Joseph's Hebrew and the Holy Language
Zachariah Edinger, Shamash

Gen 45:12: "You can see with your own eyes, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth speaking to you."

This verse occurs at the end of Joseph's dramatic revelation to his brothers. Onqelos translates the confusing phrase "it is my mouth speaking to you" as: "in your language I speak with you." Joseph's knowledge of Hebrew being the proof shown that he is indeed their brother. Similarly, Rashi, based on the Midrash, comments: "Your eyes see my glory, and that I am your brother, for I am circumcised just like you, and further it is my mouth that speaks to you in the holy language."

Nahmanides (Ramban) however, disagrees: 
...there is no proof [that he was Joseph] in the fact that someone in Egypt should speak in the Holy Tongue. In my opinion, Hebrew was a Canaanite language. Abraham did not bring it from Ur and from Haran, for there they spoke Aramaic, as the incident of the pile of stones erected by Laban and Jacob proves [see Gen. 31:47]. And it was not a private language spoken by a single person but a language of Canaan, and many people in Egypt knew it for the countries were close together—particularly the ruler, for it is customary for kings and rulers to know several languages.

Nahmanides does not think Joseph's knowledge of Hebrew is what is being referred to in this verse, but rather that by granting the brothers a special audience alone (without any interpreter or servants present) Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt, speaks to them directly, and in this way indicates that he is their brother. To Nahmanides Hebrew is merely a Canaanite language—and in expressing this opinion Nahmanides goes against generations of traditional rabbinic belief that Hebrew is special and is the "Holy Language." The belief that Hebrew is an inherently holy language has been expressed since at least the time of the Talmud. Countless sages from Maimonides to modern times have expressed this view.

...but to Nahmanides, Hebrew was simply a Canaanite language, and his view was truly revolutionary. But why then do we call Hebrew the Holy Language? Nahmanides' explains in his commentary on Exodus 10:13:

As I see it, the reason for the Rabbanis calling the language of the Torah the holy tongue is that the words of the Torah and of the prophets and all sacred utterances were all spoken in [Hebrew]; it is the language that the Holy One, blessed be He, speaks with His prophets and with His people, saying, "I am ...", "Thou shalt not have ...", and the remaining commandments and prophecies; it is the language by which He is called in His sacred names... and in which He created His universe, gave names to heaven and earth and all therein, giving his angels and his hosts names—Michael, Gabriel, etc. -- all in that language, and in that language naming the saintly people in the Land, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Samuel.

According to Nahmanides, the sanctity of language is due to its being used for sacred purposes throughout history, to write the Torah and words of prophecy. This is certainly something for us to remember. Our speech can be made holy by what we use it for, not simply by the language we say it in.
UPCOMING EVENTS

With Encouragement and Support of the Shearith Israel League

S&P Instrumental Recital for Young Musicians!
Saturday, February 7 | 7:00 pm
To be held in a private home
THE TIME TO SIGN UP IS NOW!
S&P welcomes all youth and teens -- both the children and grandchildren of members -- to play an instrument at a music recital to be held in a private home. All instruments welcome. If you prefer to perform in an instrumental ensemble with a musical friend who may not be a member, that is welcome as well. For more info and sign up, go to shearithisrael.org/recital.

Event Committee:
Robyn and Mark Tzesarsky
Rachel and Dr. David Vorchheimer

The First Shearith Israel League
Cook-Off Competition and Shabbat Dinner
Thursday evening, January 8 and Friday Night, January 9
Whether you call it Chulent, Hamin, Adafina, Chili, or just "Stew," Jews have been eating it for centuries.

We know you have great recipes. So now it’s your turn, if you dare, to test your mettle against the Shearith Israel Competition on Thursday evening, January 8. Read more and register to compete in the Cook-off competition at
shearithisrael.org/cook-off_competition

Then, on Friday evening, January 9, all are welcome to sample our congregation’s culinary diversity and to judge the winner during Shearith Israel League’s first annual Chulent/Hamin/Adafina Cook-Off Shabbat Dinner! To learn more and sign up for the dinner go to
shearithisrael.org/cook_off_shabbat_dinner

Chai Tea with Ronit Appel
Tuesday, January 13 at 5:30 pm Elias Room
"Chai Tea" is our version of high tea with a Jewish twist. On January 13, Ronit Appel will facilitate a discussion on Jewish and Israeli art. Come mingle, learn, and discuss over tea and light refreshments.

All are welcome! Recommended donation: $10 CSI members; $12 non-members. Please RSVP to ashultz@shearithisrael.org

Friday Night Lights&Bites
All congregants are welcome to join us for cocktails and light hors d’oeuvres. Registration Required.
shearithisrael.org/bites
1/30: The Wines and Fruit of Tu B’Shevat
2/20: Celebrate George Washington with Apple Cider

The series will culminate in an (extra) festive community dinner on Hilkhot of cocktails in March. Stay tuned for details.

The next Women’s Service will be held on Jan. 31. For more information contact Mrs. Lisa Rohde lirohde-csi@yahoo.com.

Judaic Education
View all our fall classes at shearithisrael.org/education.

- Psalms and Spirituality | Rabbi Richard Hidary | Sundays | 8:40 am
- Saadia Gaon’s Emunot ve’Doot on Revelation and Commandments | Sijmon den Hollander | Sundays | 9:30 am | RESUMES JANUARY 11
- Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed on Prophecy | Rabbi Richard Hidary | Monday 7:00 pm | RESUMES JANUARY 26

In partnership with JICNY
- YL Monday Night Learning | Mondays | 7:00 pm

- Hebruta Program | Mondays | 7:15 pm
- Living Jewish | Rabbi Morris | Mondays | 7:30 pm
- Rambam Rules for Young Professionals | Rabbi Morris | Mondays | 8:30 pm
- Bet Midrash | Mondays | 8:00 pm | RESUMES JANUARY 26
- History of the Sephardim, the Spanish & Portuguese Jews | Rabbi Shalom Morris | Tuesdays | 6:45 - 7:30 pm | Will resume on TUESDAY’s nights starting JANUARY 27
- Shulhan Arukh | Rabbi Hidary | Tuesdays | 7:45 am
- Jewish Time: The Festivals in Halakha and Jewish Thought - A Class for Women | Rabbi Soloveichik | Tuesdays | 9:00 am | RESUMES JANUARY 13
- Talmud Class: Tractate Berakhot and the Philosophy of Jewish Prayer | Rabbi Soloveichik | Tuesdays | 8:00 pm | RESUMES JANUARY 6
- Parashat HaShabua | Esther Hidary | Wednesdays | 10:00 am | NO CLASS THIS WEEK

Learn to read Hebrew! sign up for the new semester! Only $100 for 7 sessions!
Level 1: Sundays 10:00 am - 11:00 am | January 25 - March 15 (except February 15) | includes breakfast
Level 2: Monday 6:45 pm - 7:45 pm | January 28 - March 18 (except March 4)
Level 3: Thursdays 6:45—7:45 pm | January 29 - March 19 (except March 5)

Wednesday and Thursday classes immediately follow evening services. Participants are encouraged to attend.
shearithisrael.org/hebrewclasses