

ONES AND TENS

by Nechama Stampler

Ones and Tens¹

Your name shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be called Avraham, for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

Rashi: His new name is an acronym for the "father of a multitude of nations" of this pasuk, except for the letter reish, which had meaning when he was only a father to Aram, which was his original location. Now that he became a father to the entire world, the reish was nonetheless not dropped, because the yud in Sorai also complained to the Shechinah, resulting in its being added to the beginning of Yehoshua's name.

Some people see passages like this as "light" Torah. They see little more than observations about letters missing in one place, and reappearing in another. In the end, everything shakes out equitably, leaving everybody - even the letters of the Torah - happy. Now, fairness and equity are good things, but we would be shortchanging Chazal if treated their words so superficially.

Let us look first at the midrash^[2] from which Rashi drew his comment. "Yud said to Hashem: 'Because I am the smallest of all the letters, You took me from the name of the tzadeikes!' Hashem replied to her: 'Originally you appeared at the end of the name of a female. Now you will move to the front of the name of a male!'" The midrash links to the pasuk^[3] in which Moshe changes Hoshea ben Nun's name to Yehoshua, i.e. Yehoshua achieves his name through the conspicuous addition of a yud to the beginning of his birth name.

Know that not only is the Torah itself immutable, but its elements and principles are also fixed and unchangeable. The Torah is not a work of this world, even if it addresses events, needs, and people who live in a limited, changeable existence. The Torah comes from a place that is above the deficiencies that result in the slippery realities we are used to, in which things can and do morph from one state to another.

The true tzadik's importance cannot be overestimated. He is a pillar of existence. He gains permanence through holding steady in the face of the tumult around. Deviation from a perfect formula allows for change brought on by extreme conditions. The tzadik, however, holds on perfectly to the perfect balance, which leaves him protected from the conditions that bring on change around him.

Even the letters that accompany his name are not fungible items. They themselves express important principles. The yud that originally joined the root letters of Sorai's name cannot simply disappear, even for good cause.

Yud, as the smallest, simplest written letter of the alef-beis[4] indicates smallness, and therefore specificity. (Its use grammatically as the possessive ending is related to this function. Utilizing a possessive limits an item's belonging to a smaller class of objects than the one to which it would ordinarily belong. A book - without the possessive - has relevance to anyone and everyone. Once it becomes my book, i.e. once the possessive is used, the book is limited to a much smaller sphere of influence.) Smallness, simplicity, self-limitation are important elements in the development of the tzadik. The yud therefore complained. How could it be that the meaning that I previously conveyed could vanish from the Torah's presentation of the tzadeikes Soro?

Hashem reassured her that her meaning indeed would not disappear, but resurface in an appropriate place. Soro was not only a tzadeikes, but one of the matriarchs. The patriarchs and matriarchs lived and labored to become the beginning of a nation that would blossom and grow. The mission of the Fathers was actualized only in the lives of the Children. "The stone despised by the Builders became the cornerstone[5]." Soro's smallness and limitation became despised and rejected in the course of her lifetime. The yud at the end of her name indicated limitation. She was, initially, a tzadeikes and a matriarch - but her power was limited to her own people. When her name changed, she became a ruler (i.e. the concept conveyed by the other two letters of her name) over a much greater expanse - in effect, the entire world. As Avraham became the point to which any male in the world could attach himself as a convert, Soro became that point for women. Her importance was no longer limited to her own people. She had outgrown her smallness.

That power of limitation - which is a good thing in other regards - could not summarily disappear. This was the complaint of the yud. This power, once an important part of Soro's development, must continue to show itself. It is part of Torah, and the Torah's realities do not change.

Hashem showed the yud where it would take up new residence. The power of limitation originally appeared at the "end" of Sorai - in the last position of the three letters of her name. This meant that it was destined to be fully utilized at her "end," i.e. her goal and mission, in the lives of her children. It would surface in the life of Yehoshua. At the time of his appointment to the spies of the Land, he belonged to the collective, the group. Moshe had deep reservations about that group. He wanted Yehoshua to function in a smaller role - to limit himself so that he became the exclusive possession (again, the grammatical function of the yud) of a narrower class. In this case, it was a class of one - Yehoshua in his individual purity. Yehoshua was charged by Moshe to remain true to himself, unpolluted by the specious arguments of his fellow travelers. The addition of a yud to Hoshea meant attaching Soro's power of limitation (a power she no longer needed in her expanded role) to Yehoshua.

This power of limitation moved from a female name to a male. It is unusual for the feminine to require limitation, because the role of a woman ordinarily contains it through her more inwardly focused tzniyus. The public role of the male, however, can greatly benefit from it. Thus, the midrash speaks of moving from female to male. The "ends" of the female Soro are her children. The crucial public figure of Yehoshua would need her limitation to abstract himself from the evil of the meraglim.

The importance of the yud becomes apparent when we look at our number system. The single numbers culminate in the number ten, which is their end point. "Ten" thus relates to the nine integers that precede it. (In fact, in Hebrew, the numbers that follow ten are not "new" numbers by name, but repeat the cycle of the integers. Yet, they refer back to and are built upon the first group, summed up by the word "asar" or "esrei." Eleven is constructed as one-and-eser; twelve as two-and-eser, etc. Again, the yud calls up and relates to all the single numbers that precede it.)

Yet "ten" is also the first among the sets of ten, i.e. ten, twenty, thirty, etc. It is therefore the property of individuals and collectives, of avos and banim. To the avos, yud is appropriate because they are the singular individuals who set in motion the building of the Jewish people, and yud relates to the single integers. On the other hand, yud is part of the set of tens, the multiples of individuals, the generations of progeny of the avos.

According to Chazal[6] Moshe is likened to the sun, while Yehoshua is compared to the moon, which illuminates only with the reflected light of his master. In this regard as well, the connection between Soro and Yehoshua is particularly strong. Soro is the female-recipient. Yehoshua, one of her children, would become the master recipient of all times, faithfully passing along the Torah of his teacher.

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1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 17:5, Chidushei Aggados, Sanhedrin 90A, and Tifferes Yisrael, chapter 49
 2. Bereishis Rabbah, 47:1
 3. Bamidbar 13:16
 4. It is sometimes, in fact, referred to as the nekudah - the single point.
 5. Tehilim 118:22
 6. Bava Basra 75A
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