



Yosef the Interpreter

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In Parashat Mikeitz, a time of great crisis brings people together from across the world, desperate for help. Their savior will be a young Hebrew prisoner with the rare ability to speak to all people in their own language.

Although the narrative of the Torah is written in Hebrew, its characters are not always speaking Hebrew themselves.¹ That fact becomes clear in a moment during Yosef's negotiations with his brothers.

They have come down to Egypt during a famine to procure food, and Yosef is the distributor whom they must beseech. But when they stand before him, they do not recognize the brother they sold into slavery 22 years prior. Yosef begins to interrogate them aggressively, and as we

¹ I am presuming that the Torah intends for us to imagine Abraham and his descendants speaking in Hebrew. Avraham is called “Ha-Ivri - the Hebrew.” Yosef, similarly, is consistently identified as “the Hebrew” (Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12), and by his own account, he was taken from “the land of the Hebrews” (Genesis 40:15). So it seems reasonable to imagine they spoke some ancient form of Hebrew. Some would argue that “Hebrew” is an ethnic/national/tribal designation in the Torah—but not a linguistic one. But by the time we get to Exodus, however, where the Children of Israel are all referred to as העברים, the spoken language and the written language have a much more explicitly direct relationship. When God tells Moshe, “כתב לך את הדברים האלה” - write down **these** words,” (34:27), it seems clear, as matter of narrative, that Moshe wrote in the same language that the people spoke.



read the dialogue, we imagine him speaking to them directly. But when they turn to talk among themselves, we are told:

בראשית מב:כג

וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי שִׁמְעַתְּ יוֹסֵף כִּי הִמְלִיץ בֵּינֵיהֶם:

Genesis 42:23

They did not know that Yosef understood, for the translator² was between them.

It appears that Yosef has been speaking to them in the language of the country—exactly as you would expect a high-ranking official to do on his own territory—and they have been responding through a translator. This is how Rashi describes it:

רש"י בראשית מב:כג

כִּי נִשְׁקָיו מְדַבְּרִים עִמּוֹ הָיָה הַמְּלִיץ בֵּינֵיהֶם הַיּוֹדֵעַ לְשׁוֹן עִבְרִי וְלְשׁוֹן מִצְרִי, וְהָיָה מְלִיץ דְּבָרֵיהֶם לְיוֹסֵף וְדְבָרֵי יוֹסֵף לָהֶם, לִכְךָ הָיוּ סְבוּרִים שְׂאִין יוֹסֵף מְכִיר בְּלִשׁוֹן עִבְרִי:

² The word מְלִיץ is most commonly translated in English as “interpreter.” That corresponds with standard professional usage, which has come to distinguish between an interpreter, who translates the spoken word, and a translator, who translates the written word. But as you can see from my last sentence, the verb “translate” can very naturally be used in both contexts, because its most basic meaning is the rendering of one language into another. I am translating מְלִיץ here as “translator,” in order to distinguish it from פֹּתֵר, which I will later be translating as “interpreter.” The distinction that is more important to me in this case is that translation refers to specifically working with language, whereas interpretation can be used more broadly. I am also influenced by Aramaic (the standard translation of the Torah), in which word for the written work of translation, תַּרְגוּם, is related to the word for the person who acts as a simultaneous oral translator, מְתוּרְגֵּמָן. The word מְלִיץ itself is not a common word in Tanakh. The Radak, in his Sefer Ha-Shorashim, tells us that it comes from the root, לִוץ (meaning scorn, mockery, derision). Ibn Ezra says it is related to “מְלִיצָה - figure of speech” (from Proverbs 1:6). The only other time the word is used in this form is in Job 33:23: “מְלִיץ - an advocate.” All of these variations, like “translator,” have something to do with a sharp use of the tongue.



Rashi on Genesis 42:23

When they would speak with him, the translator, who knew Hebrew and Egyptian, was between them, and would translate their words to Yosef and Yosef's words to them, so they figured that Yosef did not recognize the Hebrew language.³

So Yosef spoke Egyptian.⁴ Of course, a moment's reflection on his story up until this point reminds us that this must be so. He works in an Egyptian household. He spends years in an Egyptian prison, and becomes a supervisor there. He then rises to a position of leadership in Egypt, marries an Egyptian woman, and is even given an Egyptian name. He undoubtedly became at least **bi**-lingual.

But some midrashic sources imagine that Yosef's language-acquisition skills were even more impressive. Pirkei de-R. Eliezer cites the same verse we began with, but reads it to mean that Yosef was the one doing the interpreting:

פרקי דרבי אליעזר ט

וכל הלשונות היו באים אל יוסף לשבור אוכל, והיו מביאין המס שלהם ומנחתם לשבור אל יוסף, והיה יוסף מדבר לכל עם ועם כלשונם, לפיכך נקרא שמו תורגמן, שנאמר כי המליץ בינותם.

Pirkei de-R. Eliezer 39

All of the languages would come to Yosef to seek sustenance. They would bring their payment and tribute to Yosef, so that he would provide for them. And Yosef would speak

³ One has to presume, many of the commentators point out, that the translator was there during the earlier dialogue but had since left. Nehama Leibowitz points out that this is also indicated in Targum Onkelos: "מִתְּרַגְּמָן - הָהוּא בֵּינֵיהוֹן - a translator **was** between them." He inserts the past tense.

⁴ These are all imprecise linguistic designations. Neither "Egyptian" nor "Hebrew" is explicitly named as a language in the Torah; the terms are used there to refer to ethnic, tribal identities. But we tend to assume each of these ethnic identities comes with a distinct language, as we find in the description of the Children of Shem: "לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְלִשְׁנָתָם בְּאַרְצֵתָם" - and to all their families, with their own languages, in their own lands" (Genesis 10:31).



to each nation in its own language. That is why he became known as Turgeman (translator),⁵ as it says, “for the translator was among them.”

In this reading of our verse, Yosef did not use a translator; he **was** the translator—the Great Translator. He was the ultimate polyglot, capable of understanding every language that came before him. His power and fame as the great sustainer of the region was directly tied to his facility with languages.⁶

A parallel story in the Talmud suggests that linguistic prowess brought Yosef to power in the first place. Just before he was summoned from prison, Pharaoh’s courtiers questioned whether a lowly slave could be trusted to advise royalty. People of royal pedigree, they insisted, must speak multiple languages. So the angel Gabriel miraculously imparted the knowledge of 70 languages to Yosef:

תלמוד בבלי סוטה לו:

וּלְמַחֵר, כָּל לִישָׁנָא דְאִישְׁתַּעֵי פְרַעָה בְּהִדְיָה, אֶהְדֵּר לִיהּ. אִישְׁתַּעֵי אִיהוּ בְּלִשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ, לֹא הָוָה קָא יָדַע מֵאִי הָוָה אָמַר. אָמַר לִיהּ: אֶגְמְרִיהּ וְלֹא גָמַר. אָמַר לִיהּ: אִישְׁתַּבֵּעַ לִי דְלֹא מְגִלִית. אִישְׁתַּבֵּעַ לוֹ.

Talmud Bavli Sotah 36b

The next day, any language that Pharaoh spoke to him, he could respond. But when Yosef spoke to Pharaoh in the Holy Tongue, Pharaoh did not know what Yosef was saying. So Pharaoh said, “Teach me.” He tried to teach Pharaoh, but Pharaoh could not learn it. Pharaoh said, “Swear to me that you will not tell anyone!” So Yosef swore to him.

⁵ Some versions of the text have מתורגמן (*meturgaman*). Both of these forms are used in Rabbinic literature. In any case, it sounds like from the *midrash* that Yosef is being given a new name: Turgeman.

⁶ The *midrash* seems to be taking the phrase כי המליץ בינתם out of context, to mean more broadly, Yosef was a translator among them—that is, all the peoples of the world. If we read this understanding back into our verse, it would imply not that there was a separate translator between them, but that they had **all** been speaking in Egyptian, and when the brothers switched to Hebrew, they did not know that Yosef was able to translate (i.e., understand) what they were saying.



Language proficiency here serves as the qualifying test for political legitimacy. There is a certain logic to this; national leaders interface with representatives of other nations (as we will see later in the story). But Yosef not only speaks all the languages familiar to Pharaoh; he also knows one that Pharaoh does not know and cannot seem to learn. Yosef is thus distinguished in Pharaoh's court through his Hebrew, the Holy Tongue that even the most privileged and educated stumble over.

This lingual dexterity, our Rabbis presume, was surely on display when Pharaoh said to Yosef: “אֵין נָבוֹן וְחָכָם כָּמוֹךָ” - there is no one as understanding and wise as you” (Genesis 41:39). If we turn back to the text of the Torah, however, we recall that in fact Pharaoh uttered those words in response to a demonstration of another of Yosef's unique gifts: his ability to interpret not languages, but dreams.

Yosef's story is pervaded by dreams from the start. It is his own self-aggrandizing dreams that get him in trouble with his family, who sarcastically (but fittingly) dub him: “בַּעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת” - the Master of Dreams” (Genesis 37:19). It is when he lands in prison, however, that his ability to interpret **other** peoples' dreams becomes known. Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker are both in prison with Yosef, and one night, each of them has a startling dream. When Yosef sees them the next morning, they look troubled, and he asks what is wrong.

בראשית מ:ח

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו חֲלוֹם חֲלַמְנוּ וּפְתֵר אֵין אֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא לְאֱלֹקִים פְּתֻרָּנִים סָפְרוּ נָא לִי:

Genesis 40:8

They said to him, “We have dreamed dreams, but there is no one to **interpret** them!” And Yosef said to them, “All **interpretations** are God's! Tell them to me.”



So the cupbearer shares a vivid dream with Yosef, who responds immediately, “זֶה פִּתְרֵנוּ - this is its **interpretation**” (Genesis 40:12), and then proceeds to explain the meaning of the details in the dream. The baker is impressed, “כִּי טוֹב פָּתַר - for he had **interpreted** well”⁷ (Genesis 40:16), and asks for an interpretation of his own dream. Again the dream has an intricate visual description, and again Yosef responds immediately with, “זֶה פִּתְרֵנוּ - this is its **interpretation**,” (Genesis 40:18) and gives a (less favorable) reading of the dream. Both of Yosef’s interpretations turn out to be correct: the cupbearer is restored to his post, and the baker is hanged: “כַּאֲשֶׁר פָּתַר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף - just as Yosef had **interpreted** them” (Genesis 40:22).

Parashat VaYeishev closes with Yosef well-established as a skilled dream interpreter. As Parashat Mikeitz begins, it is precisely this skill for which he will be summoned out of prison. Pharaoh is having now dreams of his own, and he awakens agitated, for—once again—“אֵין פֹּתֵר אוֹתָם - there is no one to **interpret** them” (Genesis 41:8). The cupbearer, since released from prison, suddenly remembers Yosef, and tells Pharaoh the story of Yosef’s dream interpretations in the prison, concluding, “כַּאֲשֶׁר פָּתַר לָנוּ כֵּן הָיָה - just as he **interpreted** them, so it came to be” (Genesis 41:13). Everything then begins to move very quickly. Pharaoh recounts his dreams, Yosef interprets them, and everyone is immediately pleased. On the strength of these interpretations, Yosef is thrust into power, second only to Pharaoh himself, and rules over all of Egypt. He will be trusted to lead, to serve, and to save—all because he was a good interpreter.

The word we have been translating as “interpret” or “interpretation” comes from the Hebrew root פ.ת.ר, and remarkably, the two scenes in which Yosef gives his interpretations, in chapters 40 and 41 of Genesis, are the only places where that root is used in all of Tanakh.

⁷ The commentators debate whether to read this as, “he interpreted well,” meaning skillfully (Bekhor Shor, Rashbam), or “he interpreted favorably,” that is, he predicted a good outcome (Ramban, Seforno).



Yosef is therefore not just a good interpreter: he is the only one ever recorded in the Hebrew Bible.

No wonder, then, that Our Rabbis imagined that Yosef was not just an interpreter of dreams, but all kinds of other languages as well. The imagery of dreams is like a language of its own. It requires an act of translation to extract from the strange logic of a dream some meaning for real life. A psychologist or a seer who “reads” someone’s dreams takes signs and symbols and tries to articulate them in a language that can be understood, like deciphering a foreign text.

The Torah tells us Pharaoh was impressed by Yosef’s dream interpretations. Our Rabbis tell us that Pharaoh was equally awed by Yosef’s ability to speak foreign languages. In both cases, the act of interpretation has the power to reveal that which is otherwise inaccessible. A translator can give us access to another person’s mind. A skilled dream interpreter may even be able to grant us access to our own minds.

Pharaoh may be alluding to all these revelatory powers with the name he ceremonially bestows upon Yosef: **צִפְנַת פַּעֲנֵחַ** (*Tzaphnat Paneah*)—though this, too, is a matter of translation. Classical commentators and modern scholars debate whether or not the name is Egyptian, as one would assume of a name given by the Pharaoh of Egypt. But Onkelos, the author of the most classic and authoritative translation of the Torah (the Targum) renders it, in Aramaic, as follows: “גְּבִרָא דְּמִטְמַרְן גְּלִין לֵיהּ - the man to whom hidden things are revealed.” He seems to be reading the name as if it were Hebrew—that is **צִפְנַת** (*tzaphnat*) is related to “לִצְפֹּן - to hide,”⁸ and **פַּעֲנֵחַ** (*paneah*) is a unique biblical word⁹ that means “to reveal.”

⁸ As in Exodus 2:2: “And the woman conceived and gave birth to a son. And she saw that he was good, and she hid him (וַתִּצְפְּנֵהוּ) for three months.”

⁹ Time for everyone’s favorite term of biblical scholarship: a *hapax legomenon*! Rashi says similarly: “וְאִין לְפַעֲנֵחַ” **וְאִין לְפַעֲנֵחַ**. In modern Hebrew, the verb **לְפַעֲנֵחַ** has come to mean “to decode,” or “to decipher”—that is, to understand something mysterious or encrypted.



What language was this name given in? An artful resolution is given by R. Ya'akov Zvi Mecklenberg:¹⁰

הכתב והקבלה בראשית מא:מה

נראה שפירשוהו על שתי כוונות, האחד כפי התרגום דמטמרין גליין ליה, והב' יסכים עם לשון מצרי, שבו לשון, "צפנת פענח" הוא ישועת העולם

Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah on Genesis 41:45

It seems that this can be explained as having both meanings: one in accordance with the Targum: “the one to whom hidden things are revealed,” and the second that concords with an Egyptian language, in which *Tzafnat Paneah* means the salvation of the world.

The bold suggestion here is that the Torah can be speaking in two languages at once, using words that are meant to have both Hebrew and Egyptian meanings. The name then parallels the image of Yosef himself, who moves back and forth between these languages. And the two meanings combine in the one name, as they will in Yosef: the one to whom hidden things are revealed will become the savior of the world.

We live in a moment in history not unlike the beginning of Parashat Mikeitz. We have awoken from a nightmare to find multiple crises looming. Nations are struggling for survival in a world with rapidly dwindling resources. We are consulting our best advisors, but no one seems to truly know the way forward. Would that we had someone who could interpret the warning signs and give us some sense of how to ensure, “וְלֹא תִכָּרֵת הָאָרֶץ - that the land will not perish” (Genesis 41:36). That kind of leader would know how to speak to many different kinds of people, to translate between languages and cultures. That kind of leader could help us make sense of the dreams we once had.

¹⁰ 19th century, Germany.

