

# APPENDIX: THE MASORAH

לעלוי נשמות  
**ציון בן** בן **מנשה** ז"ל  
**לילי** בת **נג'יה חבוב** ע"ה

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## INTRODUCTION

### *What are Masoretic notes?*

The term Masorah refers to a massive collection of thousands of terse marginal notes on most verses in the Tanach.

### *Who composed and collected the notes?*

The notes were composed and compiled by mostly anonymous Torah scholars throughout early Jewish history, with the Gemara noting some of them as *הַלְכָה לְמֹשֶׁה מִסִּינַי*, i.e., included at the time of *Matan Torah* itself. Many *Ba'alei HaMasorah* (known as Masoretes in English) lived and wrote in Eretz Yisrael; others came from various Babylonian cities. Much of the focus of their Torah study revolved around protecting the accuracy and precision with which the Books of Tanach were transmitted from generation to generation. They are usually credited with developing *nikud*, the system of vowel points used to record the proper pronunciation of the words in the unvowelized Scripture, as well as the cantillation notes used for reading the verses in the traditional chant.

In the pre-printing-press days, Masorah notes used to appear in the margins of handwritten volumes of Scripture. Unfortunately, over the centuries, a large percentage of the notes were corrupted or omitted by copyists and typesetters to whom the notes were meaningless.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the vast majority of Tanach publishers do not include the Masorah in their editions.

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1. This editor has found at least seven different versions of the Masoretic notes on *Parashas Vayishlach* cited in this Appendix, most of them defective or corrupted.

### *What is the nature of these notes?*

The notes deal with grammatic anomalies, differences in words' phonetic pronunciations, and unusual spellings and vowelizations. Many notes enumerate the number of times a particular form of a word or phrase appears; identical words that have different meanings; verses that begin and end with the same letters; unique word forms; words with two or more spellings; and other anomalies.

### *What is the purpose of the notes?*

Traditional Torah scholars point out that many types of Masoretic notes, such as those that record similar words with different meanings, are really irrelevant for scribes and copyists, but are quite relevant for the students of Tanach. Despite their brevity, Masoretic notes often conceal deep, esoteric lessons on Talmudic, Midrashic, or Kabbalistic teachings; illuminate a moral instruction; or allude to a mitzvah or *minhag* (custom) that has no other apparent source. Much of it is beyond the scope and ken of even accomplished Torah scholars, which is attested to by the fact that only a few commentaries have ever been written on the Masorah — and even those have only explained a minute fraction of the whole. These include such Torah giants as R' Yehudah Ha-Chassid and his disciple, R' Elazar Rokeach of Worms; Rabbeinu Asher and his son, R' Yaakov Ba'al HaTurim; and the Alshich.<sup>2</sup>

The Alshich quotes and expounds upon a fair number of Masoretic notes in the course of his commentary on the Torah. We have brought four of them here in order to give the reader a taste of these enigmatic notes and of the Alshich's unique approach to explaining them.

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2. All the scholars mentioned lived in the 12th and 13th centuries, while the Alshich lived in the 16th century.

## AN ETHICAL DEBATE FROM PARASHAS NOACH

A Masoretic note in Aramaic on *Parashas Vayishlach* (35:17)<sup>3</sup> presents an ethical debate between man's *yetzer hara* (inclination towards evil) and *yetzer hatov* (inclination towards good) through a series of unrelated verses that have one orthographic phenomenon in common — five consecutive two-letter words.

The note reads: ו' פסוקי דאית בהון ה' מלין דסמיכי מן ב' ב' אותיות — [In the entire Tanach there are exactly] six verses which contain five consecutive two-letter words. They are:

- (1) גַּחַ אֶת שֵׁם אֶת חָם ... *Noach [begot] Shem, Cham [and Yafes].*<sup>4</sup>
- (2) כִּי גַם זֶה לְךָ בֶּן. ... *for this one too is a son unto you.*<sup>5</sup>
- (3) כִּי יָד עַל כֶּסֶּ יְהוָה, ... *For [God's] hand is upon God's Throne...*<sup>6</sup>
- (4) עַל כֵּן לֹא בָא אֶל ... *because of this, he [David] did not come to [the king's table].*<sup>7</sup>
- (5) גַּם לִי גַם לְךָ לֹא, ... *Neither to me nor to you [shall he be, cut].*<sup>8</sup>
- (6) זֶה כִּי אִם רַע לִב [אֵין] ... *this is [nothing] but [a sign of] evil [in your] heart.*<sup>9</sup>

3. Quoted and explained by the Alshich in *Parashas Noach* 6:1.

4. *Bereishis* 5:32.

5. *Bereishis* 35:17. These are the midwife's last words to Rachel before Rachel died (during Binyamin's birth).

6. *Shemos* 17:16. Moshe is describing Hashem's promise to eradicate Amalek, the epitome of evil on earth.

7. *Shmuel I* 20:29. Yehonasan, son of King Shaul, was explaining to his father about David's two-day absence from the king's table.

8. *Melachim I* 3:26. These are the cruel last words of the woman whose baby died and who falsely claimed her neighbor's baby was hers. When King Shlomo ordered that the baby be cut in half, she agreed to the barbarity, which proved to the king who was really telling the truth.

9. *Nechemiah* 2:2. Nechemiah, the Jewish wine steward of the Persian king, had just

There is no obvious single thread connecting these six verses. Nevertheless, we may suggest that the Masorah is alluding to an ongoing debate between man's *yetzer hara* and his *yetzer hatov*. The topic of their debate is whether man should be as content with his *yetzer hara* as he is with his *yetzer hatov*.

The *yetzer hara* begins with his understanding of the first group of two-letter words: נח, שם, אה, *Noach, Shem, and Cham*. The three names in this partial verse can be understood as common nouns:<sup>10</sup> נח means “ease” or “contentment”; שם means “reputation” and refers to the good reputation of the *yetzer hatov*; and אה means “heat” and alludes to the *yetzer hara* that warms itself with the heat of sin and iniquity. In the *yetzer hara*’s proposal, the verse teaches that man should be content and at ease both with his personal שם, the *yetzer hatov* within him, and his personal אה, the *yetzer hara* within him. He should display the same respect for, and accept advice from, both.

The *yetzer hara* continues with his interpretation of the second set of two-letter words, בן, זה, לך, *for this too is a son unto you*. He tells man, “Do not be apprehensive about the evil that accompanies sin, for your sinfulness is also considered your child and will bring you much *nachas* and contentment.” He quotes the Talmudic dictum of Reish Lakish,<sup>11</sup> “*Teshuvah* performed out of fear of God is great, for it causes intentional sins to be reckoned as unintentional ones. But *teshuvah* performed out of love of God is even greater, for it causes intentional sins to be reckoned as merits.” Therefore, according to the *yetzer hara*, man should consider the path of sinfulness as a son who may

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been informed of the misery and humiliation of the Jews who were still living in Yerushalayim after the destruction of the First Beis HaMikdash. When Nechemiah was summoned to serve the king his wine, the king noticed his downcast countenance and accused him of trying to poison his wine.

10. I.e., as opposed to proper nouns, which is the simple meaning of the text.

11. *Yoma* 86a.



eventually bring him *nachas* (that is, if he should decide to repent out of love for Hashem).

Lest man think himself incapable of *teshuvah*, the *yetzer hara* concludes his proposal by citing the third set of words, כִּי יָד עַל כִּסֵּי הִיא, *For [God's] hand is upon God's Throne*. He explains this as God's promise to bolster man's efforts to repent the evil of his ways, for God has sworn by His Throne of Glory that He will not rest until Amalek — that is, the guardian angel of the Amalekite nation, whose name is Sama'el and who is the personification of the *yetzer hara*<sup>12</sup> — has been destroyed.

In summation, man's *yetzer hara* advises him to sin to his heart's desire without qualms, for if he ever feels remorse, he can simply repent his evil ways and thereby convert his sins to merits. Moreover, Hashem will even help him destroy the *yetzer hara*.

The *yetzer hatov* responds with the fourth set of two-letter words, עַל כֵּן לֹא בָא אֶל, *Because of this he did not come to [the King's table]*. That is, if a person has chosen to follow his *yetzer hara*'s advice and commit every form of sin that suits his fancy, then despite his intention of eventually showing remorse for these transgressions, he will not be permitted to sit at the table of the King of kings in Gan Eden. This is in keeping with the Mishnah's teaching: "He who says, 'I will sin [now] and I will repent [later] will not be given the opportunity to repent.'" <sup>13</sup>

The *yetzer hara* then amends his proposal and replies to the *yetzer hatov* by quoting the fifth verse cited by the Masorah, לִי גַם לָךְ לֹא, *Neither to me nor to you*. Let man listen neither to my advice to transgress Hashem's mitzvos nor to your advice to perform these mitzvos. Let him not provoke either you, his personal *yetzer hatov*, or me, his personal *yetzer hara*.

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12. See *Bava Basra* 16a.

13. *Yoma* 8:9 [85b].

The *yetzer hatov* rejects the *yetzer hara*'s second proposal by saying, *זֶה כִּי אִם רָע לֵב* [אֵין], *This is [nothing] but [a sign of] evil [in your] heart*. Sitting passively idle doing nothing, neither good nor evil, is also considered sinful, for it is a way of following the evil advice of the *yetzer hara* while ignoring that of the *yetzer hatov*. That is even more insidious than the *yetzer hara*'s original proposal that man show equal respect to both his inclinations.

## SIX "TAKINGS"

### FROM PARASHAS MIKEITZ

A note in the Masorah on *Bereishis* 44:29 reads: *וּלְקַחְתֶּם ו'*, i.e., the word *וּלְקַחְתֶּם* (*and you shall take*) appears six times [in Tanach]. It then cites a few key words from each of the verses in which this word appears. The verses are:

- (1) *וּלְקַחְתֶּם גַּם אֶת זֶה מִעַם פְּנֵי וְקָרְהוּ אֶסּוֹן וְהוֹרַדְתֶּם אֶת שִׁיבְתִּי בְּרָעָה שְׂאֵלָה*, *Now, if you would take away also this one from near my presence<sup>14</sup> and he would meet with disaster, you will bring down my old age to the grave in an evil way.*<sup>15</sup>
- (2) *וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֶגְדַּת אֶזּוֹב*, *You shall take a bundle of hyssop...*<sup>16</sup>
- (3) *וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר*, *You shall take for yourselves, on the first day, a fruit of the hadar tree...*<sup>17</sup>

14. Translation follows the Alshich.

15. *Bereishis* 44:29. In this verse, Yehudah tells Egypt's viceroy what Yaakov said when the brothers told their father that Yosef demanded that they bring Binyamin to Egypt.

16. *Shemos* 12:22. In this verse, Moshe is instructing the elders in Egypt to tell the people to dip a bundle of hyssop into the blood of the lamb of the *Korban Pesach*, smear some on the lintel and doorposts of their homes, and then remain indoors until morning.

17. *Vayikra* 23:4. In this verse Hashem is teaching Moshe the laws of the four species taken on Succos.



- (4) וְהִתְחַזְקֶתֶם וּלְקַחְתֶּם מִפְּרִי הָאָרֶץ, *You shall energize yourselves and take from the fruit of the land...*<sup>18</sup>
- (5) וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֶת אֲרוֹן ה' וְנִתַּתֶּם אֹתוֹ אֶל הָעֶגְלָה, *You shall take the Aron (Ark) of Hashem and place it upon the wagon...*<sup>19</sup>
- (6) וּלְקַחְתֶּם מִן הַחֶרֶם , ... *for [if] you will take from the forfeited property...*<sup>20</sup>

The only apparent connection between these six verses seems to be the word וּלְקַחְתֶּם. We propose that the note in the Masorah cites the six appearances of וּלְקַחְתֶּם in order to explain a difficulty in the first verse cited.

1. In speaking of his sons' request to take Binyamin to Egypt (as per the viceroy's demand), Yaakov said, וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֹתָהּ, *Now if you would take away also this one*. Why does he say three words, אֹתָהּ, instead of just saying אֶתָּה? The words אֹתָהּ and אֶתָּה are words of inclusion<sup>21</sup> and indicate that Yaakov was speaking of three people and not just one.
2. This is confirmed by the second verse, וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֶגְדַּת אֲזֹב, *You shall take a bundle of hyssop*. The Gemara<sup>22</sup> teaches that an *agudah* comprises at least three objects. The

18. *Bamidbar* 13:20. In this verse, Moshe is explaining to the spies that part of their mission is to bring back fruit from the Land of Canaan.

19. *Shmuel I* 6:8. In this verse, the Philistine elders are telling their people to return the holy Ark they had captured from Bnei Yisrael on a brand-new wagon built expressly for that purpose.

20. *Yehoshua* 6:18. After Yehoshua besieged Yericho and the walls collapsed, Bnei Yisrael were allowed to destroy the city but not take any spoils. The verse is warning that if they take from the spoils they would bring destruction upon Bnei Yisrael because (as the next verse says) the spoils were supposed to be dedicated to Hashem.

21. אֹתָהּ means *also*. According to the Sages (*Pesachim* 22b), the word אֶתָּה always comes to include something not mentioned in the text (presumably because אֶתָּה can also mean "with").

22. *Succah* 13a.

inference is that just as the word אָגַדָּת refers to three objects, so does Yaakov's אֵת זֶה גַּם וּלְקַחְתֶּם refer to three people. But who were they?

3. The identity of the first person is found in the third verse, וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר, *You shall take for yourselves, on the first day, a fruit of the hadar tree.* The פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר is clearly a reference to Yosef: (a) When Yaakov blessed his twelve sons, he began Yosef's *berachah* with the words בֶּן פֶּרֶת יוֹסֵף, *Yosef is a fruitful son.*<sup>23</sup> (b) Additionally, [Yosef is commonly referred to as Yosef "Ha-Tzaddik" and,] in the words of King Solomon, פְּרִי צַדִּיק, *The fruit of a tzaddik is a tree of life.*<sup>24</sup> (c) Moreover, when Moshe Rabbeinu blessed the twelve tribes, his blessing to Yosef contained the phrase הָדָר לוֹ (*majesty is his*).<sup>25</sup> In short, each word of the phrase עֵץ הָדָר points to Yosef as the subject of the extraneous word גַּם.<sup>26</sup>
4. Recall that when Yosef's brothers returned from their first trip to Egypt, they told Yaakov that the viceroy had kept Shimon as a hostage to ensure that they would return with Binyamin. Then they emptied their sacks and saw that each man's money bag had been returned to him. At that point, Yaakov began to suspect that none of what his sons had told him was true. He said, "*You have bereaved me: Yosef is not [with me]; Shimon is not [with me]; and [now] you want to take away Binyamin!*"<sup>27</sup> He told

23. Bereishis 49:22. The words פְּרִי is related to the word פֶּרֶת.

24. Mishlei 11:30. Thus, not only does the word פְּרִי refer to Yosef, the word עֵץ (*tree*) does as well.

25. Devarim 33:17.

26. The Alshich does not say which word (גַּם, אֵת, or זֶה) refers to which person. Presumably this is because there is no way to tell and, in truth, it makes no difference.

27. Bereishis 42:36. The Alshich explains Yaakov's thoughts here as follows: Since his sons were capable of selling Shimon for food, it is likely that Yosef had not really been attacked by a wild animal, as they had said; rather, they had sold Yosef,

them that it was impossible to believe, especially during a great famine, that they could purchase ten donkey-loads of grain and the Egyptians would not take their money. As such, they must have bartered Shimon in exchange for the grain! Thus, the fourth verse says, וְהִתְחַזְקֶתֶם וּלְקַחְתֶּם, מִפְּרִי הָאָרֶץ, which alludes to Yaakov's saying, "You have energized yourselves [to overpower and exchange Shimon] so that you could take from the fruit of the land [without spending any money]." Thus the second extraneous word in our verse, אֶת, alludes to Shimon.

5. Accordingly, הָאָרֶץ, the third word of our verse, must refer to Binyamin. That is the allusion of the fifth verse cited in the Masorah: "You shall take the *Aron* of Hashem." The "*Aron* of Hashem" is an appropriate metaphor for Binyamin, for the Beis HaMikdash that housed the *Aron* stood in the tribe of Binyamin's portion in Eretz Yisrael.<sup>28</sup>
6. However, when Yehudah pledged to forfeit his share in the World to Come if he did not bring Binyamin back to Yaakov,<sup>29</sup> Yaakov acquiesced and allowed them to take Binyamin to Egypt. That is the lesson of the Masorah's note: "You may take the *Aron* of Hashem (Binyamin)"; however, "you will [be allowed to] take [him] only from (i.e., because of) the [pledge of] forfeiture."

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just as they sold Shimon. Yaakov was therefore accusing them as follows: "You have bereaved me: Yosef is not with me, because you have sold him; Shimon is not with me, because you have sold him as well; and now you want to take Binyamin and sell him, too!"

28. See Rashi to *Devarim* 32:12.

29. See verse 43:9, where Yehudah says to Yaakov, הִבִּיאֲתִיו אֵלַיךְ וְהִצַּגְתִּיו לְפָנֶיךָ וְחָטְאתִי לְךָ כָּל הַיָּמִים, *I will take responsibility for him; of my hand shall you require him: if I do not bring him to you and set him before you, then I shall be eternally blameworthy to you.* Rashi there explains *eternally* to refer to the World to Come.