

Ô, Torah's Center
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Lev 11:42

(BHS)	(HCSB)
	1 Do not eat
	2 any of the creatures that swarm on the earth,
כל הולך על-גחון	3 anything that moves on its belly
וכל הולך על-ארבע	4 or walks on all fours
עד כל-מרה רגלים	5 or on many feet,
לכל-השרץ השרץ על-הארץ	6
לא תאכלום	7
כי-שקץ הם:	8 for they are detestable.

Okay. Right away notice that line 1 and 2 relate to lines 7 and 6 respectively. Reordering the words and lines of Hebrew is often par for the course when translating into English. Compare Holeman's to other translations and you can see how else you can arrange this sentence. In line 6 you can see a typical Hebrew construction, where the verbal form of a word is right next to its noun form, "any swarming swarmer." Line 8: most translations gloss *sheqetz* "detestable" or the like. *Sheqetz* always is found in the context of abominable foods, unclean things that Israel should eschew. What Israel ate was important to their whole program of sanctification. Please read my previous essay on this subject, "[Just Scales](#)."

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Now in Lev 11:42 there is a phenomenon unique in all of Scripture. Unfortunately, you can't see it if you are using an electronic text. You have to look at a printed Hebrew Bible. But I have reproduced it here for you to see. The interesting alteration is in the last word of line 3, *gāchôn*.

(Pronounce a hard ch, like in “chaos.”) The prominent letter is the *mater lectionis*—a full holem—the *waw* with a dot over it: **ו̇**. It is huge! Notice how prominently it towers over the other letters. It’s like: *gāchŌn*.

When this sort of thing occurs in the Hebrew Bible, we often don’t know why. We just faithfully preserve it anyway. But in this case, we actually do know the reason. That single letter is the exact center of the Law of Moses. When you count the letters before it to the beginning of Genesis, and after it to the end of Deuteronomy, you get the same number. This center is marked with the oversized **ו̇**.

Israel scrupulously put care and concern into observing the holiness laws. See how many things they kept in mind! They were not allowed to mix kinds of seed when sowing a field or different kinds of material in clothing (Lev 19:19). They had to keep away from lots of good things to eat and live on a restricted diet. They couldn’t eat the fruit of a tree until its fifth year (Lev 19:23). Their hair had to be styled correctly, and heaven forbid that they got a tattoo (Lev 19:27 – 28). And so on. The daily lives of ancient Israel were micro-managed by the Law, to impress on them more important spiritual and moral distinctions.

I think that attention to detail, that focus on honoring God down to the tiniest thing, can also be seen in how they preserved their Scripture. Just think of it. They actually counted every letter to find the center. And of course, this wasn’t just for fun. It was to make sure that they copied it right. (The closest I have ever come to this was the day that I counted all of the words in the book of Ruth. There are some critical decisions to make, like whether to regard *maqeph*. But I found the number of words to be exactly 1296, or $2^4 \times 3^4$.)

Jesus said of the religious leaders, “you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23). Notice that he isn’t criticizing their taking great pains to honor God in small ways. But they were missing the big picture. The “point” of the Law had gotten lost.

They counted every letter. That is how seriously they took the Bible. Doesn’t this make you want to find out what was so important to them? Remember, Jesus knew the Scriptures in and out. Don’t you want to get informed and reap more benefit by reading his Bible? If we are faithful in little things, we will be trusted with bigger things (Matt 25:21). I wonder how scrupulous we are with the things of God?

They tried to live by it, however imperfectly. Jesus kept it perfectly. Wouldn’t you like to as well? Why don’t you consider giving up that grievance or illicit fantasy? And let us focus on evangelism and work toward a more just society (Matt 23:23).

Something to think about.