

Rabbi's Message November 2021

Dear Friends,

At our most recent JCNWJ Adult Hebrew class, we learned the letter, *tav*. While, personally speaking, there is so much that I find fascinating about the Hebrew language, as a 21st Century Reform Jew in New York City, *tav* is particularly fascinating, and here's why...

As you may know, when describing the different traditions of Jews from different parts of the world, the two most common groups are Ashkenazi (Jews who trace back to Central and Eastern Europe) and Sephardi (Jews who trace back to Spain, Northern Africa, and the Middle East). Within Sephardi, there is an additional distinction made between Sephardi and Mizrahi, with Mizrahi referring especially to those whose families come from Central and West Asia – primarily Arabic and Farsi speaking countries. All three of these groups, of course, are fully Jewish, but there are certain customs that differ amongst them.

While it is true that in the early days of modern political Zionism, young Ashkenazi Jews were the primary movers and shakers, it would be a mistake to assume the *Halutzim* (“pioneers”) spurned Sephardi or – especially – Mizrahi custom. Far from it. In fact, because Mizrahi Jews had been living in the geographical region of Israel ever since our expulsion in 70 C.E. (with some having lived there ever since *first* expulsion in 586 B.C.E.), the Ashkenazi *Halutzim* actually *avored* Mizrahi custom because, from their point of view, Mizrahi custom was the most authentic.

Returning now to our most recent Hebrew lesson, the one in which we learned the letter, *tav*: when undertaking the complex challenge of choosing which language to adopt as the lingua franca of the burgeoning Zionist settlement in the early part of the 20th Century, Yiddish, the standard common language of Ashkenazi Jews of the time, seemed like an obvious choice. Ultimately however, Hebrew, the ancient and common language of our people worldwide, was chosen. But there's more to it than just that, because while Jews of Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi backgrounds all shared a common written Hebrew language, when it came to spoken Hebrew, there were (and continue to be) some pronounced differences, mostly with the “Ah” vowel (*qamatz* –), the place of emphasis on words (beginning or ending of words) **and the letter *tav***. More specifically, as it relates to *tav*, while this letter is sometimes written as and sometimes as , Mizrahi (and Sephardi) Jews ignore the difference and pronounce both as a “T.” Ashkenazi pronunciation, on the other hand, differs between the two, with ת sounding like a “T” and ט like an “S.” It is for this reason, since has a ט as its final letter, sometimes we hear people saying Shabbat and other times we hear Shabbes. The same goes for Sukkot/Sukkos or Simchat Torah/Simchas Torah. When we write these words in Hebrew, there is no confusion, regardless of our personal practices. But when we transliterate into English, certain decision get made, and we should be aware of that.

While it is pretty rare for Reform congregations to have specific practices that are shared by all, one practice that *does* seem to be universal amongst Reform clergy and educators – and hence

Reform congregations as a whole – is that since the State of Israel uses Mizrahi pronunciation, so do we, even though the vast majority of Reform Jews are of Ashkenazi heritage. In other words, we at JCNWJ, like Jews at every single Reform congregation that I know, make no distinction in pronunciation between and – even if there is the occasional word or phrase that slips in from growing up with our Ashkenazi parents or grandparents.

So why is all of this of particular interest to me at this particular time of year? Because with American Thanksgiving only a few weeks away, that also means (for 2021, anyway) that it's time to start thinking about Hanukkah, or Chanukah if you prefer.

Transliteration is a funny thing, because while some see it as a distinct science with specific rules and regulations utilized in academic writing, others see it as an art to help the average person know how to pronounce words in Hebrew. For example, while the Society of Biblical literature (the premier society for academic Biblical scholarship) instructs us to transliterate חֲנֻכָּהּ into English letters as *ḥa ṣnukka ḥ* – with each mark representing not only a different consonant or vowel, but even a different form of each consonant or vowel – the Central Conference of American Rabbis opts instead for *Chanukah*, which is much more user friendly to the common reader.

So as you begin thinking about sending holiday cards to friends and family, just know that while there are many accepted ways of spelling חֲנֻכָּהּ in English, I would hesitate to call any of them wrong, so long as they help you pronounce the Hebrew word, חֲנֻכָּהּ. They are just different, much as Shabbat and Shabbes are the same things, but different. We all have our own traditions, and so long as you are happy with yours, that's all that really matters, because when making your choice, you'll be just as correct as everybody else, even if different.

That said, I wish you all a (slightly premature) Happy Hanukkah, Chanukah, Hanukah, Chanuka, Hanukah, etc.,

Hanukkah Sameah (that's how I spell it, but others might write something else, such as *Chanukah Sameach*, for instance),

Rabbi Dubin