

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

**Shiur #7i: *Nussach Ha-mikra*: Accuracy of the Biblical Text**

**i. "If there would be found, in an accurate manuscript..."**

We have discussed the problematic nature of proposals for textual emendations which may obscure or even erase the important literary messages conveyed by a seemingly erroneous word or phrase. We have also seen that some textual difficulties are easily solved if there is familiarity with common biblical linguistic phenomena, rendering the attempt at textual emendation superfluous. Nevertheless, even after such instances have been resolved in a satisfactory manner, we are still left with some places where the Masoretic text presents a difficulty, and other textual witnesses may help solve the problem.

As noted, even with all due caution, both from a religious perspective and in terms of textual analysis, we are left with R. David Zvi Hoffmann's assertion that the biblical text in our possession is not perfect. Thus, while we uphold the exegetical effort to maintain the Masoretic version, we do not rule out categorically the possibility of textual emendations. It is important to emphasize that even where the commentators find no way of explaining the Masoretic text, the proposals of textual emendations nevertheless remain nothing more than suggestions or hypotheses.

An interesting example of this approach is to be found in the commentary of R. Yosef Kara on the verse, "And I shall bring upon that land all My words (*et kol devarai*) which I have uttered concerning it, all that is written (*et kol ha-katuv*) in this book, which Yirmiyahu prophesized concerning all the nations" (*Yirmiyahu* 25:13). He writes:

"And I shall bring... concerning it' – as uttered by Yirmiyahu. If an accurate manuscript would show the word '*ve-et*' in this verse [i.e., introducing the next phrase – '*and* all that is written'], then this would be the meaning. But if it is read as '*et*,' then [the second phrase, starting 'all that is written'] refers only to what appears immediately prior to it (i.e., all that Yirmiyahu himself has said)."

R. Yosef Kara raises the possibility of a textual emendation, even though he has not encountered any such textual witness (he merely makes the

acceptance of such a change dependent on it appearing in a reliable manuscript), but still interprets the verse as it stands.

Thus, we are inclined to conclude, as does Prof. Menachem Cohen:

"The ideal of the sanctity of the textual version, down to the last letter, in our time, must be understood in its purely halakhic interpretation – i.e., it must draw its validity not from the assertion that human beings have managed to preserve the text in its exact form throughout its transmission, but rather from the faith that human beings are vested with the authority to make halakhic rulings as to the form of the authorized version, down to the last letter, and that the form thus determined is the halakhically binding one, even if historically speaking it is not 'correct' or 'accurate' in all its details."<sup>1</sup>

However, one need not necessarily agree with the continuation of the passage:

"This being the case, the new religious approach to exegesis on the *peshat* level [of straightforward meaning] is accordingly committed to the method of textual criticism. Exegesis on the *peshat* level, which strives to grasp the meaning of the actual words, must – among other considerations – take into account every possible textual witness, weigh up the alternatives on their own merits, and decide on the basis of pure logic."

In contrast to this position, it would seem that our mandate is not to "decide," and our logic is not always able to substantiate a decision.

Cohen seeks to illustrate his position using a specific example. In the list of Yaakov's family members who go down to Egypt, we find the names of four sons of Yissakhar:

"And the sons of Yissakhar: Tola and Puva and Yov and Shimron."  
(*Bereishit* 46:13)

But elsewhere in *Tanakh* where we find the sons of Yissakhar listed, the name of the third son – Yov – appears in a slightly different form, with the addition of the letter "shin." In *parashat Pinchas* we find:

"The sons of Yissakhar by their families: Tola – the Tola'i family; to Puva – the Puni family. To Yashuv – the Yashuvi family; to Shimron – the Shimroni family" (*Bamidbar* 26:23-24),

and in *Divrei Ha-yamim* we find:

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Cohen, p. 68.

"And to the sons of Yissakhar – Tola and Pua, Yashiv (written 'Yashiv' but pronounced 'Yashuv') and Shimron, four." (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 7:1)

In the Septuagint and in the Samaritan text, the verse in *Bereishit* accordingly reads "Yashuv." On the basis of these data, Cohen writes:

"All of these facts make it likely that 'Yashuv' (spelled *yud, shin, vav, bet*) is indeed the name of Yissakhar's son, while 'Yov' (spelled *yud, vav, bet*) is a corruption that found its way into the text over the course of transmission of the Masoretic version, prior to its canonization...

Nevertheless, this historical conclusion is separate from the question of how a *Sefer Torah* should be written today. The word 'Yov' has been sanctified as part of the canonized version down to its letters, by the power of halakhic ruling. Anyone who introduces any change into a *Sefer Torah* disqualifies it, for this version – and this alone – is halakhically binding in the copying of the text."

Cohen's clearly stated distinction between an exegetical emendation and the halakhic ruling as to the sanctity of the Masoretic text is, of course, important, but at the same time the status of the Masoretic version is more than just formal halakhic procedure. Preservation of the Masoretic version is also an expression of the position that, following Rabbi Hoffmann, no matter how logical a textual emendation may seem, it will always remain a question. It is, admittedly, logical to argue that the name of Yissakhar's son was 'Yashuv,' but we cannot rule out the possibility that the version reflected in the Samaritan text and the Septuagint does not in fact preserve an ancient version, but rather represents an emendation of the verse in *Bereishit* in light of the verses in *Bamidbar* and *Divrei Ha-yamim*. Moreover, variations of names is a very common phenomenon in *Tanakh*, and it does not seem reasonable to propose a textual emendation for each and every such case. It may well be that similar names arose for various reasons which we are not privy to. Therefore, the rejection of the textual emendation arises not only in defense of the sanctity of the Masoretic version, but also because the emendation represents nothing more than exegesis – which is certainly reasonable, but cannot be proven.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Various explanations have been offered on the midrashic level for the Yov/Yashuv alternatives: 1. "His name was Yov (and Shimron), so why is he called Yashiv? For he brought back (*heshiv*) the suggestion to the brothers to make chariots" (Sifri Zuta 7, 18; Horowitz edition pp. 252-253); 2. "Yet it is written, 'Yashiv,' for they bring back (*meshivin*) Israel to their Father in heaven" (Midrash ha-Gadol, Bereishit 46, 13; Mossad ha-Rav Kook edition, p. 777); 3. "'And Yov...' – [so called] for his voice sang with the words of Torah. And he is the same 'Yashuv' mentioned in *Sefer Bamidbar* [...] So why was he called 'Yashuv'? Because he strengthened Torah study [the building of yeshivot] in Egypt"(Midrash Sekhel Tov, Bereishit 46:13, Buber edition p. 290). In the commentary attributed to Rashi on the verse in *Divrei Ha-yamim* we find: "His name was Yov, but since they settled down (*nityashvu*) to study Torah, as it is written, 'Of the sons of Yissakhar, men with understanding of the times' (*Divrei ha-Yamim* I 12:33), he therefore merited to be called

Thus, Cohen is correct in his assertion that "a contemporary religious commentator of the *peshat* will not have fulfilled his obligation if he fails to bring these facts and their like to the knowledge of the students," and familiarity with other versions is indeed important. However, students must be made aware of the entire range of considerations and factors involved, with a cautious distinction being maintained between possible suggestions and proven conclusions.

## j. Summary

The close attention given to the precise transmission of the *Tanakh* is clear already from *Chazal's* teachings. The quest to preserve every word and letter in its proper place and form finds expression in the impressive cross-checking mechanism developed by the Masoretes, employing an extensive system of detailed notes. In this manner the *Tanakh* has been preserved with remarkable accuracy over many generations.

At the same time, the *Tanakh* was disseminated in many copies written by many different scribes. Through this human activity, slight variations found their way into different manuscripts. *Chazal* acknowledged already in their time that they were not clear as to the exact textual version, and the Masoretic text that we have today does indeed differ slightly, in several places, from the version that *Chazal* quote. In addition, the various textual witnesses of the biblical text, including the Qumran scrolls, the Samaritan version, the Septuagint, and the Aramaic translations, serve to support the thesis that in ancient times there existed versions that differed, in small details, from the Masoretic text (along with versions that differed more substantially). During the period of the Rishonim, too, there were different manuscripts that were used by the various commentators. Rashi's version, for example, differs in dozens of small details from our Masoretic version. The editions of the *Tanakh* that are available today likewise show slight variations.

All of the above indicates clearly that we lack the ability to arrive at a *Tanakh* text which we may assert with certainty to reflect with perfect accuracy the "original" versions of each of the Books. In light of this reality we have discussed the approach to proposals for textual emendations, which are a common phenomenon in biblical scholarship. We proceeded on the basis of R. David Hoffmann's fundamental assumption that although we cannot rule out the possibility that in some or other instance a certain spelling, form, or structure may be a corruption, we are similarly unable to prove that the proposed emendation is in fact a correction. Moreover, we noted that in many cases a version that appears at first glance to be problematic, may actually reveal a significant spiritual insight, whereas a hasty emendation would cause this level of meaning

---

"Yashuv." A. Weisel, *Ha-Perush ha-Meyuchas le-Rashi le-Sefer Divrei Ha-yamim*, Jerusalem 5770, p. 105, notes that the exegete himself may have arrived at this explanation, for there is no source for it either in the writings of *Chazal* or in the earlier commentaries.

to be missed. In addition, we have seen that familiarity with different aspects of the style and language used in the *Tanakh* often renders a textual emendation unnecessary.

Nevertheless, we are still left with instances where the text as we know it presents a very difficult textual problem, and here we cannot categorically refuse the possibility of a textual emendation – especially where it is based on other textual witnesses. Obviously, the Masoretic text will continue to be the version that is halakhically binding and the standard according to which *Sifrei Torah* are written and editions of the *Tanakh* printed. In addition, on the level of religious scholarship, a textual emendation will always remain a hypothesis, such that the student is not free from the obligation to labor to understand the Masoretic version as transmitted to us.

Translated by Kaeren Fish