

The Hebrew Corner

Psalm 119 is the longest book of the Tanach, and being a volume of praise to God for giving us instruction in his way, it contains several important Hebrew words for us to consider.

There are 8 Hebrew words that are used repeatedly in this Psalm. In fact, 97% of the verses (171 of 176) contain one of these words. Let's identify them by considering some of the important verses containing them, starting with Psalm 119:11:

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”

The word translated as “word” in this passage is the Hebrew word imrah (אמרה, ihm-RAH), which may also be translated as utterance or speech. This Hebrew word is usually specific to speech or communication directly from an individual. It is then very important that speech coming directly from God be internalized, since he is righteous, the source of all that is good.

Next is Psalm 119:45:

“And I will walk in liberty, for I seek thy precepts.”

Translated here as precept, is the Hebrew word pikkud (פקוד, pihk-KOOD), which has the sole meaning precept. The Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines precept as (1) a command or principle intended especially as a general rule or action (2) an order issued by legally constituted authority to a subordinate official. Clearly God,

as creator of all, is the ultimate authority, and all mankind are subordinate to him. What's more, following his instructions as a general rule or principle, since they are intended for our good, allows us to walk in liberty. This follows because we are then able to stay away from addictions and other destructive practices that would prevent us from following the path he has laid out for our lives.

Next we consider Psalm 119:71:

“It is good for me that I have been afflicted, so that I might learn thy statutes.”

Statute is a translation for the Hebrew word *hoq* (חֹק, CHOHK), which also can be translated as something prescribed or due. This can be any enactment, decree, or ordinance of God. In this passage, we learn why we must at times go through afflictions and dark periods. This is a way that God can teach us to look for his guidance, and rely on his instructions.

In the next verse, Psalm 119:89, “word” is once again the translation, but a different Hebrew word is used:

“Forever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.”

The Hebrew word used here is *dabar* (דָּבָר, dah-VAHR). This word has broad connotations, and can mean speech, command, decision, sentence, matter, affair, way, or cause, in addition to word. In fact, when referring in Exodus to the ten commandments, *dabar* is used (ten sentences on stone tablets). The passage indicates, then, that all commands, decisions, affairs, and sayings of God are forever

settled in heaven, a very powerful statement that we can rely on!

Next we consider Psalm 119:97:

“O how I love they law! It is my meditation day and night.”

Translated as law in this passage is the familiar Hebrew word torah (תורה, toh-RAH). This is used specifically to refer to the five books of Moses that begin the Tanach, but can mean direction or instruction as well. The direction and instruction of God, is always worthwhile to meditate on, and since it is given for our benefit, it is proper to love it, but especially to love God, who gave us the torah.

The next passage also concerns meditation (Psalm 119:99):

“I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation.”

Implied here is that this individual has more understanding than his human teachers. He has gained this understanding through meditation on God's testimonies. The word translated here as testimony is the Hebrew word ayda (עדה, ay-DAH). In Exodus, this word is used to describe the tablets containing the law. Generally, in the Tanach, this word is used to describe any decree of God. Since ayda is derived from ayd (עד, AYD), meaning witness, the passage also implies that God can be relied on as a witness to the truth. So when we meditate on his testimonies, we are getting divine understanding that human teachers can never give us.

Next is Psalm 119:106:

“I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments.”

The Hebrew word translated as judgment in the passage is mishpat (עֲמֻשָּׁפֶט, mihsh-PAHT). This can mean an ordinance, decision, or an attribute of a judge. In all cases, the psalmist is dedicating himself to keep and perform the judgments of God. God's judgments are always righteous, so we should heed the above example and keep them, in order to live a holy and justified life.

We end with Psalm 119:176, the last verse of this psalm:

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant, for I do not forget thy commandments.”

Translated as commandment here, is the Hebrew word mitzvah (מִצְוָה, mihts-VAH), which the reader may recognize from barmitsvah, literally son of the commandment. The above passage is one for us to keep in mind, because by nature we are fallible, and prone to go astray at some point in time. Yet God's commandments are guideposts to get us back to his way, and to the plan that he has for our lives. First and foremost we need to accept the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, as payment for our sins, so that we can receive the love of God, and the abundant wisdom that he has for us.

I pray that you would seek God in all matters of your life, be they large or small, because they matter to God, who loves you. Have a blessed month, and may you draw nearer to God this new year.