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Teaching Letter

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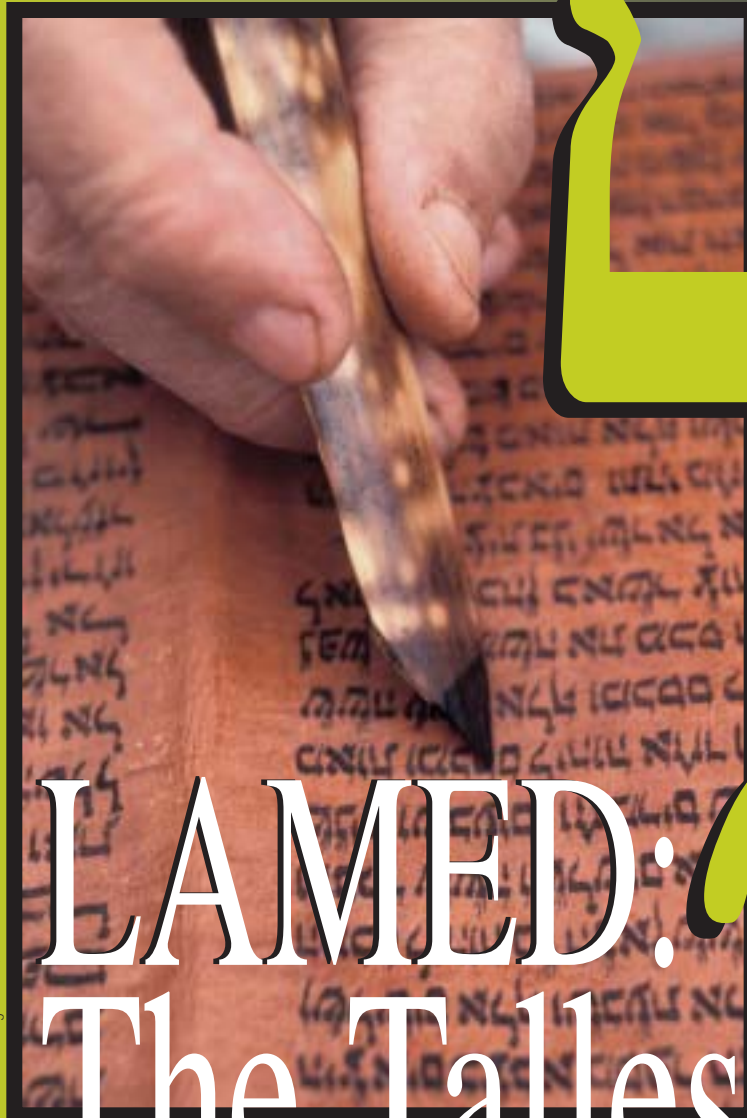
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LAMED:

The Tallest

Letter

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he largest letter in biblical Hebrew is the *lamed* (ל). This letter is positioned at the very center of the *aleph-bet* (Hebrew alphabet), towering over all the other characters. It is the only letter that ascends above the top line. For this reason alone, it stands out and is instantly discernible in all texts. The *lamed*, therefore, has been the cause of much reflection by Israel's sages through the millennia. Since God does nothing by happenstance, they reason, there must be significance in the fact that the *lamed* is so tall.

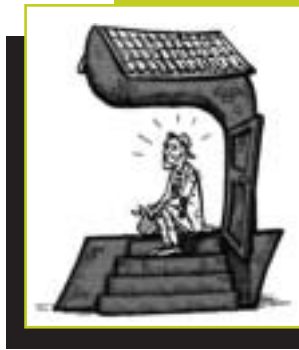
When we analyze the meaning and significance of the *lamed* in both biblical and postbiblical contexts, we gain insight into a significant part of our Hebraic heritage that has been obscured from Christian view for centuries. Now, a deep well of insight and understanding that has enriched the lives of countless Jewish people through history is being recovered for us when we reconnect with the Jewish roots of our Christian faith, including the language of Scripture itself.

Pictographs

It is important that we understand that each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet was, in ancient times, a pictograph (in a manner similar to hieroglyphic and cuneiform writing). For example, the *aleph* (א) originally represented the picture of an ox head; the *beth* (ב), a house; and the *gimel* (ג), a camel. The *lamed* (ל) was originally a pictograph of a goad, the principal instrument for training and directing oxen in ancient agrarian society.

If we look at the *lamed* (and perhaps turn it on its side), we gain a good visual image of a goad. The ascending stroke of the *lamed* is a *yod* (י), which is a pictograph of a hand. As we visualize taking this part of the *lamed* in hand, we can see that the pointed end of the image represents a perfect instrument for prodding an ox, first for training and then for directing its work.

A children's book shows the letter *beth*, which originally represented a house; today, *beth* is a word meaning "house."



This chart shows the development of the *aleph*, *beth*, *gimel*, and *lamed*, from their pictograph to alphabet form.

| Canaanite Sinai 1500 BC | Phoenician 1000 BC | Old Hebrew 700 BC | Aramaic 500 BC | Hebrew 1st century AD | Early Greek 600 BC | Formal Greek 5th century BC |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
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Teaching and Learning

The letter *lamed* is the foundation of the word *lamad* (למד), which, interestingly enough, means both teaching and learning. The *qal* (simple) form of the verb means "to learn," while the *piel* (intensive) form means "to teach." This is a great lesson that teaching and learning go hand in hand and that each of us should be both a learner and a teacher for life. When learning ceases, teaching ends. This is the reason that the most learned teachers among us are called scholars, from the Latin word *scola*, which means "school," fundamentally "student."

From the moment of birth (and perhaps before), learning begins as the newly created life exercises every aspect of sensory perception to gather information, which is then analyzed and acted upon. Infants learn at a prodigious rate from their parents and siblings and then from extended family and others. At the same time, however, even infants are giving lessons to those around them. Indeed, it is often difficult to discern who is reacting to whom! Parents learn amazing lessons from their infant children (even as their own parents predicted!). Toddlers become teachers of their younger siblings. Everyone, then, is both learning and teaching even from infancy.

Teaching and learning go hand in hand. Each of us should be both a learner and a teacher for life.



The goad of learning, the rigor of study,
inculcates understanding that leads to wisdom.
The *lamed* prods ever onward and upward
those who yield to its unrelenting pressure.

As life advances, it is easy for people to plateau in the learning process, thinking that they have acquired all the knowledge necessary for their lives or careers. Stagnation can result, at which point life descends into boredom and monotony. The wise, however, are always curious, always sensitive to new stimuli and new insight. Their lives are enriched because they see themselves as learners for life. They also maintain a passion for passing on to others what they have learned.

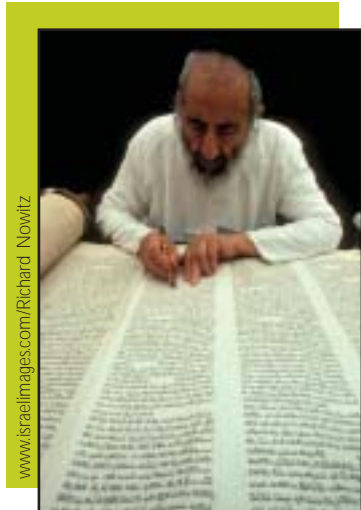
Lamed, the ox goad, is intrinsically involved in both learning and teaching. Indeed, learning is the irritating process of being goaded into proper and productive action through the rigors of discipline. It is the process of being trained, so that one becomes accustomed to and comfortable with knowledge and understanding. It is the pain that brings the gain of a richer, fuller life in which one is positioned to act rather than constantly being acted upon. It is the bleeding that precedes the blessing, the drill that produces the thrill.

Humanity's Highest Endowment

Learning is absolutely vital to life. It equips human beings with the knowledge necessary to exercise the power of reason, which separates them from the rest of creation. The capacity for learning is God's august gift to humankind, the endowment of being made in the divine image and likeness. Since God has no form, humanity's creation in His image and likeness has nothing to do with physical characteristics. The image and likeness of God are the power of reason and the free will to act on what is reasoned. Intellectual capacity and conscience (the connection between the brain and the heart) enable human beings to develop a consciousness of the Divine, to learn of His Word and will, and by grace through faith to experience and express spirituality.

Learned people who have attained wisdom stand head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd of humanity, like the *lamed* does in the midst of the Hebrew letters of the biblical text. They have subjected themselves willingly to the discipline of study, analysis, and reflection. They, therefore, live enriched lives of success and fulfillment and of service to their fellow humans. Their learning becomes teaching both through the dynamic modeling of their actions and through their words of wisdom and challenge.

Learning, therefore, has always been sacred to the Hebrew people. The progression from knowledge to understanding to wisdom has been the quest of prophets and sages, of apostles and teachers, of men and women of God from time immemorial. The passion to know with a view toward doing is central to Jewish individual and corporate identity. Literacy and education, therefore, have long been hallmarks of God's chosen people and have contributed to their success.



Learned people who have attained wisdom stand head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd of humanity, like the lamed does in the midst of the Hebrew letters of the biblical text. They have subjected themselves willingly to the discipline of study, analysis, and reflection. They, therefore, live enriched lives of success and fulfillment and of service to their fellow humans.



The Heart of Discipleship

Another form of *lamed* is the word *limud*, which means “learner” or “disciple.” A disciple, then, is one who is taught, one who has been subjected to the discipline of learning. There is no discipleship without discipline. It is the discipline of study that produces the disciple, the learner, the scholar. Those who through sloth or indifference shun discipline will never be disciples!

Limud was first used of disciples in 1 Chronicles 25:8. The word *limud* is the root of *talmid* (תלמיד), meaning “scholar,” which eventually became the most common term for student, learner, or disciple within the Jewish context and was likely the term that Yeshua (Jesus) Himself used when He spoke of His own disciples (*talmidim*). Originally the word *talmid* was applied to a student of music. This, of course, confirms to us that the disciple was not merely a repository for knowledge, for music is enjoyed only when it is performed, translating the theory into enjoyable sound through the discipline of practice. A disciple, then, is both a learner and a doer, one who “learns” in order to “do.” James tells us, “*But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves*” (James 1:22).

Discipleship as learning is also confirmed in the Greek term for disciple that appears in the Apostolic Scriptures. *Mathetes* means “learner,” “pupil,” or “disciple.” It is the root for the word “mathematics,” which everyone understands as a discipline that requires study and application. Neither mathematics nor discipleship is mastered without rigorous discipline.

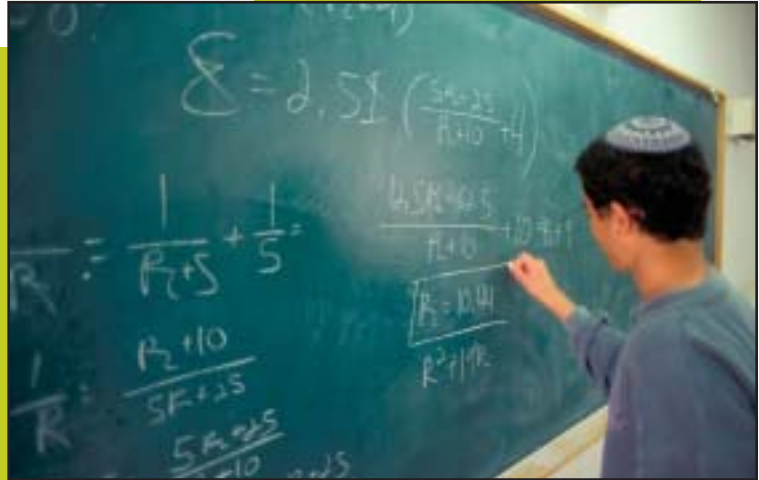
It is important that we recognize that the word “Christian” is used only twice in Scripture, while the word “disciple” is used 270 times. The ultimate function of Christian ministry is not to make “Christians” or even “believers.” It is to make disciples, which in essence is to make learners or students. Matthew 28:18–20 teaches us, “*Then Yeshua came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’*” Discipleship is not a case of the warm fuzzies, the emotional crescendo of an existential moment. It is the discipline of learning about God and doing His will. Discipleship is not just feeling, it is doing.

It is important that we recognize that the word “Christian” is used only twice in Scripture, while the word “disciple” is used 270 times.

Yeshua even emphasized the fact that the discipline of Christian discipleship is demanding and rigorous: “*And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple...Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple*” (Luke 14:27, 14:33). God’s *lamed* of discipline may well place demands of self-abnegation upon the disciple that will be painful; however, the rewards of yielding to the goad of discipleship produce the benefits of partnership with God and the blessings that accrue thereby.

Again, this is the core message of Christianity’s *Mega Mitzvah* (Great Commission). Yeshua instructed His *talmidim* in this manner: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...*” (Matt. 28:19–20). The foundation of Christian dis-

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A delegation of Jewish doctors traveled to Sri Lanka after the tsunami there in December 2004. They treated over 300 patients each day.

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cipleship is learning and teaching, and the foundation of the learning and teaching is the commandments of Yeshua. Converts are made to the faith of Yeshua, so that they may become disciples through the discipline of obedience to divine instructions.

The fundamental meaning of the term that Yeshua used to describe His followers sheds an entirely different light on the true nature of Christian discipleship. Christian discipleship is an exercise of learning through the discipline of instruction in Messiah's (Christ's) teaching. It is yielding oneself to the goad of training, permitting the pointed *lamed* to prick one's heart and marshal one's actions in the right and proper direction and to the God-determined end.

With the *lamed* imagery in focus, Yeshua's invitation in Matthew 11:29–30 becomes much more clear and understandable: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me..." The metaphor is the same: Being yoked together with Yeshua means learning—learning the teachings of Yeshua, which are, after all, "easy." And one could just as readily say that Yeshua's *lamed* (goad) is not cruel, inflicting unnecessary and excessive pain. It generates just enough discomfort to move the heart in the right direction of closer relationship with God and with one's fellow man.

Learning to Follow

Returning Christian discipleship to the matrix from which it was birthed brings greater understanding of both the concept and practice of discipleship. In the time of Messiah, discipleship was expressed in the teacher-student relationship. The dynamic exchange of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom that this relationship produced was and remains the essence of discipleship. The learning process was carried out in relationship, even apprenticeship, as it were.

The greatest honor of first-century Israel was to be "covered in the dust of the rabbi." How so? The learning process featured a "come walk the road

with me" dynamic in which one followed the teacher and thereby was engaged in the great lessons of life in the course of everyday living. The *rabbi-talmid* (teacher-student) relationship was one of continual engagement, and the learning process was often one of imitation of practice more than an exchange of philosophical concepts. It was an exercise of following and learning by example.

Classic examples that demonstrate the teaching-learning process produced by following are seen in the Moses-Joshua, Elijah-Elisha, and Paul-Timothy relationships. Joshua served as Moses's personal attendant and servant for decades before he was appointed to lead Israel. Perhaps the most important work that Elijah the prophet did occurred at

And so it was with the disciples of Yeshua.
They were covered with the dust of His teaching.

the end of his career when he disciplined Elisha and equipped him with the skills he would need for a "double portion" ministry. Paul carefully instructed Timothy in God's Word, so that he could replicate the apostle's vision, passion, and commitment in his own ministry. All of these disciples learned the lessons of life and ministry as they carefully followed their instructors. They walked with their teachers on a path that led to success.

And so it was with the disciples of Yeshua. Those who had followed the Master on the dusty roads of Israel were covered with dust, but not just the sandy granules of the Judean roadways. They were covered with



THE GREATEST HONOR of first-century Israel was to be "covered in the dust of the rabbi." It was an exercise of following and learning by example.



THE DUSTY ROADS OF ISRAEL

the dust of His teaching—"Yeshua dust," as it were. Others could tell that they had been with Yeshua, not because of their words, but because of their actions (Acts 4:13). In following the Master, they had so conformed their lives to His actions that the Messiah now lived in and through them (John 14:23; Col. 1:27).

FOR A TRUE
disciple, there is
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Following is more than a physical act. *Mimetes*, the Greek word for follower, means to "imitate." Herein is the essence of the Christian life: To be "Messiah-like" is to imitate the life of Yeshua, keeping His commandments. When Yeshua instructed His disciples to "follow" Him, He was asking them to commit themselves to a life of imitation in which they would mime the Master's actions. Those who followed Rabbi Yeshua were able to give this instruction to others: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Messiah" (1 Cor. 11:1). Their actions so imitated the life of Messiah that they became "Christians," dynamic models of the biblical lifestyle.

For a true disciple, there is no greater pleasure or fulfillment than replicating the knowledge and actions of his teacher. This is the reward of intense observation, of insightful analysis, of unending rumination, of practical demonstration. Christian disciples faithfully replicate the life of the Messiah, their Master, as they follow in His footsteps.

Walking with God

This idea of walking in fellowship with the Master and learning through the process is as old as humanity itself. God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, communicating to them His will for their lives. Later, Enoch walked with God in such a pleasing way that he was translated and did not experience death. Abraham walked with God and was perfect before his Maker because he walked in faith and faithfulness. He believed God, and he acted instantly and without reservation upon God's instructions. For this reason, God was not ashamed to be called the God of Abraham (Heb. 11:16).

Enoch's walk with God was of particular importance in that his very name in Hebrew, Hanoch, means "dedication" but with an emphasis on education. (The term *Hanukkah* comes from the same root and also means "dedication.") It has been suggested that Enoch was the first scientist, the first truly educated man. Because of his dedication to learn of God, Enoch pleased God and was received into God's presence supernaturally.

Micah spoke of the value of walking in dedication to God and gave his understanding as the summation of humanity's entire duty toward God: "Do justly...love mercy, and...walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8c). Doing right, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow—these things are the product of learning (Isa. 1:17). When one has so studied and learned divine instruction in the Holy Scriptures that he is able to conduct all of his affairs with justice and mercy, he has attained unto a position of walking humbly with God and is a true disciple.

John the apostle emphasized this kind of relationship: "This is love, that we walk according to His commandments" (2 John 6a). Paul fully agreed with this assessment: "...We urge and exhort in the Lord Yeshua that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God" (1 Thess. 4:1). Walking in obedient submission to God's instructions and commands is a walk of freedom (James 1:25). The prodding of the Holy Spirit will always turn the believer, who is so exercised, into the path of truth and justice, where there is, indeed, no condemnation (Rom. 8:1-2).



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SyWia Large

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Receiving God's Instruction

What is a disciple to do? What should he learn? A good place to start is with the apostle Paul's instruction to his star pupil, *talmid* Timothy: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth...From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Messiah Yeshua [Christ Jesus]. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 2:15, 3:15-17).

The first and foremost purpose of every disciple must be to study God's Word. The study, however, must be with a view toward *doing* God's Word. Like Ezra of old, the *talmid* has to set his heart to study God's Word, so that he may first do it and then teach it (Ezra 7:10). This mindset was the focus of the holy men and women of God with whom God dealt in ancient times and through whom He conveyed the understanding encapsulated in Holy Scripture (2 Pet. 1:19-21). As they studied what God had already communicated to His servants, they received additional insights into His will and purposes for their own time and were thereby empowered to accomplish God's designs for their lives and communities.

Learning without doing is tantamount to sin, for one who knows to do good and fails to do it is a sinner (James 4:17). It is akin to believing without decision and action. Theory without practice is meaningless and even deceptive. Anything that is not practical and practicable is not spiritual, despite the elevated emotion or euphoria that it may elicit. The evidence of belief is action based upon understanding and belief. Without such evidence, discipleship is never established.

A disciple of Messiah will be a student of God's instruction. God is the first and foremost teacher, and He has taught His people through prophets and apostles, who were the authors of both the Old (Hebrew Scriptures) and New Testaments. The primary corpus of this knowledge of God is the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible. It is unfortunate that this ancient and honorable Hebrew word has been translated as "Law" in English versions. Its true meaning is "instruction," the words of insight from a wise Father. Moreover, the word *Torah* comes from the root *yarah*, which is an archery term meaning "to aim at a mark and hit it."

Is it any wonder then that King David exclaimed, "I desire to do Your will, O my God; Your Torah is within my heart...I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your Torah is my delight" (Ps. 40:8, 119:174). History's wisest human observed, "For the commandment is a lamp, and the Torah a light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Prov. 6:23). Indeed, the incarnate *Torah* Himself declared, "If you love Me, you will obey what I command...If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 14:15, 15:10). If Yeshua demonstrated His submission to the will of His Father by obedience to His instructions, how much more should Christian disciples submit to the Lordship of Yeshua by keeping His commandments!

Studying God's Word is essential to discipleship. This truth is further illustrated by another Hebrew word that is derived from *lamad*. This is the word *Talmud*, the title for the expansive corpus of knowledge that the sages and teachers of Israel derived over centuries of study in the *Torah*. The *Talmud* is comprised of the *Mishnah*, a compilation of oral tradition and commentary developed from study of the *Torah*, and the *Gemarrah*, a compilation of further commentary on the *Mishnah*. It is apropos, therefore, that the term used to describe centuries of Jewish investigation and commentary is *Talmud*, which is directly related to *talmid*, or disciple.



"I desire to do Your will, O my God; Your Torah is within my heart..."

I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your Torah is my delight."

Psalms 40:8, 119:174



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Christians who desire to be true disciples of Messiah must learn to honor and study God's instruction manual for successful human living. They must become students of Scripture, permitting the *lamed* of God's instruction to prod them toward right conduct and proper posture in their relationship with God and man. Love for God and man (the two greatest commandments) will be fulfilled in their lives because they will learn from the *Torah* (particularly from the Ten Commandments) how to do so.

High Worship

Many, if not most, Christians would agree with Solomon's assessment: "Be warned...Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body" (Eccles. 12:12). Study is, indeed, hard work, part of the discipline of the learner or disciple; however, its assets far outweigh the liabilities of acquisition.

The Jewish people have long believed that study is the highest form of worship. How, we might ask, can study be worship? The words for worship both in Hebrew (*segad*) and Greek (*proskunéo*) mean to "prostrate oneself in the presence of the Deity." The ultimate form of prostration before God—submission to His will—is demonstrated in the study of the Scriptures with a view toward doing what God has said. Study of God's Word, particularly of the *Torah*, then, is a form of worship or submission to God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel encapsulated this Jewish approach to study by saying that while the Greeks study in order to understand, the Hebrews study in order to revere. God's Word and ways are ineffable: Only by doing them does one understand them. Study of God's Word in order to mold one's lifestyle to that Word is worship in the truest sense of the English word "worship," which means to "ascribe worth to." When we fully submit our lives to God's Word, when we study what He has said with complete devotion and intensity, we do, indeed, ascribe worth to Him: We worship Him.



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A Lifestyle of Learning

Hebrew's highest letter brings life's greatest rewards and, in the end, the "strength of salvation" (Isa. 33:6) and eternal life. The goad of learning, the rigor of study, inculcates understanding that leads to wisdom. The *lamed* prods ever onward and upward those who yield to its unrelenting pressure. It produces and maintains a mindset of instruction that ever enriches and blesses. As wisdom grows, learning continues to increase: "A wise man will hear and will increase learning..." (Prov. 1:5).

This lifestyle of learning opens their understanding by discipline...If they will serve obediently, they shall spend their days in happiness, their years in delight" (Job 36:5, 36:10–11). Disciples are *talmidim*, yielded to the flexible and easy *lamed* with which Yeshua gently prods those who are yoked together with Him. With biblical discipline, they are assured that their lives will be filled with happiness. They experience the exercise of receiving divine wisdom and insight, which bring abundant life. "The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails... When all is said and done, this is the conclusion of the matter: Revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind" (Eccles. 12:11, 12:13).

Richard Hook



By John D. Garr, PhD, ThD
President, Restoration Foundation

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Many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! That is why I am sending out this *Israel Teaching Letter*. It is my hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:3).

