

The Hebrew Corner

The Hebrew letter lamed (ל) is unique among the letters of the aleph-bet in that it extends above the line of the Hebrew square script. This is especially pronounced in the Hebrew scrolls of the Tanach (the reader is encouraged to view the facsimiles of ancient Hebrew scrolls on the web). The lamed as seen in these scrolls extends upward, often touching the line of script above, and so stands out in this regard. Why does the lamed have such a long upward extension? No one knows for sure, but this will be the subject of discussion in this month's corner.

Hebrew script has changed over the years, but originally each letter was a pictograph, that is, its form was a representation of an animal or another physical object. The original form of the lamed appeared as a shepherd's staff or a goad. The shepherd's staff was used to lead along, and the goad was used to prod the animal into moving in the direction that the shepherd desired. In the Tanach, we have a passage in which God likens himself to a shepherd, as spoken through the words of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34:11-12):

“For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.”

In the gospel of John, Jesus describes himself in similar terms (John 10:11):

“I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the

sheep.”

The tall extension of the letter lamed, then, could be calling attention to the leadership being provided by God as shepherd of the flock. When we view the scrolls, our eyes tend to be attracted and led along by the tall lameds as we come across them.

There is an important Hebrew word that is formed from the same three-letter root as the name of the letter lamed. The word is lamad (למד, lah-MAHD), which means to learn or to teach. From this word containing lamed, we see the reference to the learning, studying, and teaching necessary to understand and apply the word of God, as described in Deuteronomy 4:1:

“Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you.”

In the above passage, the word translated as teach is a form of the word lamad.

The dedication of the heart and the mind to God is captured in the Hebrew word lavav (לבב, lah-VAHV), which means heart or mind. The unity of the heart and mind, that is the emotions and reasoning, in our dedication to God is of critical importance, as evidenced by the following passage from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4-6):

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all the heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall

be in thine heart:”

The word translated as heart in this passage is lavav. This could be also translated as mind, and could well be referencing both heart and mind.

A critical word used frequently in the Tanach is the word lo (לא, LOH), which means no or not. This is a word used to prohibit certain acts of people. In fact, the last five of the ten commandments all start with the word lo (Exodus 20:13-17):

“Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.”

So each one of these commandments starts out with the lamed, acting as a kind of stop sign to get our attention.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the lamed is that it points upward. It points us away from the matters of the world, which are not pleasing to God, but instead directs us to look upward for spiritual guidance. May the letter lamed remind us to constantly be learning, growing, and looking upward to the glory and majesty of God. Have a blessed month, and shalom to you!