



A Marvelous Insight from the Chasam Sofer

The Fascinating Connection between the Midpoint of the Torah in Words

"גחון" and the Midpoint of the Torah in Letters the "Vav" of "דרש דרש משה"

This week's parsha is parshas Shemini. We will focus on the fascinating fact that HKB"H arranged that the middle of the Torah's words and the middle of the Torah's letters are both in this parsha. In the passuk (Vayikra 10, 16): "וְאֵת שְׂעִיר" —the first "דרש" is the last word of the first half of the Torah, while the second "דרש" is the first word of the second half of the Torah. In the passage discussing the characteristics of creeping creatures that we are prohibited to eat, it says (ibid. 11, 42): "כָּל הוֹלֵךְ עַל גַּחֲוֹן" —the letter "vav" of the word "גחון" is the midpoint of the letters of the Torah. For this reason, tradition dictates that this "vav" be written as an enlarged letter.

The source for this phenomenon is found in the Gemara (Kiddushin 30a): "לפיכך נקראו ראשונים סופרים, שהיו סופרים כל האותיות שבתורה, שהיו אומרים וא"ו דגחון חציין של אותיות של ספר תורה, דרש דרש חציין של אותיות של ספר תורה. Therefore, the early scholars were known as "sofrim," since they would count all the letters of the Torah. They would say that the "vav" of "גחון" is the midpoint of the letters of a sefer Torah, and "דרש דרש" is the midpoint of the words. This same distinction is pointed out 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 ראש שיטה. Here it states that the "vav" of "גחון" should be enlarged; and the word "דרש" should be written at the end of a line in a sefer Torah, whereas the word "דרש" should appear as the first word of the next line—indicating that it is the beginning of the second half of the sefer.

Now, the mere fact that Chazal refer to these early scholars as "sofrim"—literally, "counters"—because they painstakingly counted the letters and words of the Torah to identify the precise midpoints of the Torah, indicates that this knowledge is extremely significant. With this in mind, let us endeavor to explain the profound significance of HKB"H's choice to have these two midpoints—"דרש דרש", the midpoint of its words, and the "vav" of "גחון", the midpoint of its letters—to both be in parshas Shemini.

The Nachash Was Created with Legs so that It Could Serve Man while He Studied Torah

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by introducing an intriguing insight in the teachings of the Chasam Sofer, zy"a, in Toras Moshe (Shemini). To truly comprehend his sacred comments, we will refer to the curse HKB"H imposed on the "nachash hakadmoni"—the primeval serpent—after it enticed Adam and Chava to partake of the Eitz HaDa'as (Bereishis 3, 14): "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶל הַנָּחָשׁ כִּי עָשִׂיתָ זֹאת אֲרוּר אַתָּה מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִכָּל חַי הָאָרֶץ וְעַל גִּבְעוֹנְךָ תֵּלֵךְ וְעַפְרָא תֹאכַל כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ. Hashem G-d said to the nachash, "Because you have done this, accursed are you beyond all the cattle and beyond all beasts of the field; upon your belly shall you go, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life. With regards to the words "upon your belly shall you go," Rashi comments: "רגלים היו לו ונקצצו"—it (the serpent) **once had legs, which were later cut off**. Practically speaking, its legs were no longer necessary to facilitate the service and

assistance of mankind. On the contrary, it was preferable that it not have legs that could enable it to run to perpetrate evil. After all, it had acted as man's deterrent and adversary rather than as his assistant. The source for Rashi's comment is the Gemara (Sotah 9b): **וְכֵן מְצִינוּ בְּנַחֲשׁ הַקְּדֻמוֹנִי שֶׁנֶּתַן עֵינָיו בְּמָה שֶׁאֵינוֹ רְאוּי לּוֹ, מָה שֶׁבִּיקֵשׁ לֹא נִתְּנוּ לוֹ וְמָה שֶׁבִּידּוֹ נִטְלוּהוּ מִמֶּנּוּ, אָמַר הַקֹּב"ה אֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי יִהְיֶה מֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל בְּהֵמָה וְחַיָּה, וְעַכְשֵׁי אֲרוּר הוּא מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִכָּל חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה, אֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי יִהְיֶה בְּקוֹמָה זְקוּפָה, עַכְשֵׁי עַל גַּחוֹנוֹ יֵלֵךְ.** **And so we find concerning the "nachash hakadmoni" that set its eyes on something not fit for it. What it sought, they did not give it, and what was in its hand, they took from it. HKB"H said: I had said that it should be king over every animal and beast, but now, it is more cursed than all the animals and beasts of the field. I had said that it would walk upright, but now, on its belly, it will go.**

Furthermore, according to the Midrash, prior to the cheit, the nachash was as tall and strong as a camel (B.R. 19, 1): **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: He was like a camel.** As a result of the curse, **the world was deprived of much good; for if not for this, a person would send merchandise with it, and it would travel (to the desired destination) and return.** Similarly, the Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Chapter 13) teaches that prior to the cheit, the nachash was as tall as a camel, and the "samech-mem"—the embodiment of the yetzer hara—rode on it to help it trap Adam and Chava and cause their downfall. **Samael took its entourage with it down (from the heavens) to earth to examine the creatures HKB"H had created in His world. It did not find any creature wiser with regards to doing evil than the nachash . . . It resembled a sort of camel; he (Samael) climbed up and rode on it.**

To explain why HKB"H chose to punish the nachash specifically by cutting off its legs, the Chasam Sofer refers to what we are taught in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 59b):

"תָּנִי רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן מִנְסִיא אֹמֵר, חָבַל עַל שֶׁשֶׁם גָּדוֹל שֶׁאֵבֵד מִן הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁאֵילְמָלָא נִתְקַלַּל נָחֶשׁ, כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל הָיוּ מְזַדְּמָנִין לוֹ שְׁנֵי נָחָשִׁים טוֹבִים, אֶחָד מִשְׁגֵּר לְצִפּוֹן וְאֶחָד מִשְׁגֵּר לְדֶרֶם, לְהַבִּיא לוֹ סַנְדְּלָבוֹנִים טוֹבִים וְאֲבָנִים טוֹבוֹת וּמִרְגְּלִיּוֹת, וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שֶׁמִּפְּשִׁילִין רְצוּעָה תַּחַת זַנְבוֹ וּמוֹצִיא בָּהּ עֹפֶר לְגַתָּהּ וּלְחֹרְבָתָהּ."

It was taught in a Baraisa: Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya says: It is unfortunate that a great servant was lost

from the world. For, had the serpent not been cursed, each and every one of Yisrael would have had two good serpents as servants; one he would send to the north and one he would send to the south to bring him gems, precious stones, and pearls. Furthermore, it would have been possible to attach a strap beneath its tail and have it take out soil to his garden and to his ruin.

This explains why the nachash was originally created with legs. The original heavenly-ordained plan was for it to serve a holy purpose—to use its legs to scurry in every which direction to perform man's worldly services and needs. Thus, man would be unencumbered and free to study Torah and dedicate himself to the service of Hashem. Thus, the nachash would have been a partner in man's Torah-study like Shimon the brother of Azaryah, as described in the Midrash brought down by Rashi (Zevachim 2a): **He was referred to by this moniker, because his brother Azaryah engaged in commerce to provide for Shimon, so that he could devote himself exclusively to the study of Torah. In return, it was agreed that Shimon would share with Azaryah his reward for that study. Therefore, he was called by this moniker indicating that he (Shimon) was able to learn on account of him (Azaryah).**

This implies that the nachash and the "samech-mem" were supposed to be man's partners like the paradigm of Yissachar and Zevulun. Every Jew would occupy himself with the study of Torah like Yissachar—the pillar of Torah—and the nachash and "samech-mem" were supposed to supply all of their mundane needs—like Zevulun, who provided for Yissachar, so that he could study Torah without distractions.

As we know, the "samech-mem" and the nachash did not abide by this arrangement; instead, they rebelled against Hashem. Not only did they not help man serve Hashem, but they even caused him to sin. Therefore, HKB"H decreed that the legs of the nachash be cut off, since they were of no further service to mankind. In fact, the opposite was true; they would likely be used to combat man and hinder him from studying Torah. This prompted Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya to lament, **"It is unfortunate that a great servant was lost from the world."**

The “Nachash HaKadmoni” Whose Legs Were Cut Off Combatted the Legs of Kedushah —the Supporters of Torah Study

We will now introduce fascinating but disturbing teachings related to this subject from the Zohar hakadosh (ibid.). The guardian angel of Eisav is none other than the “nachash hakadmoni” who caused Adam and Chava to sin with the Eitz HaDa’as and was punished by having its legs cut off. This motivated it to wrestle with Yaakov Avinu and strike a blow to the ball of his thighbone—i.e., those who support Torah-study. They represent the legs of kedushah; when they are not supporting Torah-study, the “nachash hakadmoni” commandeers those legs enabling it to stand and walk on them to combat the legions of kedushah.

How sweet are the words of the great Rabbi Aryeh Leib Tzintz of Platsk in Derashos Harael (Part 3, Drush 23). He explains the deeper message of the passuk (Iyov 1, 6): **וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְיַצֵּב עַל ה'** וַיָּבֹא גַם הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם, וַיֹּאמֶר ה' **אֵל הַשָּׁטָן מֵאֵינְךָ תָּבוֹא, וַיַּעַן הַשָּׁטָן אֶת ה'** וַיֹּאמֶר מִשּׁוֹט בָּאֶרֶץ וּמִהֲתַלֵּךְ בָּהּ. **It happened one day; the angels came to stand before Hashem, and the Satan, too, came among them. Hashem said to the Satan, “Where have you come from?” The Satan responded to Hashem and said, “From wandering about the earth and walking on it.”** Rashi explains that the Satan told Hashem that it is his *modus operandi* to wander about and observe the bad people and the good people. The redundant language of the passuk--“**from wandering about the earth and walking on it**”—needs to be explained.

The explanation, however, is that this is the Satan’s method of finding fault with Yisrael. When he wishes to wander among G-d’s creatures to check if they are meritorious or not, he must do so on his belly, since he lacks legs to walk around on. If, however, he finds that Yisrael, chas v’shalom, are not studying Torah properly—due to a failure on the part of the benefactors of Torah-study—known as “Yaakov’s legs”—to fulfill their commitment, the Satan steals those legs for his own needs to actually walk around on earth.

So, when HKB”H inquires of the Satan, **“Where have you come from?”** His response constitutes an indictment against Yisrael: **“From wandering about the earth and walking on it.”** At first, I wandered about the earth,

crawling without legs, to see if the people were meritorious or not; however, once I did my due diligence and found that they did not support Torah-study as they should, I was no longer restricted to **“wandering about the earth”** on my belly—but, instead, I was also able to **“walk on it.”** This was because I succeeded in confiscating “Yaakov’s legs,” which were remiss in their support of Torah-study; this enabled me to use them for my own needs and walk on them.

The Ramban’s Intriguing Insight regarding the Combinations of the Letters in the Torah

Proceeding along this illuminating path, we will now elaborate on the Chasam Sofer’s comments regarding the letter **“vav”** being the midpoint of the letters of the Torah. We will begin by introducing what is brought down in the sefer Ba’al Shem Tov (Zot HaBerachah 4). The holy Ba’al Shem Tov asks a question concerning HKB”H’s admonition to Adam HaRishon (Bereishis 2, 17): **וּמַעַץ הַדְּעִת טוֹב וְרַע לֹא: —but of the Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa, you must not eat thereof, for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.** This implies that Adam could have chosen not to eat from the Eitz HaDa’as, and then he would not have died.

This is difficult, because we learn from the Midrash (B.R. 8, 2): **The Torah existed two thousand years prior to the creation of the world.** If that is true, then how could it be written in the Torah prior to the creation of the world (Bamidbar 19, 14): **זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲדָם כִּי יָמוּת בָּאֵהָל: —this is the Torah of a man who dies in a tent?** How could the matter of death be written several times in the Torah before the world was actually created? Perhaps Adam HaRishon would not have sinned and would not have had to die.

The Ba’al Shem Tov answers that prior to the creation, HKB”H wrote the Torah with different combinations of letters that made no mention of death. Then, when Adam HaRishon sinned and was sentenced to die, the combinations of letters was modified resulting in the combinations familiar to us today. Hence, it was possible to write: **“אֲדָם כִּי יָמוּת בָּאֵהָל.”** Similarly, all the sins and punishments mentioned in the Torah are combinations of letters that changed after the initial sin.

Undoubtedly, the answer of the Ba'al Shem Tov is based on the commentary of the Ramban (Introduction to the Torah). The Ramban reveals an amazing fact concerning the combinations of letters of the Torah that HKB"H wrote in the form of black fire etched upon white fire. Here is a translation of his sacred words:

We have yet another mystical tradition (Zohar hakadosh, Yisro 87a) that the entire Torah is comprised of names of HKB"H, and the letters of the words can be rearranged into other divine names. For example, the passuk "בראשית ברא אלקים" can be rearranged to form other words such as "בראשית ברא אלקים". This applies to the entire Torah except for the permutations and gematriot of the holy names . . .

It appears that the Torah which is written with (letters of) black fire upon a background of white fire was in this form that we have mentioned—namely, that the writing was contiguous, without being broken down into words. Thus, it was possible for it to be read by way of divine names and also by way of our normal reading relating to the Torah and the mitzvos. It was given to Moshe Rabeinu using the division of words which conveys the mitzvos, and it was transmitted to him orally as it read consisting of holy names.

Based on this sublime introduction, we can begin to comprehend the answer of the Ba'al Shem Tov hakadosh. For, we are taught in the Midrash (ibid. 1, 1): **HKB"H would look in the Torah and create the world.** In a similar vein, the Zohar hakadosh says (Terumah 161a): **"כך ברא קוב"ה עלמא—when HKB"H created the world, He looked in the Torah and created the world.**

Thus, it is evident that everything that was created in the world originates solely from the power of the letters of the Torah; HKB"H looked at them and created the world. Hence, the fact that death exists in the world is because it is mentioned in the Torah: **"On the day you eat of it, you shall surely die."** Similarly, all the diseases in the world exist because they are mentioned in the Torah in the tochachos and the curses in parshas Bechukosai and parshas Ki Savo.

Accordingly, based on the original version of the Torah before the world was created—according to the Ramban, before it was divided up into words, when it consisted of permutations of holy names capable of imparting every sort of good to the world—death and disease would not have existed.

According to this understanding, if Adam HaRishon had not sinned, he would have indeed lived forever. Because we would have been privileged to receive the Torah with the arrangement of letters that does not mention death or any form of illness. Yet, since he did sin, and it was decreed that he must die, HKB"H rearranged the letters of the Torah broken down into words, as we find in our sefer-Torahs today. Accordingly, death and punishments exist to atone for man's sins.

This is hinted to brilliantly in the passuk: **"זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל"**. Now, the Ba'al Shem Tov asked how could death have been written in the Torah before Adam HaRishon sinned; perhaps he would not have sinned and would not have died. Therefore, HKB"H answers this question as follows: **"זאת התורה"**—only in this Torah, as it appears before us today, is it written: **"If a man dies in a tent."** In its original form, however, before the world was created, the Torah consisted exclusively of contiguous permutations of holy names without division into words; there was no mention of death.

Now, this illuminates for us the explanation of the Chasam Sofer concerning the midpoint of the letters of the Torah—the **"vav"** of **"כל הולך על גחון"**. Before the **"cheit Eitz HaDa'as,"** the letters of Torah were arranged without being broken down into words. Accordingly, it did not say that the nachash would ambulate on its belly—**"gachon."** Had it not enticed Adam and Chava to sin, it would have had legs with which to serve man. In other words, the letters would not have been arranged with the words **"הולך על גחון"**; instead, they would have only been combinations of holy names.

The Letter "Vav" Alludes to Zevulun the Sixth Shevet and His Connection with Shevet Yissachar

Following the lead of the Chasam Sofer, I believe that we can explain why the **"vav"** of **"גחון"** was chosen as the midpoint of the letters of the Torah when the Torah was yet contiguous permutations of holy names—i.e. before the legs

of the nachash were excised, before it was compelled to travel on its belly. Additionally, what does this fact come to teach us nowadays, after the legs of the nachash were excised?

We can suggest that it alludes to Shevet Zevulun, the sixth of the twelve shevatim fathered by Yaakov Avinu, in this order: **Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Yissachar, Zevulun**. Now, Rashi teaches us a fundamental principle regarding the letter “vav” (Bereishis 17, 9): **The letter “vav” adds on to the previous subject.** The letter “vav” (whose gematria is six) connects an item to the item preceding it. With this in mind, we can suggest that HKB”H arranged for Zevulun, Yaakov’s sixth son, to be born immediately after Yissachar, Yaakov’s fifth son, the pillar of Torah. In other words, Zevulun was the connecting “vav.” This was designed to illustrate the intimate relationship between Zevulun and Yissachar. Zevulun’s role was to provide for and support Yissachar’s life of Torah.

Furthermore, Rashi explains: “כל הולך על גחון”—**whatever crawls on its belly: This refers to a snake. The term «גחון» means bending low; for, it moves bent low and falling on its belly.** Thus, HKB”H established the enlarged “vav” of the word «גחון» to be the midpoint of the letters of the Torah as a reference to the nachash. In this manner, we are being taught that the original purpose and plan was for the nachash and man to be connected—alluded to by the connecting “vav”—such that it would enable man to devote himself to the study of Torah and service of Hashem. It was meant to use its legs to run around and take care of all of man’s mundane needs. Had it fulfilled this original purpose, we would not have the combination of words of “כל הולך על גחון”; instead, we would have permutations of holy names that would help the nachash fulfill its intended role.

However, this was not to be. The “nachash hakadmoni,” in cahoots with the “samech-mem,” mutinied. Instead of assisting man to study Torah and serve Hashem, it persuaded Adam and Chava to partake of the Eitz HaDa’as. As a consequence, its legs were cut off and the combinations of words detailing the features of tumah of creeping creatures—“כל הולך על גחון”—came to be. In this context, the letter “vav” of “גחון” took on an entirely different meaning.

Since Yisrael lost a good, capable servant when the legs of the nachash were taken away, this sacred role fell to those who possess the wherewithal to support and finance Torah-study. Like Zevulun, the sixth of the shevatim, they would function like a connecting “vav” bound in an intimate relationship with Yissachar, the fifth shevet. Thus, the “vav” of “הולך על גחון” teaches us that it is now incumbent upon Zevulun to fulfill the intended role of the nachash, who is now condemned to crawl on its belly, because it did not wish to fulfill its intended role.

We can now begin to appreciate the message HKB”H is conveying to us by also placing the midpoint of the words of the Torah in this parsha in the words “דרש דרש משה”. For, we find the following halachic ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D., Hilchos Talmud Torah 246, 1):

Every Jew is obligated to study Torah—whether he is poor or rich, whether he is physically able or handicapped, whether he is young or elderly. Even a pauper who goes from door to door, even a man with a wife and children, he must designate times for Torah-study during the day and at night, as it says (Yehoshua 1, 8): “You shall contemplate it day and night.” And someone who is unable to learn, because he does not know how to learn at all, or because he is overburdened, should support others who study. The Rama adds: “It will be considered as if he himself studied. Furthermore, a person can arrange with his fellow that one will study Torah, and the other will support him; and he will split the rewards with him.”

Accordingly, we can posit that the repetitive (double) language—“דרש דרש משה”—is meant to teach us that one who studies Torah should have two people in mind when he is learning and expounding—himself and his Zevulun, who owns part of his Torah. Now, the **Moshe** in this passuk can be interpreted as a reference to anyone studying Torah. For, we find in the Gemara (Shabbas 101b, Succah 39a, Beitzah 38b) that Torah scholars used to say to one another: “משה שפיר קאמרת”—**Moshe, you have spoken well.**

Thus, the two midpoints of the Torah—"דרש דרש משה" and the letter "vav" of "גחון"—go hand in hand magnificently. They impress upon us the need for both Yissachars and Zevulun among us. The former devotes himself to the study of Torah, while HKB"Y arranges for the latter to be involved in business and commerce like Zevulun, the sixth of shevatim, to support Yissachar. This sacred role is alluded to by the letter "vav"—the letter that connects things. In this manner, they share in the rewards of Yissachar's Torah-study, as alluded to by the repetitive phrase "דרש דרש משה".

In this merit, we will be privileged to witness the fulfillment of the passuk: ואת שעיר החטאת דרש דרש משה והנה

"שורף"—regarding the he-goat of the "chatas," Moshe made a detailed inquiry. The Degel Machaneh Ephraim interprets this passuk as follows: "The he-goat"—"שעיר"—represents the klipos—the negative forces generated by our sins, as we find in the passuk (Yeshayah 13, 21): ושעירים ירקדו שם—"דרש דרש משה"—due to the efforts of a "talmid-chacham," a representative of Moshe, analyzing and elucidating the Torah over and over again, diligently and arduously; "והנה שורף"—the negative, external forces of the klipos are incinerated and abolished. In this manner, we will merit the total geulah, swiftly, in our times! Amen.



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