

## NIVHAZ OR NIVHAN?

ZVI RON

In II Kings 17, we read how the king of Assyria brought people from other lands to settle in the cities of Samaria from which the Israelites had been exiled. The idols of these newcomers are listed, and we are informed that *the Avvites made Nivhaz* [נִבְחָז] and *Tartak* (v. 31). In the Talmud, these idols are identified with animals; Nivhaz with a dog and Tartak with a donkey.<sup>1</sup> However, when the Talmud quotes the verse, the word Nivhaz is written with the letter "nun," making it Nivhan [נִבְחָן]. In this article we will explore the different traditions relating to the spelling of this word, and how they originated.

### NIVHAZ

Radak, in his commentary on this verse, specifically relates to how the word Nivhaz should be spelled and why: "Nivhaz is written with a *zayin*. There are books where it is written with a *nun*; this is incorrect. It should be with a *zayin*, and there is an error in those books." Radak explains, along the lines of the Talmud, that Nivhaz was represented by a dog; he understands the word Nivhaz to be made of the two words *noveach* [barking] and *chaz* [showing, in the sense of showing his teeth]. The idol representing Nivhaz is now understood to be not just a dog, but a dog exposing his teeth when barking. Without the letter "*zayin*" in the word, this interpretation could not be made.

The Daat Mikra commentary to this verse explains that Nivhaz may be a reference to the Elamite deity Ibnakhaza.<sup>2</sup> This follows the approach of scholars who identify Avva, the home of the Avvites, with the Elamite city Ama, and the gods Nivhaz and Tartak with the Elamite divinities Ibnakhaza and Dirtaq.<sup>3</sup> Others contend that "a proposed Elamite deity is not suitable," and suggest that the word is "a corruption or a deliberate Jewish distortion of *mizbeah*, 'altar.' Deification of an altar is not unknown."<sup>4</sup> In either case, the word should contain the letter *zayin*.

*Zvi Ron received semikhah from the Israeli Rabbanut and his Ph.D. in Jewish Theology from Spertus University. He is an educator living in Neve Daniel, Israel, and the author of Sefer Katan ve-Gadol (Rossi Publications: 2006) about the big and small letters in Tanakh.*

In many printed versions of the text, the *zayin* of the word Nivhaz is larger than the other letters. The letter appears as large in the Leningrad Codex and the Messorah Ketana, and so was printed large in the Venice edition of Mikraot Gedolot.<sup>5</sup> This led to widespread use of a large letter *zayin* in modern editions.<sup>6</sup> Writing a letter extra large was a technique used by scribes in order to make sure that misspellings would not occur.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Norzi, in his *Minhat Shai*, suggests that perhaps the large *zayin* itself looked like a final *nun*, leading to the incorrect spelling noted by Radak, although he himself did not find this letter mentioned in any of the lists of large letters.

#### NIVHAN

Both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud quote this verse, and both have the spelling Nivhan. The Talmud states that Nivhan was represented by a dog, which fits well with this spelling, as the word could be read *navhan* [a barker]. Maharsha, in his commentary to Sanhedrin 63b, records the comment of Radak that Nivhan is an incorrect spelling. He further states, like Norzi, that since the *zayin* was written large, people may have mistaken it for a *nun*.<sup>8</sup> Yaakov Emden, in his commentary to Sanhedrin, also writes that the text should read Nivhaz and not Nivhan. He explains, similarly to Radak, that the word is a contraction of two words, *noveah* [barking] and *haz* [seeing], meaning a dog that barks when it sees a stranger. Shmuel Strashun, in his notes to Sanhedrin, also writes that the text should be changed to read Nivhaz.<sup>10</sup> Raphael Rabinovicz, in his work *Dikdukei Sofelim*, where he notes textual variants from various manuscripts of the Talmud, did not find a version with the Nivhaz spelling.<sup>11</sup> Since both Talmuds quote the verse with the reading Nivhan, and no editions of the Talmud have any other spelling, it is reasonable to say that there was an alternate tradition that saw Nivhan as the correct spelling.

Norzi, in his *Minhat Shai*, in fact quotes one source, *Derekh Emmunah*, which states that the word was "written with a small *nun*, so that many thought it should be a *zayin*." This small *nun* does not appear in any of the traditional lists of small letters.<sup>12</sup>

## ZAYIN/NUN TRANSPOSITIONS

We have seen that the letters *zayin* and *nun* are susceptible to chance interchange, especially if the *zayin* is written too large or the *nun* too small. This led to confusion regarding the spelling of Nivhaz/Nivhan, particularly since the word is foreign and only appears once in the Tanakh. Confusion between these two letters was common in other written documents as well.<sup>13</sup> Rosh, in a responsum about a *get* [divorce document], notes that "there are places where the final *nun* is written small, and it is read as a *zayin*."<sup>14</sup>

The Tanakh contains a number of possible *zayin/nun* transpositions.<sup>15</sup> Both the Leningrad Codex and the Aleppo Codex contain very few small or large letters, the most common of these being the final *nun*. In fact, the only letters that these manuscripts have as small at all are three final *nuns*, in Isaiah 44:14 (אָרן), Jeremiah 39:13 (וּנְבוּשֶׁזַבְן), and Proverbs 16:28 (וְנִרְגָּן).<sup>16</sup> Through the ages, commentators have suggested that the small *nun* in these verses may be interpreted homiletically as a *zayin*.<sup>17</sup>

These two letters have always been viewed as very close in appearance and in danger of being interchanged, much like the letters "*dalet*" and "*resh*."<sup>18</sup> The word *Nivhaz* is one of the cases where the *zayin* was occasionally misread as a *nun*, a reading that is preserved in the Talmud. In an effort to preserve the correct spelling, the letter *zayin* was sometimes written large, which, as noted by Norzi and Maharsha, may have led to further confusion with the letter *nun*.

## NOTES

Special thanks to my student and friend Jonathan Engel who asked the question that inspired this article.

1. BT Sanhedrin 63b, JT Avoda Zara 3:2.

2. *Daat Mikra – Melachim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989) p. 700.

3. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *Anchor Bible – II Kings* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1988) p. 212.

4. Gwilym H. Jones, *New Century Bible Commentary - 1 & 2 Kings*, volume 2 (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott Publ. Ltd., 1984) pp. 554-555. Shmuel Shimshoni suggested that the altar itself was shaped like a dog, thus combining the interpretation of the Talmud with this modern scholarly approach (personal correspondence). Some identify Nivhaz with the jackal-headed Egyptian deity Anubis; see Alfred Jones, *Jones' Dictionary of Old Testament Proper Names* (Kregel Academic & Professional, 1990) pp. 275, 276, but this identification is consi-

dered "out of the question" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Baker Book House, 1949) p. 155.

5. *Daat Mikra – Melachim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989) introduction, p. 220.  
6. See for example Daat Mikra, Koren, and Artscroll editions.  
7. Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah* (New York: Scholars Press, 1980) p. 48.  
8. Commentary of Maharsha on Sanhedrin.  
9. Commentary of Yaavetz (Rabbi Yaakov Emden) on Sanhedrin.  
10. Commentary of Rashash on Sanhedrin.  
11. Raphael Rabbinovitz, *Dikdukei Soferim* (Jerusalem: Or HaChokhma, 2002) vol. 10, p. 178.  
12. Zvi Ron, *Sefer Katan vGadol* (Jerusalem: Rossi Publications, 2006) p. 4.  
13. See for example Meir Bar-Ilan, "HaSheimot HaPrati'im B'Divrei Gad HaChozeh," *Sinai* 114 (1994) pp. 109-119.  
14. *Sheilot VTeshuvot HaRosh*, 45:2.  
15. See Bar-Ilan, note 13 above, especially footnote 35.  
16. Shmuel Shnitzer, "Otiot Gedolot vZeivot bMikra", *Beit Mikra Quarterly* vol. 89-90 2/3 (1982) pp. 254-255.  
17. Zvi Ron, pp. 228, 230, 240, 247.  
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82.



**עשה תורתך קבע**  
**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**  
**DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ**

October	Isaiah	20 – 49
November	Isaiah	50 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 11
December	Jeremiah	12 – 40
January	Jeremiah	41 – 52
	Ezekiel	1 – 16
February	Ezekiel	17 – 45

