Rav Mordechai Breuer's: "Doubts" That Aren't

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I

The accepted custom in Ashkenazic communities is to read, then repeat a second time, those passages in *Megillat Esther* whose correct versions are considered "a matter of doubt." Thus, the Ashkenazim read "*le-hashmid laharog u-le-abed*" (Esther 8:11), and then they repeat it as "*le-hashmid ve-laharog u-le-abed*." And they read "*ve-ish lo 'amad bifneihem*" (Esther 9:2), and then repeat it as "*ve-ish lo 'amad lifneihem*."

This is done in order to sidestep a doubt that arose concerning these two *pesukim*. For although *Minḥat Shai* ruled long ago that the correct versions are "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*," the Ashkenazic scribes still write in their *megillot* "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*." The solution adopted in each of the two cases is to read both versions, in the manner of the Talmudic dictum "*heilkhakh neimrinhu le-tarvaihu*" ["Let us therefore say them both," i.e., when there is a doubt as to the correct way to fulfill a religious obligation, doing it both ways allows us to "cover all our bases," as it were].

In other words, the custom is to read first what is actually written in the megillah, and then to repeat, reading what *should be* written in the megillah.

The source of the erroneous readings "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*" can be traced to the *Mikraot Gedolot Tanakh* edition published in Venice from 5284 to 5286 [1524–1526]. That *Tanakh* was edited by Yaakov ben Ḥayyim ben Yitzḥak ben Adoniyahu, who labored—to the best of his abil-

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ity—at eliminating the numerous errors that were common in the Ashkenazic manuscripts of that period. He also added a *masorah gedolah* and *masorah ketanah*, which he collected from various manuscripts.

The Venice *Mikraot Gedolot* was reprinted numerous times, in Venice and also in many other cities, such as Amsterdam and Warsaw. Its final incarnation can be seen in the *Mikraot Gedolot* editions that are commonplace in our own communities, all of which are photoreproductions of the Warsaw edition.

Notwithstanding that Yaakov ben Ḥayyim labored assiduously over his *Tanakh* edition, he failed to create a high-quality product. His *Tanakh* includes thousands of errors in spelling, punctuation, and cantillation. The spelling errors involve, primarily, the plene and defective forms of words, but there are also instances of aleph interchanged with he, bet interchanged with kaf, additions or deletions of voiced *vav*, and even substitutions of entire words.

The first to address these issues was R' Menaḥem de Lonzano, author of *Or Torah*, who corrected all the errors that he found in the *Mikraot Gedolot* text of the five books of the Torah. His work was later supplemented by R' Yedidyah of Norzi, better known as the author of *Minḥat Shai*, who corrected the errors that he found anywhere in *Tanakh*: in the Torah as well as *nevi'im* and *ketuvim*.

The corrections and annotations of *Minḥat Shai* were subsequently accepted by Jewish communities everywhere, and it is often said that the Venice *Mikraot Gedolot* represents the de facto standard *Tanakh* version accepted by all Jews. This refers, however, not to the *Mikraot Gedolot* edition published by Yaakov ben Ḥayyim himself, but, rather, to Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's work as later revised to incorporate also the corrections of *Minḥat Shai*.

We can now understand, based on all of the above, how the version of *Megillat Esther* that was accepted in the Ashkenazic community came to be. Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's edition includes twelve spelling errors in *Megillat Esther* alone. Ten of those errors involve plene and defective spellings: *tavo*: missing *vav* (1:19); *betulot*: missing *vav* (2:2), *yoshev* (2:21), *va-yavo* (4:9), *yode'im* (4:11), *aḥashverosh* (6:2), *ve-hilbishu* (6:9), *u-mishloaḥ* (9:22), *le-kayyem* (9:31), *le-rov* (10:3).

And then there are the two additional errors, "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*," which we've already mentioned. Ten of these twelve errors—to the exclusion only of "*ve-hilbishu*"[1] and "*le-kayyem*"[2] —were corrected by *Minḥat Shai*.[3] And since *Minḥat Shai* was considered an authority on everything relating to the text of *Tanakh*, we might have expected that all these corrections would have been accepted by every scribe and printer. The text of the megillah would then have conformed in virtually every respect to what the Masorah had established.

What actually happened, however, was somewhat different. The *soferim* [scribes] and printers did in fact accept all the corrections of *Minḥat Shai* concerning plene and defective spellings.[4] But the two corrections that involved formative letters—"*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*"—did not garner wide acceptance in the community. Thus, the Ashkenazic megillah scrolls, as well as the well-known printed megillah editions such as that of Letteris, which was later reprinted in facsimile editions by the Israeli publishing houses Yavneh, Eshkol, and Sinai, all incorporate the erroneous readings of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim: "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*."

All this demonstrates that the authority of *Minḥat Shai* was never accepted as final and absolute, and with that in mind we need to differentiate between the corrections of *Minḥat Shai* to the Torah text, and his corrections to the other books of *Tanakh*. With regard to the text of the Torah *Minḥat Shai* followed in the footsteps of *Or Torah*, who in turn followed Ramah, who was among the greatest of the Rishonim, and whose rulings concerning the written text of the Torah were accepted in their entirety by the Ashkenazic community. There were only a small number of issues which Ramah himself had left as open questions, and which *Or Torah* resolved on the basis of his own judgment.

The outcome of all this was that the written text of the five books of the Torah had been everywhere clarified and resolved based on the testimony of two or even three witnesses, whose authority was sufficient to

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1 Proof for the plene spelling of *ve-hilbishu* can be found in the *masorah gedolah* of Leningrad B 19a to *Daniel* 5:19. (The *masorah gedolah* of *Mikraot Gedolot* there is corrupted.) Cf. also note 3, end.

2 Everywhere else "*le-kayyem*" is spelled with only one yod. If the correct spelling of this one instance was with two yods, the Masorah would have noted that with the notation "*l' male'*." Cf. also note 3, end.

3 He also corrected one other word that did not need correcting, namely, *u-mishloaḥ* (9:19), which he believed should be spelled with a *vav* after the lamed. Proof for the defective spelling can be found in the *masorah gedolah* of *Mikraot Gedolot* to *Esther* 3:9.

4 This includes the extraneous correction mentioned in note 3.

remove all doubt from anyone's mind. But concerning the written text of *nevi'im* and *ketuvim*, including *Megillat Esther*, things took a different turn.

Ramah and *Or Torah* had dealt strictly with the Torah text, leaving as the authority for *nevi'im* and *ketuvim* only *Minḥat Shai*; thus, the latter had to resolve all those issues of his own accord, with no support from other *gedolei yisrael*. And the opinion of *Minḥat Shai* alone did not carry sufficient weight to dispel all doubt in the minds of the public.

All this explains why the corrections of *Minḥat Shai* to *Megillat Esther* were accepted only in matters of plene and defective spellings, but not in the two cases involving formative letters, "*ve-laharog*" and "*bifneihem*." For there is a well-known halakhah that a megillah is not rendered invalid by erroneous spelling, or even by the omission of entire words, provided only that the reader mouths the text correctly.[5] Now, errors in plene or defective spelling alone have no effect on how a word is read, whereas errors in formative letters, on the other hand, would materially affect the reading. Thus, if the text of the megillah used by the reader is in question, and he reads the text exactly as it is written in the megillah, the validity of the reading itself is likewise subject to doubt, with the possible result that the obligation of reading the megillah would not have been fulfilled at all.

We can now begin to understand how the Ashkenazic version of *Megillat Esther* came to exist. Initially, the *soferim* would write their *megillot* in accordance with the Ashkenazic manuscripts that served as the basis of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's corrupted edition. Over the course of time, however, as the authority of *Minḥat Shai* came to be recognized, and his corrections found acceptance in the communities, the *soferim* would copy Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's text as it had been corrected by *Minḥat Shai*. But they did so only with those corrections that involved plene and defective spellings. On those issues, there was no question that *Minḥat Shai* could be considered reliable, because, even if it were to come to light that *Minḥat Shai* had erred, there would be no material ramifications, since a megillah cannot in any case be invalidated by errors of that type alone, nor would such errors affect the actual megillah reading in any way.

But when it came to the two changes that do affect the reading, "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*," the *soferim* were hesitant to contravene already established custom, and for that not even the authority of *Minḥat Shai* was sufficient. In all probability, they reasoned to themselves as follows. Since the correct text is a matter of doubt, and a wrong decision could negatively impact the entire community, the best approach is to take no action at all and simply maintain the status quo. They therefore retained the old text

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5 See *Shulḥan Arukh, O. H.* 690:3.

of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim, rather than replacing it with the corrected text of *Minḥat Shai*.

We can further surmise that there was also a practical consideration behind the reluctance of the *soferim* to change the text in these two instances. It was simple enough for the *soferim* to adopt in practice the decisions of *Minḥat Shai* concerning plene and defective spellings, for these are details that would generally go unnoticed by the larger community. Someone purchasing a megillah from a given *sofer* would not even realize that the *sofer* had altered the accepted text of prior generations.

But the situation with the two changes affecting the formative letters is entirely different. All the existing handwritten and printed *megillot* being used by the community would still have the readings "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*," and only this megillah, which the *sofer* had written for a member of that community, would now have new, different readings: "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*." If that person were to read from his new megillah publicly, the inevitable result would be a tumult in the synagogue, and the listeners would have no rest until that reader exchanged his megillah for a different one that was "kosher to the standards of even the most scrupulous," and until he read the accepted versions, "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*." The purchaser of that megillah would then return to the *sofer* much aggrieved that the latter had tripped him up by selling him a megillah that was not optimally kosher in every respect.

"Surely," the *sofer* would argue, "no one can expect me to endanger my livelihood simply for the sake of restoring a text attested by no one but *Minḥat Shai*, whose opinion in this case might anyway be incorrect."

An allusion to all of the above can be found, it seems, in the words of R' Shelomo Ganzfried, author of *Keset ha-Sofer*. Better known to the Torah community for his *Kitzur Shulḥan Arukh*, R' Ganzfried achieved particular renown among *soferim* as the author of *Keset ha-Sofer*, in which he clarified the laws of writing Torah scrolls, and also established the correct versions of the written text of the Torah and of *Megillat Esther*.

At the point where he discusses the difference of opinion regarding "*laharog*" vs. "*ve-laharog*" of Esther 8:11, Ganzfried relates that a certain very prominent rabbi had demonstrated to him, using a conclusive proof from the Masorah, that the correct reading is "*ve-laharog*," in accordance with the opinion of *Minḥat Shai*. After failing to offer any well-formulated refutation of that proof, R' Ganzfried concludes his discussion as follows: "Nevertheless, it is difficult in my humble opinion to go against established precedent and change prevailing custom." And this may be understood to mean: Given that the already established custom is to write and also to read "*laharog*," it would be difficult to change the existing custom,

both because of the lingering doubt in people's minds about which is the correct version, and also because such a sudden, unexpected change would only aggrieve the community.

And so it came to pass that the text of all Ashkenazic *megillot* is non-conformant to the Masorah. But not only was the erroneous version found in all written *megillot*, it was also the version that was *read* aloud publicly on Purim for hundreds of years. We have testimony that still in the days of the author of *Keset ha-Sofer*, only one hundred fifty years ago, the Ashkenazic communities would read *only* that version. If not for the principle of "*dillugo 'alai ahavah*" [out of love for us, God overlooks our omissions], we would have to say that, strictly speaking, no one of any of those communities during all that time fulfilled his obligation of hearing the reading of the megillah.

But that state of affairs could not persist. For as we know, only the truth endures; lies cannot endure. The decision of *Minḥat Shai*, compounded with the thoroughly unambiguous proofs from the Masorah, eventually came to the attention of the Ashkenazic community, and it was no longer possible to ignore the fact that the version of *Megillat Esther* that had been accepted by the Ashkenazim was completely without validity or foundation, and had become an obstacle to the entire Ashkenazic community, year in and year out.

The first halting effort at righting this wrong could be described as distressingly unsatisfactory. The author of *Keset ha-Sofer* testifies about his *rebbe*, the author of *Imrei Eish*, that "his custom was to read '*laharog*,' but then to say, silently, '*ve-laharog*'." But what had been the private practice of one individual, the author of *Imrei Eish*, later became the dominant custom in all Ashkenazic communities: after saying "*laharog*," the reader would then add—not silently, however, but aloud—"*ve-laharog*." And the analogous treatment was given to "*bifneihem*" / "*lifneihem*" as well. In a *Luaḥ Minhagei Eretz Yisrael* by R' Y. M. Tukchinsky, in the section dealing with the laws of Purim, we read that there already was a custom to read the entire *pasuk* twice (that is, once according to the old, erroneous version, and then a second time according to the corrected version of *Minḥat Shai*).

The upshot of all this is that the Ashkenazic practice of repeating the reading of each of the two verses is not an ancient, venerated custom passed down via tradition from generation to generation; rather, it is an innovation that took hold only in the recent era. We may therefore ask ourselves whether perhaps the time has finally come to correct these "corrections," and whether the time is right to resolve this "doubt," which, in all truth, has no place in the category of doubt at all. The result will be only to increase the joy of Purim, for no joy can compete with the joy of resolving doubt.

It is of paramount importance to emphasize that this "doubt" exists only within the Ashkenazi community and nowhere else. Because the Sephardim—and, it goes without saying, the Yemenites—know nothing at all of this entire upheaval. Their *megillot* are both written and read correctly and properly. That is, they write and read "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*," and it has never even entered anyone's mind in those communities to cast any doubt on the issue.

This point alone would be a highly compelling justification for us to revisit and reevaluate the whole issue. After all, that there are three different versions of the *tefillot*—Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Yemenite—is common knowledge. But now it suddenly comes to light that also the Torah in our possession is not just one Torah, but two Torahs (as concerns *Megillat Esther*, at least[6]): an Ashkenazic Torah, and a Sephardic and Yemenite Torah. And that is a position that no rational person can possibly accept.

"LAHAROG" / "VE-LAHAROG"

(A) In section 253 of the work *Akhelah ve-Okhlah*, an ancient and precise collection of Masoretic lists,[7] we find a list of seventy-four word pairs. The first element of each of the pairs in that list begins with vav, and is also a unique occurrence, found in the given form exactly once in all of *Tanakh*, whereas in every other place in *Tanakh* where that word is found, it appears without a leading vav.

For example:

- "*ve-dagan ve-tirosh*" (*Bereshit* 27:37), corresponding to which there is only "*dagan ve-tirosh*" everywhere else (ibid 28, *Devarim* 33:28, and elsewhere).
- "*ve-shim'on ve-levi*" (*Bereshit* 35:23), corresponding to which there is only "*shim'on ve-levi*" everywhere else (*Bereshit* 34:25, 49:5, and elsewhere).

Among the pairs in that list we find also "*ve-laharog u-le-abed*," which the Masorah explicitly notes is in the verse that begins with the words "*asher natan ha-melekh*" (*Esther* 8:11). It follows that the correct wording

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6 This phenomenon is found also in the Torah itself, where there are three Torahs: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Yemenite. It would be very straightforward to resolve those differences—all in favor of the Yemenite version. But effecting such a correction in the five books of the Torah would be more problematic. The Ashkenazic and Sephardic customs are quite old, and, moreover, *Minḥat Shai* gave them his approval. But in the case of *Megillat Esther*, the Ashkenazi custom in its current form is less than one hundred years old, and *Minḥat Shai* ruled against it.

7 *Akhelah ve-Okhlah*, ed. Z. Fransdorf, Hanover, 5624 (1864).

there is "*ve-laharog u-le-abed,*" while everywhere else the correct wording is "*laharog u-le-abed*" (*Esther* 3:13, 7:4).

A similar though not identical list can be found in the masorah printed at the end of the *Mikraot Gedolot* (item number 89 of the "vav" section). That list too includes the "*ve-laharog u-le-abed*" pair. It was the proof from that list in *Mikraot Gedolot* that was brought to the attention of the author of *Keset ha-Sofer*, as we've mentioned previously.

(B) In the same Masorah printed at the end of *Mikraot Gedolot* (item number 11 of the "lamed" section) we find a list of unique words beginning with *vav-lamed*, e.g., "*u-le-yamim*" (*Bereshit* 1:14) and "*ve-limshol*" (ibid. 18). Also mentioned among the words enumerated there is the word "*ve-laharog,*" and once again the Masorah states explicitly that the *pasuk* containing those words begins with "*asher natan ha-melekh*" (Esther 8:11). Thus, we see conclusively that the given word begins with the conjunctive *vav*, but in this *pasuk* only, while in every other instance the corresponding word appears without the leading conjunctive *vav* (*Esther* 3:13, 7:4, and elsewhere). This proof too was brought to the attention of the author of *Keset ha-Sofer*.

(C) The Lenigrad Codex (formerly known as B 19a), written in the year 1009, not long after the Masoretic period, is the oldest known extant and intact manuscript of the entire *Tanakh*. In the Leningrad Codex there is a Masoretic circle between the two words "*le-hashmid*" and "*ve-laharog*" (Esther 8:11), which is meant to call attention to the *masorah ketanah* marginal note, "*l'* " (i.e., a single lamed followed by an apostrophe). The meaning of that terse notation is that the combination of those two words is unique in *Tanakh* (hence, "*l'* ," an abbreviation for "*leit di-khevatteh*," "there is no other like instance"). That Masoretic notation likewise demonstrates that the Masorah considers "*ve-laharog*" to be the correct reading. For if we were to suppose, contrarily, that the correct reading is "*laharog*," the Masorah could not have notated that word pair with "*l'*," given that the word pair "*le-hashmid laharog*" is not unique, but actually appears in two other places in *Tanakh*, both of them in *Megillat Esther* (3:13; 7:4).

"BIFNEIHEM" / "LIFNEIHEM"

Minḥat Shai quotes the Masoretic notation accompanying the word "*bifneihem*" of *Yehoshua* 21:42, which says: "*Ve-nakotu ve-dein.*" The interpretation of that notation is that the word "*bifneihem*" is found in only two places in *Tanakh*, the one being "*ve-nakotu bifneihem*" of *Yeḥezkel* 6:9, and the other "*dein*"—"this one"—of *Yehoshua* 21:42, "*ve-lo 'amad ish bifneihem.*" *Minḥat Shai* cited that Masoretic note as proof that the correct reading in *Megillat*

Esther is "*ve-ish lo 'amad lifneihem*"— since, if the reading there were "*bifneihem*," there would then actually be three occurrences in *Tanakh* of that word, while the Masorah tells us that there are only two. Although we do not know in which manuscript *Miḥat Shai* found that masorah which he quotes, we have no reason to doubt that it is both precise and authoritative, since it appears also in the masorah collection of C. D. Ginsburg,[8] which says: "All instances are "*lifneihem*" except for two that are "*bifneihem*," namely, "*ve-lo 'amad ish bifneihem"* of *Yeshoshua* (21:42) and "*ve-nakotu bifneihem el ha-ra'ot asher 'asu*" (*Yeḥezkel* 6:9).

Moreover, the same Masoretic note, couched in entirely unambiguous language, appears also in the *masorah ketanah* of the Leningrad Codex, whose character and importance we have already explained earlier. For so does the Masorah state in *Yehoshua* 21:42, that "*bifneihem*" there is one of but two occurrences in all of *Tanakh*, the other being in *Yeḥezkel* 6:9, where the same Masoretic note likewise appears.

All this demonstrates conclusively that the Masorah recognizes the word "*bifneihem*" as correct in exactly two places in *Tanakh*, viz., *Yehoshua* and *Yeḥezkel*. We thus conclude that the word "*bifneihem*" does not appear in *Megillat Esther*, where the correct reading of our word must therefore be "*lifneihem*."

The Masoretic notes we have cited here were collected from a number of different sources. Some of them are found in exceedingly old manuscripts, whose authority we have no reason whatsoever to doubt. Others, however, are found in the Venice edition of *Mikraot Gedolot*, published from 1524 through 1526. The masorah of that edition, which—as noted earlier—was compiled by Yaakov ben Ḥayyim, is notorious for its errors in more than a few places. Nevertheless, proofs adduced even from that masorah are not without significance, given that the reading "*laharog*" has come down to us only via Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's edition, and now it comes to light that that masorah is quoted by Yaakov ben Ḥayyim himself, thus contradicting his own reading in the text of his *Tanakh*. As the saying goes, should we believe the dough when the baker himself testifies against it?

All of the above seems sufficient to dispel all doubt in anyone's mind. That is, it should be considered conclusive that the correct readings as attested by the Masorah are "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*," and Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's readings, "*laharog* and "*bifneihem*," are corruptions having absolutely no grounds or support whatsoever.

However, we have in our possession yet one more proof that is equal in weight to all the other proofs combined. This last proof would alone

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8 C.D. Ginsburg, *Ha-Masorah 'al-pi Kitvei-Yad 'Attikim*, London, 5640 (1880), section "*pe*," item 175.

be sufficient justification for expunging Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's version once and for all from our *megillot*, both as written and as read, such that no memory of it whatsoever would ever remain.

We mentioned earlier the Leningrad Codex, which was written very close to the Masoretic period. The Leningrad Codex, as well as other manuscripts written during the same era, were discovered only fairly recently, and thus were completely unknown in the times of *Minḥat Shai* and *Keset ha-Sofer*.

Alongside those manuscripts, we must also mention yet another renowned one, the Aleppo Codex, known in Hebrew as the *Ketter Aram Tzovah*. This manuscript was corrected and pointed, and a masorah attached to it, by R' Aharon ben Asher, known as the last of the Masoretes. His name alone would be enough to impart to the *Ketter* superlative importance. The Jewish people accepted that version of *Tanakh* that had been established by the "western" school of Masoretic scholars who were based in Tiberias. For that reason, a manuscript issued from the hand of Aharon ben Asher, considered the last of the great Masoretes, can be seen as an absolute authority on whom no one can cast any aspersions.

The inherent superiority of the *Ketter*, however, lies not in its pedigree, but in the importance attached to it by Rambam, who mentions this manuscript in *Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 8:4, where he enumerates the complete list of all the "open" and "closed" paragraph breaks of the Torah. Rambam copied that list directly from the *Ketter*, and he writes there: "The text we have relied on for this and other similar purposes is the book known in Egypt to contain all twenty-four books of *Tanakh*. It was in Jerusalem some years back for the purpose of editing, based on it, other Torah scrolls and manuscripts. It was deemed authoritative by all, because Ben Asher had edited and corrected it, giving it his meticulous attention over the course of many years, and repeatedly correcting it again and again. Thus, it was used by the copyists as a highly accurate text. When I wrote a Torah scroll according to Halakhah, I, too, relied on the *Ketter*."

These words of Rambam brought renown to the *Ketter* throughout the entire Jewish nation, and imparted to it an authority not less than that of a final halakhic decisor. After many travails the *Ketter* finally reached its final destination, Aram Tzovah—which is Aleppo, Syria—and numerous people would then endure the long and arduous journey to Aleppo in order to resolve, based on the *Ketter*, doubts and differences of opinion that had arisen regarding the correct text of *Tanakh*. Because the Jews of Aleppo ascribed to the *Ketter* supernal sanctity, they would not permit it to be photographed. Moreover, they would usually not even allow an outsider to examine the *Ketter* directly. Instead, the practice was that questions

about the correct text of *Tanakh* were referred to a member of the community who had been specially appointed to deal with such inquiries. The latter would examine the *Ketter* and inform the inquirer as to what the *Ketter*'s reading was.

In the year 5708 (1948) marauders set fire to the Aleppo synagogue in which the *Ketter* was stored for safekeeping. The Jews of Aleppo risked their lives in order to save the *Ketter*, but in the course of that rescue the initial and final portions of the *Ketter* were lost or burned—about a third of the manuscript in total. All five books of the Torah through the middle of *parashat ki tavo* were lost. Also lost were most of *Shir Ha-Shirim* and all of *Kohelet, Esther, Daniel, and Ezra*. Nevertheless, the greater part of the *Ketter* was saved, and was eventually brought to Jerusalem. A photographic facsimile of the *Ketter* manuscript is now in the public domain.[9]

Anyone examining the *Ketter* will find that it is a manuscript unique to its genre,[10] having no peer in any other manuscript or printed edition. All other manuscripts and printed editions of *Tanakh* known to us include hundreds of words in *nevi'im* and *ketuvim* whose spelling does not accord with the rulings of the Masorah, whereas the text of the *Ketter* everywhere agrees with the rulings of the Masorah, almost without exception.[11] Such precision is almost beyond the limits of human ability. Any scribe can testify to that, even as concerns the writing of a *sefer torah*; how much more so, then, with respect to *nevi'im* and *ketuvim*. A text of *nevi'im* and *ketuvim* fully conforming to the Masorah was not known at that time, and to this very day is still unknown. The scribe could not copy from a known, exact text, for even the text he would be copying from was full of corruptions. Rather, a Masorete needed to precisely coordinate his copying of the text with the instructions dispersed among the Masorah's thousands of rules, some of which are phrased in highly enigmatic terms. No Masorete succeeded in this undertaking, or even came close—with the sole exception, that is, of the *Ketter Aram Tzovah*.

Thus, the superiority of the *Ketter* does not consist in the importance of the names of the personalities associated with it, namely, Aharon ben Asher who edited it, and Rambam who testified to its authority. For even

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9 See the facsimile edition: "The Aleppo Codex with Masorah and Pointing by Ben Asher," part 1, the panels, Jerusalem 5736 (1976).

10 I have examined the *Ketter* over the course of many years, comparing it to all other extant and available manuscripts. The results of that examination are described in my book, *Ketter Aram Tzovah ve-ha-Nussah ha-Mekubbal be-Yisrael*, Jerusalem, 5737 (1977).

11 In the entire manuscript, I have found only two places where I can say with certainty that a scribal error has eluded the sharp eyes of its illustrious pointer and editor [Aharon ben Asher].

if this were an anonymous manuscript edited by an unknown Masorete, and even if no renowned Torah authority had testified to its character and quality, it would behoove us nonetheless to acknowledge the *Ketter*'s preeminence, to make it the cornerstone of our efforts for establishing the correct text of *Tanakh*, and the last word for resolving all scriptural doubts and disputes.

Returning to our main topic, it is now clear that if we had the *Megillat Esther* text of the Aleppo Codex, there would be no question or doubt about the entire issue. We would consult the *Ketter*, and based on it we would establish the correct text of the megillah; that is, the correct texts for both reading and writing. But as already noted, the latter portion of the *Ketter*, including Esther, is no longer in our possession. Nevertheless, we are in fact able to say definitively what the reading of the *Ketter* was in those two verses that the Ashkenazic community considers "matters of doubt."

The doubt of "*bifneihem*" / "*lifneihem*" has already been resolved from that portion of the *Ketter* that we still have. Because in both Yehoshua (21:42) and Yeḥezkel (6:9) the *Ketter* has "*bifneihem*." And since the *masorah ketanah* of the *Ketter* in *Yehoshua* tells us that there are two instances of "*bifneihem*" in *Tanakh*, we deduce that in *Megillat Esther* (9:2) the *Ketter* had "*lifneihem*," otherwise there would be not two but three occurrences of "*bifneihem*" in *Tanakh*. And no one familiar with the extraordinary precision of the *Ketter* and the absolute agreement between its *Tanakh* text and its masorah could possibly imagine that the *Ketter*, after stating in its masorah that a certain word is found only twice in all of *Tanakh*, would then proceed to write that word three times.

However, as irrefutable as this evidence is, we have an even more conclusive proof that encompasses together both of the two verses that are considered "subject to doubt."

We have already mentioned that scholars and *soferim* would often turn to the community of Aleppo to resolve, based on the *Ketter*, matters of doubt that had arisen regarding the correct *Tanakh* text. Among them, and particularly deserving of mention, was R' Yaakov Sappir, a native of Safed who lived in Jerusalem. R' Sappir was renowned, *inter alia*, for his monumental work *Even Sappir*. In that book, he describes his travels around the world as an emissary of the community of Perushim in Jerusalem, including an engrossing and fascinating description of Yemenite Jewry, and its lifestyle and customs, in both the sacred and secular domains.

R' Yaakov Sappir was an eminent Torah scholar, a man of broad horizons who had an intimate familiarity with the manners and mores of the world. As we should have expected, then, he did not overlook even those

areas of the Torah that are not objects of particular interest to most Torah scholars—questions having to do with the correct readings of *Tanakh*, for example. It appears that he was rather passionate about such matters, because he composed in writing a list of some 550 questions relating to the correct readings of the Torah, the *haftarot*, and *Megillat Esther*, which in the year 5617 (1857) he sent from Jerusalem to Syria through his own emissary, a certain Yaakov Ze'ev. The list of questions was relayed to R' Menasheh Sithon, who examined the *Ketter* and then noted, next to each question in R' Sappir's written list, the corresponding reading of the *Ketter*.

The manuscript that includes those questions and answers bears the name *Me'orot Natan*. The section covering the books of *Bereshit* and *Shemot* was published no less than 125 years ago, in the periodical *Ha-Levanon*.[12] A photoreproduction of the entire manuscript was brought to light in our day by Professor Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, who described it in volume 2 of the periodical *Textus* (pp. 53 ff.). Actually, though, I have reason to believe that that manuscript had been discovered even earlier by my uncle R' Eliezer Eliner *z"l*, who was among the dignitaries of Jerusalem.[13] The manuscript has been published only very, very recently by Mr. Rafi Zer in the periodical *Leshonenu*.[14]

It is clear in any case that R' Yaakov Sappir had already inquired about the textual reading of the *Ketter* in the two passages we've been dealing with in this article. Permit me to cite here verbatim the actual question and answer as recorded in the *Me'orot Natan* manuscript:

The Questions	The Answers
[8,] 11: "*le-hashmid ve-laharog u-le-abed*"	Yes, with *vav*
[9,] 2: "*ve-ish lo 'amad lifneihem*"	Yes

This testimony alone seems sufficient to dispel from anyone's mind even the very last remnant of any shred of doubt. We can by now state with no hesitation whatsoever that the correct textual readings are "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*."

And yet, this chapter of our story, and our accounting of the evidence available to support our premises, are still not complete. Because astounding confirmation for the testimony we've received through R' Yaakov Sappir has been found in a different, independent source, also recently and in our very own day.

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12 Year 1, sheets 3, 4, 5, and 11.

13 Rafi Zer took note of this in his article in *Leshonenu*, about which see infra.

14 R. Zer, "The Meorot Natan of R' Yaakov Sappir," *Leshonenu* no. 50, Nisan-Tammuz 5746 (1986), pp. 151– 213.

We wish to mention here R' Shalom Shakhna Yellin, father of R' Aryeh Leib Yellin, author of *Yefeh 'Einayim* on the Talmud and other works. Born in Lithuania, R' Shalom Shakhna made *aliyyah* to Jerusalem in 1858. Working as a proofreader and editor, he became interested, by virtue of those activities, in matters of the Masorah and the correct text of *Tanakh*. That he was an expert in that field is apparent from the numerous interesting notations that he made in the margins of his copy of *Mikraot Gedolot*, which I have personally seen and evaluated. It was R' Shalom Shakhna's fondest wish to travel to Syria in order to resolve all his doubts concerning the text of *Tanakh*. And actually, he had already received a letter of recommendation from the rabbis of Jerusalem to the rabbis of Syria, requesting that R' Shalom Shakhna, as their emissary, be granted permission to inspect the *Ketter*.

For a number of different reasons, however, R' Shalom Shakhna was not able to realize his dream. At the end of his life—he was by then very advanced in age—he entrusted the mission instead to his son-in-law, R' Yehoshua Kimḥi, who travelled to Syria, carrying with him a small printed *Tanakh*. In the margins of that volume his father-in-law R' Shalom Shakhna Yellin had noted his various observations concerning the text of *Tanakh*, and the places where he felt doubtful about the correct text.

After R' Shalom Shakhna's death the *Tanakh* editions that had been in his possession passed to his heirs, while his estate as a whole remained in the attic of a certain house in Jerusalem that was the property of his family. None of them realized what a treasure store resided on their property, and one fine day they simply transferred the estate in its entirety to a student of Yeshivat Har Etzion, with the understanding that he could use or dispose of the estate in the manner that he saw fit. That yeshiva boy then turned to the students of Mr. Yosef Ofer, an outstanding young researcher in the field of Masorah, who immediately grasped the importance of that chance discovery, and rescued from *genizah*—at the last possible moment, literally—the *Tanakh* volume in which R' Yehoshua Kimḥi had inscribed his notes about the text of the *Ketter*.

An examination of those notes shows that in each of those places in *Tanakh* where his father-in-law had raised an issue regarding the correct text, R' Yehoshua Kimḥi had likewise indicated what the corresponding reading was in the *Ketter*. And the following is what we see in each of the two passages that are the subject of this article. In the body of the Tanakh we find the erroneous text of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim. The first letter of each of those two words in the text is marked with a small circle. And in the page margin appear the notations of both R' Shalom Shakhna and his son-in-law R' Yehoshua:

Word as Printed	Notes of R' Yellin	Notes of R' Kimchi
laharog	*Minḥat Shai* here requires a *vav*	Yes
bifneihem	*Minḥat Shai* requires *lifneihem*, with lamed	Yes

Thus, we now have two independent testimonies that perfectly coincide. The emissaries of R' Yaakov Sappir and of R' Shalom Shakhna Yellin have both testified that the readings of the *Ketter* were "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*." And "on the evidence of two witnesses shall a matter be confirmed!"

From all of the above we arrive at the following conclusions:

(A) The very old manuscripts[15] written close to the era of the Masorah have "*ve-laharog*" and "*lifneihem*,"[16] which was likewise the reading in the *Ketter Aram Tzovah* written by Aharon ben Asher, and relied upon by Rambam.

(B) Evidence for the correctness of those readings is found in the masorah that accompanies each of those old manuscripts, and in the masorah found in *Mikraot Gedolot* as well.

(C) *Minḥat Shai* too rules that we are to accept those readings as the correct ones.

Case closed!

The first practical ramification of these conclusions is that our *soferim* should be instructed to strike from our *megillot* the corrupted readings of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim, "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*." For although it is true that a megillah is not rendered invalid by either or both of those readings, the presence of such an error is equivalent to the corresponding word being completely absent, with the result that the reader is effectively reading that word completely from memory. Clearly, it is not a first-resort best practice for even an individual, let alone the community, to fulfill in this manner the obligation of reading the megillah.

That is only the beginning, however, and not sufficient in and of itself. In light of all our above findings, the custom—an innovation of only very recent times—of repeating each of the two *pesukim* during the reading of the megillah must be viewed as entirely lacking in foundation or justification. To do so is downright improper, actually, and does not befit the

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15 Leningrad B 19a, and Sasson 1053.

16 My friend R' Ḥanokh ben Arza has proposed as a mnemonic, "*Lu ḥakhemu yaskilu zot*" [*Devarim* 31:29, "If only they had wisdom they would understand this"]. The *lamed* and *vav* of "*lu*" allude to the *lamed* of *lifneihem* and the *vav* of *ve-laharog*, respectively.

honor of either the Torah or the Jewish community. The sentences containing the words "*laharog*" and "*bifneihem*" are nothing more than baseless fluff devoid of any sanctity whatsoever. Surely no one would consider interrupting the reading of the megillah with the recitation of some passage from, say, *pesukei de-zimra'* [notwithstanding that any of those passages is itself an actual *pasuk* from *Tanakh*]. That being the case, how much more so must we deem it improper to interrupt a megillah reading with the recitation of a passage that is nothing more than the invention of some writer from the Middle Ages.

I would like, however, to conclude with one additional observation—hardly a trivial one. We wrote earlier of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's valiant attempts to establish a correct *Tanakh* text and to edit the Masorah. For those efforts he earned the admiration of the scholars of his generation, including R' Eliyahu Baḥur, who wrote a song of praise in Yaakov ben Ḥayyim's honor, printed at the end of the final volume of the Venice *Mikraot Gedolot* of 1524–1526.

But however he may have begun, Yaakov ben Ḥayyim ended quite badly, for his old age was a disgrace to his youth. Toward the end of his days he renounced his Jewish faith and converted to Christianity, thus removing himself from the Jewish community. After his death, R' Eliyahu Baḥur declared: "May the memory of Yaakov ben Ḥayyim be preserved in a perforated bag!"

All this should give us pause. Here we have two competing forces: From the one direction, we have Aharon ben Asher, and Rambam, and the Masoretes, and *Minḥat Shai*. And from the opposite direction we have Yaakov ben Ḥayyim ben Yitzḥak ben Adoniyahu. And yet somehow we still find ourselves incapable of deciding between these two "equal" forces, between the son of Adoniyahu, and *adonenu*—our master—Rambam. And when we read the megillah, carefully following the text laid down for us by our rabbis and teachers, all of whose souls repose in *Gan 'Eden*, we feel we still cannot refrain from allowing a permanent and everlasting monument to endure to the memory of a deserter and apostate who bequeathed to us nothing more than a corrupted *Tanakh* text.[17]

We seem to be saying: May the memory of Amalek be obliterated! But let the memory of that apostate, the son of Adoniyahu, be preserved for all eternity, alongside the memories of Aharon ben Asher, and Rambam,

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[17] That Yaakov ben Ḥayyim did not simply invent his own Tanakh version is self-evident. Rather, he found it in the corrupted Ashkenazic manuscripts that served as the basis for his version. Nevertheless, Yaakov ben Ḥayyim was the conduit through which that version reached the Ashkenazim.

and all our rabbis of blessed memory! Isn't it high time for us to finally right this wrong?

II

Let's move on from here to another Masoretic issue associated with Purim. In section 34 of *Ma'aseh Rav* the author testifies about the Gaon of Vilna: "When he reads *parashat zakhor*, he reads "*zekher*" with *seggol* under the zayin." R' Ḥayyim of Volozhin, however, in his approbation to the same book, writes as follows: "But as for his statement that in *parashat zakhor* one should read "*zekher*" with six dots, I myself heard from the Gaon's holy mouth that he read it with five dots [i.e., *tzere*, not *seggol*]. I thus cannot be sure whether someone was listening but heard wrong, and mistakenly reported six dots, or whether perhaps in his later years the Gaon had had a change of heart."

This difference of opinion regarding the Gaon's custom finds expression in *Mishnah Berurah* 685:18: 'Be aware that some say one should read "*zaykher 'amalek*" with *tzere*, while others say that it should be read "*zekher 'amalek,*" with *seggol*. The correct approach, therefore, is to read it both ways, in order to be certain that one has fulfilled his obligation.'

This custom of repeating the word "*zkr*" in *parashat zakhor* was apparently accepted practice among the Perushim communities of Jerusalem, which is understandable, given that the Perushim, from the day of their arrival in Jerusalem, accepted upon themselves to observe the customs of the Gaon. Therefore, the doubt mentioned earlier as to what the custom of the Gaon actually was might have motivated them to fulfill their obligation both ways.

Contrarily, that custom was, to the best of my knowledge, not practiced anywhere else in Israel or the Diaspora. However, in recent times *Mishnah Berurah*'s ruling has been accepted as halakhah in virtually all Ashkenazic communities, both inside and outside Israel. And not by *mitnaggedim* only, for even the Hasidim observe this halakhah, which originates in the *beit midrash* of the Gaon. It is doubtful that any significant number of Ashkenazic communities still remain who, following the custom of their ancestors, read "*zaykher*" with *tzere* only.[18]

Everything just said applies, of course, strictly to Ashkenazic communities. Sephardim in any case do not distinguish between *tzere* and *seggol*.

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[18] All of this is said only as a general observation, based on word of mouth in the Jewish community, and reports I have received from travelers to many foreign countries. While I cannot vouch for the absolute accuracy of these statements with regard to all countries and all communities, I nonetheless believe I am not mistaken in saying that the majority of communities never before knew of this custom, and adopted it only in our lifetimes.

But when it comes to the Yemenites, there is nothing even to talk about. The mere suggestion that they would change the custom of their ancestors because of some doubt that has arisen only in recent times would be laughable to them. Even if *Eliyahu Ha-Navi* himself were to come and instruct the Yemenites to change their ancestral customs in the slightest, they would simply ignore him.

Such stubborn insistence on adhering to ancestral precedent is one of the hallmarks of the Yemenite community, a feature not found in the same degree among the Ashkenazim. And yet, there do still remain a few places in the world where Ashkenazim too uphold their ancestors' customs. Among those, and worthy of mention, is the *kehillah* of my uncle, Rav Yosef Breuer, *zt"l*, of New York, whose members have accepted upon themselves to maintain their venerated Frankfurt customs, and will not be persuaded to veer from them even a hairsbreadth. In that congregation *parashat zakhor* is still read according to the accepted custom of our sacred ancestors everywhere in the world, with no semblance whatsoever of any repeated, or "*seggolate*," "*zekher*."

And recently I've been told that the situation is the same in the community of Amsterdam, Holland. When a young rabbi engaged by the community tried to introduce the custom of repeating "*zaykher*" / "*zekher*," the *gabba'im* refused to obey, informing him emphatically that they had no intention of changing their ancestral customs.

But we are justified in wondering how all other Ashkenazic congregations so readily allowed themselves to disregard the straightforward custom that had always been their heritage. The practice of reading "*zaykher*" / "*zekher*" is something unprecedented in Jewish history. Ḥatam Sofer wrote likewise in his responsa to *Orah Ḥayyim* 181: "The best thing overall is to not alarm the Jewish people with innovations never envisioned by our ancestors. I have already expressed my opinion on this in the past, namely, that any innovation is forbidden by the Torah." Based on that very principle Ḥatam Sofer sought to permit using an undersized *etrog*, basing his ruling on prior precedent and accepted practice, notwithstanding that the issue involves the possibility of completely negating the performance of a positive Torah commandment.

We therefore struggle to understand how the Torah readers took it upon themselves to shock the community with such an innovative reading unforeseen by our ancestors, given that the entire question is only an issue of *hiddur* [embellishment] in the first resort. That is, there is unanimous consensus that regardless of how the word is pronounced, there will be no hindrance to fulfilling the Torah's requirement.

The fact that *Mishnah Berurah* required it is not sufficient to dispel our bewilderment. Because in any such situation the words of *Mishnah Berurah*

do not constitute an absolute and final halakhic ruling. No one would ever imagine that every person is obligated to say "*vehigi'anu lizman hazzeh*," or "*ha-mehullal befeh 'ammo*," or "*yitgaddel ve-yitkaddesh shemeh rabba*" in opposition to his ancestral customs, simply because *Mishnah Berurah* says so.[19] For we know that in such situations, the operative rule is "*Puk ḥazi mai 'ama devar*." ["Go out and see how the people conduct themselves."]

All of the above would be equally true and relevant even if we were to presume for the moment that there is any validity at all to the doubt regarding the custom of the Gaon and regarding the correct scriptural reading. Even on the basis of that presumption it would still be improper for our communities to abandon their historically accepted custom simply for the sake of fulfilling a small *hiddur*, which is itself predicated on doubtful premises. In truth, however, the entire question should never have arisen in the first place. But when it did arise, some decision should have been rendered in favor of the one or the other reading, just as we routinely decide which readings are accurate and which are corruptions, which are correct and which are erroneous.

The source of the question of the correct pointing of the word "*zkr*" is in the *Sefer Ha-Shorashim* of Radak, entry *Z-K-R*, where we read as follows:

> "*Timḥeh et zekher 'amalek*" (*Devarim* 25:19) takes six dots, but "*le-zaykher kodsho*" only five dots, the latter being in *Tanakh* a unique occurrence. This is the reading adopted by some of our texts, whereas in others, every "*zkr*" without exception is pointed with five dots.

It follows, then, that the author of *Ma'aseh Rav* believed that the Gaon had decided in favor of the first of those two opinions, whereas R' Ḥayyim of Volozhin maintained that the Gaon had decided in favor of the second. It was on this basis, apparently, that the author of *Mishnah Berurah* issued his ruling that a God-fearing Jew will be meticulous to fulfill all opinions.

But we know that at least one of the *gedolei ha-dor* of the previous generation disagrees with *Mishnah Berurah*'s decision, namely, R' Meshullam Roth, author of *She'elot u-Teshuvot Kol Mevasser*, who was, unquestionably, among the first-rank *gedolei ha-dor* of the previous generation. In section 5 of *Besorat Eliyahu* R' Roth deals with this dispute between *Ma'aseh Rav* and R' Ḥayyim of Volozhin, and in his opinion it is R' Ḥayyim's testimony that should be given preference, inasmuch as R' Ḥayyim is "the incomparable teacher, faithful in the house of the Gaon." "Moreover," writes R' Meshullam, "in the majority of our *ḥumashim* we find "*zaykher*" written

[19] See *Mishnah Berurah* 676:1; 51:1; 56:1.

with *tzere* under the zayin, which would seem to indicate that the correct reading is "*zaykher*" with five dots."

On that basis he offers an appealing explanation of the Talmud's story (*Bava Batra*, 21a) about Yoav's teacher, who brought about Yoav's downfall by reading to him "*et zekher 'amalek*" so as to give the impression that the obligation of obliterating Amalek applies only to male Amalekites, but not to females.

R' Meshullam Roth raises a difficulty with this, i.e., it just doesn't make sense that anyone would confuse two words that are so very different in their pronunciations, "*zekher*" and "*zakhar.*" Moreover, the grammatical form called for there is the *semikhut* form of the noun, i.e., "*zekhar*" (to indicate the males *of* Amalek), not "*zakhar.*" And "*zekhar*" is even more different from "*zekher*" than "*zakhar*" is.

R' Roth therefore argues as follows. We know that there are certain Hebrew nouns whose independent [non-*semikhut*] form consists of two long vowels, while their *semikhut* form matches the vowel pattern of "*melekh.*" For example, " *'ashan* " (smoke) and "*yarekh*" (loins), whose *semikhut* forms are " *'eshen* " ["smoke of"] and "*yerekh*" ["loins of"], respectively.[20] We can therefore say that Yoav's teacher likewise read to him "*zekher*" with two *seggol*s, which Yoav understood as the *semikhut* form of "*zakhar.*" Had the teacher read the verse to Yoav with the correct punctuation—"*zaykher*" with *tzere* and *seggol*—Yoav would not have erred as he did.

Based on all of the above the author of *Kol Mevasser* ruled that in *parashat 'amalek* the word "*zaykher*" is to be read with a *tzere*. Now, as it is beyond any doubt that R' Roth was familiar with the ruling of *Mishnah Berurah*, his words carry great weight that is impossible to disregard. Consequently, it would have behooved us to adopt his opinion in actual practice even if that position had no additional support from anywhere else. But how much more so, given that his reading agrees with all established Jewish precedent, and every other possible proof without exception supports that custom.

We have already mentioned earlier the two contradictory testimonies regarding the *minhag* of the Gaon, and the opinion of the author of *Kol Mevasser* that the view of R' Ḥayyim of Volozhin should be given preference, because of the latter's very close and longstanding relationship with the Gaon. But even if we were to completely ignore the testimony of R' Ḥayyim, the veracity of his claim is nonetheless entirely self-evident. For although Radak cited both opinions without deciding between them, we shall prove in the course of this discussion that the second opinion, which

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20 " '*Ashan*" / " '*eshen*": see, e.g., *Bereshit* 15:17; *Shemot* 19:18. "*Yarekh*" / "*yerekh*": see, e.g., *Bereshit* 32:33.

reads "*zaykher*" with *tzere*, is clearly superior, while the first opinion is refuted, it would seem, by all the rules of Halakhah and its decision-making process.

Even so, we might have imagined still that the Gaon himself gave consideration also to that view, and ruled accordingly that one should read "*zekher*" also with *seggol*, in order to sidestep the doubt. However, the testimony of the author of *Ma'aseh Rav* is quite different, namely, that the Gaon read "*zekher*" with *seggol only*. This would mean that the Gaon rejected the opinion of the Masorah, as well as that of the most accurate manuscripts, as well as that of *gedolei yisrael*, whose opinions we routinely accept as undisputable (as we shall demonstrate in due course), and he accepted instead only the rejected opinion mentioned by Radak. Such an assertion about the Gaon is something that no rational person can possibly accept under any circumstances.

In truth, however, that is not the question under consideration here. For we are dealing here not with a typical question of Halakhah, but with a question concerning a correct reading in *Tanakh*, in which domain we acknowledge the authority of the Masoretes, and only their authority exclusively. For even in such places in *Tanakh* where the Talmud and the Masorah are in disagreement concerning the correct reading, the last word is always with the Masorah. R' Akiva Eger, in *Gilyon Ha-Shas* to Shabbat 55b, cites a long list of *pesukim* where the version of the Talmud differs from that of the Masorah, including the case of the correct spelling of "*u-le-totafot*" of the passage that is included in every pair of *tefillin*.[21] Effectively, then, according to the version of that *pasuk* quoted by the Talmud, all our *tefillin* as we write them are unkosher, meaning that the entire Jewish nation is, Heaven forefend, in the category of "a skull that does not don *tefillin*." And yet, it never entered anyone's mind to don two pairs of Rashi *tefillin* in order to sidestep this difference of opinion between the Talmud and the Masorah.

And that is because the entire Jewish nation long ago accepted upon itself the decision of the Masorah in all matters concerning the correct version of Tanakh, while even those versions explicitly quoted in the Talmud are rejected completely and unconditionally whenever the Masorah's opinion is different.

Given that all of the above applies even to the rabbis of the Talmud, then how much more so as concerns Radak. For Radak was a commentator and a grammarian, but he is not considered a scholar or authority on

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21 Or so we are given to understand, in any case, based on Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 4b, s.v. *be-farashat shema'*.

the Masorah. If we were to give any credence whatsoever to Radak's citations of *Tanakh* passages, then we should do so in no smaller measure, at least, to similar citations in the Talmud, to the Targums of Onkelos and Yonatan, and to every ancient manuscript found in the various collections. For there is no doubt that each and every one of those versions is authoritative at least to some degree; how, then, can anyone be certain which version is the "correct" and authoritative one?

But all of those versions have one thing in common, namely, that they have been rejected by the Masorah, and that is the reason we need not concern ourselves with any of those versions. As a highly instructive example, consider the case of Seligman Baer, author of the siddur "*Avodat Yisrael*." Baer, a scholar of note, using all the scholarly apparatuses available to him at the time, published an edition of Tanakh that he described as "based on the Masorah." All the big names in the scholarly world supported him in his efforts and relied on his results. Today, however, it is a matter of common knowledge that Baer's edition is full of errors and corruptions, to the point of lacking any value whatsoever.

One of Baer's mistakes was his inordinate reliance on Radak's readings. Thus, following Radak's *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, his pointings include "*yeter*" with *tzere* under the yod (*Yeshaya* 56:12), "*ka'at*" with *kamatz* under the aleph (*Yeshaya* 34:11), and many similar situations that directly contradict the attestations of the manuscripts passed down to us from the Masoretes of Tiberias. And that is something that cannot be condoned under any circumstances.

For that reason, Radak's opinion regarding the correct pointing of the word "*zkr*" is also entirely inconsequential and insignificant, and that is also equally true of any other situation that concerns establishing the correct *Tanakh* text. Instead, our obligation is to ascertain what is the opinion of the Masorah; that is, the opinion of those scholars of Israel who occupied themselves with the study of the Masorah and are recognized as experts in that field. It is only their opinion that matters for establishing the correct version of *Tanakh*—in general, and also for our specific case ("*zaykher*" / "*zekher*").

Bearing all this in mind we can see that in this case there is no doubt, or even any shadow of a doubt. For in *Mikraot Gedolot* of Venice 5284–5286 "*zaykher*" is pointed with *tzere*. And as we've already mentioned earlier, *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai* both examined that *Tanakh* edition and corrected all the errors they encountered, whether in spelling, punctuation, or cantillation. We may take the complete silence of those two authorities with regard to "*zkr*" as conclusive proof that they accepted the given pointing [with *tzere*] as entirely straightforward, with no room for any doubt of any kind.

Now, *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai* are the recognized and undisputed authorities in all questions concerning the correct version of *Tanakh*. No one ever took issue with any of their opinions without having irrefutable proof that they had erred in their judgment. But in the case of "*zaykher*" / "*zekher,*" not only do we not find that anyone ever attempted to adduce any such proof, but, more importantly, all the available data actually prove that the opinion of *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai* is correct. YHBY Ha-Naqdan in his *'Ein ha-Kore'* agrees with their pointing with *tzere*, and R' Wolf Heidenheim likewise quotes him without additional comment. YHBY ha-Naqdan lived during the period of the Rishonim, and the correct pointing of *Tanakh* and questions of Masorah, in general, were his primary area of expertise.[22] As for R' Wolf Heidenheim, he is the last of the great Masoretic scholars, whose opinions earned the approval of no less an authority than Ḥatam Sofer.[23] Moreover, every manuscript and printed edition known to C. D. Ginsburg likewise had "*zaykher*" pointed with *tzere*, for he mentions no other pointing or cites any other opinion.

We are not claiming that it is utterly impossible that some manuscript somewhere in the world has "*zekher 'amalek*" pointed with *seggol*. After all, *tzere*/*seggol* variants are quite common, especially among Sephardic grammarians, because Sephardim do not distinguish between their pronunciation of *tzere* and *seggol*. We are only saying that if we were to worry about every corrupted manuscript that we might ever encounter, there would be no end ever to the endeavor.

The very greatest proof, however, for pointing "*zaykher*" with *tzere* comes from the very old manuscripts that have come to light only in recent decades, namely: Leningrad B 19a, Jerusalem 5702 24 (formerly known as Sasson 507), and Sasson 1053. All three of those manuscripts were written close to the Masoretic period, and are extremely precise in both punctuation and cantillation. And they all point "*zaykher*" with *tzere*. All this only goes to prove that *tzere* is the pointing of the "Western" Masoretic school, which the entire Jewish nation follows by unanimous agreement.

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22 See R' Wolf Heidenheim's comments in the introduction to his *'Ein ha-Kore'* (top of page IV): "From this it is clear that YHBY ha-Naqdan had texts that originated in Spain that were older and better edited than those that Radak had. For this reason, we should consider his opinions even more authoritative than those of Radak, which is hardly surprising, given that he was a *nakdan*, after all, and that was his primary occupation." Hence, we can infer that *nakdanut* was *not* Radak's primary occupation.

23 I was told by R' Meir Medan *z"l* that the Koren *Tanakh* was edited to conform to the principles and methods of R' Wolf Heidenheim because of that ruling of Ḥatam Sofer.

We have already mentioned earlier that in the *Ketter Aram Tzovah* all that remains of the Torah is a small portion beginning with the middle of *parashat ki tavo*. For that reason, we are unable to consult the *Ketter* for its opinion on the issue under discussion. Nevertheless, we are able to deduce a proof indirectly from the *Ketter*.

The only possible source for the opinion attributed to the Gaon is the *Sefer Ha-Shorashim* of Radak, where we are told that every "*zkr*" in *Tanakh* is pointed with *seggol*, with the sole exception of *Tehillim* 30:5. But the opinion of the *Ketter* is clearly otherwise, since every "*zkr*" of *nevi'im* and *ketuvim* is pointed in the *Ketter* with *tzere*, not *seggol*.

It is not possible to bring any direct proof from the Masorah about this question, since the Masorah, as a rule, makes note only of those spellings or pointings that it considers exceptional. Whereas, since the Masorah points every "*zkr*" with *tzere*, it has no reason at all to comment on our word. On the other hand, it is in fact possible to demonstrate conclusively that the opinion cited by Radak is not the one that was accepted by the Masorah. Because that opinion maintains that all "*zkr*" in *Tanakh* are pointed with *seggol*, with the sole exception of "*le-zaykher*" of *Tehillim* 30:5, which it points with *tzere*. But if the Masorah were of the same opinion, there is no doubt that it would have noted there, in *Tehillim*, "*l'*" (a single lamed followed by an apostrophe), i.e., "*leit di-khevatteh be-tzere*"—"there is no other instance but this one where '*zaykher*' is pointed with *tzere*." But since we have not seen any such Masoretic notation in any known manuscript or printed edition, we take that as conclusive proof that "*zaykher*" of our *pasuk* is no different in its pointing from every other "*zaykher*" in *Tanakh*, and that according to the Masorah, the correct pointing is with *tzere*, both here and everywhere else in *Tanakh*.

All of the above has been known—or *should have* been known—for the longest time. But there is yet another point that has come to light only in our own era, and should be brought to the attention of scholars and cognoscenti.

We mentioned earlier R' Yaakov Sappir, who sent his emissary to Syria in order to determine the opinion of the *Ketter* regarding various passages in Tanakh. R' Yaakov Sappir's questions, and the answers to them provided by R' Menashe Sithon, are freely available in the work entitled *Me'orot Natan*, published from manuscript only recently. We now know that the questions posed by R' Sappir included also the issue under discussion here. Allow us to quote verbatim that question and its answer:

THE QUESTION	THE ANSWER
25, 19: "*zkr*" with five dots	Yes

That is to say: "*zkr*" in the *Ketter* is pointed with *tzere* under the zayin, not *seggol*.

This, then, is the power struggle between the various forces of this discussion. On the one side we have the refuted testimony of *Ma'aseh Rav* about the practice of the Gaon. And from the other side we have the opinions of *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai*, and YHBY Ha-Naqdan and R' Wolf Heidenheim, and the various manuscripts and printed editions, old and new, the most prominent of them all being the *Ketter Aram Tzova*, pointed by R' Aharon ben Asher and deemed by Rambam himself as most authoritative.

Where does that leave *us*? The answer should be thoroughly self-evident. We've already mentioned that the custom of repeating the word "*zkr*" was totally unknown to our ancestors, and is nothing but a modern innovation of our own generation. It is this and all similar situations that *Ḥatam Sofer* had in mind when he declared: "Any innovation is forbidden by the Torah."

It seems that the time has come to revert to finer days, to return to the customs of our sacred ancestors, as they practiced them steadfastly since the dawn of our history.

Let's read *parashat zakhor* the way it was read by all the *gedolim* of Ashkenaz from time immemorial. When we cast aspersions on the correct text of *Tanakh*, where there never, ever was any doubt to begin with, we are only doing ourselves a disservice.

Let's erase the memory of Amalek definitively, and not in a manner tainted with doubt! Before actually concluding this discussion, however, I wish to offer yet one more observation.

It is common knowledge that the correct version of the Torah is in fact a matter of dispute in many places. While most of those disputes were long ago resolved by Ramah, there were a few cases where Ramah himself remained dubious. One of those should be mentioned, i.e., the dispute of "*va-yehi*" vs. "*va-yihyu*" (*Bereshit* 9:29). Ramah cited both opinions without deciding between them; only *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai* decided and ruled in favor of "*va-yehi*," and that ruling was accepted by all Ashkenazic communities. The Yemenites, however, still write "*va-yihyu*," and there is no question today that only that reading accords with the Masorah.[24]

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[24] We even have testimony that such was the reading of the *Ketter*, but that is beyond the scope of this article. See also infra, note 25.

There are other such disputed cases as well, e.g., in *Devarim* 23:2, the word "*dakkah*" (ending with he) as it is written by most Ashkenazic *soferim*, but "*dakka'* " (ending with aleph) according to the opinion of the Yemenites, Ḥabad, and others. There are also seven other places where the readings of the Yemenites differ from those of both the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim.

Nevertheless, although in each of those cases the reading of the Yemenites is the one that accords with the Masorah,[25] it would never occur to anyone that we should instruct our Ashkenazic *soferim* to change the version of the Torah that has been their tradition for hundreds of years, and was approved by both *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai*. And all this notwithstanding that today it is a fact beyond all doubt that those readings are not the ones that were sanctioned by the Masoretes of Tiberias.

So ask yourself this: When someone listens to the reading of *parashat zakhor* from an Ashkenazic *sefer torah*, in which the text at *Bereshit* 9:29 reads "*va-yehi*," is he not saying, essentially, that he deems the customs of our ancestors, and the rulings of both *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai* concerning the text of the Torah, sufficiently reliable even where those readings fly directly in the face of the Masorah, and even when there is a well-founded suspicion that the very validity of the reading has been irreparably compromised?

But then that same person reads and repeats "*zaykher*" / "*zekher,*" thus averring, effectively, that to him neither the customs received from our ancestors nor the rulings of *Or Torah* and *Minḥat Shai* are reliable, even when every proof in the world supports their position, and even when the issue could not possibly affect the validity of the reading to any extent or in any shape or form.

These are two inherently contradictory positions that no rational person can possibly reconcile or accept. ☙

[25] See my book about the *Ketter* (supra note 10), section *gimel*, items 4–10.