

Was Avram a Second Language Learner?

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At the conclusion of Chapter 11 of Sefer Bereishit, the peoples of the world are divided by Divine command into distinct groups with mutually incomprehensible languages. This tale of the Tower of Babel accounts for the fundamental question of why human beings can be so different from each other while coming from the same source. It also sets the stage for what follows: a freshly divided world, with the inability to communicate as a driving force of division.

Thus, when we open our *humashim* to Genesis 12 and begin Parashat Lekh Lekha, it is quite a shock to see our father Avram leave his birthplace and journey across the known world on a mission from God. Forget homesickness—how does he understand the language?

According to rabbinic tradition, Babel was dispersed very soon before Avram is commanded to leave his ancestral land. Rashi cites the Seder Olam Rabbah, a second-century chronicle of biblical events, which dates it to the last year of the life of Peleg, son of Eber, who was so named “for in his days the earth was divided [*niflegah*]” (Gen. 10:25). This timing suggests that Avram was alive, and thus quite plausibly there building the tower, before leaving (returning?) to the land of the children of Eber where he spoke the language. (If we accept this chronology, we could also conclude that the people he encountered on his journey are former neighbors and co-workers from the Great Tower of Babel. The question in this case is less about Avram’s ability to communicate with total strangers and more about how he communicated with former acquaintances literally pushed away from him by God.)

If Avram personally experienced the dispersion from Babel, God’s command that Avram leave his people is a contradiction of that earlier divine imperative. It is as

contradictory as the later command that Avram kill Isaac despite repeated promises of progeny. Having been all but commanded to stick to his own kind, Avram is then directed to become a stranger in a strange land.

So, how did Avram communicate in the foreign lands of Canaan and Egypt?

There are a few possibilities:

- 1) There are translators, unmentioned by the text, mediating between Avram and others. This theory is supported by a crucial later appearance of a translator standing between Joseph and his brothers in Egypt, misleading the latter into believing that Joseph cannot follow their conversation (Gen. 42:23). By the time of Joseph, these intermediaries were evidently available in the Egyptian royal court. But this solution only multiplies the fundamental problem, as we would need to account for how the translators themselves so quickly learned new languages and developed their craft (in the midrashic chronology, they would have only about 50 years to figure it out).
- 2) Avram knows all the languages he needs to by divine assistance. God smooths his path to a foreign land by giving him a unique gift of language. This is indeed what the midrash says of Joseph, who gets a crash course in all seventy languages from the angel Gabriel during his speedy ascent to power in Egypt (Sotah 36b). Others like Moses and Mordecai, also close to power, reportedly know all seventy languages as well (Bereishit Rabbah 49:2; Megillah 13b). But if Avram is a part of this club of polyglots,

the rabbinic tradition is oddly silent about it. And there are reasons to be skeptical: Avram, though he attains riches, is not a cosmopolitan palace denizen like his great-grandson. There is also the pesky issue of Avram's nephew Lot, who interacts (albeit not so smoothly) with other peoples too and is by no means an exemplary individual. Does he have miraculous multilingualism as well? But the main problem with this possibility is theological—what is God's plan? Fundamentally, if Avram's journey is a test, why would God do so much of the hard work for him?

- 3) The remaining possibility is that Avram doesn't start off knowing any languages besides his own, and that learning how to communicate with the people of strange tribes and nations is an arduous, challenging process. Read in this light, there is a definite progression in Avram's journey. He and his family are not known to have spoken to anyone in their initial sojourn in Canaan. In Egypt, he directs Sarai to present herself a certain way, but mutely takes gifts of riches and words of rebuke from Pharaoh. Their sojourn to Egypt ends without a single recorded word of speech by Avram or Sarai – except to each other. Avram's first recorded spoken words to a foreigner are not until Chapter 14, when he emphatically rejects looted war wealth offered by the King of Sodom. Before then, he must have engaged in painstaking efforts to understand and make himself understood in order to develop alliances (as with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre in his battle campaign against Chedorlaomer) and navigate a new world. By the end of his story (and life), he is quite deftly capable of navigating Hittite norms of communication, successfully arranging a sale of territory by mutual consent. Nonetheless, his foreignness remains front and center in this interaction; he begins his courteous entreaty of Efron the Hittite by saying, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you" (Gen. 23:4).

The post-Babel world is defined by the obstacles of language and human difference, but that does not mean those differences are insurmountable. The Holy Blessed One is not content to allow imperial projects of human unity, nor to let the peoples of the world go their own way. Avram and his progeny bear the contradictions of a middle path. We must respect the divinity of human difference but rise to the challenge of traversing it.