

Komemiyyut – Standing Tall, Erect and Prominent

In this week's Torah portion, *Bechukkotai*, we see a word that appears only once in the Torah. That word is *komemiyyut* (קוֹמִיּוּת):

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִהַיְוָה לָהֶם עֲבָדִים וְאֲשַׁבֵּר
מִטַּת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלָךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמִיּוּת:

I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no longer, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk *komemiyyut*. [Leviticus 26:13]

It also appears in the siddur, in the prayer Ahava Rabbah, recited before the Shema in the Shacharit service:

*Vehavienu leshalom me-arbah kanfot ha'aretz vetolichenu
komemiyyut l'artzenu.*

May You bring us together from the four corners of the earth, leading us *komemiyyut* to our land.

We find it also in Birkat Hamazon, the Grace After Meals:

*Harachaman Hu yishbor alenu me'al tzavarenu v'Hu yolikhenu
komemiyyut le-artzenu.*

The compassionate One! May He break the yoke of oppression from our necks and guide us *komemiyyut* to our land.

What does the word mean? If a word appears only once in the Torah, we cannot be sure of its meaning, because we cannot compare it to its other appearances.

In Sifra, an ancient halachic midrash from Talmudic days, we learn that *komemiyyut* means "erect" [Sifra on Bechukkotai 3:7]. It is quoted as such by Rashi, who made that interpretation near-universal. The 1948 Israeli War of Independence is sometimes referred to as *milchemet ha-komemiyyut* – the war in which we were finally able to walk erect after 2000 years. It was Ben Gurion's favorite name for it.

One problem with this interpretation is that the Talmud prohibits walking in an upright and haughty manner:

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי אסור לאדם שיהלך ארבע אמות בקומה זקופה

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: It is prohibited for a person to walk even four cubits with an upright posture [considered arrogant], because it says in Isaiah:

מלא כל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

The entire earth is full of [God's] glory [Isaiah 6:3].

[Kiddushin 31a]

Presumably, he means that by walking erect (meaning haughtily) one insults the honor of God, Who is everywhere.

On the other hand, elsewhere in the Talmud, in commenting on the word *komemiyyut* specifically, Rabbi Meir says:

[In the future, the Jewish people will be] 200 cubits [tall], equivalent to two [times the] height [*komo*] of Adam, the first man. [Bava Batra 75a]

He sees the word as coming from *koma*, meaning height, and *me'at*, akin to hundreds.

I personally don't think Rabbi Meir is talking about physical height, but rather about importance, achievement, influence.

Also, it is impossible for a man to be 200 cubits tall and present the same characteristics as a man, because the universe is not invariant under a change of scale. For example, consider a cube with sides one foot long and weighing one pound. The pressure on its base is one pound per square foot. If you double its dimensions, so each side is two feet, it will weigh eight pounds, for a base of only four square feet. The pressure on

its base is now TWO pounds per square foot. If you triple its dimensions, it will weigh 27 pounds, for a base of only nine square feet. The pressure on its base is now THREE pounds per square foot.

So, if a man could grow in size while retaining the aspect and proportions of a man, he would feel heavier and heavier until he could no longer stand. Small insects have long, spindly legs because they are small. They would crash to the ground if you could increase their dimensions while retaining their proportions. Likewise, large animals (such as gorillas, whales, elephants or dinosaurs) have very large ovoid bodies and very small, but powerful, limbs.

So, does *komemiyut* mean erect or tall? They are different. You can be erect but not tall, or tall but not erect. Or does it really mean important, prominent, influential, highly productive, as we Jews are and will continue to be? As the Talmud says when it cannot resolve an issue: *Teku* – Let it stand.

Shabbat shalom.