

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 Hei-Hei** (*Pirke Avot* 5.26). What is of interest is that there is evidence that William Shakespeare knew of this dictum and shared its view. In clear appreciation of it, the poet wrote a magnificent sonnet in praise of this talmudic sage and embedded within it not only the sage's name but two full transliterations of his dictum in Aramaic. The Aramaic words of the dictum and their translation are 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** (which literally means “*son of Hei Hei*”) is thought to be the son of converts to Judaism, indicated by his parents having taken as their name, **Hei Hei**, an alliteration of the Hebrew letter **Hei** (ה) — 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 *AbraHam* and *SaraH* and initiating 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 it succeeded. *This insight told that such effort is in itself meritorious and that those who may fall in such a cause are already worthy of heavenly coin.*

It is this sage teaching that will be forever memorialized in the “*living record*,” the *Talmud*.

The sonnet's embedded elements of the sage's name and dictum are shown on the next page in their original 1609 spelling and configurations but with surrounding words removed so that the embedments are apparent. (*The full sonnet is shown on page 3 approximating the original alignments. A facsimile of the original appears on page 4.*) In the original, the poet makes use of a wide variety of devices to communicate his thoughts, including supposed misprints and spelling errors. There should be little doubt about what is crafted since the poet repeats no less than two sets of full transliterations of the sage's Aramaic dictum and many other related telltale elements.

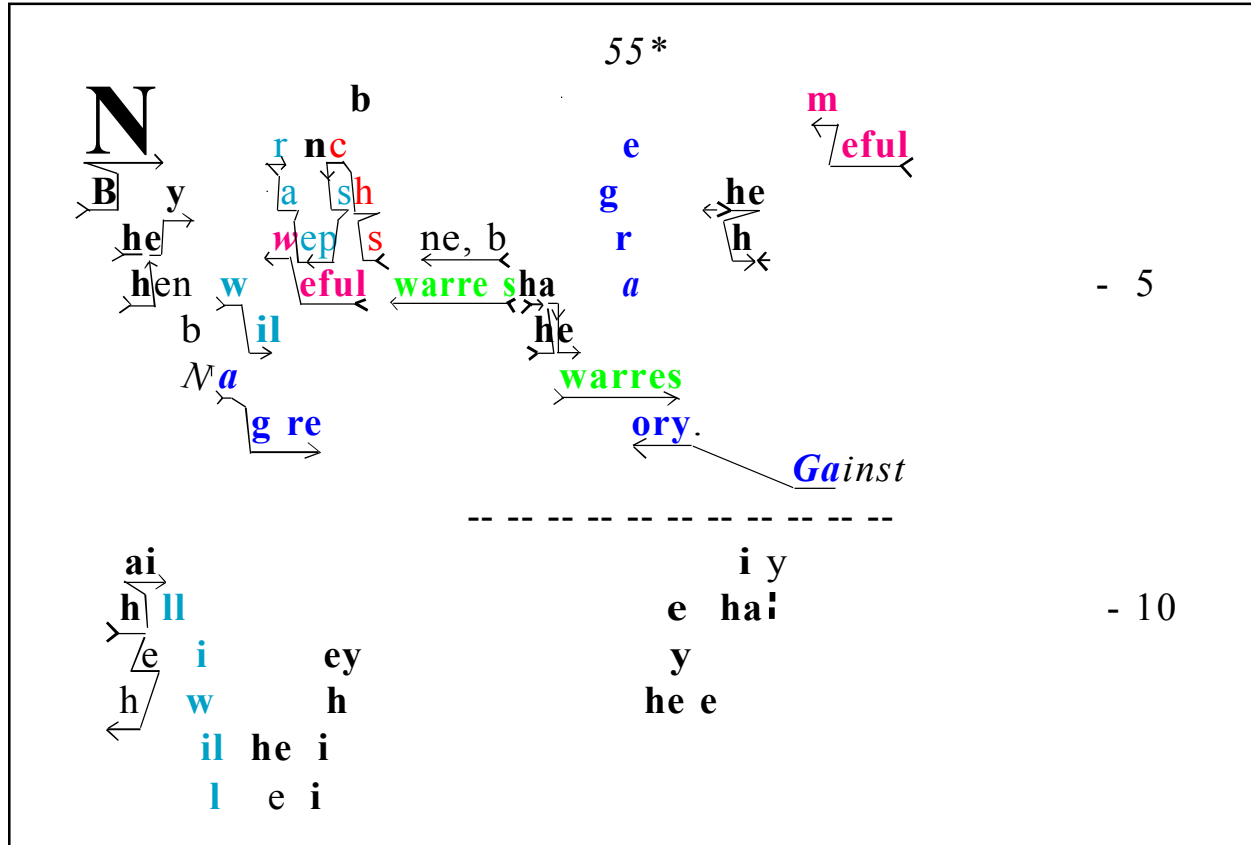
Transliterations of the dictum's word **TSAR'RA** appear in the text as **serraw**, read right to left in the words “*warres*” (line 5) and “*warre s[hall]*” (line 7). Similarly, **LE'FUM** appears twice. One instance, **luf[u]m**, begins on line 2 in a right to left reading of letters in the word “*powrefull*” as **luf**, completed by a letter “*m*” above and in tandem. The second instance is a more complex device. It makes use of a defective letter “*w*” in the original printing of the word “*vnswept*” on line 4. This letter with an indistinct arm is shaped to resemble a mirror image of the Hebrew “*Mem*,” a letter pronounced like “*m*” and when written

in Hebrew script resembles the letter “N.” This letter tags on to letters on line 5 read *right-to-left* in the word “*wastefull*” as *lufe*, giving the reading *le’fue-m*. Note how the poet again calls attention to his device of *mirror reversal* by another defective “w” in “sword” (line 7) and also gives a correct looking version of the script version of *Mem* as shaped by a deformed letter “M” in “Vars” (line 7).

The third word of the dictum, *AG’RA*, is transliterated running vertically downwards as *e-g-r-a* in a letter string that begins on line 2 with the “e” of “*liue*.” It occurs twice more. One of these shows up as *a-g re* beginning with the “a” of “*Mars*” on line 7 that is read on a diagonal downward to the right to pick up the letters “*g re*” in the words “*liuing record*.” The other instance is the approximation *aG-yro* that is formed by reading *right-to-left*

the first two letters *aG* of the word “*Gainst*” of the *catchword* in the original sonnet printing, continuing on to pick up the letters “*yro*” of “*memory*” at the end of line 8. (*The “catchword” is a word placed at the end of a page to anticipate it as the first word on the very next page.*) See all these shown below.

The poet also renders the sage's full name as *ben Hei-Hei*. *Ben* is read *right to left* in the letters of the words, “*stone, besmeared*.” It also occurs twice in vertical alignments. One appears aligned vertically in the letters of the words “*marble*” and “*Princes*” on lines 1 to 2. The second appears more dramatically in the “*B*” that begins line 3 that is read with the sonnet’s large letter “*N*” above it as “*B-N*.” This is then read with the two sets of the letters “*he-y*,” stacked and intertwined on lines 4 and 5, as shown below.



The part of the name as “*Hei*” is transliterated through various horizontal and vertical devices — instances too numerous to be accidental. These are represented as “*he-y*,” “*h-e-y*,” “*h-e-h*,” “*h-y*,” “*hei*,” “*hi-e*,” “*h-y-e*,” “*h-ai*,” “*ha-i*,” and “*ha[i]*.” The appearance of the last instance is the result of a broken letter “*l*” in “*shalt*” in the original printing on line 10, making it look like an “*i*” — *one example of many instances of the poet’s resourcefulness in communication through a use of deliberate printing errors.*

Among the *Hei* representation are three whole transliterations dramatizing the alliteration, *Hei Hei*, in configurations in which the parts of the name are conspicuously stacked one upon the other. These show up as the noted “*he-y--h-e-y*,” and as “*ha-e--h-a-e*” and “*he-h--h-eh*,” all presented in bold, extracted on the previous page and below in the text.

Also to be observed is that the talmudic sage’s name is alluded to in sonnet number 55 since the Hebrew number 5 is also the letter “*Hei*.” Therefore, 5-5 itself is a visible marquee declaring “*Hei-Hei*.”

This poetic 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 afield to observe that still another signpost confirming the religious subject of this sonnet is to be found in the sonnet’s closing lines 13-14 that correspond to *verses 13-14 of Psalm 55*. In the psalm, the psalmist, *as does the poet in his 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.*”

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 Mars his sword, nor warres quick fire shall burne:
 The liuing record of your memory.

Gainst

 Gainst death, and all obliuious emnity
 shall you pace forth, your praise shall stil finde roome, - 10
 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.

*Letter alignments are approximated. See facsimile on last page.

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 And broiles roote out the worke of masonry,
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That the poet means to allude to God is shown by the two device versions of the sacred name as *y-h-W-h* and *i-h-u-h* at the beginning of sonnet lines on each part (see page 3).

Note also how the poet phonetically represents his own surname in the sonnet device "*s-h[a]-c-s-pe-a-r*." It begins on line 4 with the "s" of "stone" read upward along a diagonal to "h" and "c" as "*s-h[a]-c*" (*the vowel assumed in the Hebrew manner*) and continues down along a rising arc to pick up the letter sequence, "*s-pe-a-r*." Also note his

name, "*w-il*," "*w-i-ll*" and "*w-il-l*" (lines 5-6; 10-14), highlighted in the sonnet on page 2.

This article provides only a sample of the hidden devices that an imaginative poet crafted to communicate his thoughts within his sonnets. See *THE SHAKESPEARE CODES* for many more striking examples. Learn of a poet whose astounding mastery enabled the communication of his praises of God and of admired friends, achieved despite the dangers of the hostile and watchful eyes of censoring government authorities.

For more information on *The Shakespeare Codes*,
 consult the following web pages
www.davidbasch.net and www.davidbasch.net/codes.htm