"Tzav: Masoretes and the enigmatic little *mem*"

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צַו אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה הִוא הָעֹלָה עַל מוֹקְדָה
עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר וְאֵשׁ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תּוּקַד בּוֹ׃

> *And God said to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering. The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it* (Lev. 6:2)

A glance at the Hebrew word מוֹקְדָה reveals that its first letter, *mem*, is written in miniature. We have already drawn attention (See our thought on last week's sidrah, *Vayyikra*) to another example of a miniature letter – there, the latter *aleph* - at the end of its very first word.

Given that the Torah was handed down without vowel signs – and has so remained – it was difficult to establish the authentic pronunciation, as any Barmitzvah boy will still affirm when he stares for the first time at a Torah text whose vowels he has to memorise by heart. Rules governing the vowel notation system, spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, accents, and trop symbols to aid cantillation of the *TaNaCh*, had to be produced, therefore, with a view to the creation of a standardised, authoritative version for world Jewry. This was all the creation of the *Ba'alei ha-Masorah*, two main schools of textual scholars and grammarians who were active, both in Israel and Babylonia, from the 5th to the 10th centuries.

'Masorah' is from the verb *m-s-r*, 'to hand down,' since their objective was to restore the version of the Torah that had been originally 'handed down', but which, over time, had

become victim to many textual variations. These were largely due to the paucity of Torah scrolls and the poor conditions in which they were kept as Jews carried them from country to country and town to town in their long history of exile and travel.

We take it for granted that our contemporary Sifrei Torah are written on the finest hides that have been professionally prepared, and that the texts are accurately written by skilled scribes who can command a price that enables them to devote their full time and attention to their sacred task – and even have it finally computer checked to ensure it is error free. We also assume that our scrolls will be housed within an Ark and building whose temperature ensures that there will be little if any deterioration of the parchment.

Such precautions did not exist down the ages. And if we go back to pre-Masoretic times, there was no guarantee that the scrolls being used by scribes for their master-copies were not themselves subject to errors. There were also many hasty and careless scribes rushing to complete their tasks and move on to the next commission. We should also note that few 'minyanim,' especially, but not exclusively, in rural communities, would have afforded more than a single scroll which they might well have felt constrained to use even if an error had been detected. Remember the story of the famous Vilna Gaon being unable to secure a lulav and etrog one year, and agreeing to transfer his heavenly reward for that year's mitzvah to a wealthy man who insisted on that precondition as the price for making a set available to the sage. (Though irrelevant to our theme, I can't help but quote the latter's response: Rather than rejecting the deal, he was authentically overjoyed, saying, "At last I can fulfil a mitzva without any ulterior motive, even that of gaining a spiritual reward in the World to Come!")

It inevitably occurred that such faulty scrolls would have been used subsequently as master-copies by unsuspecting scribes when writing further scrolls! The Talmud already confirmed that common situation, recording the fact that three scrolls were found in a room off the

Temple Court, all three of which had one significant variant of a particular word. The differences were then resolved in each case by the selection of the reading found in two out of the three scrolls (See; Tal. Y. *Ta'an*. 4:2 (68a); *Mas. Sof*. 6:4). Hence, the Masoretes set about their task of collecting and combing countless texts with a view to determining which version was to be relied upon, with the final objective of creating a standardised (Masoretic) text.

There were two main schools of Masoretic research: that of the Ben Asher and that of Ben Naphtali. A measure of their differing textual traditions may be gained from the fact that their versions are characterised by some 875 differences [See Appendix]. Our text does not follow uniformly either tradition, but, though closer to Ben Asher, borrows also from Ben Naphtali. Naturally, with the later advent of printing (15th cent.), and the reproduction in printed form of the Masoretic text, scribes had a uniform master copy from which to write their Torah scrolls.

The early Masoretes, in addition to their basic contribution towards establishing the authentic spelling and pronunciation of the text, also drew our attention (in our printed texts by asterisks and marginal notes) to biblical words (See on Gen.5:29) or whole sections (See Deut. 5:6-18) with an unusual cantillation, or by placing dots over words or letters to draw attention to a notable interpretation of the Talmudic sages (See Gen. 33:4), or to words which are to be pronounced differently to how they are spelt (kere/ktiv: See Gen. 8:17). The most common example of the latter is where the text spells a word הוא, but which tradition demands that it be read as היא.

And this brings us back to מוֹקְדָה. In most cases, the Masoretes' reference is clear and plausible, but not here! And hence the variety of suggestions, most of which are homiletical rather than exegetical. Hence the popular Chasidic explanation (in the name of R. Nachman of Bratzlav) that its meaning, 'a place of burning,' comes to remind us that every Jew has within him a soul

that, once ignited, will burn fiercely with love of God and enthusiasm for his faith. The small letter comes to tell us never to give up on a person, for, often, that spark is hidden, unrecognisable, suppressed, and, like the letter *mem*, with no apparent means of escaping and leaping heavenward until the door of his or her heart is spiritually opened.

Another, symbolic, explanation is that there is a special caution inherent in the *mem* of *mokdah*, namely, that, just as the fire of the altar burns upwards, symbolic of pride, so that pride itself has to be offered up on the altar and totally removed from one's religious consciousness. The greater one's spiritual awareness and knowledge of Torah, the greater should be one's humility.

Others find significance in the numerical value – 40 – of the letter *mem*, evocative of the 40 days and nights that Moses spent on Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, with the mount also 'burning with fire' (Ex. 19:18). Torah demands sacrifice; it demands the fire of enthusiasm; it requires us to be 'a nation of priests.'

Let us move now to the grammatical explanation of the little *mem* provided by the *Minchat Shai* of R. Yedidiah Norzi (1560- 626), an Italian exegete and scholar of the Masorah. He states that its purpose is to draw attention to the fact that the word *mokdah* is missing a dot – called a 'mappik'– in its final letter, *hey*. As it stands, the word *mokdah*, without the dot, represents simply, the feminine form of *moked*, an altar. But, Norzi states, the proper spelling of *mokdah* should be with the dot in the *hey*, which gives it the possessive sense of 'its' altar. The sentence would then yield the meaning, 'the burnt offering itself shall remain *on its altar*…'

I would hazard the suggestion that the *mem* may serve to indicate that the text is elliptical (phrased with an economy of speech), omitting a verb. The verse has הֻוא הָעֹלָה עַל מוֹקְדָה which, translated literally, means, 'this is the burnt offering upon the altar [all night until the morning].' It is clear that a verb is missing. And this is indeed inserted by the official Aramaic translation, the Targum Onkelos, which renders הֵיא עֲלָתָא עַל דְּמִתּוֹקְדָא עַל מַדְבְּחָא – 'This is the burnt offering *that is kept burning* on the altar…' I suggest that the small *mem* is a marker that the text is to be understood in this way, but that it has been 'abbreviated.'

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Jeffrey

Appendix

For twenty years after the conclusion of World War II, 1,564 Torah scrolls lay unattended in a damp, mouldy warehouse that had been converted from a former synagogue in Prague, Czechoslovakia. These Torahs, formerly the property of hundreds of Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe that had been wiped out during the war, were stacked up and rotting. In 1964 a well-known London art dealer, with funding from a congregant of the Westminster Synagogue in London, quietly negotiated with the Czech government for the purchase of the entire lot of Torahs and had them shipped to the Westminster Synagogue. There, a Holocaust Torah Scroll Trust had been established to take custody of the scrolls, care for, repair, and ultimately return them to the communities from which they were taken.

Chavurat Tikvah, in Westchester, New York, received one of the 1,564 scrolls on "permanent loan." This is how they described their scroll:

> 'The Torah that we received to care for, while complete, is not a "Kosher" Torah in that it has been re-assembled from parts of several Torahs that had been otherwise damaged beyond repair. Our Torah has been reclaimed from several Torahs originally stolen by the Nazis from the community of Brno, Czechoslovakia.'

This adequately mirrors the situation that regularly occurred down the ages as Sifrei Torah accompanied their owners or saviours from place to place, only to be deposited or stored in unsuitable, unventilated, or damp places. Inevitably, either the script faded in parts or became illegible, and the parchment ripped. Poor communities might well have contented themselves with an inadequate, if not botched, attempt at restoration, and unqualified laymen might well have attempted to fill in the lacunae incorrectly. This explains the vast number of variant spellings that the Masoretes discovered in the scrolls they examined as a basis for their research.