

Two weeks ago when we came into the sanctuary to read from the Torah, I mentioned to Malcolm that in order to keep accuracy high as Torah scrolls were copied through the generations, a system had been established where columns begin with the Hebrew letter vav. That way one can scan quickly and establish whether the column was copied exactly.

But Malcolm isn't someone to accept things at their word and he looked at the top of the column and found, low and behold, that it didn't, unlike the nearby columns, start with a vav. He asked a great question- why not? Was our Torah defective or was there something special about this column? And he didn't give up.

The Cantor and I found various answers to his questions. First, to our great relief, we did find that this exception was standard practice and that our Torah is not defective. The Cantor found reference to six exceptions that together spell out the Hebrew words, with God's name, expressing the purpose of the scribes work.

The vav's were not chosen just because they are the simplest Hebrew letters, written with one stroke. The vavei ha-amudim, are an old custom going back to the 13th century and wrest on a Hebrew pun. In the ancient tabernacle there were hooks, that's what vav means literally, that held up

the curtains for the mishkan, thus establishing its structure. The Hebrew words, vavei haamudim, hooks that hold up the tapestry, is the same as the words for vav's for the columns. There is also an interpretation requiring this from a verse in Deuteronomy, in the chapter towards the end in which the writing of a Torah is commanded and the instruction to put it in an ark is given. According to Deuteronomy, every Jew is to write a Torah scroll once in their lifetime, a mitzvah we fulfilled at our congregation a couple of years ago when we had a scribe write in a Torah in our name, with many of us having the opportunity to help write a letter in the scroll.

But what was most interesting to me, was something else that I uncovered in looking for the answer to Malcolm's question. The entire enterprise of fixing the text of the Torah, that is the work of the Masorites, was probably in response to a major argument that was going on in the Jewish world at that time.

In the ancient world there was no punctuation, not in our Torah text, and not in the great texts of Egypt or even the Greek world. The great library at Alexandria introduced a form of punctuation but it didn't catch on.

In the Jewish world, a group of scholars, known as the Masorites, began to work on the text of the Torah in the 6th-10th century. They lived in ancient

Palestine, mainly in the holy cities of Tiberias, and Jerusalem, and also in Babylonia, what is today Iraq. They standardized the text of the Torah, fixing paragraphs, checking verse divisions, and eventually adding the cantillation notes which would be the first punctuation.

What prompted this work? At the time a great division of thought was developing in the Jewish world between the Karaite's and the Rabbanites. The Rabbanites held firmly to the belief that two Torahs had been given at Mt Sinai, the written Torah and the oral Torah. The Oral Torah included the Mishnah and the Talmud, along with the Midrashim and other later texts. These were understood to have been given to Moses and then passed down orally from generation to generation. Thus they were also to be viewed as inspired literature and binding on the community. The Karaite's saw a more significant difference between the Torah, revealed by God, and all these later writings. The argument went on for centuries, though individuals in each group continued to marry each other. This debate also prompted a great deal of the philosophical writing in the Sephardic community, as the Rabbanite's view was defended. It also prompted a great deal more attention on the Biblical text, and some feel that among the Masorites doing this important work there were Karaite scholars as well as Rabbanites. When the Reform movement first developed in the early part

of the 19th century, the early Reformers were accused of being Karaite's because of their focus on the primacy of the Bible over later rabbinic law.

Though unfamiliar to most Jews, there are still Karaite communities in the world today mainly in Israel and but also right here in Daly City.

One complicating factor in the 20th century was a decision made on January 5, 1939, by the Reich Office for Genealogical Research stating that it did not view the Karaite community as being racially connected to the Jews. As a consequence, most of the approximately 7,000 Karaites living in those parts of the Soviet Union occupied by Germany were spared annihilation. The Nazi's were thorough in this as in other matters. They had ordered an important scholar in Vilna, the center of Jewish learning, to create a bibliography for them of sources on the Karaites. He went out of his way to find materials to support the view that the Karaite's were not Semites and had no racial connection to the Jewish people. Similarly the Ashkenazi rabbis of the Crimea told the Nazi's that the Karaite's were not Jews in order to save their lives.

Many Karaite's helped Jews during the war by hiding them or including them in community lists, and many Karaite's also died in Nazi work camps. However after the war, and particularly in Israel, this decision by earlier

generations to declare the Karaite's a separate community was difficult to undo and some Karaite's are still reluctant to reveal their idea lest they experience exclusion from the mainstream Jewish community.

Isidore Rabi a Nobel prize winning physicist was once asked what had made him into the great scientist that he was. He said that as a child when he came from school, his mother had always asked him, not whether he had behaved, or had a good day, but "Izzy, did you ask a good question today?" Malcolm has asked a good question, a question that has prompted investigation and new learning, may you continue to do so throughout your life.