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Torat Imecha
NACH YOMI

ד"ר

Holiness of the Hebrew Language

At the end of his sefer, Nehemiah bemoans the fact that the children of the Jewish men who had married foreign wives were unable to speak Hebrew. Preserving Hebrew as the language of the Jewish people has always been a fundamental value in Judaism.

The midrash enumerates faithfulness to the Hebrew language as one of the merits that contributed to bringing about the redemption from Egypt. Retaining our unique language is one of the primary factors that distinguishes us from the surrounding culture. Speaking the language of Creation and Revelation serves as a hallmark of Jewish identity and has enabled the survival of the Jewish nation

throughout centuries of exile and dispersion.

The failure of Nehemiah's contemporaries to transmit the Hebrew language to their children was so potentially catastrophic that he highlights it alongside desecration of Shabbat and intermarriage as posing a threat to the continuity of the Jewish nation.

In fact, this failure led to a significant alteration in Jewish practice that still resonates today. The Rambam (Hilchot Tefillah 1:4) cites the verse from Nehemiah to explain the need seen by the Sages to compose a fixed text for prayer. Since the people were unable to express themselves coherently in Hebrew, rendering them incapable of sufficiently praising Hashem and entreating Him to grant their desires, they would abbreviate their prayers. To remedy the situation, Ezra and his court established the eighteen blessings of the silent Amidah so that the entire nation could be equally eloquent in praising Hashem, asking Him to fulfill their needs and expressing their gratitude for His benevolence, even if they themselves were not fluent in Hebrew.

The Hatam Sofer (פרשת שמות; קצת מדרוש notes that in Tanach, Hebrew is referred to as "Yehudit" - the language of Judaism. The designation "Lashon HaKodesh", the holy tongue, was introduced by Hazal only after the Babylonian exile, which had resulted in the assimilation rate that brought about the crisis highlighted by Nehemiah. He questions why in the Babylonian exile the Hebrew language was

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so underused that it was nearly forgotten, while in the roughly two thousand years of exile following the destruction of the Second Temple Jews throughout the diaspora have been able to preserve this same language.

The Hatam Sofer attributes this phenomenon to the concept that lies behind the term “Lashon HaKodesh”. The nature of holy entities is that they resist bonding with the physical world. The Neshama, the divine spark that animates us, resists bonding with the body and acquiesces only under compulsion. The holy Torah, according to the Sages, is easily forgotten if not acquired through intense, focused study and determination. So too the Hebrew language; nevertheless, this quality of the Hebrew language was not appreciated until after the Babylonian exile.

When Hazal realized how easily the language could be forgotten, they recognized its intrinsic holiness and termed it Lashon HaKodesh. Once we became conscious of the holiness of the language, we were able to guard more assiduously against its extinction.

When Yosef identified himself to his brothers in Egypt, he stated: וְהִנֵּה עֵינֵיכֶם רְאוּת... כִּי פִי - המדבר אליכם - You can see for yourselves... that it is indeed my mouth that is speaking to you. The midrash interpolates: You can see for yourselves... that I am speaking Lashon HaKodesh, the holy tongue. The Hatam Sofer explains that Yosef was implying to them that his ability to retain his command of the Hebrew language even while serving as viceroy of the most spiritually corrupt empire attested to his faithfulness to the teachings of his father, and his commitment to Torah study even under the most trying circumstances. Despite everything that had come between them, his fluency in Lashon

HaKodesh served as proof that they were still brothers, still committed to the same values.

In the Talmud Yerushalmi (1:3) Rabbi Meir is quoted as teaching that “Whoever lives permanently in the Land of Israel, eats (even) his profane food in purity, speaks in Lashon HaKodesh and recites Kriat Shema morning and evening is assured of life in the World to Come.” To this inducement to speak Hebrew we might add that as we prepare for the coming redemption and more and more Jews gather in the Land of Israel from all parts of the world, speaking Hebrew affords us a strong sense of shared identity and purpose, contributing to the unity we so long for during this challenging era. ■

Mrs. Leah Feinberg is a master educator who taught at the SKA High School for Girls in Hewlett for twenty-one years, also serving as Tanach Department chairperson and New Teacher Mentor. Leah is currently on the faculty of the OU Israel Center and has taught in all three cycles of the OU Women’s Initiative Nach Yomi program

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