

LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbat

Vayigash

Vol. 10, Issue 14 • 6 Tevet 5786 / December 26, 2025

CONTENTS: Slamovits (Page 1); Kohn (Page 6)

Sponsorships for future editions of Lehrhaus over Shabbat are available at <https://thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

What Avram and Sarai Taught the World Zionist Congress: An Orthographic Exploration of Parashat Lech Lecha

Gabriel Slamovits is a practicing attorney who recently served as part of a delegation to the 39th World Zionist Congress on behalf of Dorshei Torah v'Tzion, which he helped found prior to the 2020 World Zionist Congress Elections.

Introduction

A few days after the final in-person meeting of the 39th World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem just under two months ago, Jews around the world read Parashat Lech Lecha. That *parashah* has an unusual orthographic feature at Bereishit 16:5:

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם חָמְסִי עָלַיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי
בְּחִיקוֹךָ וַתֵּרָא נִי הָרְתָה וְאִקְלָ בְּעֵינַיִךָ יִשְׁפֹּט ה' בֵּינִי
וּבֵינֶיךָ:

Sarai said to Avram, “The abuse I suffer is your fault. I myself laid my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she looks upon me with contempt. Let God judge between me and between you!”

The word וּבֵינֶיךָ, which literally means “and between you,” contains a dot over the second to last letter, the yud.

The context of our verse is that Avram and Sarai are childless. Sarai decides to give Avram her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, in the hopes that she will give him a child. However, the Torah tells us that, once Hagar conceives, there is significant tension between the two women: Hagar “made light of her mistress [Sarai] with her eyes” (alt.: “she began to look upon her mistress with contempt”) (16:4). Our verse is the immediate continuation of that narrative, when Sarai conveys her feelings of pain and anger to Avram. In her cry to Avram, she asks God to judge “between me and you,” a phrase we are called to pay attention to due to the insertion of the dot.

Why The Dot? Grammatical Implications¹

Tradition often posits that a dot over a letter indicates that it has been singled out for special emphasis.² In practice, dots on a letter or word often qualify it, either by treating the letter as if it were deleted or by reducing the impact of the letter in some way.³

Would our word be translated differently if it were read without the dotted yud, as ובינך instead of וביניך? The answer is no: it would still be translated as “and between you.” But the *meaning* of the

word could be quite different. “You,” as English speakers know, refers to both the singular and the plural. The yud in our verse is an implicit differentiator between “you” in the singular and “you” in the plural: Written without the yud, the “you” in ובינך is unequivocally in the singular. However, a yud in וביניך, which is how the word is written in the Torah, is an indicator that the word “you” could be read in the plural.

I say “an *implicit* differentiator” and “*could* be read” because the yud alone is not enough to change the meaning of “you” from the singular to the plural; the final letter, ך, would also need to be changed to כם, so that we would have the word וביניכם. So what we have here is a yud that serves as a marker of a change from singular to plural, but not one that makes the change an absolute one.

There is a second, and equally important, possible read to this yud. Rashi notes that this is the only place in the Torah where ובינך is spelled with the added yud. He suggests that we read the word not as וביניך but as וביניך, a subtle difference that would give us a “you” in the singular feminine form instead of the masculine form. Since the Torah scroll does not have any diacritic, it’s

¹ The first grammatical reading was brought to my attention by Rabbi James S. Diamond in *Scribal Secrets*, 39, Pickwick Publications, 2019. The second grammatical reading was brought to my attention by Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld’s “An Extraordinary Point,” *Lech Lecha*, 5779, 10/22/18, https://www.ohevdc.org/sermon?post_id=352382.

² See *Zohar* to Beha’alotekha 13:67: “*Kulhu atyan le-ahza’ah milah* - all of them come to make the matter (alt: the word) more visible.”

³ See, e.g., Rashi to *Pesachim* 93b, s.v. *nikkud al heh*; *Mizrahi* to *Bamidbar* 3:39; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 3:13; *Avot dr-Rabbi Natan* 34:4; *Piskei Tosfot* to *Menahot* 231; Jerusalem Talmud *Pesachim* 64b; Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 43b, s.v. *ela*.

plausible to read the letter as ך rather than as ך. However, it is strange in context: why would Sarai refer to Avram in the feminine form?

Taken together, the two grammatical insights gleaned from the yud suggest that Sarai is asking God to not only judge Avram, but also to judge Hagar. Hence, the Torah's text alludes to both the plural form of "you" (to refer to a person other than Avram alone) and to the feminine form of the word (to indicate that the other person being referred to is Hagar). Even when Sarai's words emphasize that this is a dispute between husband and wife ("between me and between you"), an extra yud subtly serves to underscore that Hagar is central to Sarai's pain.

Midrashic Analyses

Let's keep this in mind as we read two *midrashim* about our verse.⁴ In *Sifrei* 69:2, we read:

[There is a dot above the yud in וביניך to [indicate] that Sarah was not speaking about him [Avram], but about Hagar alone. And others say [she spoke of Hagar] who engendered strife between him and her.

And in *Midrash Mishlei* 26:24, we read:

The yud of ביניך is dotted to teach

that Sarah our foremother said, "Hagar should return to her [status as a] handmaid," and Abraham our forefather said "After we made her a *gevirah*,⁵ we would go back and enslave her?! This would be a *hillul sheim Shamayim*, a desecration of God's name!" [Sarah replied,] "If so, let God decide based on my words and your words."

[And indeed, God did so, as later in the Torah God tells Abraham] As it is written, "all that Sarah tells you, heed her voice." Just as in the first instance it was about Hagar, so too in the second instance [God is judging] about the matter of Hagar.

So our midrashic tradition accords with a key aspect of our grammatical analysis: each *midrash* indicates that the dotted yud is to serve as a reference to Hagar. The first interpretation in the *Sifrei* goes so far as to suggest that she was the *sole* subject of the dispute (which could fit with Rashi's read of the word as a feminine singular "you"). The *Sifrei's* second interpretation is in line with the *peshat*, the straightforward interpretation of the text, that places the dispute as one between husband and wife, but one that involves Hagar. And the *Midrash Mishlei* imagines the conversation that might have taken place

⁴ Both *midrashim* were brought to my attention by Rabbi Diamond in *Scribal Secrets*, 39-40.

⁵ *Gevirah* is perhaps best translated as a "lady" in the formal sense.

between them about this.

What might all of this teach us?

Conclusion: Strengthening the Family Unit⁶

At the beginning of this essay, it was stated that dots over a letter or word often qualify the impact of that letter or word, either by treating the dotted letter or word as if it were deleted or by reducing the impact of that letter or word in some way. The dotted letter in our discussion is a particularly interesting example of this phenomenon.

The word וביניך, in our context, clearly refers to a dispute between Sarai and Avram; the word “you” is stated in a verse that opens, “Sarai said to Avram.” This is a marital dispute. And yet, the Torah does something unusual: it adds a yud, which, as Rashi told us earlier, is the only “וביניך” with such a yud in the Torah. The yud, dotted for emphasis, is teaching us that while this dispute is primarily in the singular—a dispute between Sarai and Avram—it also has broader roots. The role of Hagar in their lives is one that has complicated their own relationship. In a sense, the yud, and our midrashic tradition which is drawn to the emphasis of the dot, reminds us of the conflict’s broader roots.

But the dotted yud does not just emphasize. It

reduces. And what does it reduce? The impact of that letter on the word. It allows us to read the word as though the yud were deleted. It is as if the Torah is saying, “Yes, the conflict has broader roots. We can think through the tensions inherent in polygamy, surrogate pregnancy, slavery, equality, and more. We will hint at it by adding a yud into the conversation. But that yud needs to be qualified. It needs to be reduced.” Because, at the end of the day, this dispute is primarily one between husband and wife, the covenantal couple chosen by God to be His messengers to the world. While the two of them are certainly allowed to have their differences, Sarai must express her pain, and they must work toward reconciliation, because the two of them need to be on the same page to carry out their mission.

This means that husband and wife need to resolve their differences and settle both new and old tensions. Earlier in this chapter, we read that Hagar is originally from Egypt. Some commentators link her to Avram and Sarai’s sojourn to Egypt, where Sarai was degraded by Pharaoh. If so, we can understand Sarai’s anger and outcry as one that also recalls her experience in Pharaoh’s palace (an outcry that resonates even more loudly given the midrashic tradition that suggests that Hagar is Pharaoh’s daughter).⁷

⁶ The penultimate paragraphs of the conclusion owe much to my time in the classroom of מו"ר Rabbi Dr. Zvi Grumet and to his *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant*, Koren Publications, 2017. See also *Scribal Secrets*, 40-41.

⁷ *Bereishit Rabbah* 45:1.

In fact, ensuring that Sarai and Avram resolve lingering tensions and are on the same page is so critical that, later in the Torah, God interrupts Himself from telling Avraham, his new covenantal partner, that He plans to destroy Sodom and its neighboring city-states.⁸ Why? Because He needs to rebuke Avraham for not telling Sarah that He had promised that she will have a son. God cannot share any more of His plans with Avraham until Avraham has shared God's word with Sarah. Together, the couple are a powerful and complementary unit. The yud reminds us of all of the broad elements that lead to conflict between them, and the dot reminds us that "between you and me" there need not be extra letters. Sometimes we need to remove an extraneous letter, just as, in some conflicts, we need to ignore the extraneous elements and focus on ourselves. By doing that, Avram and Sarai are better able to focus on the mission given to them by God at the beginning of the *parashah*: "Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."⁹ By strengthening their own family unit, Avram and Sarai become a family that is able to bring blessing to all others.

⁸ Parashat Vayeira begins by telling us that God appeared to Avraham, but "makes no mention of the content of the appearance" (Grumet 195), instead continuing with the story of Avraham being visited by three guests who carry the message that Avraham already knows – and that Sarah is to learn from this conversation – that Sarah will bear Avraham a child. Only then does God continue the conversation and reveal to Avraham that he plans to destroy Sodom. See Bereishit ch.18 and Grumet, 195, 199-200.

"*Ma'aseh avot siman le-vanim* – the actions of our ancestors foreshadow the lives of their children," writes Nachmanides about our forefathers in his commentary to this *parashah*.¹⁰ I recently had the *zekhut* (privilege) of serving as part of a delegation to the 39th World Zionist Congress as one of the party leaders for Dorshei Torah v'Tzion, a religious Zionist party, following in the footsteps of my great-grandfather, a religious man who had attended both the Pressburg Yeshiva in Austria-Hungary and the World Zionist Congress in Switzerland. The Congress was both incredibly inspiring and chaotically cacophonous. Over 2,000 Jews from 43 countries came together to draft, discuss, and debate legislation that will impact policy relating to the expenditures of billions of dollars by Israel's national institutions over the course of the next five years. To say that these conversations became heated at times would be a vast understatement. Raw emotions were on display. A sampling of the charged topics under discussion included the draft system in Israel, public access to the egalitarian section of the Western Wall, and combating antisemitism in primary, secondary, and higher education.

⁹ Beresihit 12:3.

¹⁰ Ramban to Bereishit 12:6, s.v. *Va-ya'avov Avram ba-aretz ad mekom Shechem*. The actual quotation is slightly different from the common phrase used in the body of the piece; it is *kol mah she-ira la-avot siman le-vanim*, all the events that occur to the patriarchs in some way foreshadow the history of their descendants. See also *Midrash Tanhuma*, Lech Lecha 9.

Reasonable – and perhaps sometimes unreasonable – minds disagreed, and often did so loudly. But, like Avram and Sarai, we, all Jews, are one family unit, and at this Congress we had a mission which united us. A few hours after the closing session of the in-person portion of the Congress, I walked to the *Kotel* to pray in the dead of night. On my journey to, from, and at that sacred space, I spoke with numerous other young delegates from across the world: a Yemenite woman from Melbourne, an Iraqi man from Vienna, a student leader from Barcelona, a Swiss Jew, a British Jew – not to mention American delegates from Los Angeles to New York. Together, the different factions and parties that make up the Congress – from left to right, from religious to secular, from Ashkenazi to Sephardi and beyond, and from all corners of the globe – are collectively a powerful and complementary unit, united by our Jewish identity and shared belief in the centrality of the Congress’ mission. It is precisely by honestly expressing those raw emotions in such a forum – following in the footsteps of Sarai and Avram – that we can work toward reconciliation and thereby stand united in carrying out that holy mission.¹¹

A modified version of this piece was originally delivered at a breakfast for the Kol Israel – General Zionists faction after the final night of in-person voting.

¹¹ Indeed, this is exactly how the resolution drafting process at the World Zionist Congress works, as the various factions are represented in committee meetings where they discuss, debate, and refine the legislation before it is discussed by

“We Should Make a Documentary About Circles.” (After Terrances Hayes’s “We Should Make a Documentary about Spades”)

Ian Kohn is an American Jewish writer, performance poet, and on-and-off actor. His foray into the written word began in his teens, when he joined Get Lit: Words Ignite’s youth poetry troupe, the Get Lit Players.

And this is all we need before our shoot:

A pen, some paper, sprawling migrant fleets
Which disembarked from southernmost Ukraine;
The passengers each arrive in New York,
Becoming hands to man the factories
Or threading looms in dingy sweatshop mills
A fair substitute for deliverance,
But still in stark and plainly dressed *galut*.
What worth is *geulah* to a fair wage,
A ladder up from urban peasantry?

So show America’s conveniences
They’ll recline into for a century.
Gaze upon the bareheaded juveniles
With ruddy cheeks and red persuasion,
The vanguard of the General Labor Bund.
Then turn your gaze to those who kept Torah,
Their children donning Borsalino hats.
And turn again to *ba’alei teshuvah*,
Whose trembling knees are cured with *bitachon*.

Recall the etymology of *kike*,

the Congress as a whole. For more information on this process, see the Standing Orders of the Zionist Congress, available at <https://www.wzo.org.il/sub/39th-zionist-congress/governing-documents/en>.

Derived from Yiddish *kaykel*, or “circle”—The
shape our forebears signed papers with
At Ellis Island, in lieu of an X,
Which evokes a cross they don’t deem holy,
To say naught of their illiteracy
In our exalted Roman alphabet.
Then note the circle we built for ourselves,
Preserving tautly tied bonds between us.

The nations commend our architecture,
As well as the narrow space between each of us.
Yet their resentment washes over praise.
Alas, no new case for our dignity
Will crush interminable bigotry.

Emancipation happened so far back
That you can make up damn near anything
To argue we pull the whole world’s strings.
When Mayer Amschel became his own boss,
And then left the *Judengasse* in haste,
A false quote of his was left to cite:
“If I control its currency’s supply,
I care not who writes a country’s laws.”
Don’t spend the effort answering this quote
So early on into our humble film.

Instead, begin it on Shabbat in *shul*,
When men sing and dance to *Lekhah Dodi*
Around the podium, for the night’s bride.
She then takes each man there as her groom:
The sinful and *tzaddikim* equally,
And those in between—the majority.
They surround the *amud*, then circle it,
A microcosm of the larger one,

Which we assure ourselves will never break.
It’s been intact for two millennia.

Indeed. Allow me one note on that, though.
The circle’s exit door oft *is ajar*;
We plant one foot outside it—integrate.
Our Nobel Prizes do not win themselves.
And yet the nations will not reckon us:
Suppressing fight or flight, we carry on;
As much as they revile and attack us,
The circle stays intact, maintaining calm.
Some in the circle’s center may soon move
To Israel, in light of current times;
They therefore widen the diameter,
Allowing me more space to drift within.
When I’ve come of age, I’ll catch up with them.

Yet still, we can’t discount the open door,
Enticing us to turn and leave for good.
Assimilation screams from yards
away,
Or perhaps a few feet beyond the
porch.
It rings in your ears, akin to the shame
That you feel secondhand as you behold
A couple spontaneously divorce.
If we depict a Jew marrying out,
It must provoke our grimmest pangs of guilt.
Recall Moshe as he ground up the calf,
Its dust dissolved and forced into our mouths—
Or perhaps a Shoah-surviving man
Conveying inner demons to his son
At the sharp tip of a leather belt.
Why must he store it on a closet hook,

Where it crudely forms a circle as it hangs?

But please, leave me out of the brunt of it.
I get the stakes for continuity,
So don't put undue pressure on me too.
I already strived not to marry out.
This circle will not force me out its door.
Nor will I choose to stride across its fringe,
As if I might as well not be inside.
How can I forego this circle's warmth,
Its insularity that, nonetheless,
Spans wherever in the world we go?

And yet the circle will no doubt compress
And shift to Israel, as is presaged.
Our circle is a *migdal*, or *mitzpeh*.
The nations wouldn't dare to mount a raid,
Nor breach our walls, all hardened by our past.
We clench our fists in daily consciousness
Of how we must maintain eternal wrath.

But let us not forget to teach ourselves
Our means of buttressing the circle's walls.
To do so calls for some geometry.
Circumference: 3.14... and so on,
A 6.28 radius—six days
To create the world, one day of Shabbat,
6,000 years for us to be redeemed,
A people bound together by design,
Some on the fringe and others at the core,
While some up and leave, never to return,
And G-d agrees to keep this status quo
Until its obsolescence is made clear.

Managing Editor:

Davida Kollmar

Editors:

David Fried

Shayna Herszage-Feldan

Chesky Kopel

Tamar Ron Marvin

Chaya Sara Oppenheim

Michael Weiner

Consulting Editors:

Miriam Krupka Berger

Michael Bernstein

Elli Fischer

Miriam Gedwiser

Yosef Lindell

Chaim Saiman

Jeffrey Saks

Jacob J. Schacter

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld

Shlomo Zuckier

Please contact us at editors@thelehrhaus.com