

The Amazing Connection between the Two Midpoints of the Torah-- the Midpoint of Words and the Midpoint of Letters

In this week's parsha, parshas Shemini, we find the midpoint of the Torah both with regards to the number of words and with regards to the number of letters. Hence, we shall explore the rationale for this divine division, and why HKB"H chose to divide the Torah into two parts from both aspects specifically in parshas Shemini. In the passuk (Vayikra 10, 16): **“ואת שעיר החטאת דרש—regarding the he-goat of the “chatas” (the sin-offering), Moshe made a detailed inquiry—the first “דרש” concludes the first half of the Torah with respect to its words; while the second “דרש” begins its second half. On the other hand, in the passuk dealing with the prohibition to eat crawling creatures (ibid. 11, 42): “כל הולך על גחון”—all that travels on its belly (snakes)—the letter “vav” of “גחון” is the middle of the Torah with respect to its letters. Therefore, tradition dictates that this “vav” be written as a large letter.**

The source for this comes from the Gemara (Kiddushin 30a): **“לפיכך נקראו ראשונים סופרים, שהיו סופרים כל האותיות שבתורה, שהיו אומרים—וא”ו דגחון חציין של ספר תורה, דרש דרש חציין של תיבות—therefore, the early sages were called “sofrim” (counters), because they counted all the letters of the Torah. They used to say: “The ‘vav’ of ‘גחון’ represents the midpoint of the letters of a sefer-Torah; while the words “דרש דרש” represent the midpoint of its words.”** A similar explanation is found in Maseches Sofrim (9, 2): **“וי”ו דגחון צריך להיות זקוף שהיא חצי אותיות של: תורה—דרש דרש חצי תיבות של תורה, דרש בסוף שיטה, דרש בראש שיטה—the “vav” of “גחון” should be large, because it is the midpoint of the letters of the Torah; the words “דרש דרש” are the midpoint of the words of the Torah—the first “דרש” should be at the end of a column, while the second “דרש” should be at the beginning of a (the next) column.**

The Middle of the Torah—Letters and Words— Conveys a Fundamental Message

We will begin to shed some light on the connection between these two halfway-points--“דרש דרש” and the “vav” of “גחון”—based on a fundamental principle we have learned from our early sources. Leading the way is the Maharal of Prague in Gevuros Hashem (46); he states that the central point of any object constitutes the completion and perfection of everything that surrounds it.

We will bring an example from the Gemara (Ta’anis 30b): **“עתיד הקב”ה לעשות מחול לצדיקים, והוא יושב ביניהם בגן עדן, וכל אחד ואחד מראה באצבעו, שנאמר (ישעיה כה-ט) ואמר ביום ההוא הנה אלקינו זה קוינו לו ויושיענו, -- in the future, HKB”H will make a circle of the tzaddikim, and He will sit among them in Gan Eden; each and every one will point his finger, as it says (Yeshayah 25, 9): “He shall say on that day, ‘Behold! This is our G-d; we hoped to Him and He saved us; this is Hashem to Whom we hoped; let us exult and be glad in His salvation.’”** We see that HKB”H will sit in the center of the circle of tzaddikim; for He represents their ultimate purpose and completion. Thus, they point with their fingers indicating that: **“This is our G-d; we hoped to Him and He saved us.”**

From what we have just learned, we can conclude that the midpoint of the written Torah—Torah she’b’chsav—whether it be from the aspect of its letters or its words, represents the center or focal point of the entire Torah. There lies the foundation of the entire Torah. Now, we learn from Rabbi Yochanan in the Gemara (Gittin 60b): **“לא כרת הקב”ה ברית עם ישראל אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה”-- HKB”H only established a covenant with Yisrael on account**

of the Oral Law. For, without the clarification provided by Torah she'b'al peh, we would have no idea as to how to perform the vast majority of the mitzvos prescribed by the Torah. Therefore, HKB"H chose to allude to the vital importance of Torah she'b'al peh by means of the midpoint of Torah she'b'chsav.

“All that moves on its belly” Refers to the Primeval Serpent

Accordingly, let us proceed to demonstrate precisely how HKB"H employed the midpoint of Torah she'b'chsav to allude to the fact that the focal point of the entire Torah is Torah she'b'al peh. To begin with, we will focus on the midpoint of the letters of the Torah—the **“vav”** of **“גחון”**. According to Rashi, the portrayal: **“הולך על גחון” is a reference to the “nachash” (serpent); the term “גחון” means bending low, for it travels bent low and falling on its stomach.** Thus, we learn that HKB"H chose the large **“vav”** of the word **“גחון”**--a reference to the serpent who slithers on its belly—as the central point of all the letters.

First, let us explain why HKB"H alludes to the **“nachash”** by the way it travels—**“on its belly”**—rather than by its actual name—**“nachash”** or **“serpent.”** HKB"H intended to remind us why the **“nachash”** travels on its belly rather than on its legs. As we know, the **“nachash hakadmoni”**—the primeval serpent—is none other than the yetzer hara, who tricked Adam and Chava into partaking from the **“Eitz HaDa'at.”** As a punishment for its duplicity, its legs were cut off, as it is written (Bereishis 3, 14): **“ויאמר ה' אלקים אל הנחש: כי עשית זאת ארור אתה מכל הבהמה ומכל חית השדה על גחונך תלך ועפר תאכל כל ימי חיך”** and Hashem G-d said to the serpent, **“Because you have done this, more cursed are you than all the animals and all the beasts of the field; upon your belly shall you go, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life.”** Rashi provides the following clarification: **“רגלים היו לו ונקצצו”**—**it had legs and they were cut off.** Perforce, it travels on its belly.

Furthermore, the Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (13) explains that before HKB"H cut off the legs of the **“nachash,”** it had the appearance of a camel--**“כמין גמל”**. The **“samech-mem,”** the yetzer hara, rode upon it in its efforts to bring about Adam and Chava's downfall: **Samael was the great ministering angel in heaven . . . What did Samael do? He took his cohorts, and went down to see the creatures HKB"H created in His world. He could find no creature more adept at evil than the nachash, as it states: “And the nachash was more cunning than any beast of the field.” Its form resembled a type of camel; he mounted it and rode on it.**

Overcoming the Yetzer HaRa by means of Torah She'b'al Peh

Now, we have learned in the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b) that HKB"H said to Yisrael: **“בני בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי לו תורה תכלין, ואתם עוסקים בתורה אין אתם נמסרים בידו”**—**“My children, I have created the yetzer hara and I have created the Torah as its antidote; if you engage in Torah-study, you will not fall prey to it.”** It is clear from this Gemara that the only way to abolish the yetzer hara is by means of Torah-study. Regarding this point, however, it is important to point out that which is stressed in our sacred sefarim. While it is true that every Jew should study Torah she'b'chsav—the Torah that was given to Moshe at Sinai—for every single letter contains countless allusions and secret meanings; nevertheless, the primary weapon against the yetzer hara is none other than the toil and exertion associated with the study of Torah she'b'al peh.

Therefore, from the very onset, HKB"H employed and stressed the word **“עוסקים”** (engage in)—it is specifically the toil and exertion of the study that is the effective antidote. In this manner, the Taz (Orach HaShulchan 47,1) explains why the formula chosen for the berachah related to Torah-study is **“לעסוק”** rather than **“ללמוד דברי תורה”**. The aspect of engaging in laborious study and dialectic is emphasized—analogous to a person involved in his daily chores and business. We can make a similar inference from the language of the Mishnah (Avos 2,2): **“יפה תלמוד תורה עם דרך ארץ שיגיעת שניהם משכחת עון”**—**“the optimum is to combine Torah study with an occupation, for the exertion of both of them eliminates sin.”** Once again, we see that it is specifically the element of toil and exertion in our Torah endeavors that eliminates sin.

In this light, it is apparent that the main way to subdue the yetzer is through rigorous study of Torah she'b'al peh. For the main toil and exertion in the study of Torah pertains to Torah she'b'al peh—as explained in the Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 3): **“שכל מי שאוהב עושר ותענוג אינו יכול ללמוד תורה שבעל פה לפי שיש בה צער גדול”** and **“ונדוד שינה”**, i.e. learning Torah she'b'al peh requires sacrifice and suffering; it is not for those who seek wealth and pleasure and a walk in the park. Torah she'b'al peh demands in depth analysis and discussion in order to attain the proper understanding of any given halachah. On the other hand, Torah she'b'chsav without Torah she'b'al peh is not that demanding. That is the message conveyed by the Gemara cited above: **“לא כרת הקב"ה ברית עם ישראל: אלא בשביל דברים שבעל פה”**—**HKB"H only established a covenant with Yisrael on account of the oral law.”** Without the toil and

exertion of Torah She'b'al peh, we are powerless against the yetzer; it is inconceivable that HKB"H would enter into a covenant with Yisrael if they were unable to control their yetzers.

We can now rejoice, for this enlightens us as to by HKB"H established the large "vav" of "כל הולך על גחון" as the midpoint of all the letters of Torah she'b'chsav. If we desire to vanquish the "nachash hakadmoni"—the embodiment of the yetzer hara, who travels on its belly, "גחון"—it is advisable to engage in the arduous study of Torah she'b'al peh, which encompasses the six orders of the Mishnah. This is alluded to by the letter "vav" of "גחון", which possesses a numerical value of six. In the merit of engaging in the study of the six orders of the Mishnah, the Talmud Bavli and the Talmud Yerushalmi—that explain the Mishnah, alluded to by the letter "vav"—we are able to attack, shatter and disperse the "vav" in the belly of the "nachash," annulling its power, in keeping with the passuk (Tehillim 92, 10): "יתפרדו כל פועלי און"—**all evildoers shall be dispersed.**

Torah Debates Incinerate the Prosecutors Generated by Sin

Continuing onward and upward along this enlightening path, let us now explain why HKB"H chose the following passuk as the midpoint for all of the words of Torah she'b'chsav: "ואת שעיר החטאת דרש משה והנה שורף". We will refer to the Degel Machaneh Ephraim's interpretation of the passuk: "ואת שעיר החטאת"—the "he-goat of the 'chatas'" represents the klipot—the negative forces—generated by our sins, as it is written (Yeshayah 13, 21): "ושעירים ירקדו שם"—**and demons will dance there; דרש** "דרש משה"—as a result of a "talmid-chacham," a Torah-scholar, representing Moshe, analyzing and elucidating the Torah over and over again, diligently and arduously; "והנה שורף"—he effectively incinerates and annuls the negative, external forces.

This coincides very nicely with what we learned about the midpoint of all the letters of the Torah—the big "vav" of "כל הולך על גחון". In the merit of engaging in the study of Torah she'b'al peh, encompassing the six orders of the Mishnah, we are able to effectively negate the yetzer hara—the "nachash" that travels on its belly. Therefore, HKB"H provides us with the following allusion related to the midpoint of all the words of the Torah: "את שעיר החטאת"—even if a person was remiss in his Torah-study, and consequently committed aveirot, which generated prosecutorial forces; notwithstanding, a remedy exists: "דרש משה"—he should engage in the arduous study of Torah she'b'al peh; thus: "והנה שורף"—he can eliminate the external, negative forces.

Viewed in this manner, the exalted lessons of the two midpoints coincide magnificently. They both teach us that the focal point of the entire Torah is the arduous, diligent study of Torah she'b'al peh. In its merit, the yetzer hara is abolished, preventing it from instigating sin. Yet, even if a person does sin and prosecutorial forces are generated, he can destroy them by means of the power of Torah dialectic.

"דרש משה" Alludes to Moshe Rabeinu's Humility

It is with great pleasure and delight that we can now entertain an additional explanation regarding the connection between the two midpoints of the Torah—"דרש משה", the midpoint of words, and the "vav" of "גחון", the midpoint of letters. As explained, they represent the focal point of the entire Torah. Now, it is well-known that the acquisition of Torah hinges on the character-trait of humility—"anavah." For, we have learned in the Gemara (Ta'anis 7a): "למה נמשלו דברי תורה למים דכתיב (ישעיה נה-א) 'הוי כל צמא לכו למים, לומר לך, מזה מים מניחין מקום גבוה והולכין למקום נמוך, --אף דברי תורה אין מתקיימין אלא במי שדעתו שפלה'— **Why are words of Torah compared to water? . . . To teach us that just as water flows from higher ground to lower ground, so, too, words of Torah are only retained by someone who possesses a lowly self-image (humility).**

Similarly, we have learned elsewhere in the Gemara (Sotah 5a): "לעולם ילמוד אדם מדעת קונו, שהרי הקב"ה הניח כל הרים וגבעות והשרה" "A person should always learn from the 'da'at' of his Maker; for HKB"H passed over the taller mountains and hills and rested His Shechinah on Har Sinai. Conversely, regarding a haughty person, one who lacks "anavah," the Gemara states (Pesachim 66b): "כל המתייהר אם חכם הוא חכמתו -- מסתלקת ממנו" **anyone who becomes haughty, if he is a wise man, his wisdom abandons him.** Thus, we can conclude that the common denominator shared by the midpoints of the words and the letters concerns the all-important characteristic of humility; it is the foundation of the entire Torah.

Let us now introduce the Megaleh Amukos on Vaeschanan's (9) incredible interpretation of the passuk: "ואת שעיר החטאת דרש משה והנה שורף". He also addresses why Masechet Sofrim instructs us to write the first "דרש" at the end of a column and the second "דרש" at the beginning of the next column. He begins his explanation by addressing Moshe's entreaty to enter Eretz Yisrael (Devarim 3, 23): "ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההיא לאמר, ה' אלקים אתה: החלות להראות את עבדך את גדלך ואת ירך החזקה, אשר מי אל בשמים ובארץ

I אשר יעשה כמעשיך וכגבורותיך, אעברה נא ואראה את הארץ הטובה וגו'. **implored Hashem at that time, saying, "Hashem-Elokim, you have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand, for what power is there in the heaven or on the earth that can perform according to Your deeds and Your mighty acts? Let me now cross and see the good land . . ."**

The Megaleh Amukos explains that although Moshe Rabeinu had merited receiving the entire Torah on Har Sinai, nevertheless, due to his extreme humility, he viewed himself as if he had not accomplished anything. He expresses this fact to HKB"H as follows: "אתה החלות להראות את עבדך"—You have just begun to show me Your greatness in the Torah; as of yet, I have not grasped or achieved anything. Therefore, I beseech You: את ואראה את הארץ הטובה—permit me to enter this special land, so that I may be enlightened. After all, the Gemara teaches us (B.B. 158b): **אוריא—דארץ ישראל—the air of Eretz Yisrael instills wisdom.**

Based on this, he explains quite elegantly the tradition of writing the first "דרש" of "דרש דרש משה" at the end of a column with the second "דרש" at the top of the next column. The message is clear. Even if a person feels that he has studied and absorbed the entire Torah and that he has reached the end of the page—alluded to by the first "דרש" at the bottom of the column; he should rest assured that he is still at the beginning of the path—alluded to by the second "דרש", at the beginning of the next column.

This then is the interpretation of the words: "דרש דרש". Even if a person believes that he has already elucidated the entire Torah, "דרש"—do it all over again; for you haven't accomplished anything, yet. He uses the example of **Moshe** to prove this point. Even though he received the Torah at Sinai; nevertheless, he felt as if he still hadn't accomplished anything. The passuk provides us with his rationale for this belief: "זהנה שרף". The word שרף can be interpreted as an abbreviation for: **ש'שישים ר'יבוא פ'ירוששים—six hundred thousand interpretations.** Every letter of the Torah possesses six hundred thousand interpretations.

It is now quite evident why HKB"H, Who adores the lowly, established the midpoint of the words of the Torah in the passuk: "דרש דרש משה". For, this passuk displays the paradigm of Moshe. Even if a person has studied and elucidated a lot, he should embrace Moshe Rabeinu's model of "anavah"; he should consider

it as if he had still not accomplished anything. This coincides with the central point of the entire Torah, which is compared to water—always seeking the lowest ground.

The Exalted Lesson of the "Vav" of "גחון"

Following this glorious path, we will now explain why HKB"H chose to establish the midpoint of the letters of the Torah in the passuk: "כל הולך על גחון". The large "vav" of "גחון"—the halfway point of the letters of the Torah—alludes magnificently to the "nachash hakadmoni" and its downfall. Initially, it walked and stood erect, like the letter "vav"; it had legs and resembled a camel. It was so haughty and arrogant, and felt superior to all of the other creatures. Ultimately, this drove it to persuade Adam and Chava to defy Hashem's command. It was punished accordingly for its haughtiness; its legs were cut off, and it has slithered on its belly, ever since.

This then is the allusion inherent in the letter "vav" of "גחון". Any person who emulates the behavior of the "nachash"—demonstrating "ga'avah" and standing up tall and full of itself like the large "vav"—is guaranteed that HKB"H will take him down; he will crawl on his belly like the "nachash," so to speak. Thus, the exalted lesson of the midpoint of the letters of the Torah coincides wonderfully with the exalted lesson of the midpoint of the words of the Torah. They both teach us to avoid the characteristic of "ga'avah" demonstrated by the "nachash hakadmoni," and to embrace the characteristic of "anavah" demonstrated by Moshe Rabeinu.

Based on what we have discussed, we can appreciate why HKB"H chose to teach us this lesson specifically in parshas Shemini. For, in a non-leap year, this parsha always falls during the days of "sefiras ha'omer." These days constitute our grand preparation for receiving the Torah on the festival of Shavuos. As we have learned, the trait of "anavah" is a prerequisite for acquiring the Torah; this was demonstrated by the fact that HKB"H chose to give the Torah on Har Sinai, the lowest of all the mountains. Therefore, HKB"H alluded to this critical lesson with both the midpoint of the letters of the Torah and the midpoint of the words of the Torah. We should distance ourselves from "ga'avah" and embrace "anavah," so that we merit receiving the Torah on the auspiciously approaching festival of Shavuos.

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