



The Story of Hushim ben Dan

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My mother tongue was no tongue at all, but a pair of hands. My parents were both deaf, so my first language was American Sign Language. I didn't think much about it at the time; when you're a kid, your parents are just your parents and your life is just your life. It is only in retrospect that I have come to appreciate how profoundly the experience of growing up in a Deaf family, and spending my early years signing as well as speaking, has shaped my relationship to language in general.

So when I came upon a deaf character in the Torah, of course I took notice. To be more precise: the character is in the Torah, but his deafness we learn from a wild story in the Talmud. How the Talmud arrived at that connection is a wild story of its own.

As the Book of Genesis comes toward its end, Ya'akov's sons all gather around his bed to receive one last blessing. When he finishes blessing them all, he announces that he is about to die, and adjures his children to bury him with his ancestors “בְּמַעְרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשֵׂדֵה הַמַּכְפֶּלֶה” - in the cave that is in the field of Makhpelah” (Genesis 49:30). Avraham purchased that cave from Ephron the Hittite, in order to bury Sarah there (Genesis 23). Over the years, the cave became the family burial plot, as Ya'akov details for us: “There Avraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Yitzhak and his wife Rivkah were buried; and there I buried Leah” (Genesis



49:31). Now that Ya'akov is ready for his own death, he wants to join his wife, his parents, and his grandparents in the cave. So the last chapter of Genesis sees all of Ya'akov's descendants, who have just come down from the Land of Canaan to Egypt, now traveling back up to bury their patriarch.

But according to an extended *aggadah* in Massekhet Sotah (13a), when they arrive at the cave, they run into a problem. Esav, Ya'akov's twin brother and arch-nemesis, is standing there at the entrance, blocking their path. He indicates that he will not allow them to bury Ya'akov there, and makes a claim on the burial rights for himself:

תלמוד בבלי סוטה יג.

"קרית ארבע" ארבע זוגות היו אדם וחווה אברהם ושרה יצחק ורבקה ... איהו קברה ללאה בדידיה והאי דפייש דידי הוא אמרו ליה זבינתה אמר להו נהי דזביני בכירותא פשיטותא מי זביני.

Talmud Bavli Sotah 13a

“[The cave] is in Kiryat Arba (*lit.* Town of Four)’ (Genesis 23:2), so there should be four pairs: Adam and Havah, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzhak and Rivkah.... [Ya'akov] already buried Leah in his portion and what remains belongs to me.” They replied to him, “You sold it!” He said to them, “Granted that I sold my birthright, but did I not sell my basic rights as an heir!”

Esav's argument seems to be that this is a cave for pairs (Makhpelah means “doubling”), in the town of Arba (four)—so four pairs makes eight spots total, and seven of them are already taken. Ya'akov has used up his spot by burying Leah there, and so the remaining space belongs to Esav. There is some contention over this claim since, after all, Esav sold his birthright—but Esav refuses to budge. It is at this point that we are introduced to the deaf member of the family:



חֹשִׁים בְּרִיָּה דָּדָן תָּמַן הוּא וַיִּקְרֶן לִיה אֹדֻנִּיָּה אָמַר לֵהוּ מֵאִי הָאִי וְאָמְרוּ לִיה קָא מַעֲכָב הָאִי עַד דַּאֲתִי נִפְתְּלִי
מֵאֲרַעַא דְּמִצְרַיִם אָמַר לֵהוּ וְעַד דַּאֲתִי נִפְתְּלִי מֵאֲרַעַא דְּמִצְרַיִם יְהֵא אֲבִי אֲבָא מוּטֵל בְּבִזְיוֹן שְׁקֵל קוֹלְפָא
מִחִיָּה אֲרִישִׁיָּה נִתְרַן עֵינֵיהּ וְנִפְלוּ אֲכָרַעַא דִּיעֻקֵּב פִּתְחִינְהוּ יַעֲקֹב לַעֲיִנֵּיהּ וְאַחִירָא. וְהֵיִינוּ דְּכֹתִיב "וְשִׂמַּח צְדִיק
כִּי חָזָה נֶקֶם פַּעֲמָיו יִרְחֹץ בְּדָם הָרָשָׁע".

Among those present was Hushim, son of Dan, who could not hear¹; so he asked them, "What is happening?" They said to him, "Esav is preventing the burial until Naftali returns with a bill of sale from the land of Egypt." He retorted: "Is my grandfather to lie there in disgrace until Naftali returns from the land of Egypt?!" So he took a club and struck Esav on the head so that his eyes popped out and fell and rolled onto Ya'akov's lap. Ya'akov opened his eyes and smiled. And this is like what is written, "The righteous will rejoice when he sees vengeance, his feet will be bathed in the blood of the wicked" (Psalm 58:11).

Hushim at first cannot understand what is happening, but when he realizes Esav is blocking the burial of his grandfather, he is outraged. He leaps into action and does away with Esav in gruesome fashion. The burial proceeds as planned and Hushim, the deaf grandson, is the hero of the family that day.

But who was Hushim? Where did our Rabbis find this character and how did they know he was deaf?

The story begins with a very unusual verse in Parashat VaYigash. As Ya'akov travels down to Egypt, the Torah gives us a list of everyone in the clan. All of his sons are named and then their children are listed. So: "the children of Reuven" and a list; "the children of Shimon" and a list; "the children of Levi..." and a list. But when we arrive at Dan, the "list" looks like it has been truncated:

¹ *Lit.* "his ears were heavy." In the version of this story in Pirkei de-R. Eliezer (39), it says "חֹשִׁים בֶּן דָּן הָיָה פֶּגוּם" - Hushim ben Dan was defective in his ear and his tongue." Interestingly, according to one *midrash* (in Bereshit Rabbah 93:7), Hushim ben Dan had **super**-hearing.



בראשית מו:כג

וּבְנֵי דָן חֲשִׁים:

Genesis 46:23

The children of Dan were Hushim.

The grammar of this short verse is odd.² It records the “children” of Dan, but there seems to be only one child mentioned. Why doesn’t it say: “the **child** of Dan was Hushim”? Then again, Hushim, with the “*im*” ending, looks like a plural word.³ Was there more than one “Hush”?⁴

This ambiguity leads to a series of speculations as to how many children Dan really had. Ibn Ezra offers a tragic possibility:

אבן עזרא בראשית מו:כג

יתכן שהיו שנים ומת אחד מהם ולא הזכירו הכתוב כי כן דרך הלשון

Ibn Ezra to Genesis 46:23

It is possible that there were two and one of them died. And though the verse does not mention him, this is the language style of the Torah [to use the word “children” anyway].⁵

So perhaps Dan had twins, and one did not make it, and in memory of that original family, the verse uses “children.” But another opinion in the Talmud understands the verse to mean just the opposite:

תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא קמג:

דְּלָמָא כְּדִתְנָא דְּבִי חֲזָקִיָּה: שְׁהָיוּ מְרֻבִּין כְּחוֹשִׁים שֶׁל קִנְהָ!

² In fact, this is the shortest verse in the Torah—only three words and 10 letters long!

³ This is not unusual for names in the Torah, however: just two verses back we have Binyamin’s sons, “מִפִּים וּחִפִּים” - Mupim and Huppim” (Genesis 46:21).

⁴ This possibility leads a *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah 94:9 to use the extra “Hush” to make up the the full tally of 70 people who came down to Egypt.

⁵ See Numbers 26:8.



Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 143b

Perhaps it is like what is taught in the House of Hizkiah: That there were many [children], like bundles (*hushim*) of reeds.

Maybe we should read the plural of “children” and the plural-sounding name Hushim as an indication that Dan had not just one child, but a large number of children. In fact, the tribe of Dan one day becomes the second-most populous tribe in Israel,⁶ so there is some reason to suspect that this lineage must have been multiplying rapidly all along.

To all the confusion that comes from the plural grammar of the verse, we can add another textual oddity that we encounter when Dan’s children are again named in a census in the Book of Numbers.

במדבר כו:מב

אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי דָן לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְשִׁוְחָם מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשִּׁוְחִי אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפְּחֹת דָּן לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם:

Numbers 26:42

These are the descendants of Dan by their families: of Shuham, the family of the Shuhamites. Those are the families of Dan, by their families.

Again, only one name is listed—but now it is a different name: Shuham. But even stranger, the new name shares all the same consonant letters as Hushim: שוחם vs חשים. It is as if Hushim, who already had an indeterminate identity, has now been jumbled up and called by another name. Rashi and Ibn Ezra both presume this is the case and tell us explicitly: this is Hushim. But no one seems to know why the letters would have been scrambled.

⁶ The total is 64,400, second only to Yehudah at 76,500. See Numbers 26:22,43.



All kinds of textual vagaries surround the figure of Hushim. But how does all that lead our Rabbis to suggest that he was deaf? What was the midrashic move that took them there?⁷

R. Shmuel Eidels (the Maharsha) gives a brilliant explanation, the more so because it is founded on a clue that has been right in front of us all along. He reminds us that the Talmud's story of Hushim ended with a quote from Psalm 58: "The righteous will rejoice, when they see vengeance..." We might have thought that was just a rhetorical flourish. But the reference is quite precise, as the Maharsha explains:

מהרש"א, חידושי אגדות, סוטה יג.

"חושים בן דן כו' והיינו דכתיב ישמח צדיק כי חזה" גו'. 'יראה שכל זה נדרש ממזמור זה שאמר זורו רשעים מרחם הוא עשו שכבר בעודו ברחם היה מפרכס לצאת אחר ע"ז תועה לדבר כזב שלא מכר חלק קברו ליעקב חמת למו כדמות חמת נחש גו' בא בכעסו לעכב קבורתו כי כחו הוא נחש הקדמוני ואמר חרש יאטם אזנו והוא חושים בן דן שלא שמע לקול מלחשים והוא חבר חברים מחוכם לידע על מה שלחו לנפתלי והנה ע"י הרס שנמו גו' של עשו

Maharsha, Hiddushei Aggadot, Sotah 13a

"Hushim ben Dan... this is like what is written, 'the righteous will rejoice when they see...'"

It seems that this is all drawn out from that psalm, which says (Psalm 58:4), "The wicked have been estranged from birth..."—that is Esav, who [according to midrashic traditions] tried to break out of the womb in order to follow idolatry. [The verse continues:] "...the liars go astray from the womb"—when he said he did not sell his plot to Ya'akov. "Their venom is like that of a snake"—when he came in angrily and tried to prevent the burial, for his power comes from the primordial snake [in the garden]. And then it says (Psalm 58:5):

⁷ I was tempted to read the word חושים to mean, "senses," as in the five senses, as it is used in modern Hebrew. Maybe the name was meant to draw our attention to his senses, and to indicate that there was one he lacked, or others that were heightened. But the word does not take on that connotation until after the talmudic period. In the Torah, the word refers to an energetic effort (as in Numbers 32:17: "וַיִּצְנְחוּנוּ בְּחִלְץ חֲשִׁים"). In the Talmud, the word means simply, "feeling" (as in Eruvin 54a: "חֶשֶׁ בְּרָאשׁוֹ"), which is a step closer to "sensing." It isn't until the medieval period that we begin to see the use of חוש to mean a physical sense like "חוש השמיעה" - the sense of hearing."



“a deaf viper that stops its ears up”—that is Hushim ben Dan. “So it does not hear the voice of whisperers, the sharp discussion of the group”—to know why they were sending Naftali. And then, through him (Psalm 58:6), “his teeth were smashed”—that is, Esav’s.

The Maharsha deftly reads the whole story back into the psalm that was quoted at its conclusion. “The Talmud,” he explains, “abbreviated all this with just a hint (קיצר ברמז), by bringing the one verse at the end.” We were meant to go back to the psalm and see how it provides the structure for the Hushim ben Dan narrative. There we find, in its fifth verse, the word, “חרש - deaf.”⁸ Finally, we are beginning to see the word-chain of connections between Dan’s family and deafness.

One final connection. If the Talmud was speaking in abbreviated, “hinting” language, why not quote just the verse with the word “deaf” in it? Why instead was our reference to the verse that began “ישמח צדיק” - the righteous will rejoice”? Take a look at the letters in that first quoted Hebrew word: “ישמח - will rejoice.” It is yet another name-jumble, for there are all the same letters as in the name of our friend, Hushim: חשימים.⁹

I have always been dazzled by the linguistic creativity and virtuosity in the interpretative technique of the Talmud and *midrashim*. I think I was well primed for it by sign language. From my parents I learned that language was multidimensional—that meaning could move in physical space through moving hands. From our Rabbis, I learned that letters could also fly through the air, that words could jump across texts, that the Torah could communicate with every form of expression available to the human mind.

⁸ Not only that, but a “פֶּתֶן חֵרֶשׁ” - a deaf **viper**.” That is also significant to this midrashic reading, because in the final blessing Ya’akov gave to Dan, we read: “יְהִי דָן נָחֵשׁ עָלֵי דֶרֶךְ שְׂפִיפֵן עָלֵי אֶרֶץ” - Dan will be a snake on the road, a serpent on the path” (Genesis 49:17).

⁹ This I understood only after reading the Shelah ha-Kadosh (R. Yeshayahu Horowitz, 16th-17th century Prague), who writes: “I found that the Arizal wrote that the name is written without a *vav* (ו), so that it is the letters of משיח (*mashi’ah*).” He had previously pointed out that “ישמח - will rejoice” is also the letters of משיח.

