

**Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak**

Shiur #07b: *Nusach Ha-mikra* – Accuracy of the Biblical Text (continued)

B. The text of the *Tanakh* during the period of *Chazal*

The existence of questions concerning the correct text of the *Tanakh* is also reflected in the phenomenon of dots placed above certain words in the Torah.¹ This is a very ancient tradition, and these dots are among the very few markings of any sort that are to be found in a Torah scroll, which contains no punctuation or cantillation marks. One instance of these dots is the verse (*Devarim* 29:28), “The hidden things are for the Lord our God, while the revealed things are **for us and for our children (*lanu u-le-vanenu*)** forever, to perform all the words of this Torah.” A *beraita* in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* depicts the following scene:

Ezra said: If Eliyahu would appear to me and ask, “Why did you write it this way?” I would say to him, “I have already placed dots above the letters.” If he says to me, “You have done well in writing [the Torah text in this way],” then I will remove the dots from above the letters.²

From the midrash it would appear that Ezra the Scribe had some doubt as to the proper rendering of this verse, and for this reason he chose to write it in a way that would give expression to both versions of the text.³ Indeed, it is a

¹ This phenomenon occurs in ten different places in the Torah, four places in *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and there is also once instance in the *Ketuvim* (Writings). The phenomenon is noted in several sources in *Chazal*, including *Sifri*, *Bamidbar Beha'alotekha* 69, Horowitz edition p. 164.

² *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version A, chapter 34. Schechter edition 51a.

³ Regarding the same verse in *Devarim*, the Gemara quotes R. Yehuda asking: “Why are there dots over the words, '*lanu u-le-vanenu*', and upon the letter '*ayin*' in the (next) word, '*ad*' (forever)? This teaches that God did not punish for hidden things until Bnei Yisrael had passed over the Jordan River” (*Sanhedrin* 43b). From this we understand that there are indeed two possible ways of reading the verse, each pertaining to a different historical period: one reading of the text expresses the idea that is relevant only after the nation's entry into the land – i.e., that Bnei Yisrael is punished even for hidden sins of the individuals among them, since the idea of mutual responsibility entails punishment even for sins that are not committed in public. However, the other reading indicates that prior to the entry into the land, the nation was not punished for hidden sins. How does this idea arise from the placing of dots, indicating words that should be “erased,” as it were? Rashi writes (*ad locc*): “The dots should have been placed over the words ‘for the Lord our God’ – teaching that these [hidden] things do not remain within the realm of the Lord our God forever. However, it is not the way of the world to place dots over the Name of God, and therefore they are placed over the words ‘for us and for our children,’

well-known practice, found in manuscripts ranging from the Dead Sea Scrolls to manuscripts from the Middle Ages, that marking words with dots over them is intended to show that they have been “erased.”

In light of the *beraita*'s clarification, it is not difficult to understand the meaning of both versions of a verse where the phenomenon of dotting occurs. For instance, in the unit dealing with the census of the *leviim* (priests), we find:

All who were counted of the *leviim*, whom Moshe counted, **and Aharon**, at God's command, by their families – every male from a month old and upward, were twenty-two thousand. (*Bamidbar* 3:39)

There are dots above the name “Aharon,” and this is presumably explained by the fact that at the beginning of the census the command is given solely to Moshe (ibid. 14-15). Indeed, R. Chaim Paltiel⁴ writes in his commentary on verse 39:

Why are there dots on the word ‘Aharon’? Because he did not perform the counting; it was undertaken by Moshe alone, since he alone had been commanded. For this reason the text says “whom [Moshe] counted” [in the singular], and not “whom [Moshe and Aharon] counted,” [in the plural].

According to the textual version that we are familiar with, we must conclude that Aharon participated and aided Moshe in the census, although he was not commanded to do so.

In the encounter between Yaakov and Esav we find, “And Esav ran to meet him, and he embraced him, and he fell upon his neck, **and he kissed him**, and they wept,” with dots appearing above the word “and he kissed him” – *va-yishakehu*. (*Bereishit* 33:4) Here, too, we may assume that the two versions represent two possibilities as to how warm the encounter was, from Esav's point of view, and it seems that this is the meaning of the teaching which actually creates a balance between the two viewpoints: “he did not kiss him

indicating that this is not their proper place.” In other words, the dots should really have been placed over the words “the Lord our God,” such that the alternative reading, without these words, would render Am Yisrael responsible even for hidden matters: “The hidden and revealed things are for us and for our children forever.” The only reason that the dots appear over different letters is because it is not proper to place dots over God's Name. The Tosafot (ad loc.) note that according to Rashi's understanding, the letter ‘*ayin*’ in the following word, ‘*ad*’, is likewise dotted, to indicate that there are a total of 11 letters that should be dotted (the Tetragrammaton [God's Name] + the Name ‘Elokenu’), and therefore an alternative set of 11 letters is so marked (*‘lanu u-le-vanenu’* + the letter ‘*ayin*’).

⁴ R. Chaim Paltiel lived in France and in Germany during the 13th century, and was a disciple and friend of R. Meir (ben Barukh) of Rothenburg (Maharam). The work *Perushei ha-Torah* that is named after him is a collection of commentaries on the Torah by the Ba’alei ha-Tosafot, which was edited by the son of R. Chaim.

wholeheartedly.”⁵

Concerning the angels who visit Avraham, we read: “they said **to him**, Where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent” (*Bereishit* 18:9), with the word ‘to him’ (*e/av*) dotted. It is clear that the verse would still retain the same meaning were it to be read without this word. Ralbag, commenting on this verse, writes:

To my mind, the dots that are above (the word) ‘*e/av*,’ and similar examples, appear to me to indicate an intermediate situation between the presence of the dotted word and its absence. For the dots are placed over a word [in order] to erase that which appears under the dots. But since the word remains written in the text with the dots above it, it indicates that it is not erased altogether, nor is it written in its [usual] entire manner.⁶

The Amoraim stated explicitly that they were not experts in the exact text of the *Tanakh*. In the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 30a) we find:

Therefore the early Sages were called ‘*soferim*’ (literally – ‘counters’) (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 55), for they would count all the letters in the Torah. They established that the ‘*vav*’ of the word ‘*gachon*’ (*Vayikra* 11:42) is the halfway mark of all the letters in a Sefer Torah; the words “*darosh darash*” (*ibid.* 10:16) are the middle words [of a Sefer Torah]; and the verse that begins ‘*ve-hitgalach*’ (*ibid.* 13:33) is the middle verse [of a Sefer Torah].

In other words, the early Soferim (a reference to the sages at the time of Ezra) possessed an extremely accurate version of the text, and they had a tradition as to the middle letter, word, and verse of the Torah.⁷ In the continuation of the gemara, R. Yosef raises a question: assuming that the number of words in the Torah is an even number, such that there is no exact “middle letter,” does the letter ‘*vav*’ represent the last letter of the first half of the Torah, or the first letter of the second half? The Gemara proposes counting the letters in a Sefer Torah in order to arrive at the answer to this question, but then

⁵ Commentary of the Sifri (see above).

⁶ See Ralbag’s commentary on the Torah, Brenner and Freiman edition, Ma’aleh Adumim 5753, p. 248, n. 10.

⁷ The specifications here are quite far removed from the “middles” as we know them today: The middle letter in our Sefer Torah is the letter “*alef*” in the word “*hu*” (*Vayikra* 8:25) – almost five thousand letters away from the letter specified in the *sugya*. The mid-point in our Sefer Torah in terms of words is to be found in between the words “*e/ yesod*” (*ibid.* 15) – about a thousand words away from the location cited in the *sugya*. The middle verse of the Torah as we know it is *Vayikra* 8:8 – about 60 verses away from the one cited in the *sugya*. The Minchat Shai (*Vayikra* 8:8) notes this considerable discrepancy, noting first the possibility that “we might say that we are not experts in the verses,” but goes on to acknowledge, “But my mind is not reconciled with this, since the discrepancy is very great... [Eliyahu] the Tishbi will bring the solution.”

rejects the idea: “They were experts in the traditional plene and defective spellings, but we are not.” Further on, the Gemara explains that we are likewise unable to locate the “middle verse” of the Torah:

When Rav Acha bar Adda came he said, In the west [i.e., in the Land of Israel] the following verse is read as three [separate] verses: “And God said to Moshe, Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud...” (*Shemot* 19:9).⁸

From these discussions it would appear that already by the period of the Amoraim there were questions concerning textual variants – involving plene and defective spellings, and even the division of verses.⁹ Obviously, this matter has significant halakhic ramifications, which are discussed by the commentators and authorities throughout the generations.¹⁰

⁸ The full verse reads, “And the Lord said to Moshe, Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever. And Moshe told the words of the people to the Lord.” This may be broken down into three parts (see commentary of Maharsha to the gemara in *Kiddushin*, ad loc.).

⁹ No similar question appears in the Gemara concerning the “middle word” of the Torah, and on this basis the Tosafot ha-RID (Yishayahu di Trani) sought to conclude that “concerning the words there is no room for doubt as there is concerning the [middle] letters and verses.” However, a counting of the words in the Torah shows that according to the version of the text as we know it, the middle words are found a whole two chapters earlier: “...at the bottom of the altar and sanctified it” (*Vayikra* 8:15). This calculation is cited in the word of R. Yaakov Shor on the Tosefta (Mishnat Rabbi Yaakov, Pieterkov 5690). For this reason it would appear that concerning words, too, the Soferim had a different tradition (although R. Yaakov Shor rightly asks how it is possible for there to be such a great discrepancy between the tradition of the Soferim and the text as we have it), and the reason that the Gemara does not ask the same question about the words is, as the Ramah (R. Meir ha-Levi Abulafia) suggests in his commentary ad loc., that the tradition was that the words “*darosh darash*” are exactly the middle: the first word concludes the first half, and the second word starts the second half.

¹⁰ R. Menachem ben Shlomo ha-Meiri, in his commentary on the gemara in *Kiddushin*, concludes as follows: “The guidelines that we have been given by the Soferim that we rely on for the purposes of writing a Sefer Torah are based on the most precise texts in our possession, but it is not to say that we have absolute clarity on the matter. And on account of this I feel it is wise to be lenient and not invalidate a Sefer Torah on account of this [a missing or additional letter], for this could only apply to experts.”

The Rema rules similarly that the law concerning a Sefer Torah in which a mistake has been found – i.e., that it is returned to the Holy Ark and a different Torah scroll taken out to be read – applies “specifically when a definite mistake has been found, but one does not take out another scroll merely on account of plene or defective spelling of words, since our Torah scrolls are not so accurate that we can be sure that the second scroll will be any better [than the first]” (Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim 143:4). The Sha’agat Aryeh (36) writes that on the basis of the gemara’s discussion we may indeed conclude that in our times there is no possibility of writing a “kosher” Sefer Torah, and therefore the commandment of writing a Sefer Torah does not apply in our times: “Because even in the times of the Amoraim they were not expert in plene and defective spellings... and, after all, a Sefer Torah that lacks even a single letter, or has one extra letter, is invalid. Therefore, we are unable to observe this commandment.” The Chatam Sofer (Orach Chaim 52) used this reasoning to explain why we do not recite a blessing over the writing of a Sefer Torah. (Admittedly, there were other authorities who disagreed on this point, maintaining that the version that has been handed down to us by the Masoretes, to be discussed in a later *shiur*, is the version that we are halakhically required to follow, and therefore writing such a scroll does in every respect represent the fulfillment of the

We may therefore conclude by saying that during the time of *Chazal* the version of the *Tanakh* was for the most part fixed and uniform, but in some instances there arose questions of textual variants, and where such details as plene or defective spelling were concerned there was a lack of clarity, which became more pronounced during the period of the Amoraim.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

commandment to write a Sefer Torah, and that a scroll lacking a single letter must not be read from in public. See Shu"t Ginat Veradim, Orach Chaim 2:6 and elsewhere.)