoken in the palace of Pharaoh, since if a person were to come from a different place (other than Egypt) they would speak to him in his language. (This was clearly evidenced by the interaction between Yosef and his brothers before the former revealed his true identity to them.) I am going to go as Your Emissary, and they will test me to see if I am the Emissary of God, and it will become evident to them that I will be unable to converse with them, won't they laugh at me and say, 'Look at the Emissary of the One Who Created the World, he doesn't know all of the languages in order to respond.' It will be humiliating. I am not a man of words, but rather (Shemot 6:12, 30) 'I am a man of uncircumcised lips.' The Holy One, Blessed Be He, Said to him: Behold, Adam, who was never taught by anyone, from where did he know seventy languages, as it is said, (Beraishit 2:20) 'And Adam called names to all the animals and birds of heaven and the beasts of the field...' A 'name' to all of the animals is not written here, but rather 'names' (implying multiple names in different languages!), and you (have the audacity to) say 'I am not a man of words' (despite My Ability to Empower you however I Wish?) After forty years when the Jews left Egypt, he (Moshe) began to explain the Tora in seventy languages, 'Explain this Tora'. The mouth that had said, 'I am not a man of words', said 'These are the words' and the prophet shouted and said, 'Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing;' Why? 'For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.' That is why it says, 'These are the words'.

The tradition of seventy languages and Pharaoh's palace is invoked by the Talmud with regard to Yosef's qualifications for becoming Pharaoh's second-in-command, as well as his receiving permission to bury his father Yaakov in Canaan:

Sota 36b

R. Chiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: At the moment when Pharaoh said to Yosef, (Beraishit 41:44) "And without thee shall no man lift up his hand etc.", Pharaoh's astrologers exclaimed: 'Wilt thou set in power over us a slave whom his master bought for twenty pieces of

the Tora in "Shivim LaShon" (seventy languages.) It would appear that the concept "seventy languages" is not necessarily to be taken literally, i.e., that the number seventy is exact and that no more nor no less languages and dialects were extant, but rather metaphorically in the sense of invoking every type of verbal expression with which people of at least the surrounding areas were cognizant. This seems to be the sense of R. Yochanan's statement in Menachot 65a,<sup>4</sup> to the effect that since judges comprising the Great Sanhedrin were supposed to be able to hear testimony directly from the litigants and witnesses, rather than via a translator, they would be required "Yodim Shivim Lashon" (knowing seventy languages).

***The origins of the tradition of Moshe explaining the Tora in seventy languages.***

Some commentators understand the basis of the contention that Moshe, prior to his death at the beginning of Devarim taught and/or reviewed the Tora in seventy languages to be the parallelism between the phrase in question, and a similar phrase at the end of Devarim, describing what is to be done with a set of large stones (see Devarim 27:2 ff.<sup>5</sup> and Yehoshua 4)<sup>6</sup>

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silver!' He replied to them, 'I discern in him royal characteristics.' They said to him, 'In that case he must be acquainted with the seventy languages'. Gavriel came and taught [Yoseph] the seventy languages, but he could not learn them. Thereupon [Gavriel] added to his name a letter from the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he learnt [the languages] as it is said: (Tehilim 81:6) 'He appointed it in Yehoseph for a testimony, when he went out over the land of Egypt,' where I [Yoseph] heard a language that I knew not. On the morrow, in whatever language Pharaoh conversed with him he replied to him; but when [Yoseph] spoke to him in the holy tongue he did not understand what he said. So he asked him to teach it to him; he taught it to him but he could not learn it. [Pharaoh] said to him, 'Swear to me that thou wilt not reveal this'; and he swore to him.

When [Yoseph] later said to him, (Beraishit 50:5) 'My father made me swear, saying,' he (Yaakov) remarked to him (Yoseph), 'Go, ask [to be released from] thine oath.' He replied to him, 'I will also ask [to be released from my oath] concerning thee'. Therefore, although it was displeasing to him, [Pharaoh] said to him, (Ibid. 6) 'Go up and bury thy father, according as he made thee swear.'

<sup>4</sup> But did not every member of the Sanhedrin know seventy languages? For R. Yochanan said: None are to be appointed members of the Sanhedrin but men of wisdom, of good appearance, of fine stature, of mature age. men with a knowledge of sorcery and who know seventy languages, in order that the court should have no need of an interpreter!

<sup>5</sup> Devarim 27:2-8

And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over the Jordan unto the land which the LORD thy God Giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaster them with plaster. And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over; that thou mayest go in unto the land which the LORD thy God Giveth thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of thy fathers, hath Promised thee. And it shall be when ye are passed over the Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaster them with plaster. And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones; thou shalt lift up no iron tool upon them. Thou shalt build the altar of the LORD thy God of unhewn stones; and thou shalt offer burnt-offerings thereon unto the LORD thy God. And thou shalt sacrifice peace-offerings, and shalt eat there; and thou shalt rejoice before the LORD thy God. And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly.'

<sup>6</sup> Yehoshua 4

And it came to pass, when all the nation were clean passed over the Jordan, that the LORD Spoke unto Yehoshua, saying: 'Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, and command ye them, saying: Take you hence out of the midst of the Jordan, out of the place where the priests' feet stood, twelve stones made ready, and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging-place,

that are to be erected by the Jews, (27:8) "VeKatavta Al HaAvanim Et Kol Divrai HaTora HaZot Bei'eir Heitev" (And you will write on the stones all of the words of this Tora accompanied by a good explanation). Here too, RaShI notes that seventy languages is suggested by the term "Bei'eir Heitev". Sotah 35b,<sup>7</sup> due to ambiguities in Devarim and Yehoshua, and carrying the parallelism to another level, posits that there were actually three sets of twelve stones: the first was erected in the plains of Moav as part of Moshe's final presentation to the people prior to his death and before the Jordan was crossed, the second placed in the Jordan itself, and a third set located in Gilgal.

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where ye shall lodge this night.' Then Yehoshua called the twelve men, whom he had prepared of the children of Israel, out of every tribe a man; and Yehoshua said unto them: 'Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take you up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder, according unto the number of the tribes of the children of Israel; that this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask in time to come, saying: What mean ye by these stones? then ye shall say unto them: Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the Covenant of the LORD; when it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off; and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel forever.' And the children of Israel did so as Yehoshua commanded, and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD Spoke unto Yehoshua according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel; and they carried them over with them unto the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. Yehoshua also set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests that bore the ark of the Covenant stood; and they are there unto this day. And the priests that bore the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the LORD Commanded Yehoshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Yehoshua; and the people hastened and passed over. And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the LORD passed on, and the priests, before the people. And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, passed on armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spoke unto them; about forty thousand ready armed for war passed on in the presence of the LORD unto battle, to the plains of Jericho. On that day the LORD Magnified Yehoshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life. And the LORD Spoke unto Yehoshua, saying: 'Command the priests that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of the Jordan.' Yehoshua therefore commanded the priests, saying: 'Come ye up out of the Jordan.' And it came to pass, as the priests that bore the ark of the Covenant of the LORD came up out of the midst of the Jordan, as soon as the soles of the priests' feet were drawn up unto the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned unto their place, and went over all its banks, as aforesaid. And the people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, on the east border of Jericho. And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, did Yehoshua set up in Gilgal. And he spoke unto the children of Israel, saying: 'When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying: What mean these stones? then ye shall let your children know, saying: Israel came over this Jordan on dry land. For the LORD your God Dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the LORD your God Did to the Red Sea, which He Dried up from before us, until we were passed over, that all the peoples of the earth may know the Hand of the LORD, that It is Mighty; that ye may fear the LORD your God forever.'

<sup>7</sup> In consequence [of what is related in the Scriptures], you must conclude that there were three sets of stones: one which Moshe caused to be erected in the land of Moab, as it is said: (Devarim 1:5) "Beyond Jordan, in the land of Moab, began Moshe to declare etc.," and elsewhere it states: (Ibid. 27:8) "Thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law [very plainly]," and the inference is drawn from the use of the analogous word ("Bei'eir Haitev") [that as in the latter passage stones were employed, they were similarly employed in connection with what is narrated in the first passage]. The second set was that which Yehoshua caused to be erected in the midst of the Jordan, as it is said: (Yehoshua 4:9) "And Yehoshua set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan." The third set was that which he caused to be erected in Gilgal, as it is said: (Ibid. 20) "And those twelve stones which they took."

***The assumption that the Tora would have to be publicized in multiple languages because all peoples had to be familiar with its tenets.***

Since at least the latter set of stones would serve as a public monument and announcement to all passersby, Jew and non-Jew, regarding the Divine Law that applied to the land to which all inhabitants, temporary residents and even visitors were expected to conform--while some Tora laws apply specifically to Jews, there are many laws that apply to non-Jews as well, e.g., the seven Noachide commandments and their detailed applications--it is understandable to assume that it would be insufficient for this information to be recorded in a single language known only to Jews. It would appear, in light of the assumption that multiple languages were being presented, that artifacts, comparable to the Rosetta Stone,<sup>8</sup> but far more sophisticated in terms of the number of languages recorded thereon, were being created.

***Did the Jews also need a presentation of the Tora in seventy languages?***

However, it is more difficult to account for why the verbal presentation to the Jewish people by Moshe necessitated the utilization of seventy languages. Even taking into consideration the "Eiruv Rav" (the mixed multitude),<sup>9</sup> comprised of many ethnic groups, that joined the Jews upon their leaving Egypt, to assume that a multi-lingual presentation by Moshe would be required, after the forty years of wandering in the desert, is difficult to fathom.

***Two explanations for why the Jews would need a "multi-lingual" explanation of the Tora.***

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<sup>8</sup> The **Rosetta Stone** is an ancient Egyptian granodiorite stele inscribed with a decree issued at Memphis in 196 BC on behalf of King Ptolemy V. The decree appears in three scripts: the upper text is Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the middle portion Demotic script, and the lowest Ancient Greek. Because it presents essentially the same text in all three scripts (with some minor differences among them), it provided the key to the modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs...

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta\\_Stone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone)

<sup>9</sup> Shemot 32:7

And the LORD spoke unto Moses: 'Go, get thee down; for thy people, that thou broughtest up out of the land of Egypt, have dealt corruptly'

Shemot Rabba, Parasha Ki Tisa, #42

"Go get thee down, because thy people..."

It does not say "the people" but rather "thy people". Said Moshe: Master of the Universe! How are they "my people"? Said the Holy One, Blessed Be He, to Moshe: They are thy people because while they were in Egypt I Said to you, (Shemot 7:4) "But Pharaoh will not hearken unto you, and I will Lay My Hand upon Egypt, and bring forth My Hosts, My People the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt, by great judgments." I Said to you not to mix within them a mixed multitude. You, who were humble and worthy, said to Me: We must always accept penitents. I Knew what they were going to do in the future, and therefore Said to you: No. But in the end I Carried out your will. And it was they who made the Calf, for they worshipped idolatry, made it and caused My People to sin. See what is written, (Ibid. 32:8) "they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I Commanded them; they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed unto it, and said: This is thy god, O Israel, (in contrast to 'our god') which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.' For the sojourners who went up with Moshe, they made it and they said to Israel: "This is thy god". This is why the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Said to Moshe: Go, get thee down for your people... have dealt corruptly."

BaMidbar 11:4

And the mixed multitude that was among them fell a lusting; and the children of Israel also wept on their part, and said: 'Would that we were given flesh to eat!

Two intriguing explanations that draw a distinction between Moshe's presentation to the people referred to at the beginning of Devarim and what was inscribed on the stones mentioned at the end of Devarim, in contrast to the assumption of Sota 35b, which seems to understand that these were synonymous with one another (see fn. 7) are offered by R. Yaakov Tzi Mecklenberg in his commentary *HaKetav VeHaKabbala*, and R. Avraham Shmuel Sopher in *Ketav Sopher*.

**a) "Seventy languages" as multiple explanations.**

R. Mecklenberg suggests that the term "Lashon" (language), can connote "intentions" or "meanings", thereby literally paralleling the Rabbinic statement, "There are seventy faces/facets to the Tora" (see BaMidbar Rabba 13:15/16.)<sup>10</sup> While for some, as in the case of a foreigner for whom the entire corpus of law is alien, a translation will initially suffice to at least gain a peripheral understanding of what is entailed, ultimately this will prove insufficient, and greater depth and detail will have to be offered in order to reach a point of understanding, let alone mastery and internalization. Consequently, "Mishneh Tora", a term for Devarim,<sup>11</sup> becomes not merely a review of what has already been presented, but a more profound explanation, detailed and nuanced, which would hopefully engender long-term commitment to the Tora's dictates, even when Moshe was no longer leading the people and clarifying for them aspects of the Tora that escaped them.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ... (BaMidbar 7:13, 19, 25, 31, 37, 43, 49, 55, 61, 67, 73, 79) "And his offering was one silver dish, the weight thereof was a hundred and thirty shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary; both of them full of fine flour mingled with oil for a meal-offering."

"One silver basin of seventy shekels"—this is comparable to Tora that is associated with wine, as it is said, (Mishlei 9:5) "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled." And since it is the way of wine to be drunk out of a silver basin, as it is said, (Amos 6:6) "That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are not grieved for the hurt of Yoseph," therefore he brought a bowl. "The weight of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary"—why? Just as wine, its arithmetic value is seventy (Yud = 10; Yud = 10; Nun = 50), so too there are seventy faces to the Tora...

<sup>11</sup> Devarim 17:18

And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a "Mishneh Tora" in a book, out of that which is before the priests the Levites.

<sup>12</sup> Even if the number "seventy" is not taken literally, it certainly suggests that even one or two explanations do not suffice, and multiple approaches should be taken to considering what the Tora might be conveying. On one level, this could allude to the classical dichotomy of the approaches to Tora that the anagram, "PaRDeS" represents, i.e., Peshat (a relatively literal rendering); Remez (hints having to do with letters that are larger or smaller than average, dots, backwards "Nun"s, etc.); Derash (homiletical insights); Sod (Kabbalistic interpretations). But it could just as well reflect the numerous disputes that are recorded in the Oral Tradition regarding the literal meanings of the Tora's teachings. Not only is there a tradition of multiplicity with respect to the Written Tradition, but there are also a wide range of views when it comes to establishing Halachic practice. While generally an attempt is made to get to closure in order to assure that there will be standard practices among the Jewish people, broad variations nevertheless continue to exist with respect to how individuals associated with different communities and traditions understand Jewish law. Could the concept of "Shivim Panim LaTora" advance the idea that there regardless of how one ultimately practices, there is a value to know what the manifold possibilities of interpretation are, including minority opinions, rejected opinions, etc. ? This past Shabbat, Parashat Matot-Masai, 5773, R. Benyamin Samuels served as SIR at KMS and in the last of his three Shiurim, advanced the hypothesis that codifiers such as R. Yehuda HaNasi, RaMBaM and R. Yosef Karo were driven to unify and simplify the corpus of Halachic sources due to the vagaries of exile and the danger of the tradition being forgotten altogether. But one can wonder about the price that has to be paid for such an

***b) "Seventy languages" as multiple cultural milieus.***

R. Sopher, on the other hand, suggests that the invoking of "seventy languages" at the beginning of Devarim to provide insight into Moshe's approach to the Tora commandments at this point, is to be viewed more symbolically and homiletically than literally. Clearly having in mind the social and religious tensions of his age (R. Sopher lived between 1815 and 1871), the commentator writes that Moshe was attempting to dispel the false assumption that Jewish law was meant to be observed only while the Jews were living in the insular environment of their desert encampments, or even in the land of Israel (the social analogue for R. Sopher's experience would have been pre-enlightenment and post-enlightenment), when the culture, as represented by language, was singular and consistent; however, once the Jews would find themselves in an open society where the overall culture was not "Jewish", i.e., the "language" was other than Hebrew or Aramaic, they might think that they would no longer be expected to comply with Tora commandments. Consequently, the "seventy languages" were meant to emphasize that in all times, places, and cultural milieus, adhering to the Tora was expected.

Of course such an approach begs the question as to how does living in different cultural settings impact upon the practice and understanding of the Tora? Is the "same" Tora being observed by Jews living in different times and places, under different governmental systems and experiencing different economic conditions? Some change and adaptation is inevitable; are they part of the "seventy faces" or do they constitute radical departures? Such questions offer much grist for the academic and scholarly mill. Hopefully we too can reach clarity of understanding regarding how to fulfill the Mitzvot of the Tora in the spirit of Moshe's "Bei'eir Heitev".

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initiative. What is lost when the Shivim Panim are reduced to monolithic perspectives? And the critics of these commentators argued vociferously that individual custom and practice must be preserved. Is the ideal that regardless of the practice that one adopts for himself, he has an obligation to be familiar with what others do in the interests of preserving the "Shivim Panim" construct?