

Parshat Pinchas 5782

How do we know that [a Cohen] with a blemish cannot carry out the service [in the Beit HaMikdash] – Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel, because the passuk says ‘I will give him [Pinchas] My covenant of peace (שלום)’ – meaning when he is complete (שלם)...the vav in shalom is cut (ketiah) – Kiddushin 66b

This is one of many derashot in the gemara that derives laws from the appearance of the words in the Sefer Torah – mainly related to whether the word is written with/without an extra vav or yud. With many of these there is a divergence between the tradition that we have for writing sifrei torah and the tradition mentioned in the gemara. Professor Sid Leiman wrote a fascinating essay dealing with this issue “Masorah and Halakha: A Study in Conflict”, from which I have drawn some of the sources in this piece.

I would like to examine here what the gemara means by *ketiah* (cut) and how we have come to the practice that we follow today.

The Ritva says that the vav is cut in two, because otherwise it should have said that the vav is written small (in the same way that many letters in the Torah are traditionally written large or small). He then carries on to say that we should correct all of our sefarim where the vav is written normally.

It is clear from his comments, and other documentary evidence, that the practice was to write the vav normally, and the Ritva is one of a host of Rishonim and Acharonim who have written throughout the ages that we should adapt our sifrei torah to conform to the gemara’s traditions, generally to no avail. While the Ritva thinks that the vav should be cut in two, Maharsha says that it should look like a yud, so that the word looks like שלים which means complete in Aramaic. This is quite radical as he is effectively saying that the word should be written “wrong”.

Minchat Shai, a 17th century expert on the Masoretic text, also rejects the idea that the vav is written small but says that the leg is written a bit shorter than normal. He ascribes this idea to Ritva, but also acknowledges that there is another version of the Ritva, as we have seen above. He then goes on to say that although he has seen one old Spanish Sefer written with the vav cut in two, he has seen many with the short vav that he describes. I assume from this that he has also seen many more with a normal vav.

R Akiva Eiger (18th/19th century) was asked (Shu”t Mahadura Kama 75) about a Sefer that had been written with a short vav, and when a sofer saw this, had lengthened it to a normal vav. In the course of examining the various opinions he asks what exactly the Ritva meant when he said the vav was cut in two. On the one hand, if it is cut too far up and the top bit looks like a yud, then as far as halacha is concerned it is a yud and the Sefer is pasul. On the other hand, there is an opinion brought by the Bach that if a letter is cut after it has been written properly and it still looks like the original letter then that is allowed – however, the consensus is not like this view. He ends up by saying that when he wrote his own Sefer Torah he wrote a small vav, then left a small gap and then added a small line underneath. In this way he felt that he was fulfilling all the opinions – he had written a short/cut-off vav (if you ignore the additional extraneous line) that is definitely a vav and not a yud; and he had also written a vav that is cut into two.

We have seen a wide range of opinions for how to write this vav – Daf al HaDaf brings the following list:

- A small vav (R Bechaye)
- Like a yud (Paneach Raza – and we saw the Maharsha)
- A short vav (Minchat Shai)
- Cut in two with the top half like a yud (Ohr Torah)
- Cut in two but with a very fine line connecting so not a real break (Batei Kehuna)
- A short vav with a separate line underneath (R Akiva Eiger)
- Written as a normal vav (they don’t list this one, but none of the Rif, Rambam or Rosh mention *vav ketiah*)

In practice, it appears that most Sifrei Torah nowadays follow the compromise opinion of R Akiva Eiger.

Finally, Daf al HaDaf mentions a lovely story that someone had donated a Sefer Torah in Yerushalayim and it turned out that the vav was written normally. The donor was very upset and turned to R Shlomo Zalman Auerbach who recommended that they should lengthen all the other letters of the word to make it look like the vav was small. With all this machloket, it is good to remember that the word we are discussing here is “Shalom”!