

# SMALL LETTER, BIG MESSAGE

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the kohen has turned My anger away from the Children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me among them... (Bamidbar 25:11)

NO MATTER HOW many times I try to have my name spelled on official Israeli documents WITH a Yud (Peh-YUD-Nun-Ches-Samech) they spell it WITHOUT the Yud. It's just not the way most people spell "Pinchas," even though for the original Pinchas, the Yud meant so much. It certainly means a lot to me.

Of course, it doesn't change the pronunciation of the name at all. The Yud was always there in sound, represented instead by a Chirik vowel under the Peh instead. But as a result of Pinchas' great heroic act of zealousness, God decided to make the Yud prominent in his name, and it was spelled that way henceforth.

What difference does it really make, besides a little extra ink? Well, it certainly made a big difference to Yehoshua's name, actually changing it. As Rashi points out, Moshe Rabbeinu added the Yud in advance of the mission of the spies. It was to protect Hoshea from falling into the advice of the 10 bad spies.

And it wasn't just any Yud that Hoshea received. His Yud came from another very important name, Sarai. It had been taken from her name and swapped with a Heh to make her name "Sarah," to indicate her changed status. She was the princess of EVERYONE, not just God.

According to the Midrash, the Yud didn't like that. Why should it have? It had been part of the name of one of the most important people in world history, and now it was orphaned. However, the Yud was pacified when God told it that it would have a different mission in the future, when Hoshea had to become Yehoshua, to be protected from the deceit of the spies.

Is it just a grammatical thing, just something symbolic, or a lot more?

Judging from the Talmud, it seems that the Yud is the basis of a lot more than just an extra letter in a name, or a transformative one in another. According to the Talmud, the Yud is the very letter God used to make the World-to-Come, the place that life in this world is supposed to lead to (Menachos 29b). What does THAT mean?

To explain that, we have the Maharal.

The Maharal says that the letter Yud is the only one from the Aleph-Bais that is not a composite of

other letters. As such, it represents the sublime spiritual simplicity of the World-to-Come. Adding a Yud to a person's name, at least in biblical times, meant adding the element of Olam HaBa—the World-to-Come to the reality of a person.

What does that mean, and how does it happen?

It's like sap inside of a tree. It's already there, though you can't see it or use it. To access it, you have to stick some kind of spigot into the side of the tree that accesses the sap, and then allows it to flow to the outside.

The same thing is true of the World-to-Come. It is already inside of us, because our souls are made of the same "material." Every soul is not just a "package" of divine light, it is a portion of the World-to-Come inside of each person. It's usually just hidden away and inaccessible.

Until, that is, a person sticks a spiritual spigot into themselves, and accesses their soul. There are a few ways to do this, but they all amount to the same thing, the reality of the letter of Yud. That's what Pinchas did when he rose to the occasion and stopped the evil in its track, stopping the plague at the same time.

That's why it was so important to make the Yud visible in his name. Everyone knew it was always there, like all souls, hidden from eyesight. You can "hear" it every time a person is self-sacrificing for a higher cause. But you can also lose it when it gets smothered by the demands of the body, and for many people, that is MOST of the time.

Every time a person reaches deep into themselves to go against that other voice that would rather do the less "noble" thing, they tap into the soul and bring it to the surface for all to see. It's the only way to do the right thing, especially in a society that promotes just the opposite in one way or another.

After all, it is no coincidence that it is harder to do the wrong thing in, let's say, a synagogue. That's a spiritual environment that talks to the soul, and makes it easier for the soul to surface. In a less spiritual environment, like a shopping mall for example, the soul has less of a say in a person's behavior.

Pinchas was probably somebody who ALWAYS listened to his soul, but out of eyesight of everyone else. He was a virtual nobody, a kohen who had missed the cut for the priesthood because he had been born too early. It was his heroic act of zealotry that catapulted him into the public eye.

But though God knows the motivations of a person, people do not. They wanted to string Pinchas up for his killing of a prince of the Jewish people. Even though he had performed the law as required, they still probably suspected he had acted for himself, as a lot of would-be zealots do...in the Name of God, of course.

Therefore, God brought the Yud of his name—a Yud that exists in ALL of our names, if not grammatically, then certainly conceptually—out into the open for all to see. It was God's way of

revealing to the angry public what had driven Pinchas to act as he did. It put all misgivings about Pinchas' act out of business.

After that, Pinchas went from being rejected to being followed. He became the leader of the people who went into battle against Midian for their role in the disaster. Later he evolved into Eliyahu HaNavi, herald of the Final Redemption, and the very symbol of Godly zealousness.

We all have it in us, that Yud, because we all have a soul. Great is the person who taps into and accesses their personal portion of eternity, and injects their Yud into their everyday actions. It transforms everything, especially the person who does it.