



THE LETTER

KUF

Divrei Hokhmah



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Brought to You by the Letter *Kuf*

This year's *Divrei Hokhmah* offer a different approach for study to open your meetings. Rather than focus on an annual theme or concept, we are presenting brief study pieces on words that begin with the letter *kuf*.

Why the letter *kuf*? *Kuf* is the 19th letter of the Hebrew alphabet and has the numerical value of 100. As we begin to mark Women's League's 100th anniversary, how appropriate to identify Hebrew words beginning with *kuf* to complement this centennial celebration!

The selected *kuf* words should be well known and are a fitting reflection of the Women's League mission to educate its members.

Of course, if you have another offering, please feel free to present it. And don't forget to share it with us!

Origins of the Letter *Kuf*

There are several theories about the origins of the shape of the letter *kuf*. Recent works (A. B. Davidson, *Hebrew Primer and Grammar*, and Harvard Studies in Classical Philology) suggest that its shape was meant to depict a sewing needle, specifically the eye of the needle, or knot. *Kuf* in Hebrew (and Aramaic) can mean "eye" or "hole" – as in eye of a needle.

An additional theory is that the letter looks like a monkey and its tail. Accordingly, the Hebrew word for monkey is *kof*.

There also are numerous mystical/kabbalistic explanations for the letter *kuf*. However, they are interpretations – and its origin still remains uncertain.

קודם **KODEM** (*before, previously*)

This year, as Women's League for Conservative Judaism celebrates its 100th anniversary, is a year in which we pay tribute to that which came before, **kodem**.

The organization has undergone extraordinary changes throughout the decades. The primary language of our members is no longer Yiddish. Our per capita dues have gone from ten cents to \$15. We no longer wear hats and gloves to meetings. In fact, many sisterhoods no longer have meetings. Our members today can be in touch, instantaneously, with any member, any place in the world, with the click of a mouse.

But some things remain the same, unchanged from **before (kodem)**.

In her speech calling for the establishment of a women's auxiliary of the United Synagogue, founder Mathilde Schechter said that this organization would not duplicate the work of other established women's organizations, but rather it would be ... "*a women's organization for Jewish work of a unique character – not for altruistic spirituality and uplift, but before all for the saving of our own souls and of those who came after...*"

- How would you characterize the mission of Women's League in relation to other women's organizations?
- Do you think that we have maintained the focus of those who came before?



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קדוש KADOSH (to sanctify)

- When you think of the word “holy” what behavior or thoughts comes to mind?
- What do the following have in common?
You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind
You shall not abuse a stranger living in your midst....
You should leave some gleanings from your field and fruit fallen from your vines for the poor...
- What is their common source?
[All of these commandments (*mitzvot*) appear in parashat Kedoshim (Holy things/ deeds) Leviticus 19-20. In this parashah, God commands a wide variety of actions – from treatment of the poor and disabled, to prohibitions against fraud, lying, stealing, and even prohibition against seeking out the supernatural.]
- What makes the above acts holy?
[Throughout the parashah, God says: “You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy”.]

All of our actions should be holy, even the most mundane.



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קטן KATAN (to be small)

We read in Pirkei Avot 4:26

Rabbi Yose bar Yebudah of K'far Bavli taught:

When a person learns from the young – hak'tanim – to what can she be compared? To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks from the vat. When a person learns from the elderly (zaken) to what can she be compared? To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks wine that is aged.

- What is this Mishnah suggesting?
[youth is unschooled or under-developed; ages yields the best results]
- For the contemporary individual, can you see competing values in this Mishnah?
[youth vs. maturity or There is value in a new, fresh approach vs. the traditional, tried and true approach]
- How do we reconcile these competing values?
- How do these competing values emerge in our synagogues and sisterhoods?



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קיים KAYAM (*preserve, sustain, save, maintain, exist*)

The verb *kayam* appears repeatedly in familiar texts.

Shebechayanu – the blessing we say to thank God for sustaining us (*kiyemanu*) so that we can celebrate great moments in our lives.

Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe who has granted us life (*shebecheyanu*) and sustained us (*vikeyemanu*) and enabled us (*vehigiyanu*) to reach this time. [BT Berachot 24a]

David Melekh Yisrael – (famously known as a popular children’s song) from the Talmud in which Rabban Gamliel suggests that those who are among the first to sight the new moon use an encoded message: *David melekh yisrael chai ve’kayam* (David king of Israel, lives and endures) [BT, Rosh Hashanah 25a]

The person who saves a single life [in Israel] is as if he/she has saved the whole world

Kol mekayam nefesh achat miyisrael....ke’ilu kayam olam malei (M, Sanbedrin)

- Is there any connection between these three usages of *kayam*?
[In all three rabbinic passages, the word *kayam*, preserve and endure, are infused with sanctity. God preserves Israel; King David endures; and every person in Israel has the capacity and/or obligation to preserve and sustain life as a sacred act.]
- What do we want to sustain and preserve today and how will we do that?



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קהילה KEHILLAH (*Community*)

100 years ago, Mathilde Schechter and her fellow rabbinic spouses founded our Women’s League community. Their mission was “to perpetuate traditional Judaism in our homes, synagogues and communities, a task for American Jewish women.”

Times have changed and now we are embarking on our second 100 years.

- How has our community of Conservative Jewish women changed?
- Is there a need for women’s groups anymore?
- What can we do to remain a Kehillah Kedoshah, a special community of Jewish women in our synagogues and globally?



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קמח KEMAKH (*flour*)

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah taught:

*...Im ein kemakh, ein Torah,
Im ein Torah, ein kemakh.*

“...No sustenance, no Torah;
No Torah, no sustenance.”

[Pirkei Avot 3:21]

Some synagogues have created new approaches to collecting dues.

- Can a synagogue survive without a dues structure?
- Should sisterhoods discontinue collecting dues?
- Do we need to pay for our children to receive a Jewish education?
- Does this quote from Pirkei Avot apply to us today?



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קרוב KERUV (*drawing near, bringing near*)

How far we have come from Tevye who cast out his daughter when she married a non-Jew!

The treatment and attitudes toward intermarried couples have gone through enormous changes in synagogues within the Conservative movement. They have evolved from Tevye-like responses to those more reflective of contemporary social realities.

From the United Synagogue website on Keruv:

Rabbi Robert Slosberg of Adath Jeshurun in Louisville, Kentucky, the RA Keruv Committee's co-chair, said, “We'll never all be exactly on the same page, and I don't want us to be, but the movement is taking a double-edged approach, both encouraging conversion and welcoming people who are not at all interested in converting but still want to have some connection to the community. Outreach may lead to conversion if that is what the person desires, but even if it doesn't, the notion of being welcoming and inviting and loving, of making people feel embraced, is to me what the Conservative movement is all about.”

- What is the double-edged approach that Rabbi Slosberg is suggesting?
- How does this conform to traditional Jewish notions about intermarriage?
- What do you think about this change in attitude – how will it affect our movement?



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קשר KESHER (*tie, knot, relationship, connection*)

Family, friends, acquaintances, business colleagues, synagogue and sisterhood members – relationships are central to our lives. We have a need to connect with others.

The Hebrew word קשר (*kesher*) translates as tie, knot, relationship or connection. Those knots that we tie are the connections we make with others, the people with whom we unite. It is interesting that from the same root, the word תקשרת (*tikshoret*, translated as “communication”) is derived.

How important is communication to the maintenance of relationships? Don Oswald said, “Communication must be HOT, that’s Honest, Open, and Two-way.”

Miscommunication results in the unraveling of the connections we’ve spent so much time tying together. *Kesher*: tying people together in relationships by communicating precisely.

- Tony Robbins said, “The quality of your life is the quality of your relationships.” Is this true? If I love my job, live in a beautiful home, eat at gourmet restaurants, wear designer clothes, vacation wherever I want – do I not have quality of life?
- How can you enhance relationships in your sisterhood or in your life?

קבוצה KEVUTZAH (*team*)

The verb, kuf-bet-tzade, *kabat* (to gather) is commonly and frequently employed. It is the root of several well known words:

kibbutz

kevutzah (team)

We Jews are a communal people. We place great value in assembly – the synagogue, the minyan, the organization, the committee (to name but a few).

This value is reflected in Pirkei Avot 3:7 which states:

When ten persons sit together and study Torah, the Shekhinah hovers over them, as it is written, “God is present in the divine assembly.”

- What do you think is the meaning of this mishnah?

While we Jews maintain that sanctity of the individual is unambiguous – we nevertheless place great significance in collectivity. But this creates a tension.

- How do we negotiate the needs of the individual needs over those of the community?
- In what types of situations do these conflicts arise?
- What creative mechanisms might we employ to negotiate the tensions between individual and communal needs?



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קלף KLAF *(the specially prepared parchment for a Mezuzah)*

The Shema, the first prayer we teach our children, the prayer on the lips of the dying, the prayer that is central to Judaism, is written on the *klaf*.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

“Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, The Lord is One.”

- Are we being asked to “hear” or to “listen?”
[Hearing is an involuntary act. Listening is focused and intentional.]

Nancy Foster, in her article “Good Communication Starts With Listening,” says that “listening” is the foundation of good communication: “We have two ears and only one mouth.”

www.mediate.com/articles/foster2.cfm

- How do these statements reconcile with your definition of “communication?”
- What are some ways we can become more effective communicators?
- What is the importance of the word “shema” in this prayer?

קול KOL *(voice)*

The Hebrew word for “voice,” *kol* has another meaning. It can also mean sound. For instance, *Kol Han'harot* is the sound of the rivers. The roaring rivers over time erode the land around them, literally shaping and changing the world.

- How does your *kol* shape the world?

Gil Ezring

Jewish Theological Seminary

H.L. Miller Cantorial School, 2018