

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

### WHY ARE THERE CROWNS ON THE LETTERS IN THE TORAH?

When you look at the letters in a Torah scroll you notice that they are different from printed Hebrew words. The calligraphy of the Torah includes decorative crowns on many of the letters. Though one could accept these crowns as mere decorations, Rabbi Akiba actually saw them as full of meaning. He developed a system of interpreting these crowns and all the seemingly unimportant, small grammatical forms of the Torah. This passage, and its surrounding context, shows how esoteric and important this sort of Torah interpretation was.

It once happened to Rami b. Tamre, also known as Rami b. Dikule, that the leg of the letter vav in the word va-yaharog (Exodus 13:15 which is included in tefillin) had been severed by a perforation; whereupon he came to R. Zera who said, Go, fetch a child that is neither too clever nor too foolish; if he is able to read the word as va-yaharog, it is valid; otherwise, the word is yyaharog and it is invalid.

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: When Moses went up to the heights [to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai] he found the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting and putting crowns on the letters [of the Torah]. Moses said before God, "Master of the Universe, who delays your hand [and makes you take the time to write all these crowns on the letters]?" He said to him, "A person will come along in the future at the end of several generations and Akiba ben Yosef is his name. And in the future he will make on every jot and tittle heaps and heaps of laws." [Moses] said to the Master of the Universe, "Show him to me." [God] said to him, "Turn around [and look]." [Moses] went and sat at the end of eight rows [of students, i.e., the very back of the class]. And he was unable to understand what they were talking about. He was befuddled until they came to a matter and [Rabbi Akiba's] students said [to him], "Rabbi, from whence do you [derive a certain law]?" He said to them, "This is a law [given] to Moses from [Mount] Sinai." [Upon hearing this Moses] calmed down. [Then Moses] turned [back] and came before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, "Master of the Universe, You have such a person [as wise] as this one and [yet] you are giving the Torah through me?" [God] said to him, "Silence! This is how [I] have decided [it shall be]." [Moses] said to the Master of the Universe, "You have shown me his Torah, now show me his reward." [God] said to him, "He turned [and looked] behind him and saw them weighing [his] flesh in the meat markets. [Moses] said to Him, "Master of the Universe, is this Torah and this its reward?!" [God] said to him, "Silence! This is how [I] have decided [it shall be]."

Said Rava, "Seven letters need three strokes and these are they: shin, ayin, tet, nun, zayin, gimmel and tsaddi. (B. Menachot 29b)

The context for this passage is a discussion of how much, or how little, of a text must be written incorrectly for it to invalidate a mitzvah that requires a perfect text, such as tefillin or a mezuzah. Set within these rules is the story of Rabbi Akiba. The story of Rabbi Akiba and Moses is important on many levels:

It shows that we may learn a tradition not fully understanding its meaning and yet keep something alive that will be important to future generations. Thus, Moses put the crowns on the letters but didn't understand why he was doing it. Only some 1500 years later would the crowns be revealed in their full meaning. It shows that we may feel inadequate to perform a certain task: there are others who are so much better qualified. Yet, if we are the ones that God has chosen for a task we must not resist our fate. We are also not allowed to question what becomes of the most righteous people. They may suffer the worst pain in the world without deserving it at all. Yet, if this is God's decree then we must accept it, no matter how hard that might be to do.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Try examining the crowns of the letters in Torah or in a mezuzah or tefillin. What meanings might you derive from them? What do you think the person who affixed them to the letters was thinking when they were written down?
2. Moses feels inadequate before Rabbi Akiba. How is his feeling justified? How is it unjustified? How can you apply Moses' experience to your life?