

## The Large Significance of the Littlest Letter

Dr. Malka Strasberg Edinger (KGS '24)



Could one tiny letter really be so important? At the beginning of this week's parashah, as Moshe sends twelve scouts to tour the Land of Canaan, we are told that Moshe changed Joshua's name from Hoshea to Yehoshua:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֵׁעַ בְּיָנוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ

Moshe called Hoshea the son of Nun "Yehoshua"  
(Num. 13:16).

Midrash Rabbah (Sotah 34b and Rashi on this verse) tells us that this name change was in fact a prayer for Yehoshua to be saved from the counsel of the other scouts, as the verb "called" can also refer to prayer (cf. Jeremiah 29:12) and the name "Yehoshua" can mean "May YHWH save him." In consonantal Hebrew, the change from Hoshea/הושע to Yehoshua/יהושע is achieved by the addition of the single letter yod, י. But the midrash teaches us that this was no ordinary י; God had been saving it for this moment in time. When God changed Avram and Sarai's names to Avraham (via the addition of a medial ה) and Sarah (via the replacement of the final י with a ה), the letter י complained to God: "Because I am the smallest of all the letters, you have taken me out of the name of the righteous Sarah!" God appeased this י by telling it that its new location would be at the beginning of Yehoshua's name. This special little י knew that despite its size it was fulfilling a holy purpose in the world by being a part of a righteous person's name, and it didn't want to settle for anything less (Bereishit Rabbah 47:1).

The י may be the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet but it is important. Beyond its place in the names of biblical righteous people, י stands in the most prominent place of the most prominent name of all: the beginning of God's holy name, the Tetragrammaton, יְקוֹקָה/YHWH. The י also

played an important role in YHWH's creation of the world. Isaiah 26:4 reads:

בְּטַחוּ בִּיקוּק עַד־עַד כִּי בִּיָּהּ יְקוּק צוּר עוֹלָמִים:

Trust in YHWH forever, indeed, in Yah, YHWH,  
the Eternal Rock.<sup>1</sup>

Midrash Tehillim (114:1) reads the second half of this verse in an acontextual hermeneutic manner, as is the midrashic way: "for with "Y-H" (the letters yod/י and heh/ה) God formed the worlds." That is, God used the two letters to create two worlds, this World and the World to Come. But which letter was used to create which World?! Genesis 2:4 reads: וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם, "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created." The ה in the word בְּהִבְרָאָם is written small in the Torah, serving as an invitation for rabbinic interpretation. Midrashically, the word can be read as if it were vocalized בְּהִבְרָאָם (with the letter ה God created them). Thus, the heavens and earth, i.e., this World, were created with the letter ה, and the World to Come was created with the letter י. What a large feat for such a small letter!

Elsewhere, Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, teaches that just as the written letter י floats above the other letters on a line of text, the י represents the metaphysical—that which transcends the earthly physical world and its constraints of time, matter, and space. Thus, י is truly the letter of the metaphysical World to Come. The letter י is also the recipient of a few special written forms in a Torah scroll. The text of each Torah scroll is written precisely, with certain layout formats, certain words beginning each column

<sup>1</sup> Shadal (R. Shmuel David Luzzatto, 17<sup>th</sup> century, Italy) explains the word כִּי in this verse as a word conveying emphasis (i.e., "indeed") rather than introducing a reason (i.e., "for, because"), as is prevalent in poetic passages.

of text, certain words written with seemingly superfluous or missing letters, and certain letters written in unusual forms, e.g., upside down, inverted, majuscule/enlarged, minuscule (such as the aforementioned ה in Genesis 2:4), and with dots placed above them.<sup>2</sup> One occurrence of the letter י with a special written form appears in this week's parashah where an enlarged י is found in Moshe's plea to God to muster God's strength to forgive the nation for their rebellion:<sup>3</sup>

וְעַתָּה יַגְדִּילֵנָּא כַּח אֲדָנִי

Now may the power of the Lord be magnified  
(Num. 14:17).

This enlarged י is understood by biblical commentators in various ways. One explanation is that the י, which has a numerical value of ten, is a hint to the forefathers—and particularly Abraham, who underwent ten tests of faith—that in their merit God should forgive the nation (Paaneah Raza, Tur). R. Bahya explains that the י, which represents the divine name YHWH and, therefore, God's attribute of Mercy, indicates Moshe's plea for God's attribute of Mercy to ascend and prevail over God's attribute of Justice (represented by the divine name Elohim).<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that the enlarged י in the word יַגְדִּילֵנָּא ("may the power be magnified") indicates the magnitude of the strength God would need to forgive the people—a level greater than all the strength God had showed in all the miracles performed thus far, both in Egypt and throughout the wilderness.

The Jewish people share a kinship with the letter י. The י is the smallest letter and the Jewish people are the smallest nation, as acknowledged in Deuteronomy 7:7:

כִּי־אַתֶּם הַמְעַט מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים

for you are the fewest of all peoples.

But despite our size, we can, like the letter י, strive both individually and collectively for holiness and not settle for anything less. We can be great and even limitless, and not let our size hold us back. We can strive for transcendence, and always channel faith, divine mercy, and willpower. Let us strive to learn these lessons from the י and live our lives in a manner resonant with this tiny but great letter. And as we do so, may the letter י, representing YHWH, protect us from negative influence and save us from harm, as it did for Yehoshua many years ago.

<sup>2</sup> There are many different traditions regarding writing majuscule and minuscule letters in a sefer Torah; few of them are universal.

<sup>3</sup> This majuscule yod, י רבתי, though not universal, is attested in the commentaries of the Paaneach Raza (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yehudah haLevi, 13<sup>th</sup> century, N. France), Rabbeinu Bahya (Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, 13-14<sup>th</sup> century, Spain), the Tur (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, 14<sup>th</sup> century, Germany/Spain), Minchat Shai (Rabbi Yediyah Shlomo Norzi, 16-17<sup>th</sup> century, Italy), and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19<sup>th</sup> century, Germany).

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Aggadah (Buber) and Rashi, Genesis 1:1, s.v. ברא אלהים.