

Family Language

Elisha Porat

Translated from the Hebrew by Alan Sacks

I had a vision one night of my grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Yoselevitch, my father's father who died in Poland before the war. He lay in his house by the window while outside, hundreds of Jews wrapped in black fur hats and dark coats gathered in the small planked yard awash in mud left by the melting snow. With a bright face, he smiled and beckoned me closer. "Please, don't be afraid, my grandson-whom-I-did-not-deserve. Come to me, come to grandfather." The windows were open, it was cold, and dozens of grieving Jews thrust their heads into the room.

"Pay no attention to them," grandfather said. "And don't be afraid. Come to me."

Wait a minute. What language did he speak to me? Yes, I have this bad habit. I bring myself to a stop in the middle of reliving the dream. I have to know: What language did they actually speak in the dream? Did my grandfather speak Sephardic Hebrew, for him the language of a future that he never knew? Or did he speak to me in Yiddish, which for me was a useless language of the past? Or was it a picture language peculiar to dreams that was not Hebrew, Ashkenazic German, or Yiddish?

I just don't remember. Sometimes, something from my dreams comes to me weeks later. It's usually a trivial thing, of no importance, yet stamped indelibly into my memory. I once read some book about the interpretation of dreams. The author claimed that it was precisely these small, seemingly meaningless details that must be grasped because they hold the key to explaining the dream.

During a trip to Europe some years ago, I met my uncle, my mother's brother, for the first and last time. My uncle was already old and ill. His legs were nearly paralyzed and he moved about with difficulty, with a

walker. On the way from the hotel to his house, I wasn't concerned with which language we would speak. It all seemed so simple. The old uncle and his nephew from Israel were meeting. Was it conceivable that they would be unable to speak to one another? And in fact, the instant we met—after a few awkward moments—the flow of talk never ran dry. He asked questions, which I answered, and then he tried to answer my questions.

We sat in the house with his family, his sickly wife and watchful son-in-law as his daughter fussed around us. My wife, who had come with me from the hotel, also sat with us. I've saved it all inside me: the names, the dates, the family history that has come down to us. The siege, the rescue, the flight, everything. I even knew that he had grown tired of Judaism and was leading an assimilated life. But in his soul, he yearned to live a different kind of Jewish life.

On our ride back to the hotel that night, I asked my wife what language my uncle and I had spoken. I felt excited and quite confused. My question astonished her. Why, it was the family language, of course, the language revived from the past. "True, but what is the family language based on?" I persisted. My wife had noticed bits of Hebrew, fragments of French, she said, whole sentences spoken in Yiddish and a lot of English. I was amazed that night at how all those languages had melded inside me. They had been hiding, waiting for the right moment, and when they burst forth, there emerged a coherent, whole language: the family language.

And now we return to my paternal grandfather, to his last night in a small city in northeastern Poland on the Lithuanian border. The windows are open to the chilly, early spring evening. He signals me, calling me to him. I now know that he called me in the family language; indeed, we did not speak any common language. Actually, I still hadn't said anything. To tell the truth, that night, a night in the Hebrew month of Shevat in the year 1935, I still hadn't been born.

My father, a young, zealous pioneer, had already been in the land of Israel for some years. But I distinctly remember that he was with us there, at the rabbi's bed. And when I probe my memory, I also recall the faces of the founders of our kibbutz standing along the walls. Some of them are still shod in the high rubber boots they wore during our wet winters. Their boots are sopping with our reddish mud, the loam of the land of Israel, not the dark Polish forest mud whose exact color even I don't know. Through the open window comes the piercing cry of wailing. Some women mourning in the

distant throng can no longer control themselves.

Are the women allowed to enter the dying man's room? I don't know. I'm not an expert in religious law. All I know is what I can see in my dream. Women were there, definitely: relatives, neighbors who loved the brilliant rabbi, tender young girls of the Hashomer Hatzair Zionist movement bound for Israel, all encircling the house. Some of them were already bursting into tears. The men still restrained themselves, but were praying in pained, tormented voices: "May the rabbi live, amen. May the rabbi live, amen. Maytherabbiliveamen. Amenamenamen."

Only someone who has tried diving into a raging sea can begin to imagine what I went through. There is no firm bottom to a dream. Everything is mixed together, swept around, and I was close to drowning.

On my grandfather Rabbi Yosef Yoselevitch's last night, he appeared to me, the baby, his grandson not yet born. He smiled and invited me to play on his knees. But I could already detect beneath his yellow skin something that the jostling crowd on the wooden streets outside hadn't seen. Large white candles glowed in the room beside his head and someone put a damp towel on his brow. The murmur of prayer outside grew louder.

If the language of my grandfather's terms of endearment had been hard for me, the language of the prayers was seven times harder. I couldn't tell at first if they were real words or just sounds that repeated themselves like the booms of distant drums.

But now I could hear the recurring words of the prayers like a solemn oath. "*Ana b'khoach gedulat y'minkha*. With the strength of your right hand's greatness, we beg thee. We beg thee, use your power. We beg thee with the strength, we beg thee with the strength. With the strength of your right hand's greatness."

In the little garden trampled beneath the street's leafless trees, people were weeping, stooped over and wailing, the women in high, shrill voices, the men in dull ones. The language of the prayers outside was carried inside the room and surrounded the beloved rabbi on his death bed. "With the strength of your right hand's greatness, we beg thee. Preserve the life

**Just now, I don't care
at all what the source
of the prayer is.**

Just let it work.

within him, let him sit again among the living. By your right hand so great and mighty, can you not return our dead to life?"

What did I know of the world of yeshivas? What did I know of the Lithuanian school or the geniuses of the Musar movement? Even in my wildest dreams, I couldn't guess that I would seek out the schools in Jerusalem and read the heartrending lamentations that the great rabbis of Israel and Diaspora had written over my grandfather.

Once, giving in to a pique of curiosity, I went to visit the Lithuanian yeshivas in Jerusalem. I met teachers and headmasters, some of whom remembered my grandfather and even gave me a measure of respect, or perhaps it only seemed to me that they did, because I was the grandson of the Lubitsch. I chatted with them about the great achievements of those who had restored the world of the Lithuanian yeshivas, the giants of Musar, Abramsky and Grodzensky, the Meltzer rebbe and the Blazer rebbe. But inside, I felt that this was a lost world. I sat in their narrow, cramped offices in the Romema quarter. I drank from their cups and ate a little from their tables. They exchanged words among themselves in an indecipherable language; all I understood was that they were intrigued to see what had become of the secular grandson of the master of Lubitsch.

"Pay no attention to them," my grandfather the Lubitscher draws me to his bed ringed with candles. He chirps at me and showers me with sweet words of affection, hoping that I'll come out of the wall and take the form of a baby in the room, that I'll climb on his knees on this, his last night. Yes, it seemed to me in the dream that he swung me up on his frail knees and hummed in my hair some forgotten melody that I, too, sometimes recall. Then I am snatched off his knees because the rabbi is very weak. He has to be put to bed at once and prepared for death. So many Jews crowd around his bed. The dark coats are steaming and I recoil from the acrid stench of their boots. "Pay no attention to them."

My grandfather draws me to his ever paler face on the pillows. Outside, the women's wails are now rending the night air and the men are tearing their clothes. At night, in my hospital bed across from the cardiology nurses' station, I grasp for my memory. Tenaciously, by sheer force, I struggle to remember every word of the prayer-oath, "We beg you, with your strength." If the Jews clustered by the dying rabbi's window had such unshakable faith in the words' magic powers, why shouldn't I believe in it,

too? Why shouldn't its powers heal me, too? In every corner, they murmured, "May the rabbi live, may the rabbi live," even though his soul was already fluttering around the candles' flickering flames. What is the power of this prayer? Was it the combination of its letters, or the charm of its syllables, or the 42 words whose initials form the secret 42-letter Name of God? I too join those in the crowd, whispering and hoping. I too put letters together, compose abbreviations and memorize obscure acronyms. Let it have an ancient source. Let it have a mystical source. Let it even come from the imaginary world of the Kabbalah. Just now, I don't care at all what the source of the prayer is. Just let it work. Let the threat hanging over me in the hospital ward be removed and shattered. I know in my heart that my request hasn't been granted. The brilliant rabbi, the man of morals beloved by his people, was called to the Yeshiva on High and has not come back. Only in my cryptic dreams is he lying on his deathbed, propped up on his pillows. A sweet smile, a smile unlike any I have ever seen before, spreads over his face, its pallor calling to me.



Israeli author Elisha Porat was born in 1938 to pioneer parents who were among the founders of Kibbutz Ein Hahores, where he has lived all his life. His stories are often based on kibbutz life, army service, and more recently, on the nearly fatal heart attack he suffered a few years ago. Porat received the 1996 Prime Minister Levi Eshkol Prize for Literature, and has published more than a dozen books of fiction and poetry in Hebrew. "Family Language" is from Porat's Hebrew fiction collection, Kefitza Meshuleshet [Triple Jump], (Sifriat Poalim, 1994). He is the author of The Messiah of LaGuardia, a collection of stories.