

Lamed

The Tallest Letter

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The largest letter in the biblical Hebrew script is the *lamed* (ל). This letter is positioned at the very center of the Hebrew *aleph-bet* (alphabet), towering over all the other Hebrew characters. It is the only Hebrew letter that ascends above the top line. By this reason alone, it stands out and is instantly discernable in all Hebrew texts. The *lamed* has, therefore, been the cause of much reflection by Israel's sages through the millennia. Since God has done nothing by happenstance, they reason, there must be significance in the fact that the *lamed* is so tall.

When we analyze the meaning and significance of the *lamed* in both biblical and post-biblical contexts, we gain insight into a significant part of our Hebraic heritage that has been obscured from Christian view for centuries. Now, a deep well of insight and understanding that has enriched the lives of countless Jewish people through history is being recovered for us when we reconnect with the Jewish roots of our Christian faith, including the language of Scripture itself.

Pictographs

It is important that we understand that each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet was, in ancient times, a pictograph (in a manner similar to hieroglyphic and cuneiform writing). For example, the *aleph* (א) originally represented the picture of an ox head, the *beth* (ב), a house, and the *gimel* (ג), a camel. The *lamed* (ל) was originally a pictograph of a goad, the principal instrument for training and directing oxen in the ancient agrarian society.

If we look at the *lamed* (and perhaps turn it on its side), we gain a good visual image of a goad. The ascending stroke of the *lamed* is a *yod* (י), which is the pictograph of a hand. As we visualize taking this part of the *lamed* in hand, we can see that the pointed end of the image is a perfect instrument for prodding an ox first for training and then for directing its work.

Teaching and Learning

The letter *lamed* is the foundation of the Hebrew word *lamad* (לָמַד), which, interestingly enough, means both teaching and learning. The *qal* form of the verb means “to learn,” while the *piel* form means “to teach.” First, this is a great lesson that teaching and learning go hand in hand and that each of us should be both a learner and a teacher for life. When learning ceases, teaching ends. This is the reason that the most learned teachers among us are called scholars, from the Latin word *scola*, which means “school,” fundamentally student.

From the moment of birth (and perhaps before), learning begins as the newly created life exercises every aspect of sensory perception to gather information that is then analyzed and acted upon. Infants learn at a prodigious rate from their parents and siblings and then from extended family and others. At the same time, however, even infants are giving lessons to those around them. Indeed, it is often difficult to discern who is reacting to whom! Parents learn amazing lessons from their infant children (even as their own parents predicted!). Toddlers become teachers of their younger siblings. Everyone, then, is both learning and teaching even from infancy.

As life advances, it is easy for people to plateau in the learning process, thinking that they have acquired all the knowledge necessary for their lives or careers. Stagnation can result, at which point life descends into boredom and monotony. The wise, however, are always curious, always sensitive to new stimuli and new insight. Their lives are enriched because they see themselves as learners for life. They also maintain a passion for passing on to others what they learn.

Lamed, the ox goad, is intrinsically involved in both learning and teaching. Indeed, learning is the irritating process of being goaded into proper and productive action through the rigors of discipline. It is the process of being trained so that one becomes accustomed to and comfortable with knowledge and understanding. It is the pain that brings the gain of a richer, fuller life in which one is positioned to act rather than constantly being acted upon. It is the bleeding that precedes the blessing, the drill that produces the thrill.

Humanity's Highest Endowment

Learning is absolutely vital to life. It equips human beings with the knowledge necessary to exercise the power of reason which separates them from the rest of creation. The capacity for learning is God's august gift to humankind, the endowment of being made in the divine image

and likeness. Since God has no form, humanity's creation in his image and likeness has nothing to do with physical characteristics. The image and likeness of God is the power of reason and the free will to act on what is reasoned. Intellectual capacity and conscience (the connection between the brain and the heart) enable human beings to develop a consciousness of the Divine, to learn of his Word and will, and by grace through faith to experience and express spirituality.

Learned people who have attained wisdom stand head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd of humanity, like the *lamed* does in the midst of the Hebrew letters of the biblical text. They have subjected themselves willingly to the discipline of study, analysis, and reflection. They, therefore, live enriched lives of success and fulfillment and of service to their fellow humans. Their learning becomes teaching both through the dynamic modeling of their actions and through their words of wisdom and challenge.

Learning, therefore, has always been sacred to the Hebrew people. The progression from knowledge to understanding to wisdom has been the quest of prophets and sages, of apostles and teachers, of men and women of God from time immemorial. The passion to know with a view toward doing is central to Jewish individual and corporate identity. Literacy and education have, therefore, long been hallmarks of God's chosen people and have contributed to their success.

The Heart of Discipleship

Another form of *lamed* is the word *limud*, which means "learner" or "disciple." A disciple, then, is one who is taught, one who has been subjected to the discipline of learning. There is no discipleship without discipline. It is the discipline of study that produces the disciple, the learner, the scholar. Those who through sloth or indifference shun discipline will never be disciples!

Limud was first used of disciples in 1 Chronicles 25:8. The word *limud* is the root of *talmid* (לַמִּיד), meaning "scholar," which eventually became the most common term for students, learners, or disciples within the Jewish context and was likely the term that Jesus himself used when he spoke of his own disciples (*talmidim*). Originally the word *talmid* was applied to students of music. This, of course, confirms to us that the disciple is not merely a repository for knowledge, for music is enjoyed only when it is performed, translating the theory into enjoyable sound through the discipline of practice. A disciple, then, is both a learner and a doer, one who learns in order to do.

Discipleship as learning is also confirmed in the Greek term for disciple that appears in the Apostolic Scriptures. *Mathetes* means “learner,” “pupil,” or “disciple.” It is the root for the word *mathematics* which everyone understands as a discipline that requires study and application. Neither mathematics nor discipleship is mastered without rigorous discipline.

It is important that we recognize that the word *Christian* is used only three times in Scripture (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16) while the word *disciple* is used 270 times. The ultimate function of Christian ministry is not to make “Christians” or even “believers.” It is to make disciples, which in essence is to make learners or students. Discipleship is not a case of the warm fuzzies, the emotional crescendo of an existential moment. It is the discipline of learning about God and doing his will. Discipleship is not just feeling, it is doing.

Jesus even emphasized the fact that the discipline of Christian discipleship is demanding and rigorous: “Whosoever does not bear his cross cannot be my disciple . . . whosoever that forsakes not all he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 4:27; 14:33). God’s *lamed* of discipline may well place demands of self-abnegation upon the disciple that will be painful; however, the rewards of yielding to the goad of discipleship produce the benefits partnership with God and the blessings that accrue thereby.

This is the core message of Christianity’s *Mega-Mitzvah* (Great Commission). Jesus instructed his *talmidim* in this manner: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). The foundation of Christian discipleship is learning and teaching, and the foundation of the learning and teaching is the commandments of Jesus. Converts are made to the faith of Jesus so that they may become disciples through the discipline of obedience to divine instructions.

The fundamental meaning of the term that Jesus used to describe his followers sheds an entirely different light on the true nature of Christian discipleship. Christian discipleship is an exercise of learning through the discipline of instruction in Christ’s teaching. It is yielding oneself to the goad of training, permitting the pointed *lamed* to prick one’s heart and marshal one’s actions in the right and proper direction and to the God-determined end.

With the *lamed* imagery in focus, Jesus’ invitation in Matthew 11:29-30 becomes much more clear and understandable: “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me . . .” The metaphor is the same: being yoked together with Jesus means learning: learning the teachings of Jesus, which are, after all, “easy.” And, one could just as readily say that Jesus’ *lamed* (goad) is not cruel,

inflicting unnecessary and excessive pain. It generates just enough discomfort to move the heart in the right direction of closer relationship with God and with one's fellow man.

Learning to Follow

Returning Christian discipleship to the matrix from which it was birthed brings greater understanding of both the concept and praxis of discipleship. In the time of Christ, discipleship was expressed in the teacher-student relationship. The dynamic exchange of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom that this relationship produced was and remains the essence of discipleship. The learning process was carried out in relationship, even apprenticeship as it were.

The greatest honor of first-century Israel was to be "covered in the dust of the rabbi." How so? The learning process featured a "come-walk-the-road-with-me" dynamic in which one followed the teacher and thereby was engaged in the great lessons of life in the course of everyday living. The *rabbi-talmid* (teacher-student) relationship was one of continual engagement, and the learning process was often one of imitation of praxis more than an exchange of philosophical concepts. It was an exercise of following and learning by example.

Classic examples that demonstrate the teaching-learning process produced by following are seen in the Moses-Joshua, Elijah-Elisha, and Paul-Timothy relationships. Joshua served as Moses' personal attendant and servant for decades before he was appointed to lead Israel. Perhaps the most important work that Elijah the prophet did occurred at the end of his career when he disciplined Elisha and equipped him the skills he would need for a "double-portion" ministry. Paul carefully instructed Timothy in God's Word so that he could replicate the apostle's vision, passion, and commitment in his own ministry. All of these disciples learned the lessons of life and ministry as they carefully followed their instructors. They walked with their teachers on a path that led to success.

And so it was with the disciples of Jesus. Those who had followed the Master on the dusty roads of Israel were covered with dust, but not just the sandy granules of the Judean roadways. They were covered with the dust of his teaching—"Jesus dust," as it were. Others could tell that they had been with Jesus, not because of their words, but because of their actions (Acts 4:13). In following the Master, they had so conformed their lives to his actions that the Messiah now lived in and through them (Colossians 1:27; John 14:23).

Following is more than a physical act. *Mimetes*, the Greek word for follower, means “to imitate.” Herein is the essence of the Christian life: to be “Christ like” is to imitate the life of Jesus, keeping his commandment. When Jesus instructed his disciples to “follow me,” he was asking them to commit themselves to a life of imitation in which they would mime the Master’s actions. Those who followed Rabbi Yeshua were able to give this instruction to others: “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Their actions so imitated the life of Christ that they became *Christians*, dynamic models of the biblical lifestyle.

For a true disciple, there is no greater pleasure or fulfillment than replicating the knowledge and actions of his teacher. This is the reward of intense observation, of insightful analysis, of unending rumination, of practical demonstration. Christian disciples faithfully replicate the life of the Messiah, their Master, as they follow in his footsteps.

Walking with God

This idea of walking in fellowship with the Master and learning through the process is as old as humanity itself. God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, communicating to them his will for their lives. Later, Enoch walked with God in such a pleasing way that he was translated so that he did not experience death. Abraham walked with God and was perfect before his Maker because he walked in faith and faithfulness. He believed God, and he acted instantly and without reservation upon God’s instructions. For this reason, God was not ashamed to be called the God of Abraham (Hebrews 11:16).

Enoch’s walk with God is of particular importance in that his very name in Hebrew, *Hanoch*, means dedication with an emphasis on education. (The term *Hanukkah* comes from this same root and means “the dedication.”) The root word *hanakh* means to dedicate or initiate by “narrowing.” This brings to mind the words of Jesus that the path of the believer is a “narrow way” that leads to life (Matthew 7:14). It has been suggested that Enoch was the first scientist, the first truly educated man. Because of his dedication to learn of God, Enoch walked with God and pleased God, and he was received into God’s presence supernaturally.

Micah spoke of the value of walking in dedication to God and gave his understanding as the summation of humanity’s entire duty toward God: “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before thy God.” Doing right, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow—these things are the product learning (Isaiah 1:17). When one has so

studied and learned divine instruction in the Holy Scriptures that he is able to conduct all of his affairs with justice and mercy, he has attained unto a position of walking humbly with God and is a true disciple.

John the apostle emphasized this kind of relationship: “And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments” (2 John 1:6). Paul fully agreed with this assessment: “We exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God . . . that you excel still more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Walking in obedient submission to God’s instructions and commands is a walk of freedom (James 1:25). The prodding of the Holy Spirit will always turn the believer who is so exercised into the path of truth and justice, where there is, indeed, no condemnation (Romans 8:1-2).

Receiving God’s Instruction

What’s a disciple to do? What should he learn? A good place to start is with the Apostle Paul’s instruction to his star pupil, *Talmid* Timothy: “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. . . . From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The first and foremost purpose of every disciple must be to study God’s Word. The study, however, must be with a view toward doing God’s Word. Like Ezra of old, the *talmid* has set his heart to study God’s Word so that he may first do it and then teach it (Ezra 7:10). This mindset was the focus of the holy men and women of God with whom God dealt in ancient times and through whom he conveyed the understanding encapsulated in Holy Scripture (2 Peter 1:21). As they studied what God had already communicated to his servants, they received additional insights into his will and purposes for their own time and were thereby empowered to accomplish God’s designs for their lives and for their communities.

Learning without doing is tantamount to sin, for one who knows to do good and fails to do it is a sinner (James 4:17). It is akin to believing without decision and action. Theory without praxis is meaningless and even deceptive. Anything that is not practical and practicable is not spiritual, despite the elevated emotion or euphoria that it may construe. The evidence of belief is

action based upon understanding and belief. Without such evidence, discipleship is never established.

A disciple of Christ will be a student of God's instruction. God is the first and foremost teacher, and he has taught his people through prophets and apostles who were the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. The primary corpus of this knowledge of God is the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It is unfortunate that this ancient and honorable Hebrew word has been translated "Law" in English versions. Its true meaning is "instruction," the words of insight from a wise Father. The word *Torah* comes from the root *yarah*, which is an archery term meaning "to aim at a mark and hit it."

Is it any wonder then that King David exclaimed, "I desire to do your will, O my God; your Torah is within my heart. . . . I have longed for your salvation, O Lord; and your Torah is my delight" (Psalm 40:8; 119:174). History's wisest human observed, "The command is a lamp; and the Torah is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Proverbs 6:23). Indeed, the incarnate Torah himself declared, "If you love me, you will obey what I command. . . . If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (John 14:15; 15:10). If Jesus demonstrated his submission to the will of his Father by obedience to his instructions, how much more should Christian disciples submit to the Lordship of Jesus by keeping his commandments!

Studying God's Word is essential to discipleship. This truth is further illustrated by another Hebrew word that is derived from *lamad*. This is the word *Talmud*, the title for the expansive corpus of knowledge that the sages and teachers of Israel derived over centuries of study in the Torah. The *Talmud* is comprised of the *Mishnah*, a compilation of oral tradition and commentary developed from study of the Torah, and the *Gemarrah*, a compilation of further commentary on the *Mishnah*. It is apropos, therefore, that the term used to describe centuries of Jewish investigation and commentary is *Talmud*, which is directly related to *talmid*, the disciple.

Christians who desire to be true disciples of Christ must learn to honor and study God's instruction manual for successful human living. They must become students of Scripture, permitting the *lamed* of God's instruction to prod them toward right conduct and proper posture in their relationship with God and with man. Love for God and love for man (the two greatest commandments) will be fulfilled in their lives because they will learn from the Torah (particularly from the Ten Commandments) how to do so.

High Worship

Many, if not most, Christians would agree with Solomon's assessment: "Be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and much study wearies the body" (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Study is, indeed, hard work, part of the discipline of the learner or disciple; however, its assets far outweigh the liabilities of its acquisition.

The Jewish people have long believed that study is the highest form of worship. How, we might ask, can study be worship? The words for worship both in Hebrew (*segad*) and in Greek (*proskunéo*) mean to "prostrate oneself in the presence of the Deity." The ultimate form of prostration before God—submission to his will—is demonstrated in the study of the Scriptures with a view toward doing what God has said. Study of God's Word, particularly of the Torah, then, is a form of worship or submission to God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel encapsulated this Jewish approach to study by saying that while the Greeks study in order to understand, the Hebrews study in order to revere. God's Word and ways are ineffable: only by doing them does one understand them. Study of God's Word in order to mold one's lifestyle to that Word is worship in the truest sense of the English word *worship*, which means to "ascribe worth to." When we fully submit our lives to God's Word, when we study what he has said with complete devotion and intensity, we do, indeed, ascribe worth to him: we worship him.

A Lifestyle of Learning

Hebrew's highest letter brings life's greatest rewards and in the end is the strength of salvation and eternal life (Isaiah 33:6). The goad of learning, the rigor of study inculcates understanding that leads to wisdom. The *lamed* prods ever onward and upward those who yield to its unrelenting pressure. It produces and maintains a mindset of instruction that ever enriches and blesses. As wisdom grows, learning continues to increase: "A wise man will hear and will increase learning" (Proverbs 1:5).

This lifestyle of learning opens one to God's profound promise: "See, God is mighty . . . in strength and in mind. . . . He opens their understanding by discipline . . . If they will serve obediently, they shall spend their days in happiness, their years in delight" (Job 36:5, 10-11, *Tanakh*). Disciples are *talmidim*, yielded to the flexible and easy *lamed* with which Jesus gently

prods those who are yoked together with him. With biblical discipline, they are assured that their lives will be filled with happiness. They experience the exercise of receiving the divine wisdom and insight that bring abundant life. “The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails. . . When all is said and done, this is the conclusion of the matter: Revere God and observe his commandments! For this applies to all mankind” (Ecclesiastes 12:11, NIV; 13, *Tanakh*).