

On the Number of Verses, Words and Letters in the Bible

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About 20 years ago an article titled "On the Number of Verses, Words and Letters in the Bible" was published in the periodical "Shma'atin" (number 65-66, 5741). In that article the author, Abraham Korman, sums up several articles which he had earlier published on the same subject in the same periodical.¹ In those articles Mr. Korman presented a sophistic interpretation of the well-known *braita* in Kidushin 30a about the counting of letters, words, and verses by the early *Soferim*. This *braita* and the discussion about it between R' Yosef and his students raise many difficulties, and Korman's article tries to solve them by reading the *braita* in a way that is completely detached from its plain literal meaning. Most of the solutions Korman suggests he heard from Rabbi Isaac Zilber, who immigrated from the Soviet Union at that time. Had these things been said only in the manner of "thy law is my amusement" (Psalms 119:77) I would have kept silent. But since Korman himself had testified in his article that his previous articles were received by many of the readers as the true interpretation of the *braita*, I found it fit to respond to these things in the same periodical in which they were published (Shma'atin). Unfortunately the editors of that periodical didn't find the courage to publish my response. Since I had more urgent things to deal with at the time, I put my response aside, where it stayed forgotten till now.

Lately I have heard that Korman's articles have resurfaced, and the sophistic, imaginative, and baseless interpretation of the *braita* in Kidushin 30a which appeared in them has been republished in various periodicals. R' Zilber, on whom Korman relied in his articles, has himself published his own ideas in an article in the periodical "Moriah."² It seems that the main reason for the renewed interest in this subject is the intensive occupation with the theory of Torah Codes in certain circles. This *braita* disturbs the people dealing with this subject since the plain meaning of the *braita* and R' Yosef's understanding of it seems to testify to the existence of textual variance in the Bible's text in Chazal's time. This testimony does not fit the assumption that is the basis of the Torah Codes theory, namely that no change has occurred in the text during the transmission of the Bible in general and of the Pentateuch specifically. Recently I have been asked by many people to voice my opinion on the subject, and I recalled that forgotten article. I have brushed the dust from it and I now publish it as it was written 20 years ago, with some small additions referring mainly to R' Zilber's new article.³

The *braita* on the counting of letters, words, and verses

And this is the language of the Talmud in Kidushin 30a:

"Therefore the first ones were called *Soferim*, for they counted every letter in the Pentateuch, for they said the *vav* of *Gachon* (Leviticus 11:42) is the middle of the letters of the Pentateuch scroll, *darosh darash* (Leviticus 10:16) is the middle of the words, and *v'hitgalach* (Leviticus 13:33) is the middle of the verses, *yecharsemena chazir mi'yaar* (Psalms 80:14) - the *ayin* of *ya'ar* is the middle of Psalms, *v'hu rachum yechaper avon* (Psalms 78:38) is the middle of the verses.⁴ R' Yosef asked: 'is the *vav* of *Gachon* on this side or on that side?' They told him: 'Let's bring a book and count it, like Rabba Bar Bar Hana said [in another context]: They did not move from there

until a sefer Torah was brought and counted.' He replied: 'They were experts in defective and plene spelling, we are not experts.' Rav Yosef asked: '*V'hitgalach* is on one side or on the other?' Abaye said to him: 'At least the verses we can count?' -[No,] in verses, likewise, we are not experts. For when Rav Acha Bar Ada came he said: 'In the West [Eretz Israel] they have separated this verse into three verses - "And G-d said to Moses, Behold I am coming to you in the thickness of the cloud" (Exodus 19:9).' The rabbis taught that 5888 verses are the verses of the Pentateuch, Psalms has eight more and Chronicles has eight fewer."

There is no difficulty in understanding the language of the *braitā*. The simple meaning is that *vav* of *Gachon* is the middle of the letters of the Pentateuch, and likewise *darosh darash* is the middle of the words of the Pentateuch and *vehitgalach* is the middle of the verses of the Pentateuch. This is the way R' Yosef understood these things, and so did all the people around him; otherwise their words are not clear at all. For what is the meaning of R' Yosef's question "on this side or on that side" if we don't assume that he meant the middle of the all the letters of the Pentateuch (and likewise regarding the words and verses)? It would be even more difficult to understand the answer, "They were experts in defective and plene spelling, we are not experts" if we don't assume that the discussion here is regarding the exact number of the letters in the Pentateuch.

Therefore there is no doubt about the plain meaning of the language of the *braitā*. The difficulty lies in the fact that what the *braitā* says is not in accordance with the reality in the Masoretic Torah scrolls we have nowadays. But we will miss the truth if we try to solve the problem by reading the *braitā* in a way that is completely different from its plain meaning, the meaning that was obvious to the great sages in all ages, starting with R' Yosef himself and ending with the sages of the Masorah and the prominent Rishonim and Achronim.⁵

Not only are the solutions that Korman suggested in his article based on reading the *braitā* in a way that is completely different from its plain meaning, but they also suffer from astonishingly careless presentation of the facts upon which they are based. We will discuss the issues in the order in which they are presented by Korman.

The number of verses in the Pentateuch vs. Psalms and Chronicles

We will start by checking the suggested solution to the difficult passage which compares the number of verses in the Pentateuch with those in Psalms and Chronicles. There are several difficulties in this *braitā*:

- (1) The number of verses in the Pentateuch according to the *braitā* (5888, or according to other versions 8888) is different from what we see in our books (5845 verses).
- (2) The number of verses in Psalms is not eight more than in the Pentateuch, but quite the opposite - it is fewer by thousands of verses.
- (3) The number of verses in Chronicles is not eight less than in the Pentateuch, but thousands less (even less than the number of verses in Psalms).

To these difficulties the article suggests the following imaginative solution:

- (A) The number 5888 in the *braitā* includes not only the number of the verses in the Pentateuch proper, but also includes verses from the Pentateuch that are quoted in Psalms and Chronicles. The total number of these verses, he claims, is 43 (8 in

Psalms and 35 in Chronicles), and when added to the number of verses in the Pentateuch, it gives the number mentioned in the *braita* (5888). Should you ask why the *braita* includes in this number only those verses from the Pentateuch are quoted in Psalms and Chronicles, the author has a straightforward answer: **"There was no room for comparison between the Pentateuch and other books of the Bible [besides Psalms and Chronicles] since the verses of the Pentateuch are quoted accurately only in these two books."** [Emphasis Korman's (M.C.)]⁶

- (B) The statement of the *braita* that "Psalms has eight more" means "Eight such verses from the Pentateuch appear in Psalms."
 (C) The statement of the *braita* that "Chronicles has eight less" means, in the author's words: "The difference between the number of the verses in the Pentateuch (5845) and the number 5888 is 35, which is eight less than 43, and these verses can be found in Chronicles."⁷

The author himself seems to have felt slightly uncomfortable with suggesting a solution so radically different from the plain meaning of the text of the *braita*, but he is satisfied by commenting: "Indeed the language of this *braita* is not very clear, but there are many *braitot* like this, and moreover **this is the most reasonable explanation of it, especially in view of the amazing agreement between the strange number in the *braita* and reality**" (Emphasis Korman's).⁸

Let's check to see if this "amazing agreement" indeed exists in reality, or if it is only the product of the amazing imagination of the people who suggested it, who sought a solution for the *braita* at any price.

The first difficulty is the number 5888 itself. Korman's suggestion is based totally on this number, but Korman himself commented in another place⁹ that he thinks that the original version is 8888, and not "our version (5888) which is very late." I agree with this for 2 reasons: (A) From the words of the Rishonim it's clear that their version read 8888 (see remark 27 there). (B) It seems obvious that the *braita* is based on playing with the number 8, and the number 5 spoils in the symmetry. It seems then that the whole imaginative idea is based on a late change to the original number, 8888.

A second difficulty is about the verses that are brought in Korman's article as quotes from the Pentateuch. Logically, these verses should be complete, both in the Pentateuch and in Psalms and Chronicles, for after all we are dealing here with the number of **verses** and not the number of fragments of verses! Moreover, from Korman's discussion it appears that this was indeed the criterion he followed. For in one of his remarks there he says: "In the book *Kinamon Bosem* this verse [Genesis 10:7 and its parallel in I Chronicles 1:9] doesn't appear and instead, the verse from Genesis 25:13 and its parallel in I Chronicles 1:29 appears there. **But there the verse from Chronicles is identical only to half the verse in Genesis**, whereas the verse we quoted here appears in Chronicles in its entirety." [Emphasis mine, M.C.]¹⁰

Because Korman rejects the verse from I Chronicles 1:29 as an example of a quote from the Pentateuch, one might conclude that all the other verses he brings do meet this criterion he set. But to our great surprise, when we checked those verses we found the following:

In Psalms - none of the eight citations is a complete verse both in Psalms and in the Pentateuch. In examples 1 and 8 the verse is complete in Psalms, but only part of a

verse appears in the Pentateuch. In the other 6 examples we have only fragments of verses both in Psalms and in the Pentateuch.

In Chronicles - 9 out of 35 examples are not complete verses, as follows: in examples 12, 20, and 35 the verse is complete in the Pentateuch, whereas in Chronicles it is only a fragment. In examples 11, 31, and 34 the verse is complete in Chronicles, but only a fragment in the Pentateuch. In examples 3, 28, and 33 we have only fragments of verses both in the Pentateuch and in Chronicles. We see then that 17 of 43 examples shouldn't be included in the list according to the criterion that Korman used to exclude I Chronicles 1:29.¹¹

A third problem with the 43 examples Korman brings is, perhaps, the most serious: Korman states in an unequivocal manner that only verses which are identical **down to the letter** can be regarded as quotations, and any verse which is different from its parallel even one by letter cannot be included. This criterion can be deduced from Korman's discussion of whether we should include Genesis 25:13 in the list of verses quoted in Chronicles. He decides that we shouldn't because the word נביות is written plene in Chronicles and in Genesis it is defective (נבית), whereas "all the verses or fragments of verses we mentioned are **completely identical** [Emphasis mine, M.C.] in the Pentateuch and Psalms or Chronicles."¹²

Again the innocent reader tends to believe such categorical and unequivocal statements, and to rely upon the credibility and responsibility of the author to what he writes, especially since he presents a list of the relevant verses, as though he wants the public to see and judge. And the public indeed sees, but doesn't judge or check the facts, but rather believes them without checking. Only in this way we can understand how it happened that amongst the many responses Korman says he received,¹³ not one disputed this statement he made. Had anyone bothered to check the facts he would have rubbed his eyes in wonder: not only are there several examples in Korman's lists in which the verses in Chronicles and Psalms differ from their parallels in the Pentateuch in plene and defective spelling, but some are different in consonants and even whole words, as we can see in the following table (The examples are brought in the order in which Korman listed them):

<u>Phenomenon</u>	<u>In the Pentateuch</u>		<u>In Writings</u>	
	<u>Verse</u>	<u>Text</u>	<u>Verse</u>	<u>Text</u>
Plene vs. defective spelling:	Numbers 21:34	לסִיחֹן	Psalms 135:11	לִסִּיחֹן
	Numbers 21:34	לִסִּיחֹן	Psalms 136:19	לִסִּיחֹן
	Deuteronomy 26:8	וּבְזָרַע	Psalms 136:12	וּבְזָרַע
	Genesis 10:3	וּתְגַרְמָה	I Chronicles 1:6	וּתְגַרְמָה
	Genesis 1:8	נִמְרֹד גְּבֹר	I Chronicles 1:10	נִמְרֹד גְּבֹר
	Genesis 1:15	צִדֹּן	I Chronicles 1:13	צִדֹּן
	Genesis 1:19	אוֹפֵר	I Chronicles 1:23	אוֹפֵר
	Genesis 25:4	וּחֹנֶךְ	I Chronicles 1:33	וּחֹנֶךְ
	Genesis 36:34	חֹשֶׁם	I Chronicles 1:45	חֹשֶׁם
	Genesis 36:35	חֹשֶׁם	I Chronicles 1:46	חֹשֶׁם
Genesis 38:6	וַיִּמְתְּהוּ	I Chronicles 2:3	וַיִּמְתְּהוּ	
Letter changes:	Genesis 10:3	וּרִיפַת	I Chronicles 1:6	וּדִיפַת
	Genesis 10:28	עוֹבֵל	I Chronicles 1:22	עֵיבֵל

	Genesis 36:39	הדר פעו	I Chronicles 1:50	הדר פעו
	Genesis 36:40	עלוה	I Chronicles 1:51	עלוה (written)
	Genesis 10:7	וסבתה ורעמה	I Chronicles 1:9	וסבתא ורעמא
Letter transposition:	Genesis 36:36	עוית	I Chronicles 1:47	עוית (written)
	Deuteronomy 24:16	ימתו (3x)	I Chronicles 25:4	ימותו (3x) ¹⁴
Redundant letters:	Genesis 10:13	לודים	I Chronicles 1:11	לודיים (written)
Word changes:	Exodus 34:6:	יהוה	Psalms 86:15	אדני
Missing words:	Genesis 36:39	בן עכבור	I Chronicles 1:50	(none)
	Deuteronomy 24:16	איש	II Chronicles 25:4	כאיש

In light of this long table of changes we can say that the whole edifice of Korman's sophistic explanation of the *braitā* crumbles unless the author retreats from his claim that he is talking about quotations which are letter-perfect. But in that case, we can add more quotations, and the first amongst them is the one which Korman wished to exclude from the list (Genesis 25:13/I Chronicles 1:29).

There is one more element in Korman's presentation that can mislead the reader, and this is his explanation why the *braitā* chose only these two books (Psalms and Chronicles) as books that quote verses from the Torah: "**There was no place for comparison between the Torah and other books of the Bible [besides Psalms and Chronicles] since the verses of the Torah are quoted accurately only in these two books.**" [Emphasis Korman's, M.C.]¹⁵ This sentence is the preface to the list of 43 quoted verses, and immediately following it is the presenting sentence "Here is the list of verses."

We have already seen the "precision" of many of these verses, both with regard to the completeness of the verses and the spelling. Sometimes not only doesn't the "quote" maintain the complete verse, it also fails to maintain the complete of a sentence. This is the situation in most of the examples that Korman brings from Psalms, where the quotes from the Torah are only sentence fragments. For example, from the verse "וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-תִּירָא אֹתוֹ כִּי בִדְרָךְ נִתְּתִי אֹתוֹ וְאֶת-כָּל-עֲמֹו וְאֶת-אֶרְצוֹ וְעָשִׂיתָ לוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ" (Numbers 21:34; see also Deuteronomy 3: 2), a mere three words, which don't even constitute a sentence, appear in two places in Psalms. Korman (or more accurately, Zilber) is satisfied enough with this fragment to list it as two of the quotes in Psalms (No. 4- Ps. 135:11; No. 5- Ps. 136:19). Three other quotes in Psalms are also sentence fragments:

Number 3: "אֶרְךְ אֲפִים וְרַב-חֶסֶד" (Exodus 34:6//Psalms 103:8)

Number 6: "בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן" (Numbers 33:1//Psalms 77:21)

Number 7: "בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזַרְעַ נְטוּיָה" (Deuteronomy 22:8//Psalms 136:12)

According to this criterion for the definition of quotes, we can find many quotes not only in these two books, but also in other books of the Bible. Even two of these very quotes, attributed to Psalms, also appear in other books. Thus we find

A. The expression "אָרְךָ אַפִּים וְרַב-הַסֹּד" (Exodus 34:6, number 3 on the list in Psalms) is also quoted with precisely the same spelling in Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, and Nehemiah 9:17.

B. The expression "בְּיַד הַזָּקֵה וּבְזָרְעוֹ נְטוּיָה" (Deuteronomy 26:8 and others, number 7 on the list in Psalms) is also quoted twice in Ezekiel 20: 33-34.

In the same way, the quote in Chronicles (no. 35 in the list) of the sentence "לֹא-יִוָּמְתוּ אָבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וּבָנִים לֹא-יִוָּמְתוּ עַל-אָבוֹת" (Deuteronomy 24:16) not only also appears in II Kings 14:6, but in fact the quote in II Kings is the original quote from the Torah, as it says there: "כִּכְתוּב בְּסֵפֶר-תּוֹרַת-מֹשֶׁה," while in Chronicles the verse is mentioned as part of the whole story copied from the book of Kings, as anyone who compares both chapters can see.

Anyone who bothers to search for other examples in the Bible for quotations of this kind can find many of them, and even in Psalms itself he would find many more quotes besides those used by Korman to fill his quota of eight verses. Here are a few selected examples:

"אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ" (Exodus 20:2//Psalms 81:11)

"אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם" (Leviticus 18:4//Ezekiel 20:19)

"וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם" (Exodus 6:7//Joel 4:17)

"וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה" (Exodus 10:12//I Kings 20:28)

"אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה" (Leviticus 8:37//Nehemiah 8:14)

"עַל-פִּי יְהוָה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה" (Numbers 9:23//Joshua 29:2)

"וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל מַלְאָכָיו אֶל-סִיחֹן (//סִיחוֹן) מֶלֶךְ-הָאֲמֹרִי" (Numbers 21:21//Judges 11:19)

"וַיִּצְאֶסְף סִיחֹן (//סִיחוֹן) אֶת-כָּל-עַמּוֹ" (Numbers 21:23//Judges 11:20)

"אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר" (Deuteronomy 12:5//Joshua 9:27)

"וַיִּנְקֶה לֹא יִנְקֶה" (Exodus 34:7//Nahum 1:3)

"(ו) כִּרְבִיבִים עָלֵי-עֵשֶׂב" (Deuteronomy 32:2//Michah 5:6)

"וַיִּתְעַצֵּר הַמַּגֵּפָה" (Numbers 25:8//Psalms 106:30)

Darosh darash - middle words of the Pentateuch

We shall now turn to the second solution suggested in Korman's article (in the name of R' Isaac Zilber) to the problem that arises from the *braita's* statement "*darosh darash* is the middle of the words." The difficulty, as we have already mentioned, is that this doesn't match the situation in our texts. And again a witty and enticing explanation is suggested - *darosh darash* is not the middle of all the words in the Pentateuch, as it seems from the plain meaning of the text, but rather "marks of the middle of all the double words in the Pentateuch. This is the only reasonable explanation suggested for solving this riddle."¹⁶ Here, too, Korman brings a list, this time of 89 cases of double words in the Pentateuch, with *darosh darash* indeed in the middle (number 45).

Indeed this suggestion also shows a lot of creative imagination. But to reach the truth one needs greater expertise in the customs and rules of the Masorah literature than is presented in Korman's article. After all, the Masorah literature has consolidated

through many lists and rules, the customs of counting letters, words, combinations of words, and other textual phenomena as they evolved over centuries of Masoretic activity, of which our *braitā* is one of the early flowerings. It would therefore have been appropriate to look first at the customs of the Masorah in counting the succession of letters, words, and verses of the different Biblical books on the one hand and the customs of the Masorah in counting scattered phenomena in the Bible on the other.

Such an examination will reveal that noting the half-way mark (and sometimes also the quarter-way) is done only in the context of the number of letters, words, and verses in parts of the Bible (division, book, and sometimes even *parasha*).¹⁷ But you won't ever find, in any of the thousands of lists which count various phenomena spread throughout the Bible and its parts, anyone marking their middle.¹⁸ The suggestion of seeing *darosh darash* as marking the middle of a phenomenon spread all over the Pentateuch is completely alien to the customs of the Masorah.

More than that: We can find that the Masorah referring to the very words we discuss. In any place that the Masorah mentions the middle letter, word, and verse in the Pentateuch it states that *vav* of *Gachon* is the middle letter, *darosh darash* is the middle word, and *VaYasem Alav et HaChoshen* (Leviticus 8:8) is the middle verse.¹⁹ The Masorah has adopted our *braitā*'s statement regarding the middle letter and word, but regarding the middle verse a new count was made and a different middle verse was determined. Can we cast doubt on the clear fact that this speaks of a continuum of letters and words in the Pentateuch simply because of a specific question of whether the determination about *vav* of *Gachon* or *darosh darash* is precise?

Therefore we don't really need to discuss whether the suggestion is factually correct. Even if it is correct that *darosh darash* is in the middle of the list of double words in the Pentateuch, it would have nothing to do with the plain meaning of the *braitā*, which as we said is completely clear. It is interesting, though, to follow the development of this claim described by Korman himself: Korman didn't count the double words in the Torah. He relies on counts made by others (R' Isaac Zilber and R' Meir Mazuz),²⁰ and according to his testimony the different counts led to 3 different results: 77 in R' Zilber's first count,²¹ 85 in his second count, and, finally, 89 in R' Mazuz's count, which also fits the number that appears in the book, *Or Torah*, which Korman wasn't able to locate when he wrote his article.²²

But even the final list²³ is not too "smooth," as the reader can see from Korman's hesitation regarding the double words כה כה (Exodus 7:16-17).²⁴ Although these words appear in two different verses, Korman is willing, in order to sustain his idea, to go so far as to suggest a correction to the separation of verses. He writes: "But, since the idea about *darosh darash* is amazingly suitable after a thorough check of the double words in the Pentateuch, we may assume that in Chazal's times these two verses were one, and so כה and כה were in the same verse." Here we have the system in a nutshell: the idea is "amazingly suitable," and if it doesn't suit the text so well, then we force the text to suit it.

Vav of Gachon - middle letter of the Pentateuch

All we said above is also correct for Korman's third suggestion, meant to solve the problem of *vav* of *Gachon*. This suggestion, too, was made by R' Isaac Zilber, and it says that *vav* of *Gachon* is not the middle of all the letters of the Pentateuch, only the middle amongst the unusual letters of the Pentateuch. To enlighten us, Korman also

brings a list of all these letters, 17 in number (11 large, 5 small and one truncated), with the word *Gachon* right in the middle:²⁵

1. בראשית (Genesis 1:1); 2. ב'בראם (Genesis 2:4); 3. ולב'תה (Genesis 23:2); 4. צתי^ר (Genesis 27:46); 5. נצר (Exodus 34:7); 6. אחר (Exodus 34:14); 7. ויקר^א (Leviticus 1:1); 8. וקדה^א (Leviticus 6:2); 9. גחון (Leviticus 11:42); 10. והתגלה (Leviticus 13:33); 11. יגדל (Numbers 13:7); 12. שלים (Numbers 25:12); 13. שמע (Deuteronomy 6:4); 14. אחד (*ibid.*); 15. וישלכם (Deuteronomy 29:27); 16. ה ליי (Deuteronomy 32:7); 17. תש' (Deuteronomy 32:18)

Even if this list were accurate, we would have had to reject the suggestion outright. We already mentioned above that the Masorah never mentions the middle of phenomena spread throughout the Bible, only the middle of successive segments of letters, words, or verses. We have also seen that *vav* of *Gachon* itself serves in the Masorah books to note the middle of all the letters in the Pentateuch, as *darosh darash* serves there to note the middle of all the words. We should also remember, and we already said so at the beginning of this article, that R' Yosef himself understood the *braita* in this way, for he asks "is [it] on one side or on the other?" and when people suggest that he should count he answers "They were experts in defective and plene spelling, we are not experts." We cannot understand the question nor the answer unless we assume that we are talking about the middle of all the letters in the Pentateuch.

We have to reject this suggestion more vigorously when we find that it is based on an incorrect and misleading presentation of the facts! Korman states as a well-known fact that the number of unusual letters in the Pentateuch is 17, and seemingly proves the central position of *vav* of *Gachon* by presenting the entire list of unusual letters. We have already seen how much the average reader tends to believe conclusions based upon detailed facts presented to him. But in fact the list brought by Korman (which we presented above) is incorrect, and is missing one letter: the large *nun* of משפטן (Numbers 27:5). This fact alone undermines the basis of this suggestion.

We can also add some facts which whoever wishes to attribute a particular list of unusual letters to the early *Soferim* must take into account. The particular list we presently accept (which, as we said, has 18 unusual letters and not 17) wasn't the only list accepted by the Jewish people through time, and there is no reason to assume that this is the list which was before the early *Soferim*. For example, in the Aleppo Codex, which is the most accurate Masoretic text we have and upon which Maimonides relied in his *Hilchot Sefer Torah*, as well as in other accurate manuscripts from its time, there were fewer unusual letters than we use.²⁶ On the other hand, there are later medieval traditions of writing in which the number of unusual letters is much higher than what we now use. This phenomenon is particularly common in the Ashkenazi texts. For example, in Vienna MS 1 we have 32 unusual letters in the Pentateuch:

(A) Large letters. In addition to the 11 in our list there are 15 more:

וּבֵהֶעֱטִיף (Genesis 30:42); הַכְּזוֹנָה (Genesis 37:31); חֲכִלִּי (Genesis 49:12); שְׁלֹשָׁם (Genesis 50:23); טוֹב (Exodus 2:2); צִיץ (Exodus 28:36); וִיהִס (Numbers 13:30); מֵה (Numbers 24:5); וּנְךְ (Deuteronomy 2:33); עֲרִשׁוֹ (Deuteronomy 3:11); תַּמִּים (Deuteronomy 18:3); קֵן (Deuteronomy 22:4); וְהִתְמַכְּרְתֶם (Deuteronomy 28:68); וּפְתִלְתֵל (Deuteronomy 32:5); אֲשֵׁרִיךְ (Deuteronomy 36:29).²⁷

(B) Small letters and truncated *vav*: As in our list, except for מוקדה which is written with a regular letter; instead מֵמֵרִים is written with a small letter.

When we check dozens of Biblical medieval manuscripts we find that there are three basic situations regarding unusual letters: (A) Much fewer letters than in our books. (B) A similar number of letters to our books. (C) Many more letters than in our books. Similarly, there are also situations between A and B, and between B and C. Situation A is especially common amongst ancient manuscripts from the area of Eretz Israel, but it also appears in some later manuscripts in Europe.²⁸ Situation B (or something similar to it) appears mainly in Spanish manuscripts, and situation C (or something similar to it) appears mainly in Ashkenaz.

Situations B and C stem from two Masoretic lists, one of which is probably the complement of the other. We find in different sources²⁹ a list that enumerates large letters in the whole Bible in alphabetical order. Of these 11 are in the Pentateuch and the others are in the rest of the Bible. The second list also appears in different sources and it enumerates in alphabetical order 27-28 large letters in the Pentateuch alone, including the letters in the first list.³⁰ As for the small letters, there is only one list that enumerates them alphabetically in the entire Bible; of these only seven appear in the Pentateuch (including one "truncated" *vav*), and these are the ones which appear in our texts.³¹ All the lists have some amount of variations to them, but we won't dwell on this here. What is important to say in summing this matter up is that the state of the unusual letters in our texts is the result of the combination of the lists of large letters and the list of small letters in the entire Bible. As we said, those lists have only 11 large letters and 7 small letters in the Pentateuch. This is not the place to discuss how it happened that these particular lists influenced the consolidation of the list in our current text, but we have sufficient testimony to follow this process. In any case, the information which I brought here is enough to cast doubt on the assumption that the early *Soferim* had before them any particular list of unusual letters. All signs indicate that if they had any such list before them it was more like the list which appears in the Aleppo Codex than the list that appears in our texts today.³²

R' Zilber's article

Here we have to say some words on the new article written by R' Isaac Zilber,³³ in which he reiterates what he said more than 20 years ago with some new variations, again confirming the distorted way in which "modern" interpreters treat both the facts and the conclusions of this *braita* in Kidushin. In this new article R' Zilber tries to overcome the difficulty that remained after his old explanation of R' Yosef's question, whether *vav* of *Gachon* is "on this side or that side," a question which is difficult to understand if we assume that we are talking about the unusual letters. According to R' Zilber's new suggestion R' Yosef is wondering which of two lists of unusual letters in the Pentateuch was before the *Soferim*. Was it the one which exists in our text, with **16 unusual letters** (Emphasis mine, M.C.), or the list of R' Yosef Tuv-Elem with 32 such letters?³⁴ According to the first list *Gachon* is in the 9th place, i.e. at the beginning of the second half (that is "on this side"), whereas according to the second list *Gachon* is in the 17th place, i.e. the end of the first half (that is "on that side").

Here we have yet another example of the flexibility with which R' Zilber and his followers fit the facts to their sophistic interpretation. Let us remember that in his article Korman has presented, in R' Zilber's name, 17 cases of unusual letters in the Pentateuch, so that *vav* of *Gachon* fell exactly in the middle (9th place).³⁵ Now that R' Zilber needs *vav* of *Gachon* to be in the beginning of the second half (9th place out of 16), so that it will be "on that side," he doesn't hesitate to omit one of the letters (the truncated *vav*) from the list.

Even worse is his way of treating the facts of the second list. Here he needs the *vav* of *Gachon* to be at the end of the first half. Again he tries to convince the reader by presenting a detailed list which he describes as R' Yosef Tuv-Elem's (RYTE) list, found in Machzor Vitri.³⁶ Though *Gachon* indeed appears in R' Zilber's list exactly in the right place, any connection between this list and RYTE's is entirely coincidental. Anyone who wants to prove this is invited to compare the two lists. Here is RYTE's list, in order of the appearance in the Pentateuch:

1. ברֹאשִׁית; 2. בְּבִרְאָם; 3. וּלְבִתָּהּ; 4. צִתִּי; 5. וּבִהֶעֱטִיף; 6. הַכְּזֹנָה; 7. חֲכִלִּי; 8. וְהַתְּגַלַּח; 9. טוֹב; 10. צֹא; 11. צִיץ; 12. נֹצֵר; 13. אַחֲרָיִךְ; 14. וַיִּקְרָא; 15. גִּחּוֹן; 16. וְהַתְּגַלַּח; 17. וַיְהִי; 18. יִגְדֵל; 19. מֵה; 20. מִשְׁפָּטָן; 21. שְׁמַע; 22. אַחַד; 23. עֵרֶשׁ; 24. מֵרִים; 25. תַּמִּים; 26. קָן; 27. וְהַתְּמַכְרָתָם; 28. וַיִּשְׁלַכְם; 29. וּפְתַלְתַּל; 30. הֵ לִי; 31. תֵּשׁ; 32. אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ.

To this list, which is RYTE's list in Machzor Vitri, R' Zilber made four changes: (A) He added מוֹקְדָה (Leviticus 6:2) from the list in our texts. (B) He omitted עֵרֶשׁ (Deuteronomy 3:11). (C) He omitted תַּמִּים (Deuteronomy 18:13). (D) He attributed וְהַתְּמַכְרָתָם to the Pentateuch (Numbers 31:24), whereas the word probably belongs to Nehemiah 13:30.³⁷ Without these changes *vav* of *Gachon* doesn't appear in place 16 but rather 15, and the whole explanation collapses.³⁸

Possible Solutions for the Brait'a's difficulties

So far we have concentrated on refuting method of solution suggested by Korman in the name of R' Zilber (from 1981) and those suggested by R' Zilber himself in 1998. But what solution can we ourselves suggest for understanding the *brait'a*? The fact that people find the *brait'a* difficult is the result of two assumptions: (A) That the book which the early *Soferim* had before them is identical to the letter with our version. (B) That it is impossible that the early *Soferim* made a mistake in counting (and they had to make two counts here: one to find the total number of the letters in the Pentateuch, and one to find and mark the middle letter).

The first assumption is an ideal assumption, which we tend to accept as obvious. However, the great sages in all the generations who had to compare texts as part of their Halachic work recognized that this assumption doesn't fit reality. The words of R' Yosef in this *braita* are the first explicit expression of the gap between reality and ideal: "They were experts in plene and defective spelling, we are not experts." R' Yosef recognizes the possibility that the texts of the early *Soferim* were not identical to the letter with the texts of his time and place. This he probably concluded from the fact that in Babylon itself there were differences between the letter texts of different scrolls, and there was no one version which could be identified with certainty as the one which was before the early *Soferim*. This is the plain meaning of the expression "we are not experts," and this is how all the great Rishonim who faced similar problems understood it. Only in recent generations, when the versions in all of our books are identical almost to the letter³⁹ and therefore the reality of "we are not experts" seems not to be correct, do we find people trying to explain the words of R' Yosef in a sophistic way that is completely severed from their plain meaning.⁴⁰

Let us see some examples of how the Rishonim treated this issue. In Hilchot Sefer Torah of Rabbeynu Tam we find: "From now on, pay attention to the exactness of scribes and the bodies of the letters, for they are not expert in the accuracy of the text, as Rav Yosef said at the end of chapter one of Kiddushin: "They (in Eretz Israel) are expert in defective and plene spelling; We are not expert." And because it is a time to act for the Lord, our scrolls are also considered 'kosher.'" ⁴¹

We see that Rabbeynu Tam compares the situation of texts in his time and place to the situation in Rav Yosef's times. He admits that the scribes in his area are not experts in writing the letters accurately, and he rules that the Torah scrolls in his area are kosher only because of the power of the Halachic rule, "When it is time to act for the Lord, overturn the Torah."

Even so, he urges the scribes to make the maximum effort to find the exact version. He himself brings material from the Masorah, from Tractate *Soferim*, from Midrashim about plene and defective spellings, and from the customs of writing Torah scrolls in his area⁴² to demonstrate how to write a Torah scroll. But this material itself can illustrate the situation of "we are not experts," since it has many changes compared to our present texts. Moreover, most of these changes are not rare and incidental phenomena, but rather an established tradition in Ashkenaz, as can be seen by anyone who compares Ashkenazic medieval MSS.

This situation doesn't change in the wider Ashkenazi area even 200 years later, as we can learn from what R. Yom Tov Lippman Milhausen writes in his work *Tikkun Sefer Torah*: "Because of our many sins, the Torah has been forgotten and we can not find a kosher Torah scroll; the scribes are ignoramuses and the scholars pay no attention in this matter. Therefore I have toiled to find a Torah scroll with the proper letters, open and closed passages, but I have found none, not to mention a scroll which is accurate as to the plene and defective spellings, a subject completely lost to our entire generation. In all these matters we have no choice [i.e. we are halakhically considered *anusim*]..."

In Spain too, the experts are not satisfied with the status of the texts, and they too compare it to the situation in R' Yosef's time. Thus we find in the introduction to *Masoret Seyag LaTorah* by R. Meir Ben Todros HaLevi (RaMaH, one of the greatest Torah scholars in his age, and a great expert in Masorah): "...he said to him: 'they were experts in plene and defective spelling, we are not.' All the more so now that due

to our sins, the following verse has been fulfilled amongst us, 'Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, Even a marvelous work and a wonder; And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, And the prudence of their prudent men shall be hid'(Is. 29:14). If we seek to rely on the proofread scrolls in our possession, they are also in great disaccord. Were it not for the Masorah which serves as a fence around the Torah, almost no one would find his way in the controversies between the scrolls. Even the Masorah is not free from dispute, and there are several instances disputed [among the Masorah manuscripts], but not as many as among the scrolls. If a man wishes to write a halakhically 'kosher' scroll, he will stumble on the plene and defective spellings and grope like a blind man through a fog of controversy; he will not succeed. Even if he seeks the aid of someone knowledgeable, he will not find such a one. When I, R. Meir HaLevi Ben Todros of Spain, saw what had befallen the scrolls, the Masorah lists, and the plene and defective spelling traditions due to the ravages of time, I felt the need to search after the most precise and proofread codices and the most reliable Masoretic traditions, to resolve the conflicts. The newly-produced scrolls should be abandoned in favor of older, more faithful ones and among these the majority of texts should be followed as commanded in the Torah to decide any controversy, as it is written: 'After the multitude to do...' (Ex. 23:2)."

We can see that all the great Rishonim who dealt with matters of the laws of Torah scrolls, both in Ashkenaz and in Spain, recognized the fact that there is no Torah scroll which they can say with certainty presents the text that was before the early *Soferim*. They permitted the use of the Torah scrolls they had by using halachic principles such as "When it is time to act for the Lord, overturn the Torah" or *Anusim*. Alternatively, they wrote new exemplary manuscripts according to the Masorah and according to the majority of texts. Can we really say with greater certainty than that of the Rishonim that our Torah scroll is the very text that represents, to the letter, the text that was before the early *Soferim*? After all, our books today contain the text determined by the Ramah, with some corrections made by R' Menachem Di-Lonzano in his book *Or Torah*.⁴³ Anyone who does not wish to ignore reality as it is reflected in all the periods of the Torah text's transmission will have to admit that any counting of letters in one generation or another can only represent the text in which it was counted and doesn't necessarily fit other books.

Still, it can be said that all we have said above is not enough to explain such a huge distance (about 4800 letters) between *vav* of *Gachon* and the middle letter in our text (in chapter 8 in Leviticus). We have then to seriously consider the second explanation: perhaps the early *Soferim* made a mistake in their counting.

The assumption that the early *Soferim* couldn't have made a mistake in their count is part of the educational view that is accepted among many religious people regarding the belief in the infallibility of the Sages (*Emunat Chachamim*). According to this view we mustn't attribute to the great sages of any generation, especially the early generations, any possibility of error or mistake in any of the issues on which they expressed an opinion or made a claim. This view was supported by many great rabbis who saw this total belief in the sages' infallibility as an important principle in the Jewish faith and as an important educational tool. Against this background we can understand the flinching from an assumption that the early *Soferim* could have made mistakes in counting the letters, words, or verses of the Pentateuch.

However, we have to remember that many of the sages, including Maimonides, objected to such an overarching view of the applicability of a belief in the Sages'

infallibility. They thought that there are realms in which the Sages expressed their opinion not as part of their religious authority, but rather out of rational consideration, and that we have to discern between these realms and the realms in which they spoke as part of their religious authority, so as to save the rational believer (who cannot help but examine every subject rationally) from unnecessary, harmful tension.⁴⁴ Anyone who wishes to ask whether the counting of the early *Soferim* was accurate or not can rely on these sages.⁴⁵ And indeed, it seems inevitable to assume that the *braita*'s markings of the middle letter, word, and verse are the result of an inaccurate count. Korman himself describes, correctly, the task of counting as "a very difficult task, which has a high risk of mistakes," and in his article he demonstrates many errors in counting which were made by sages throughout the ages.⁴⁶ In that case, why can we not assume that the early *Soferim*, who had no better counting tools than later sages, could also have made mistakes in counting? After all, regarding one of the other subjects mentioned in the *braita* - the middle verse - even Korman would have to admit that we must assume an error in the count of the early *Soferim*. Even he doesn't try to give any explanation on the matter of the middle verse. So we can understand that he does understand the *braita* to mean the middle of all the verses and not the middle of some special set of verses.⁴⁷ How, in that case, can we understand the statement that *v'hitgalach* is the middle of the verses unless we admit that there was an error in counting?

In fact, the Masoretic sages expressed the possibility that the early *Soferim* made a mistake in their count of the verses. The Masorah mentions another verse as the middle verse of the Pentateuch *Vayasem Alyv Et HaChoshen* (Leviticus 8:8). That is, they made a new count of the verses, the result of which contradicted what was said in the *braita*, and this new result is what was accepted in the Masorah literature. Another result of counting the verses appears in Tractate *Soferim* 9:2, which claims that *Vayishchaht* is the middle verse. What they have in common is that they assume the count of the verses by the early *Soferim* needs correction, in light of new examinations of the subject.

On this subject, it is also instructive to note that the Masorah repeats the statements of the *braita* regarding the letters and words: *vav* of *Gachon* and *darosh darash* are the middle letter and word. This is not because the sages of the Masorah recounted the midpoint of the letters and words, but rather because they didn't bother to repeat this tedious job, preferring instead to quote the *braita*. We can say this with certainty, for we see that they counted all the letters of words of the Pentateuch several times and came up with several different results,⁴⁸ while regarding the middle letter and word all the lists agree with our *braita*. For example: in the book attributed to Aharon Ben-Asher, *Dikdukey Teamim*, which contains early Masoretic material, it is said: "The sum of the words of the Pentateuch is 79,856. The sum of the letters of the Pentateuch is 400,945... The middle letter of the Pentateuch is *vav* of *Gachon*... The middle word of the Pentateuch is *darosh*..."⁴⁹ Were we to count half the number of letters mentioned in this source we would get to Parashat Naso in Numbers, much farther from the real middle letter than *vav* of *Gachon* is. This is not only proof that the Masoretic sages didn't recount to find the middle letter, it is also an excellent illustration of how a serious error in the total count of letters could have caused a similar error in marking the middle letter, like what happened with *vav* of *Gachon*, and even worse.

We will finish with a quotation from Korman himself, when he refers to the words of a certain rabbi who expressed his opinion that the division of the Bible into chapters,

made by Christian monks, is in fact a tradition given to Moses at Sinai(!):⁵⁰ "We shouldn't continue this method of proving things by sophistry instead of our old rule of 'Let's take a book and look in it.' Other nations adopted the rule hundreds of years ago, but amongst us are there still some who ignore it." Nice words indeed, only it's a pity that Korman doesn't apply them to what he writes about the subject we have discussed in this article.

NOTES

¹ See Shmaatin, number 24, 5730; number 43, 5735.

² Moriah, Elul 5748, numbers 1-2.

³ see below, pg. 11.

⁴ New attempts to count and locate the middle letter and word in the Pentateuch were not made after the early *Soferim*, though there were attempts to count all the words and letters in the Pentateuch. Thus we find in the Masorah comments that exist in many medieval manuscripts, as well as in Tractate *Soferim* and other places, that *vav* of *Gachon* is the middle letter and *darosh darash* is the middle word in the Pentateuch.

I know of nobody amongst the Rishonim who disputed this statement. Only among the Achronim were there a few attempts that showed that *vav* of *Gachon* and *darosh darash* are far from the middle of the Pentateuch in letters and words. See, for example, R"Y Shor, Mishnat R' Yaacov, chapter 4, letter C, that says that *vav* of *הוא לה אשה* (Leviticus 8:28) is the middle letter in the Pentateuch, and the word *המזבח* (Leviticus 8:15) is the middle word. However, regarding the middle verse, new attempts at counting and locating it were conducted even in the ancient period, as can be seen from what we find in Tractate *Soferim* and in the Masorah: In Tractate *Soferim* 9:2 it is said that the middle verse is *vayishchaht* (Leviticus 8:15?), and various Masorah sources note the verse *Vayasem Alyv Et HaChoshen* (Leviticus 8:8) as the middle verse.

⁵ Examples of this understanding by the Rishonim can be seen further on in this article. This understanding is also shared by the great Achronim, see for example: Responsa Chatam Sofer, Part One, 52; Responsa Ginat V'radim, Orach Chaim section, rule 2, section 6

⁶ See Korman, pg. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See pg. 14, and note 27 there.

¹⁰ See pg. 23, first note.

¹¹ And see also what is said in the second comment on p. 23, which proves that all the arithmetic hustle and bustle around this subject was not done in order to find the true facts, but in order to fit the facts to the number that was predetermined (8 in Psalms and 35 in Chronicles), numbers that had to be justified no matter what, or else the whole explanation falls apart.

¹² Korman, pg. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

¹⁴ This is the only place where Korman feels that there is a change which contradicts his criterion, and he has to wiggle in order to justify the inclusion of this verse in the count (see previous comment). In view of our table, all this effort is pointless. Incidentally, Korman didn't notice that this same verse also appears in I Kings 14:6; see more about this further on.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 24.

¹⁷ The indication of the middle of the book or parasha exists, in fact, only for the number of verses. As was said above (note 4), the Masorah sages only bothered to re-count the middle of the verses -- and it seems that not only the middle of the whole Pentateuch, but also the middle of each Chumash and on rare occasions even the middle of some parashiot.

¹⁸ If one wishes to become acquainted with the ways of the Masorah in enumerating the different phenomena spread in the Bible, he can look at the book *Ochlah W'ochlah*, ed. S. Frensdorff, Hannover 1864.

¹⁹ This is the situation in many medieval manuscripts of the Pentateuch which contain Masorah comments on this subject, and also in special books which contain Masoratic material like *Dikdukey Teamim*, *Be'er Varshtark* edition, Leipzig, 1879 (new edition, Maqor Publishing, 5730), pg. 56 and others.

²⁰ Korman, pg. 5, pg. 24 note 41, pg. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 25.

²² Korman, pg. 24, note 41. But it turns out he means the book *Ahavat Torah*, Krakow 5665, and not *Or Torah*, as R' Zilber himself mentions in his new article (see above, note 2), pg. 95.

²³ This final list, although correct, still has an arbitrary element, since there are two double words in the Pentateuch which were omitted: לך לך (Genesis 12:1) and שם שם (Exodus 15:25). Of course Korman finds an excuse why these words should be omitted (because each of the words in a pair is of a different root). But had it been necessary, similar explanations could have been invented in order to justify the omission of other words, such as השרץ השרץ (noun and verb with different vowelizations).

²⁴ See number 32 on his list, pg. 25, and note 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 27.

²⁶ See: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Sefer Torah, chapter eight, halacha four. The Keter is now in Jerusalem. About the scroll and its identification as the scroll upon which Maimonides relied, see M. Goshen-Gutstein, "The Autenticity of the Aleppo Codex", *textus* I (1960), pp. 17-58. On the unique and unusual precision of the Keter Aram Sova, see my introduction to the Johua-Judges volume of *Miqraot Gedolot HaKeter*, Bar-Ilan University Publishing, pg. 42* on; about how the Keter and other manuscripts handled the large and small letters, see there pp. 47*-49*.

²⁷ The list which matches the reality of several Ashkenazi scrolls, attributed to R' Yosef Tuv Elem, is found in *Machzor Vitri*, first edition Berliner, Nuremberg 5683, pg. 683. A comparison of this list with his formulation in the manuscript before us (Vienna 1) shows seven differences. This illustrates for us the unstable range which also exists in the transmission of texts with a large number of unusual letters.

²⁸ For example, British Library MS Har. 5710 has only seven unusual letters (two small and five large).

²⁹ See, for example, *Ochlah W'ochlah* (above, note 18), pg. 88.

³⁰ For example, *Machzor Vitri* (above, note 26), pg. 683.

³¹ See: *Ochlah W'ochlah*, *ibid.*, *Machzor Vitri* (above, footnote 26), pg. 684. This list has variations, but no comprehensive alphabetical list of all the small letters of the Torah, paralleling the list of large letters, has been created.

³² See above, note 25.

³³ See above, note 2.

³⁴ See above, note 29.

³⁵ See above, note 24.

³⁶ See his article, pg. 93. His citation is not precise; it should read "pp. 683-4." The list of unusual letters is made up of two lists there: A. the list of large letters in the Pentateuch, B. The list of small letters in the Bible, from which only the letters appearing in the Pentateuch should be taken.

³⁷ See list 84 in *Ochlah W'ochlah* (above, note 18), pg. 89.

³⁸ Here it is worthwhile to say a few words on the background for the recent rise of interest in this baseless interpretation of the *braita* and R' Yosef's words in *Kidushin* 30a. The obsessive consumers of this interpretation are a small group of religious scientists specializing in mathematics and statistics who have invented and promoted the theory of codes in ELS in the Bible. Their purpose is to imprint a scientific seal on the belief in Torah from Heaven, established in Judaism for ages. This mix of different types of matters made them into acrobats walking on a very thin rope with regard to the "scientific" nature of their research. On the one hand there is the scientific realm of mathematics and statistics, which they use extensively for their "scientific" proof. On the other hand there is another scientific realm, no less relevant to the subject of their research, and this is the history of the

transmission of the Biblical text. For if it turns out that the text of the Torah has undergone many changes since it was given, there is no point in all the statistical acrobatics that they used for one of the current versions of the Biblical texts (Koren Bible) when they want to prove the existence of codes that were presumably planted in ancient times.

They try with all their might not to fall into the scientific abyss, by totally ignoring everything that science has to say on this subject. But unfortunately for them there is, in this regard, an agreement (in principle) between scientific research and the views of the great sages of Israel throughout the ages, who also agreed that the text of the Torah has undergone changes through the ages. As we'll see below, the *braita* which we discuss and R' Yosef's words were used by many sages as a model for describing the difficult situation of the text. This explains the interest that the Codes researchers show in a "correct" understanding of Kidushin 30a. R' Zilber's explanations serve them as a lifeline in these stormy waters. Although they usually prefer not to discuss the matter of the transmission of the text, when they do have to face the subject, they point to R' Zilber's solutions. See, for example, Witztum's response to a question he was asked about the text used for his experiments, where he refers the inquirer, amongst other things, to R' Zilber's article: Concerning The Usage Of The Masoretic Text Of Genesis For The ELS's Experiments <<http://www.torahcodes.co.il/elman2.htm>>. See also the periodical *E't LaChshov* 16 (Kislev 5761), p. 42.

³⁹ This is not the place to detail the variety of factors which led to the almost absolute unification of the Torah text in our days (aside from nine differences between the Yemenite text and all others; see Rabbi M. Breuer, *Keter Aram Sova*, Mossad HaRav Kook Publications, 5737, pg. 87). We will only mention that the main factor was printing, which permitted widespread distribution of *tikkunim* with identical texts for the scribes' use throughout the diaspora, and led to the quick annihilation of differences between local traditions which existed in the manuscript era.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Korman's explanation on pg. 7, note 10, which tries to link "we are not experts" with R' Joseph's illness, which caused him memory loss.

⁴¹ See Machzor Vitri (above, note 32), pg. 654.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 656-658 for material from Masoretic sources, medrashim, and Tractate Soferim, and pp. 658-673 for material based on scribal customs in his area, under the heading: "Thus they were scrupulous to write in the scrolls"

⁴³ Examples of his corrections: ויהי in place of ויהיו (Genesis 9:29), which was common in many scrolls, and the Ramah did not decide on the matter, כלת in place of כלת (Num. 7:1), a version the Ramah accepted in accordance with *Midrash Tanchuma* (see Warsaw edition, 26).

⁴⁴ See, amongst others: Maimonides, letter to the sages of Provence on astrology, E. Marcus edition, pg. 350; R' Abraham the son of Maimonides, Essay on the exegeses of Chazal, in *Qovetz teshuvot haRambam v'igrotav*, Leipzig 5619, part 2, 45 and forward. This essay is also found at the start of many editions of Ein Yaaqov. R' Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Gedolim Maasei Hashem*, Maasei Torah chapter 31, Warsaw 1933, pp. 150, 151.

⁴⁵ We have to emphasize that the total belief in the infallibility of the Sages does not emerge unscathed even in Korman's article. For the price of the belief in the veracity of the count of the early *Soferim* is that we are asked to assume that all the generations of sages, starting with R' Yosef himself, have misunderstood the *braita* when they understood it according to its plain meaning. Is this assumption preferable, from an educational point of view, to the assumption that even the early *Soferim* could have made an error in a tedious technical task such as counting hundreds of thousands of letters, and then recounting their half? In this context we should note that Chazal do not flinch from attributing possible human error in counting, even by a prophet (see Megilah 12a).

⁴⁶ See there, pp. 9-12, and note 22. The facts in the article do not exploit all the lists found in manuscript Masoretic sources. The differences between the lists (even if we do not add to them the count of Rav Saadiah or in the books of Kabbalah; see there, pg. 9) reach some 1000 letters and some 1500 words (!).

⁴⁷ It is a wonder that Korman didn't feel that this fact alone undermines the basis of his explanation. For we can learn from what the *braita* meant regarding *v'hitgalach* for the verses what it meant regarding *darosh darash* for the words and *vav* of *Gachon* for the letters. And this is probably the reason why R' Zilber tries in his new article (see comment 2 above) p. 97 to invent a new explanation for the matter of the verses: "After research and examination, I think that it can be said the intention was to verses in which larger letters appear. As already brought above, there are two alternatives in this matter. According to our version of the Torah scrolls there are nine such verses and according to the

version of Rabbi Yosef Tuv Elem there are 23 such verses. According to both versions *v'hitgalach* is the middle verse."

⁴⁸ See footnote 45 above. The different results of counting appear in medieval Masorah books of the Torah. When you compare them you find that all of them note *vav* of *Gachon* and *darosh darash* as the middle of the Pentateuch, but they differ in the total number they give for the letters and words.

⁴⁹ See *Sefer Dikdukey Teamim* (above, note 19), pg. 55.

⁵⁰ See Korman, pg. 12, also note 24.