Not-Well-Known Hebrew Influence On The Slavic Alphabet

By Olga Kosheleva and Vladik Kreinovich

A few years ago, we attended an international conference in Pushkin, a suburb of St. Petersburg, Russia, named after Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), the most famous Russian poet. A colleague from Israel attending this conference got curious about the fact that in the Cyrillic signs, the Russian letter corresponding to the sh sound looks very similar to the Hebrew letter Shin that describes the same sound. I explained to him that this was not a coincidence; this question made me realize that not many people outside the Slavic world -- and even many people inside Russia -- know of this relation, so it may be of interest to readers of the Jewish Voice as well.

The Cyrillic alphabet is named after Cyril, a 9th century learned Greek missionary who -- together with his brother Methodius -- went to bring Christianity to the Slavs. Among many other languages, Cyril knew the language of the Slavs (some historians even claim that his Mother was a Slav), so he decided to translate the Bible into the Slavic language. The problem was that this was mostly an oral language, so Cyril and Methodius needed to come up with an alphabet. Most letters they took from their native Greek, but some sounds from the Slavic language did not have Greek equivalents, such as sh and ts. As a learned monk, Cyril knew Hebrew very well. He knew that these sounds exist in Hebrew -- and so he added the Hebrew letters Shin and Tsadi to the Greek alphabet. Cyril and Methodius also added a few more letters to describe diphthongs like ya, yu, etc.

With printing, the shape of the letters simplified, but one can still recognize the two Hebrew letters in the languages used by more than 200 million people around the world. On May 24, millions of people remember Cyril and Methodius and their alphabet by celebrating the Slavonic Literature and Culture Day. Millions of children learn these letters; they also learn the insightful names that Cyril and Methodius gave to their letters, so that when you recite them in alphabetic order, you get a powerful poetic message "Az buki vedi. Glagol' dobro," which can be loosely translated as "I know the letters, and I will only use them to spread goodness."

Russian letters: Ц Ш
Hebrew letters: כ פ

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