

שמאל - ימין

אבנר רמו

In the Book of Genesis we read: **שמאל או על-ימין** - “tell me; and I will turn to [the] right, or to [the] left” (Gen 24:29).

The terms **ימין** (*yamin*) - “right”, and **שמאל** (*semol*) - “left”, appear also in multiple other biblical verses. In addition, there are another 29 verses where “left” is spelled as **שמאל** (*semol*) - “left”



Chest X-ray showing dextrocardia

In the Book of Ecclesiastes we read:

לב חכם לימינו, ולב כסיל לשמאלו.

“A wise man's understanding is at his right hand; but a fool's understanding at his left” (Ecc 10:2).

The Greek translation follows more closely the Hebrew version of this verse: “The heart of the wise is to his right, and the heart of the fool is to his left.”

This Hebrew verse is not only biological challenging, but similarly to the rare medical condition of Dextrocardia, it is the cause of severe linguistic difficulties. Putting it simply, the transformation of these four-letter direction-related nouns, to verbs of a language in which the large majority of its verbs are based on three-letter roots is not an easy assignment.

The Chronicler wrote:

נשקי קשת, מימינים ומשמאלים באבנים, ובחצים, בקשת-מאחי שאול, מבנימן.

“They were armed with bows, and could use both the right hand and the left in slinging stones and in shooting arrows from the bow; they were of Saul's brethren of Benjamin” (1 Ch 12:2).

However, in the Book of Samuel we find:

ויאמר המלך, היד יואב אתך בכל-זאת; ותען האשה ותאמר חי-נפשך אדני המלך אם-אש להמין ולהשמיל, מכל אשר-דבר אדני המלך-כי-עבדך יואב הוא צוני, והוא שם בפי שפחתך את כל-הדברים האלה.

“And the king said: Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?’ And the woman answered and said: As your soul lives, my lord the king, none can turn to the right hand or to the left from aught that my lord the king had spoken; for your servant Joab, he bade me, and he put all these words in the mouth of your handmaid” (2 Sam 14:19).

It seems that a “minimalist” writer of the Book of Samuel (or a late scribe) wrote:

להמין ולהשמיל instead of: להימין ולהשמאיל by deleting the vowel letters י (i) and א (a) from these words, respectively.

In the Book of Ezekiel we hear the Prophet telling “the sword of the slayed”

התאחדי הימני, השימי השמילי; אנה פניך מעדות.

“Go you one way to the right, [or] direct yourself to the left; whither is your face set?” (Eze 21:21).

The Greek and the English translations of this verse do not adhere to its Hebrew words, which suggests that the translators believed that its syntax is corrupt. However, the logic of the text suggests that השימי הימני, התאחדי הימני is a letter-insertion, order-type error, letter-substitution, and letter and word deletion of:

התחזי ימינה, התשימי פניך שמאלה; אנה פניך מעדות.

“Do you look to the right? Do you put your face to the left? To where are your face directed?”

In the Book of Isaiah we find:

ואזניך תשמענה דבר, מאחריך לאמר: זה הדרך לכו בו, כי תאמינו וכי תשמאלו.

“And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying: This is the way, walk you in it, when you turn to the right hand, and when you turn to the left” (Is 30:21).

While this writer did not err on the “left” he wrote תאמינו (*thaaminu*) instead of תימינו - “turn to the right.” In addition, as דרך - “way” is a feminine term, here the words זה הדרך לכו בו appear as an order-type error of זו הדרך לכו בה.

It seems that although Abraham was politically correct, he erred grammatically when he said:

הלא כל-הארץ לפניך הפרד נא מעלי: אם-השמאל ואימנה, ואם-הימין ואשמאילה.

“Is not the whole land before you? separate yourself, I pray you, from me; if you shall go to the left, then I will go to the right; or if you go to the right, then I will go to the left” (Gen 13:9).

The comparison between these verses suggest that here **השמאל** is a letter-substitution error of **תשמאל** and the word **הימין** is a letter-substitution error of **תימין**.

In the Book of Nehemiah we read:

ואעלה את-שרי יהודה מעל לחומה; ואעמידה שתי תודת גדולת ותהלכת לימין מעל לחומה, לשער האשפת.

“Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great companies that gave thanks and went in procession: on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate” (Neh 12:31).

Seven verses latter we find:

והתודה השנית ההולכת למואל ואני אחריה; וחצי העם מעל להחומה, מעל למגדל התנורים ועד החומה הרחבה.

“And the other company of them that gave thanks went to meet them, and I after them, with the half of the people, upon the wall, above the tower of the furnaces, even to the broad wall” (Neh 12:38).

However, the comparison between these verses suggests that **למואל** (*lmoal*) is a letter-deletion and an ordertype error of **לשמאול** (*lasmoal*) - “to the left” (e.g. 2 Ki 23:8; Neh 8:4).