

Bereishit

If you open up a modern Torah today (post 1870s, or for more recent Torahs, written in the last 50-100 years), you will most likely notice that, with six exceptions, every column of the Torah begins with the letter vav. This style of writing a Torah is called, Vavei Ha'ammudim, the vavs of the columns. This scribal practice is based on three items you will find in the tabernachal, as mentioned in Parashat Terumah, which is mirrored in the writing of a Torah scroll.

Since we finished reading from the Torah, and then began again on Simchat Torah this past week, we will begin full swing this week by reading the first parasha, Bereshit-Genesis, which, very Jewishly, does NOT begin with a vav. This is so that all the Jews in the room can immediately start the year off by debating and arguing and coming up with a million different opinions as to why that is, and we're off to a proper Jewish start to the year!

Back to our vavs. In Parashat Terumah; (Ex:26:32, 37; 27:10) we find 3 items in the tabernacle:

Yeri'ot, the 'Curtains' that cover the tabernacle
Ammudim, 'Columns' which hold up the tabernacle
Vavim, 'Hooks' which hold up the curtains

In the Torah scroll, written in the 'Vavei Ha'ammudim' style,
'Yeri'ot are the pages of parchment in the scroll
'Ammudim' are the columns of writing in the scroll
'Vavim' Vav is the 6th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It also is the Hebrew word for 'Hook' , and on its own, is the prefix, "and"- a word that connects, attaches, brings things together.

The parallels drawn between the tabernacle and the Torah scroll go back as far as the 13th century, sparking some scribes to begin each column in the Torah, with the exception of 6, with the letter vav. In this way, the Torah symbolically became the tabernacle. And as God dwelled in the tabernacle in the days of our ancestors, so too, God dwells in the Torah-- both in the words and teachings which were given to us by God, and-- by using the style of the vavei ha'ammudim,-- and by us recreating the tabernacle in which God dwells.

It is a beautiful way of symbolically representing the covenant between us and God. The Vav in every column connect us to the words of God, and to our history. An even older tradition, that was kept when scribes began using the 'Vavei Ha'ammudim' style, was to begin 5 columns with the letters, "bet, yud, hey, shin and mem (in that order) followed by a Vav column that always begins with the same word (where those would be differs depending on whether the Torah is Ashkenazic, Sephardic, or what part of the world it came from). These letters spell out the acronym for a phrase from T'hilim 68.5, "B'Yah Shmo" 'God is His name".

This style of writing a Torah was not accepted at first. It is not mentioned in the Talmud or the Mishna, and arguments against it were strong and fervent, going back as far as the 1300s. However, the 'Vavei Haammudim' style is mentioned in Shulchan Aruch and the Zohar, and eventually was accepted and is the style of Torah most commonly used today.

Having just come out of Sukkot, where we invited the 'Shechina' to come into our sukkot- our outdoor homes for the week, I am reminded of the ways in which we are directed to welcome everyone into those temporary houses, and into our lives for that week; those who have, those who do not. Those who study, those who do good acts, those who do both and those who do neither--- placing value on every individual, no matter their strengths or their weaknesses and welcoming all into our community. And as we begin to read from our Torah, our most sacred document, we are continuing this tradition. We welcome our past, our present and our future in the words therein. We welcome those with whom we agree and those with whom we do not- even down to the very ways in which the words are written and laid out.

The structure of the 'Vavei Ha'ammudim' reflects structure. design. Some people are people of structure, consistency, design. The world itself- the more we learn of it- has structure, consistency and design. And the mitzvot. Don't murder. Don't steal.

But go further back. Look deeper. Before the 'Vavei Ha'ammudim'. We have less structure. We see other people reflected there. Those who do not 'fit in' to the pre-designed structure. Those who march to the beat of their own drum. Those works of creation that we simply cannot explain or understand. Coincidence. Deja Vu. The mysteries of the world in which we live. And those Mitzvot- like that of the Red Heifer- when one touches a dead body and to become ritually clean again, needs the ashes of a pure red heifer sprinkled on them to once again become purified; those mitzvot that we do not understand, but did or do out of devotion and respect for our tradition.

And then there are all those who fall in-between. The Torah- even down to the writing of the Torah- encompasses us all. We find all of us within it's sewn pages. We resonate with it, struggle with it, and occasionally reject it's ways outright.... It is a mirror of our lives-an image of ourselves.

And we, humanity, are b'tzelem Elohim. The image of God.

On this Shabbat, the shabbat of Bereishit- 'The beginning', may we-- all of us--- learn from each other, grow with each other, and walk the Torah yet again to find new meaning within it's pages.

Together.

Shabbat Shalom.