

HEARTSPEAK

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In one of the most dramatic episodes of the Torah, this week's portion tells us how Yoseph breaks the news that he is not just the viceroy of Egypt, but also that he is their brother. "He then kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; afterwards, his brothers conversed with him: The news was heard in Pharaoh's palace saying, "Yoseph's brothers have come!" And it was pleasing in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants. Pharaoh said to Yoseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this -- load up your animals and go directly to the land of Canaan. Bring your father and your households and come to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you will eat the fat of the land'"

Then Yoseph told his brothers, "Hurry -- go up to my father and say to him, 'So said your son Yoseph -- "G-d has made me master of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not delay. You will reside in the land of Goshen and you will be near to me -- you, your sons, your grandchildren, your flock and your cattle, and all that is yours. I will provide for you there -- for there will be five more years of famine -- so you do not become destitute, you, your household, and all that is yours. "

Yoseph concludes his entreaty by showing his sincerity. "Behold! Your eyes see as do the eyes of my brother Binyamin that it is my mouth that is speaking to you. (see Genesis Chap. 45)

What does Yoseph mean, "it is my mouth that is speaking to you"? Of course it is his mouth!

Yosef realized that the brothers would be skeptical. Rashi explains he spoke in Lashon Hakodesh, the Hebrew language, as proof of his true heritage. The Ramban, however, feels that speaking Hebrew would not prove anything. Egypt was close to Canaan, and leaders were fluent in many languages. Surely they knew Hebrew, the language of a neighboring country.

Perhaps the inclusion of Binyamin and the words my mouth can shed some light on the matter.

During the beginnings of détente in the 1970s, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev held a summit with President Richard Nixon. At the time, many organizations which were active in the struggle to free Soviet Jews planned a massive rally in Washington against the Russian Government. A long-time policy of Agudath Israel was not to join in unrestricted protests, as they did not want to be associated with many violent and inappropriate comments that those demonstrations often induced. In addition, the Agudah leadership worked behind the scenes to help their imprisoned brothers, using a stratagem of continued quiet diplomacy as leverage.

There was much pressure to participate in the Washington rally, which would be a clear show of

Jewish resolve to be seen by Russia's top official. But it was a very delicate time in the United States for Soviet-US relations, and an ugly showing against the USSR could have a negative impact.

The President of Agudath Israel, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, ob"m, brought the question to my grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, ob"m, a senior member of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, the Agudah's Council of Torah Sages which guided every aspect of Agudah policy.

His response was, "This protest in front of the Washington Monument is in the heart of the capitol of the country that has been the kind host to Torah Judaism during our sojourn here. Do you know if the Nixon Administration wants to see a big protest against the Soviet Government during these delicate negotiations?"

Rabbi Sherer, who had a relationship with the State Department, responded, "the officials said that they did not want to see protestors." My grandfather turned to Rabbi Sherer and re-stated his question. "Your job is not to find out what they said. I know what they said. Now your job is to find out what they want!"

Yoseph, in seconds, transformed from a vicious Prime Minister willing to imprison an old man's youngest son, to a once-scorned brother who is filled with love and compassion. He invites the rest of the family he just threatened moments ago to join him in Egypt. He promises to provide for them and treat them royally.

Was this a trick? Was it a ploy to get more members of Yaakov's family snarled in the net he carefully laid for the eleven who presently stood in front of him? Was Yosef acting as a spokesman for the regime of the Pharaoh who ruled the powerful land of Egypt?

Yosef responds by linking the affinity for his brother Binyamin together with his generous assurances that it is my mouth that is speaking to you. "It is my mouth," says Yoseph, not the mouth of Pharaoh. I am no spokesman for a regime. I speak with the wholesome sincerity of a blood-brother, who, unlike a bureaucrat, is wholly honest in his commitment.

When listening for the opinions of others, or even offering our own advice, we must be sure of who is really speaking and where the words are coming from. Are they our words or just words for the hour?

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