



The Purloined Letter

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One of Rashi's comments in this week's *parashah* highlights the rabbinic tradition of interpreting a feature of Hebrew script known as “אותיות חסירות ויתרות” (*otiot haseirot v'yeteirot*), “missing and extra letters.” The Hebrew alphabet has no vowel letters, and in most Hebrew writing, the vowel notations (*nekudot*) are not included; we know how to pronounce words based on context and tradition. But certain vowels¹ are sometimes “carried” by a silent letter, either a *vav* (ו) or a *yod* (י). In writing words with those vowels, common practice dictates whether they are written with the silent letter or not. When the writing deviates from common practice, we get the phenomenon of “missing and extra letters,” known in Latin as “defective” and “plene scriptum.” For our Rabbis, who presumed every letter in sacred scripture to have been carefully and intentionally selected, an extra or a missing letter was understood to be an encoded message, waiting to be deciphered.

One of these extra letters appears just after the section of Parashat BeHukkotai infamously known as the *tokhehah*, or “Rebuke”—a long and terrible list of curses. A cavalcade of miseries, mostly the consequences of exile from the Land of Israel, are described in detail and presented as a severe warning of what will happen if the people do not follow God's law.

¹ The *holam* (א) and the *shuruk* (א) can be carried by a silent *vav*, and the *hirik* (א) can be carried by a silent *yod*.



Then there is a bit of relief: the *tokhe^hah* is immediately followed by several verses of consolation. Even if these horrors come to be, the Torah promises, God will eventually remember the covenant and return the people to their land:

ויקרא כו:מב

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶף אֶת בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶף אֶת בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֶזְכֹּר וְהָאֶרֶץ אֶזְכֹּר.

Leviticus 26:42

Then I will remember My covenant with **Ya’akov**, and even my covenant with Yitz^hak, and even my covenant with Avraham I will remember, and I will remember the Land.

The extra letter in this verse appears in the word for the name, “Ya’akov.” It is generally written like this: יַעֲקֹב, without the letter *vav* (ו) between the *kuf* (ק) and the *vet* (ב). For a sense of this in English, imagine if it were acceptable—even standard—to write “Jacob” without the “o”: JACB. But in our verse, the phrase “My covenant with Ya’akov” has the unusual, fuller spelling: יַעֲקֹב, **with** the *vav*. Rashi wants to know why. This is what he says:

רש"י ויקרא כו:מב

בְּחֻמְשָׁה מְקוֹמוֹת נִכְתָּב מְלֵא, וְאֵלֵיהֶם חָסַר בְּחֻמְשָׁה מְקוֹמוֹת — יַעֲקֹב נִטַּל אוֹת מִשְׁמוֹ שֶׁל אֵלֵיהֶם עֲרִבּוֹן שְׂיָבָא וִיבִשָּׁר גְּאֻלַּת בְּנָיו.

Rashi on Leviticus 26:42

In five places [Ya’akov’s name] is written with the “full” spelling, and in five places the name of Eliyahu is written with [that same letter] missing. [Because] Ya’akov took a letter from Eliyahu’s name as a pledge, [to ensure that Eliyahu] would come and announce the redemption of [Ya’akov’s] children.

In his typical laconic fashion, Rashi manages to deliver a treasury of information in just 19 words. Let's take it one step at a time:

1. Someone managed to figure out that, throughout the entire Tanakh, Ya'akov's name is written with this extra *vav* (יעקוב) five times,² **and** that the prophet Eliyahu, who will appear later, in the Book of Kings, has his name written without a *vav* five times.³ In Eliyahu's case, it is not an example of a חסר, a "missing" silent letter; rather, we almost always spell Eliyahu's name with a *vav* (אליהו): and pronounced, Eliyahu—but in five cases, his name is written without the *vav* (אליה) and pronounced, Elijah. So five extra *vavs* in Ya'akov's name, and five missing *vavs* from Eliyahu's. Rashi finds this remarkable parallel in a work of *midrash*, fittingly called the "מדרש חסירות ויתרות" - Midrash of Missing and Extra Letters."⁴
2. Then Rashi adds a detail that does not appear in the original *midrash*. In Rashi's description, Ya'akov somehow reached across the Bible and "took" the extra letter from Eliyahu's name, and is holding it as a kind of promissory pledge (ערבון).
3. This idea that Ya'akov holds Eliyahu responsible for the continuing exile is playing on the tradition that Eliyahu is the prophet who never died (see: 2 Kings 2:11) and he will one day return to announce the coming of the redeemer and the return of the Children of Israel to their land.

² The other four plene spellings of Ya'akov all appear in the Book of Jeremiah: 30:18, 33:26, 46:27, 51:19. Yet this is not simply "the way Jeremiah spelled Ya'akov." The name also appears in its deficient spelling in the book 12 times. In fact, in two cases (33:26 and 46:27), both versions appear in the same verse.

³ In Eliyahu's case, four of the deficient spellings are all in the first chapter of 2 Kings 1:3, 4, 8, 12, and one is in Malakhi 3:23.

⁴ See: Torah Sheleimah, BeHukkotai, 207, or Otzar Midrashim, Midrashei Hasef v'Yater, 1: "כל אליהו מלא וי"ו בר מן: "ה' וכל יעקב חסר וי"ו בר מן ה' ללמדך שאליהו בא וגאל את זרע יעקב, שנאמר הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליהו הנביא."



4. In fact, that tradition is built on two verses at the end of the Book of Malachi, the last lines in books of the prophets:

מלאכי ג:כד

הִנֵּה אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ לָכֶם אֶת אֵלֵיהָ הַנְּבִיא לִפְנֵי בּוֹא יוֹם ה' הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא. וְהָשִׁיב לֵב אֲבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְלֵב בְּנֵים עַל אֲבוֹתָם.

Malachi 3:23-24

Behold I am sending you the prophet **Elijah** to you before the coming of that great and awesome day of the Eternal. And he will return the heart of the fathers to their children, and the heart of the children to their father.

And in that first verse, Eliyahu's name is spelled without the letter *vav*.

5. So we have the covenant of Ya'akov mentioned here in our *parashah* referring to the eventual redemption, where we find the name "Ya'akov" with an extra letter. That eventual redemption, in a later book of the Bible, is associated with Eliyahu, where we find Eliyahu's name missing a letter. So it is as if Ya'akov, here, took it from Eliyahu, there.
6. Moreover, the very redemption that Eliyahu is supposed to bring about, says the verse in Malachi, is somehow going to return fathers and children to one another. So it is fitting that Ya'akov, the father, is asking Eliyahu to fulfill his mission and return Israel, the children. And until this happens, Ya'akov is keeping the extra letter.

There is an acrobatic artistry to the interpretive method in this story of stolen letters and characters speaking to one another across time. But what does it all mean?



For those kinds of answers, we can turn to the many commentaries that are written “on top” of Rashi’s commentary, often called “supercommentaries.” My favorite of them is the Gur Aryeh, written by R. Yehudah Loew, the Maharal of Prague. And he provides an explanation of the symbolism of the missing letter:

גור אריה ויקרא כו:מב

וטעם המדרש הזה, רמז לך כי אליה לא נברא רק שיגאל את ישראל, ולדבר זה עומד. ומכיון שהוא עומד לזה, ולא היה זה עדיין, לפיכך נטל אות מאותיות שמו של אליהו לערבון אצל יעקב, כלומר אליה אין שמו שלם, מפני שכל עצמו עומד לגאול את ישראל בני יעקב.

Gur Aryeh on Leviticus 26:42

The meaning of this *midrash* is to hint to you that Eliyah was only created in order to redeem Israel—for that purpose he waits. And since he waits for this, and it still has not happened, therefore a letter has been taken from Eliyahu’s name as a pledge to Ya’akov, as if to say Eliyah’s name is not complete, for his whole essence waits for the redemption of Israel, the Children of Ya’akov.

In other words, says the Maharal, Eliyahu does not have his full name because he is not yet fully who he is supposed to be in the world. Only when he fulfills his role as the herald of the redeemer will he truly be Eliyahu. Until then, his name in the world is diminished.

This framework tracks with the Maharal’s repeated belief that “השם הוא מורה על עצם הדבר” - the name [of something] teaches about the essence of that thing” (*Netzah Yisrael* 40). To be given a name, then, is to be given an essence and a purpose. Then, one must earn that name by living up to one’s purpose. This is quite a bold claim the Maharal is making: that as long as we are in exile, the prophet Eliyahu is not yet living up to his potential, his essential nature.



Yet an even bolder explanation is given by the Maharal's own brother, R. Hayyim Loew (who also wrote a supercommentary on Rashi called Be'er Mayyim Hayyim). For in his understanding of the symbolism of these names, it is not just Eliyahu, but God Whose Name is incomplete:

באר מים חיים ויקרא כו:מב

כוונת מאמר זה נ"ל לפי שהוי"ו חסר משמו של הקב"ה כל זמן שישראל שרויין בגלות... והנביא הקדוש המבשר הזה הנקרא על שמו של הקב"ה אל יה"ו. ראוי גם כן שהוי"ו חסר משמו.

Be'er Mayyim Hayyim on Leviticus 26:42

It seems to me that the point of [Rashi's] explanation is that the letter is actually missing from God's name all the time that Israel is in exile... And this holy prophet, the herald of the redemption, is named with the name of God—for Eliyahu means, "My God is God." So it is fitting that the *vav* should drop from his name.

Now linguistically, this is true. Both parts of the name Eliyahu ("Eli" and "Yah") are borrowed from different names for God. So if you take a letter away from Eliyahu's name, you are inevitably also taking a letter out of the name of God.

But if we read that fact in light of the Maharal's theory of names and essences, something much bigger happens. It's not just that God is missing a particular letter while we are in exile. Rather, God is, somehow, fundamentally incomplete. God's essence is diminished so long as we suffer here in the world. God cannot be fully named because God has yet to fulfill God's purpose in the world. For it is God who is our true Redeemer. Eliyahu's job is just to announce that the time has come, but God is the one who is supposed to bring us back home, and to restore the hearts of parents and children.



Until God does so, Ya'akov will not give God back the letter. He will not fully call out in the name of the Eternal One until God remembers the covenant, the pledge God made to Ya'akov, and fulfills it:

זכריה יד:ט

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי ה' אֶחָד וּשְׁמוֹ אֶחָד.

Zechariah 14:9

On that day God will be One, and God's Name will be One.

