

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Ki Sisa

The Letters that Flew Up from the Luchos

BACKGROUND

One of the most traumatic moments in our formative history is described in our parsha, whereby upon witnessing the people worshipping the Egel that they had made in his absence, Moshe smashes the luchos that had been given to him by Hashem to deliver to them. Commenting on that moment, the Midrash says:¹

ראה שפרח כתב מעליהן והשליכן מידו

He [Moshe] saw that the script flew off them [the luchos], and so he threw them down from his hands.

The midrash clearly indicates that Moshe took the letters flying off the luchos as a sign for him to break them – and indeed, what use would luchos be with no writing on them? Let us ponder this idea a little further.

MANTZEPACH – FORGOTTEN LETTERS?

There is a most intriguing discussion in the Gemara² regarding the five final letters: mem, nun, tzadi, peh and kaf, known by their acronym as “mantzepach” (מנצפכ). The Gemara states that, “מנצפכ צופים – אמרום – the letters of mantzepach were said [i.e. instituted] by the prophets.” The Gemara reacts to this statement by raising two objections:

The first question is one of principle: A prophet does not have the authority to add an institution to Torah law. Hence, if this form of writing these letters is acceptable regarding Torah mitzvos, such as a Torah scroll and tefillin, it must be part of the Torah from the time it was given. How, then, can it be said to be an institution of the prophets?

The second question is one of history: We have a tradition that the letters mem and samech which were engraved in the luchos were held in place by a miracle. The idea behind this is that the engraving on the luchos went all the way through them. Almost all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have some part which would remain attached to the body of the luchos even after the letter has been engraved

1 Yalkut Shimoni Ki Tisa sec. 391.

2 Megillah 2b.

through entire thickness of the luchos. However, the engraved section of the letters mem and samech completely surrounds the middle of the letters, leaving that section of stone in the center unattached to anything! In this regard, we have a tradition that the middle sections of those letters stayed in the center of the letter with nothing to hold them via a miracle. Now, we will appreciate that, of the two letters mentioned, while the samech of course is a circle, the only type of mem which would require this miracle is the final mem which is a square. Hence, asks the Gemara, if the final mem dates back to the luchos given at Mount Sinai, why are the final letters of mantzepach attributed to the prophets?

In answer to these two questions, the Gemara explains its original statement: “שכחום וחזרו ויסדום – *They were forgotten and then [the prophets] subsequently [re]instituted them.*” In other words, although these final forms were clearly known as far back as Sinai itself, they became forgotten, with the role of the prophets not that of introducing them, but reinstating them.

Needless to say, this answer is enigmatic, to say the least. How is it possible for letters that are part of the alphabet to become forgotten? There are items that every Jewish household contains which include written sections, such as tefillin and mezuzos! As such, the notion that these letters were forgotten is very difficult, indeed.

On a separate note, the commentators point out that the way in which the prophets are referred in this statement – “צופים” – is very non-typical. The word “צופים” comes from the word “צופה” which means to see. Now, while it is true that prophets experience visions, to which end they are in fact “seers”, nevertheless, they are always referred to simply as “נביאים – prophets.” Why, in this particular context, are they called “צופים”?

ELEMENTS OF CREATION – BEFORE AND AFTER SIN

One of the outstanding Torah personalities of the nineteenth century, R' Eliyahu Gutmacher, explains as follows.³ We are aware of the concept that “Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world,”⁴ which is then expressed in the well-known idea that the Torah is the “blueprint of Creation.” On a more detailed level, this means that the letters of the aleph beis represent the elements or basic spiritual building blocks of the universe, with each letter reflecting a particular force or concept. However, as we know, as a result of the sin of Adam HaRishon, the entire world and man’s relationship with it underwent an enormous upheaval. Specifically, this impacted on five areas:

1. Death, which was originally not meant to be experienced by man, now became part of human experience.
2. Life would now be marked by setbacks and difficulty.
3. Earning a livelihood and obtaining sustenance from the world now became much more difficult.
4. Man became more animal-like in terms of his activities and interactions.
5. Evil was more present in the world, making it harder to choose and maintain a course of righteousness.

These five areas are represented by the five letters of *mantzepach*:

1. Mem represents misah – death.
2. Nun represents nefila – a fall or setback.
3. Kaf means hand, representing both Hashem’s hand bestowing sustenance and man’s hand in being able to receive it.
4. Peh means mouth, representing eating, the most basic physical activity.

3 Commentary to Chagigah 12a.

4 Zohar, Parshas Terumah 161a.

5. Tzadi is related to the term tzaddik, a righteous individual, representing a person's ability to attain righteousness.

In light of the above, we will appreciate that the letters that correspond to these five areas likewise underwent a change as a result of that sin. Initially, these letters were in the form as we have them at the end of a word:

1. The *mem* was closed, representing death being closed away and sealed off from human experience.
2. The *nun* was upright, representing man being vouchsafed from fall or setback.
3. The *kaf* was open and upright, representing receiving Hashem's sustenance with ease.
4. The *peh* was upright, representing the elevated level of man's physical activities.
5. The *tzadi* was upright, representing man's natural tendency toward righteousness.

However, in the wake of Adam's sin, the change in these five areas was likewise reflected in a change in these letters:

1. The *mem* became open, allowing death to enter the world.
2. The *nun* became stooped over, making man more prone to setback and mishap.
3. The *kaf* became stooped over, representing the hardship that would be involved in making a living from the land.
4. The *peh* became stooped over, representing the lowered nature of man's physical activities.
5. The *tzadi* became stooped over, representing the difficulty in attaining righteousness.

The crucial point emphasized by Rav Gutmacher is that there was never any difference regarding where in the word the letter appeared, whether in the beginning, the middle or the end. When the letters were used in their "upright" form, this was so even in the middle of a word. Conversely, when they shifted to their "diminished" form, this was even at the end of a word.

HAR SINAI: RECLAIMING – AND RE-LOSING – THE ORIGINAL LETTERS

This diminished situation pertained from the time of Adam's sin onward. However, at a critical point in our history, the original letters finally had the opportunity to return to their original form, namely, when we stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah. The level achieved by the Bnei Yisrael at that time was that of Adam before the sin, whereby they were to be free of death and hardship. Accordingly, the writing on the luchos was able to re-introduce the letters of *mantzepach* in their higher form after having been in hiatus for two-and-a-half millennia!

However, this elevated level, too, was short-lived, for the making of the Golden Calf precipitated a fall once more back to the post-sin state. Hence, the writing on the luchos that Moshe brought down on that occasion was again incompatible with the world in its diminished state. This, says Rav Gutmacher, is the meaning of the Midrash which says that Moshe saw script flying off the luchos as he approached the camp. The script that flew off was specifically the letters of *mantzepach*, which reflected a level that no longer pertained!

With this in mind, we return to the tradition cited by the Gemara that the letters *mem* and *samech* on the luchos were suspended miraculously. We can now understand that this was true specifically regarding the first luchos, where the letter *mem* was indeed sealed.

The second luchos, which were given after the sin of the Egel, would already have those letters in their diminished form. Thus, Hashem said to Moshe that he should carve out two new tablets of stone,

“וְכַתַּבְתִּי עַל הַלְחֹת אֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל הַלְחֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנִים – and I shall write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets.”⁵ Hashem was emphasizing that the words on the second set of luchos would be the same as on the first; however, the script would be different, with the lower form of *mantzepach* being used to reflect the fallen state of the Bnei Yisrael.

It turns out that only person who had seen the letters of *mantzepach* in their higher form was Moshe, when he received the first luchos. Beyond that point, only the diminished form of those letters was used. This is why the Gemara says that the higher form of those letters was forgotten at a certain point. Moshe may have told his disciples about them, who may have in turn passed this information on to their disciples; however, in the absence of actually being used, they faded from people’s awareness.

TZOFIM: KEEPING THE END IN SIGHT

Once again, centuries went by with only the diminished letters of *mantzepach* in use, while the higher letters were forgotten. This continued until the time of the Neviim, part of whose task it was to prophesy regarding the end of days and the future redemption of the Jewish people and the world. As part of this goal, they re-introduced the original form of the *mantzepach* letters which signify the rectification of the world that will take place at that time. That is the meaning of the Gemara which says the letters were “forgotten and then re-instituted.” Moreover, it is for this reason they instituted that these letters be used at the *end of the word* specifically, since they represent the situation that will exist in the end of days. This was, if we may say, the original postscript! Additionally, we can now understand why, within the context of this enactment, they are referred to as “*tzofim* – seers,” for the enactment itself is an expression of the vision they had of the future, and which they were seeking to instill within the Jewish people.

However, we recall that according to Rav Gutmacher, when the higher form of the letters are truly relevant, they are used wherever the letter appears in the word – whether the beginning, middle or end. And indeed, there is actually one place where this, too, is expressed. In Chapter 9 of Yeshayahu,⁶ the prophet foretells of the elevated states of the world in future times:

לְסִרְבָּה [לְמִרְבָּה] הַמְּשֻׁרָה וְלִשְׁלוֹם אֵין קֵץ עַל כִּסֵּא דָוִד וְעַל מַמְלַכְתּוֹ לְהַכִּין אֹתָהּ וּלְסַעֲדָהּ
בְּמִשְׁפָּט וּבִצְדָקָה מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם

Towards abundant greatness and boundless peace [that will rest] on the throne of David and his kingdom, to establish and sustain it through justice and righteousness, from now to eternity.

There is most unusual occurrence within this verse; unique, in fact, in the entire Tanach. The letter *mem* of the word “לְמִרְבָּה” is written as a final mem – “לְסִרְבָּה”, even though it is in the middle of a word! This, says Rav Gutmacher, is a “taste” and portent of the way these letters will be used when the time that they describe arrives – wherever in the word they appear.

May we merit to see the return of these letters in full, and the elevated state that they signify, speedily in our days!

5 Shemos 34:1.

6 Verse 6.