

This Week in Torah Naso

We have several unique Torah scrolls in our *Aron HaKodesh*. We a *kabbalistic* scroll, a scroll that survived the Holocaust, 2 scrolls from a congregation in Amsterdam NY, a scroll that we keep in a Sefardic tik which is that metal container in the Ark... and we have a scroll that is a “*vav*” scroll—which means that it comes from a school of calligraphy in southeastern Germany where all but 3 columns start with the letter “*vav*.” It is a rare find---

That sixth letter in the Hebrew alphabet which is the letter “*vav*” has lots of unique qualities. In modern Hebrew, it is synonymous with the number 6. In this week’s *parasha*, it has a very important function--- linking verses together to create a blessing that has been the way people have sought a connection to God thru-out the ages. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves—this *d’var Torah* is focusing in on that magical letter and how it helps the words of Torah come alive. It can mean a lot of things—from a conjunction [“and”] or a summation clause [“thus”] to a way go back in time even though the verb is in the future tense! It is kinda funky!!!

Before I get ahead of myself, let me start with a mystical/*Kabbalistic* teaching about this letter. A modern-day mystic who uses the nickname of “*Gal Enai*” shared this midrash: “In the beginning of Creation, when Infinite Light filled all reality, God contracted this Light to create hollow empty space, as it were, the ‘place’ necessary for the existence of finite worlds. Into this vacuum God drew down, figuratively speaking, a single line of light, from the Infinite Source. This ray of light is the secret of the letter *vav*. Though the line is singular in appearance, it nonetheless possesses two dimensions, an external as well as an internal force, both of which take part in the process of Creation and the continuous interaction between the creative power and created reality.” In this definition, the letter “*vav*” precipitates creation itself to be the catalyst for creation. And the first time the letter “*vav*” appears in the Torah it is to link heaven and earth together—interrelate all aspects of this world with a sense of holiness.

The letter “*vav*” has another unique quality in the Torah. It can reverse time! This grammatical construct is referred to as a “*vav hahifuch*”—the upside-down *vav*. This “*vav*” possesses the function of inverting the apparent tense of a verb to its opposite

from past to future or from future to past. The rabbis teach us that this is the essence of our ability to perform *teshuvah*, to repent—we can look at who we are and go back to the mistake we made and try to correct it. This *vav* appears frequently thru-out our Torah readings.

In the end of the sixth chapter of the book of Numbers, we see another use of the letter “*vav*”--- the ability to link God and the people together. The final verse of this chapter has the *birkat Cohanim*, the priestly benediction which I invoke on many happy occasions. But I should not be so arrogant as if I am doing the blessing! Right after one says: “May God bless you and keep you/May God’s radiance shine down upon you and be gracious unto you/May God lift up the divine face upon you and grant you peace,” the text reads: “Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” This means it is God doing the blessing, the one saying the words is just the intermediary.

The word “thus” is just a letter “*vav*.” The author David Mamet states that this “thus” is like the conclusion of a business contract. God’s presence is being placed on a person so that God’s name will be always with the people as a source of protection. He describes it as if the parts of the blessing have an unmentioned “whereas” and then a “*vav*” appears to make for a powerful conclusion! Jerusalem Post *darshan* Pinchus Peli wrote:

“Against the background of saints, sorcerers, and magicians in the ancient temples, Torah comes to make clear that the blessing originates not from the priest, but from God. The priest is not expected to pour out his superfluity of blessings. All he has to do to put God’s name on the people is to recite 15 words in a three-fold formula, and no more...”

A simple letter can wield such power in our tradition... a catalyst of creation, a conjunctive participle that links the mundane to the sacred, the ability to turn back time, and a way for God’s holy presence to be infused into our existence. That is the majesty of the letter “*vav*”!