

LEFUM TSARRA AGRA

(Adapted from *The Shakespeare Codes*, by David Basch)

Those who have a smattering of Jewish education will recognize the title of this article as the famous pithy Aramaic saying in the *Talmud* by *ben* (or *ven*) *Hei-Hei* (*Pirke Avot* 5.26). What is of interest is that there is evidence that William Shakespeare knew of the dictum by *ben Hei-Hei* and shared its view. In clear appreciation, the poet wrote a magnificent sonnet in praise of the *Talmudic* sage and embedded within this sonnet not only the sage's name but two full transliterations of his dictum in Aramaic. The words of the dictum translate as follows:

LE'FUM = in accordance with
TSAR'RA = sorrow, pain, effort
AG'RA = [is] reward (*literally*
a'go'rah, an ancient
coin, hence reward)

By historical tradition, *ben Hei-Hei* is thought to be the son of converts to Judaism, indicated by his parents having taken as their name an alliteration of the Hebrew letter *Hei* (**h**) — a letter corresponding to the “**H**.” This is revealing since, at the behest of the L-rd, *Abram* and *Sarai* in *Genesis* added the letter *Hei* to their names, making them *AbraH*am and *SaraH*, and thereby initiated the beginning of a people dedicated to G-d, as later followed the parents of *ben Hei Hei*.

Ben Hei-Hei's dictum presents an important conception of heavenly reward that has been a continuing inspiration. His understanding led him to the insight that a truly heavenly reward from an all knowing G-d would be based on an

individual's effort to perform G-d's service irrespective of whether the effort subsequently led to success. This insight told that such effort *is in itself meritorious and that those who fall in such a battle are already worthy of heavenly coin.*

The embedded elements of the sage's name and dictum in the sonnet are shown on the next page in their original 1609 spelling and configuration but with surrounding words removed so that the embedments become apparent. (*The full sonnet is presented on page 3, approximating the original alignments. A facsimile of the original appears on the last page.*) In the original, the poet made use of a wide variety of devices to communicate his thoughts, including supposed misprints and spelling errors. There should be little doubt about what the poet crafted since he repeats no less than two sets of full transliterations of the sage's Aramaic dictum and presents many other related telltale elements.

Transliterations of the dictum's word **TSAR'RA** appear, read backwards in the text as *serraw*, in the words, “*warres*” (line 5) and “*warre s[hall]*” (line 7). Similarly, **LE'FUM** appears twice. One instance begins on line 2 in the letters *lufe*, as read backwards in the word “*powrefull*,” and completed as *lufe-m* by the letter “*m*” that lies above and in tandem. The second instance is a more complex device that makes use of a corrupted letter “*w*” in the original printing of the word “*vnswept*” on line 4. This letter is shaped to look like a mirror image of the Hebrew letter “*Mem*,” a letter

ven shows up as *uen* and *vn* in the words "*vnswept*" and "*Euen*" — the latter amidst the letters "*h-E*" and "*h-e*." (In the original Elizabethan printing, the letters "*v*" and "*u*" are interchangeable, with the letter "*u*" becoming "*v*" in mid word and "*v*" is used for "*u*" at the beginning of words.)

The name as "*Hei*" is transliterated through horizontal and vertical devices and in combinations of these — instances too numerous to be accidental. These appear as "*he*," "*he ey*," "*h-y*," "*hei*," "*hi-e*," "*h-y-e*," "*h-E-h*," "*h-ai*," "*ha-i*," and "*hai*." The last is the result of a broken "*l*" in "*shall*" in the original on line 10, making it appear almost as an "*i*" — *another example of the poet's resourcefulness in communication using deliberate printing errors.*

There are also whole transliterations of the sage's name as *Hei Hei* in three configurations in which the two parts of the name are stacked one above the other on separate lines, dramatizing the alliteration. These show up as "*he-he*," "*ha-he*," and "*he-h-e*." These devices are shown on the previous page in bold.

Also to be observed is that the sage's name is alluded to in the very sonnet number, **55**. This is so because in Hebrew the number 5 is also the letter "*Hei*." Therefore, **55** itself is a visible marquee declaring "*Hei-Hei*."

This appreciation of *ben Hei-Hei* appears in a sonnet that has been identified by many commentators as one of the poet's only two "*religious sonnets*." (*Sonnet 146 is the other*.) Therefore, it is not far afield to observe

55 *

Not marble, nor the gilded monument,
 Of Princes shall out-lie this powrefull rime,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Then vnswept stone, besmeer'd with sluttish time.
When wastefull warre shall Statues ouer-turne, - 5
 And broiles roote out the worke of masonry,
 Nor **M**ars his sword, nor **w**arres quick fire shall burne:
 The liuing **r**ecord of your memory.

Gainst

Gainst death, and all obliuious emnity
 Shall you pace forth, your praise **sha**/l stil finde roome, - 10
Euen in the eyes of all posterity
 That **w**ea're this world out to the ending doome.
 So **t**il the iudgement that your selfe arise,
 You **l**ie in this, and dwell in louers eies.

*Vertical alignments are approximate

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But you shall shine more bright in these contents
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Gainst death, and all obliuious enmity
Shall you pace forth, your praise shall stil finde roome,
Euen in the eyes of all posterity
That weare this world out to the ending doome.
So til the iudgement that your selfe arise,
You liue in this, and dwell in louers eies.

that still another signpost confirming the subject of this sonnet is to be found in the sonnet's closing couplet lines (lines 13-14) that correspond to *verses 13-14 of Psalm 55 (verses 14-15 in the Hebrew Bible)*. Here the psalmist, as does the poet in the sonnet, mentions his relationship to a beloved colleague: "*But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.*"

This article provides only a sample of the hidden devices that an imaginative poet used to communicate his thoughts throughout his sonnets. (See *THE SHAKESPEARE CODES* for many more striking examples. Learn of a poet whose astounding skill and artistry enabled the communication of his messages of religious devotion, achieved despite the watchful eyes of censors rigorously supervising religious conformity.) •

For more information on *The Shakespeare Codes*, search topic, "*Shakespeare Codes*," on the internet or consult the web pages www.ziplink.net/~entropy and www.ziplink.net/~entropy/codes.htm