

Today we read the last two *Parshiot* of Vayikra/Leviticus - *B'har/Behukotai*. *B'har* deals with property in the Biblical Land of Israel, and *Behukotai* deals with the rewards for following Torah and the consequences for not doing so. But there is a specific problem I want to approach today.

Why do we read the Torah the way we do? How do we know when what is written on the scroll is not what the *Masorah*, the Tradition, says? In this week's *Parasha*, we have a case where the *Masorah* tells us that we read one word differently than the written text. Let's examine the text, found on page 742 of *Humash Etz Hayim*.

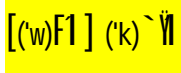
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Leviticus 25:29-31: If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, it may be redeemed until a year has elapsed since its sale; the redemption period shall be a year. If it is not redeemed before a full year has elapsed, the house in the walled city shall pass to the purchaser beyond reclaim throughout the ages; it shall not be released in the jubilee. But houses in villages that have no circling walls shall be classed as open country; they may be redeemed, and they shall be released through the jubilee.¹

1. Translation from: *Humash Etz Hayim*. JPS/RA/USCJ. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. 2001. p. 742.

This section of the text is talking about land/home owners' rights, which change, depending on whether the city is walled (from the time of Joshua) or not. The distinction of the walled city led to observing "Shushan Purim", the day after Purim, in Jerusalem and other cities that tradition says were walled from the time of Joshua.

The issue that we need to explore here is not the Biblical law of walled cities, but rather an interesting issue with the text itself.

Verse 29 sets the conditions for verse 30. It must be a walled city. The problem lies in the Hebrew in verse 30: . The verse is written לֹא, which means no; thus this text states that the city has NO wall. This is a problem, as we are dealing with the law for a walled city. The *Masoretes* (whom I will discuss in a bit), however, rendered the text as el in the spoken, i.e. when you read from the Torah. This renders the phrase as "which has a wall" since el means belonging to him or it. This change from the *Ketiv* or written form to the *K'ri* or spoken form actually changes the verse's meaning completely - from a city without a wall to a city with a wall!

There is more to this though. The Hebrew word *xir*, city, is a feminine noun. Thus the verse really needs to say dl, which would mean belonging to her or it. So, any way you render this verse in its written form, it is troublesome, based on the the context, the structure and the grammar.

There are a number of locations in Torah where the *K'ri* and *K'tiv* are different. Sometimes, it's a matter of a letter or two, and sometimes, such as in the *Tokhaha* in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, in Deuteronomy, we actually recite

completely different words in two cases.

Why does this happen?

Where do these differences and changes come from?

Pause for congregant input.

Rashi attempts to resolve the problem in our verse by saying that both are correct - that it had a wall at the time of Joshua, but it does not now have a wall. Hizkuni, (Hezekiah ben Manoah, 13th century France) attempts to resolve the issue of gender of the text by saying that the city is surrounded by a field, **dcy**. **dcy** is a masculine noun, so for Hizkuni, this resolves the issue.

The problem is that the *Mepharshim*, the commentators, don't tell us why the text needs emendation from how it is written to how it is read in the first place. Isn't this, after all, the Torah that *Pirkei Avot* states that Moses received at Sinai?

To understand this, we need to remember the history of Ancient Israel, along with the history of books in general. There were no printing presses 3,500 years ago. When Moses received Torah, it was oral. He had to write it down. Assuming you accept the traditional explanation for Torah's origin, this becomes troubling - if God dictated it, and Moses wrote it, why does it need correction?

The reality is that given the nomadic status of the Israelites until the time of Joshua, then the wars, corruption, and ultimately dispersal of the Jews caused the collective knowledge of the Torah to be lessened. As with the Mishna, which Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi wrote down in the Second Century, the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Bible had to be written down.

This resulted in several different copies of Torah with differences in them. It also did not account for the *nikkudot*, or vowel markings, of the Biblical Hebrew, the punctuation, or the cantillation. Thus we rely on the *Masoretic* tradition.

The Talmud tells us that a standard copy of the Hebrew Bible was kept in the court of the Temple in Jerusalem for the benefit of copyists; (Ketubah 106a). The Talmud also states (Soferim 6:4) that there were three scrolls found in the Temple court, which had variance with each other.²

In both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, there are discussions about this issue, and how the Torah should be read, to ensure that God's name is protected, adding euphemistic speech at times and eliminating the names of false gods.³ The *Soferim* or scribes, also added the vowelization and punctuation to certain Codices, or written manuscripts, bound in folio form.

The Leningrad Codex, called this because of its location in Leningrad, is the most complete Codex known. It is, however, not considered the definitive one. Rather, the Aleppo Codex is more widely accepted as definitive, but it is not complete. Scholars use the Leningrad Codex and other research to "fill in the blanks" in the Aleppo Codex, to determine how the Torah should be read.

In the Middle Ages, there were two competing scholars of the *Masorah*, "Ben Asher" and "Ben Naftali". Ben Asher's work, accepted by R' Saadia Gaon, became the accepted version of the Bible. This text was

2. http://www.bibliahebraica.com/the_texts/masoretic_text.htm

3. *Ibid.*

then, in subsequent centuries, emended to include vowelization and punctuation.

Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah collated a vast number of manuscripts and systematized his material and arranged the *Masorah* in the second Bomberg edition of the Bible (Venice, 1524-25).⁴

Because of the same issues we see in transmission of other texts, we end up having variations in the Biblical text. Adding to that the Oral Law and the works of scholars through the generations, we have learned how the *Tanakh* should be written and read, which leads us back to today.

Shabbat Shalom

4. *Ibid.*