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The Fractured Vav: A Theology of Sacred Brokenness as Portal Between Healing and Holiness

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the theological significance of the vav ketia (broken vav) in the Hebrew word "shalom" (peace) as it appears in Numbers 25:12, where God grants Pinchas a "covenant of peace." Through interdisciplinary analysis drawing on Talmudic sources, mystical tradition, and contemporary applications, the work develops a comprehensive theology of sacred brokenness. The broken vav is examined as both textual phenomenon and existential structure, offering insights for medical ethics, marriage counseling, and spiritual practice. The essay integrates previous work on Kiddushin to demonstrate how sanctification operates within human limitation, arguing that wholeness emerges not despite brokenness but through its creative integration. The study includes substantial analysis of Chassidic parallels and contemporary applications, presenting the vav ketia as a hermeneutical key for understanding how meaning emerges from acknowledged limitation.

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Introduction

פרשת פינחס : Parashat Pinchas	10 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:
י וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה. אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר.	11 Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned My wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was very jealous for My sake among them, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in My jealousy.
יב וְהָיָה לְךָ בְּיָמֶיךָ וּלְיָמֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל. בְּרִית כְּהֻנָּה עוֹלָם--תַּחַת--אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה לַיהוָה. וְנִקְבְּרָה עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.	12 Wherefore say: Behold, I give unto him My covenant of peace:
יג וְהָיָה לְךָ וּלְבָנֶיךָ אֶת-הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת. אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה לַיהוָה. וְנִקְבְּרָה עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.	13 and it shall be unto him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.
יד וְשֵׁם אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמֵּת. אֲשֶׁר הָקָה אֶת-הַמְדִּינִיתִי--זִמְרִי. בֶּן-קִזְבִּי: נִשְׂאָה בֵּית-אֵב לְשִׁמְעֵי.	14 Now the name of the man of Israel that was slain, who was slain with the Midianitish woman, was Zimri, the son of Salu, a prince of a fathers' house among the Simeonites.
טו וְשֵׁם הָאִשָּׁה הַמְדִּינִיתִי. קִזְבִּי בַת-זֹר: רֹאשׁ אֲמוֹת בְּיַת אֵב בְּמִדְיָן. הִוא. [ב].	15 And the name of the Midianitish woman that was slain was Cozbi, the daughter of Zur; he was head of the people of a fathers' house in Midian. [P]

was moved to zealous action. Without consulting Moses or any authority, he took a spear, followed the couple into the tent, and pierced them both through—"the Israelite man and the woman through her belly" (Numbers 25:8). This dramatic act immediately stopped the plague.

The context of the vav ketia is crucial to understanding its significance. The brit shalom is granted to Pinchas after this violent act of zealotry—an act that, while achieving the desired result of ending the plague, was performed without judicial process or divine command, yet somehow merits divine approval and the promise of eternal priesthood.

The broken vav in this context functions as a textual embodiment of the moral complexity inherent in Pinchas's act. While his zealotry achieves the desired result (ending the plague), the peace it establishes is fundamentally compromised. As Rachel Adelman observes, "the shockwaves of that violence leave that whole fragile; a broken peace, symbolized by the severed line, a white gap in the letter vav" [1].

In the sacred architecture of Hebrew letters, few carry the

The Narrative Context

The story of Pinchas unfolds in Numbers 25, during Israel's encampment at Shittim. The Israelites had begun to engage in sexual immorality with Moabite women and were subsequently drawn into the worship of Baal Peor, leading to divine wrath and a plague that killed 24,000 people. In the midst of this crisis, while Moses and the elders were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, an Israelite man named Zimri ben Salu brazenly brought a Midianite woman, Cozbi bat Zur, into the camp and into his tent, in full view of the assembled community. Pinchas, son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron the High Priest,

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mystical weight of the vav—the sixth letter, the "hook" that connects heaven and earth, the grammatical "and" that binds disparate realities into coherent wholes. Yet in Parshat Pinchas, at the very moment when God promises a "covenant of peace" (brit shalom), this connective letter appears fractured, severed down its vertical spine. The vav ketia (broken vav) stands as one of the most enigmatic textual anomalies in the Torah, a deliberate scribal tradition that transforms the word for peace into a meditation on brokenness itself.

This essay explores the profound theological implications of the vav ketia as it appears in two pivotal covenantal contexts: the brit shalom granted to Pinchas and the laws of kiddushin (Jewish marriage). Through the lens of Lurianic tzimtzum and the mystical tradition of tikkun, we propose that the broken vav represents not merely a scribal curiosity but a fundamental truth about the nature of divine-human relationship—that wholeness emerges not despite brokenness but through it, and that the most profound connections are forged in the space of absence.



However there is one exception were the scribe is **mandated** to make the letter incomplete. The letter in question in the *vav* in the word *shalom* in Numbers 25:12. This must be written with a break in the vertical line according to the Ritva (R. Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili Spain c. 1250-1330).

The Anatomical Theology of the Broken Letter

The Hebrew letter vav functions as the primary connector in both grammar and cosmology. As the "hook" (vav literally means "hook"), it links disparate elements into unified wholes. In the construction of the Tabernacle, hundreds of vavs connected the pillars, creating sacred space from separate components. Mystically, the vav represents the axis mundi—the vertical connection between the divine realm (olam ha-elyon) and the earthly realm (olam ha-tachton).

According to the Izhbitzer Rebbe, as recorded by Reb Shlomo Carlebach, the letter vav, unique among Hebrew letters, requires only itself to be pronounced—"vav is vav"—suggesting that nothing foreign penetrates to the inside of the heart when one is properly connected to truth [2].

In the structure of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה), the vav occupies the third position, connecting the upper yud and hey (representing the divine masculine and feminine aspects) with the lower hey (representing the Shekhinah in exile). This

positioning makes the vav not merely a grammatical tool but a theological necessity—the only pathway through which divine energy can flow into created reality. As the Zohar explains: "The upper vav (vav elyona) is Tiferet midway between the six joints of the upper limbs... the vav represents the torso and the bris connected as one. The second lower vav is represented by the zaddik the foundation (yesod) of the world" [3].

The vav ketia in "shalom" presents us with a fundamental paradox: how can the word for peace and wholeness contain within it a letter that is itself broken? The Talmudic discussion in Kiddushin 66b attempts to resolve this by reading the broken vav as absent entirely, transforming "shalom" into "shalem" (whole/complete). This hermeneutical move allows the passage to teach that priestly service requires bodily wholeness—a kohen with a physical blemish (ba'al mum) cannot serve in the Temple [4].

The Ba'al HaTurim points out that the broken vav, appearing like a yud, creates the reading "shaleim" (complete), suggesting that the promise of eternal priesthood applies only when the kohen is complete and unblemished. However, this interpretation reveals a deeper paradox: "there are times when completion... or perfection... can only come about through a diminution." The paradigmatic example is brit milah—before circumcision, a male child is considered like a ba'al mum, yet it is precisely the cutting away of the orlah that makes him shalem (complete) [5].

Yet this solution raises more questions than it answers. If the vav is to be ignored, why preserve it in the scribal tradition? Why not simply omit it entirely? The persistence of the vav ketia across millennia of copying suggests that its brokenness itself carries meaning—that the fracture is not accidental but essential to the theological message.

The broken vav establishes what might be called "integrative grammar"—neither purely conjunctive (chibbur) nor purely separative (chiluk) but maintaining the integrity of separate elements while holding them in creative tension. As Rav Frand explains, sometimes the vav of connection is appropriate for compromise, while sometimes the vav of separation is necessary, declaring that "machlokes is better than shalom at any price" [6].

This integrative function reflects the deeper kabbalistic reality that the vav ketia represents. The fracture in the letter creates what the tradition calls the "challal hapanui"—the vacated space that appears absent of the divine but is, paradoxically, filled with divine presence. As Reb Nachman teaches in Likutei Moharan 64, this apparently empty space is where the zaddik learns to see God in God's absence, bridging the gap through spiritual perception [7].

Pinchas and the Violence of Zealotry

The context of the vav ketia is crucial to understanding its significance. The brit shalom is granted to Pinchas after his violent act of zealotry—spearing Zimri and Cozbi in a moment of religious passion that stops a plague devastating the Israelite camp. This act of violence, performed without judicial process

or divine command, somehow merits divine approval and the promise of eternal priesthood.

The broken vav in this context functions as a textual embodiment of the moral complexity inherent in Pinchas's act. While his zealotry achieves the desired result (ending the plague), the peace it establishes is fundamentally compromised. As Rachel Adelman observes, "the shockwaves of that violence leave that whole fragile; a broken peace, symbolized by the severed line, a white gap in the letter vav" [1].

The Midrashic Tradition of Pinchas-Elijah

The midrashic tradition identifies Pinchas with Elijah the Prophet, creating a theological arc that spans from zealotry to messianic herald. The Zohar and other mystical sources explore this connection through the lens of the broken vav, suggesting that Elijah's role as the "angel of the covenant" (malach ha-brit) is precisely to repair the cosmic fracture that Pinchas's act both revealed and partially healed.

This identification is supported by an intriguing orthographic detail explored by the Ba'al HaTurim: the name "Elijah" is traditionally written without a vav (היליא), while "Jacob" is written with an extra vav (בוקעי). According to tradition, Jacob's vav was given to Elijah as collateral until the messianic age, when the cosmic repair (tikkun) will be complete and the vav will be returned to its proper place. The letters of "yismach" (will rejoice) spell "Mashiach," for in the days of Mashiach, when the vav is returned to Elijah, there will be complete rejoicing [5].

The deeper significance emerges from the Zohar's analysis of the small yud in Pinchas's name, which represents "the secret of the holy covenant" and "the diadem of yesod." This connection between the anomalous yud in Pinchas and the broken vav in shalom points to the yesod (foundation) as the connecting signifier. Yet the vav remains flawed, suggesting that even Pinchas's perfection of the brit (tikkun habris) cannot fully heal the cosmic fracture [6].

The Munkatcher Rebbe provides a crucial insight: when the Jewish people sinned with Baal Peor, they created "a tremendous break from Hashem in the very area of p'gam habris" (damage to the covenant). Pinchas restored peace between Israel and God by repairing the yesod/brit connection. His reward of brit shalom was therefore measure-for-measure—by restoring the cosmic harmony below, he merited eternal peace above [7].

Yet the vav in his reward remains broken, suggesting that this peace is necessarily incomplete in our unredeemed world. The fracture persists as a reminder that even the most zealous acts of repair cannot fully bridge the gap between the infinite divine and finite human realms.

The Laws of Lineage and the Flawed Connection

The appearance of the vav ketia discussion in Talmud (Kiddushin 66b), within the context of laws governing marriage and lineage, is not coincidental. My previous essay on Kiddushin [8] explored how this tractate reveals the fundamental tensions

between sacred connection and human limitation. The mishnah establishes four categories of marital relationships, each defined by the degree of covenantal validity:

These categories reveal a sophisticated understanding of how brokenness operates within covenantal relationships. Even when the marriage involves transgression, the kiddushin (sanctification) remains valid—the relationship is broken but not dissolved, flawed but not void.

In the context of marriage, the broken vav represents the reality that all human relationships exist in the space between connection and separation, wholeness and fragmentation. The kiddushin ceremony itself acknowledges this through the ritual of breaking: the glass shattered under the groom's foot, the ketubah (marriage contract) that anticipates potential dissolution, the very word kiddushin which means "setting apart" as much as "sanctification."

This understanding has profound implications for therapeutic practice. If the vav ketia teaches us that peace (shalom) can only be achieved through acknowledging brokenness, then healing cannot be about returning to some imagined state of wholeness but about learning to live creatively within the fracture.

As I argued in my Kiddushin essay, the very structure of marriage law reveals that connection and separation are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same reality. The broken vav becomes a textual embodiment of this paradox—present in its absence, connecting through disconnection.

Doctrine of Tzimtzum

Isaac Luria's doctrine of tzimtzum provides a crucial framework for understanding the vav ketia. According to Lurianic kabbalah, creation begins not with divine presence but with divine absence—God's withdrawal from Godself to create a space (makom panuy) in which finite existence can emerge. This withdrawal is not complete abandonment but rather a form of concealment, a hiding that paradoxically enables revelation [9].

The broken vav can be understood as a textual representation of this primordial tzimtzum. The fracture in the letter creates a space of absence within the word for peace, suggesting that shalom is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative tension—the capacity to hold brokenness and wholeness in dynamic relationship.

The tradition preserves different scribal approaches to where exactly the break should occur in the vav. Yemenite soferim place the disconnection close to the top, near the yud-like head, possibly symbolizing disconnection close to the father (chochma/wisdom) at the level of intellect. Ashkenazic tradition places it further down along the vav's shaft, in the area of "hamshacha" (divine flow), corresponding to the spiritual torso of Tiferet at the level of the heart. This scribal variation itself suggests that the location of brokenness matters—whether the fracture occurs at the level of understanding or feeling, intellect or emotion.

Reb Nachman's profound insight in *Likutei Moharan* 64 addresses the apparent paradox of the *challal hapanui*—the vacated space that seems absent of the divine. Unlike the Chabad understanding of *tzimtzum* as illusory, Breslov maintains that the contraction is real yet mysteriously filled with divine presence. Our task, Reb Nachman teaches, is to see God in God's absence.

This understanding transforms the broken *vav* from a symbol of divine absence into a representation of divine hiddenness. The gap in the letter becomes not empty space but sacred space—a place where the divine presence dwells precisely through concealment. The *zaddik*, according to this teaching, has already "crossed over" (*ivri*) this vacated space, bridging the gap in the *vav* through spiritual perception.

The Divine Fracture and Human Hope

At the deepest level of kabbalistic interpretation, the broken *vav* implies that "the connection between upper and lower worlds remains fractured even within the divine." The doctrine of *shevirat hakelim* (breaking of the vessels) suggests that brokenness exists not only in the human realm but in the divine structure itself. All human attempts at crossing this divide—"despite all the *mesiras nefesh* and martyrdom, despite all the learning fasting and *devekut*"—remain elusive because "the *challal hapanui* the vacated space remains real and unbridgeable".

Yet this apparent pessimism contains within it the seeds of hope. The *vav ketia* promises the possibility of reunion precisely because it remains aligned with its lower counterpart, "begging for the scribe to one-day fill in the gap, the *zaddik* to force that drop of ink." The tradition suggests that Moses saved a drop of ink by not filling in the *yud* of his description as "*anav*" (humble), and this extra drop appeared on his forehead as a horn of light. Similarly, the *zaddik* has the possibility of filling in the gap in the *vav* using the *yud* of Moses or the *yud* of *Pinchas*—"just a drop".

The broken *vav* provides the textual key for understanding this principle: sanctification (*kiddushin*) occurs not through the elimination of brokenness but through its integration into a larger pattern of meaning.

The *vav ketia* offers insights into the dynamics of forgiveness within marriage that extend beyond the legal framework discussed in *Kiddushin*. Rather than seeking to eliminate all sources of hurt or disappointment, the broken *vav* suggests that forgiveness involves learning to maintain connection across the space of acknowledged injury. Forgiveness becomes not the erasure of the past but the integration of brokenness into a larger pattern of meaning.

This understanding has implications for couples therapy, where the goal is not to eliminate all conflict but to help partners develop the capacity for creative engagement with difference. The broken *vav* teaches that the most profound intimacy often emerges not from perfect harmony but from the ability to remain connected across the space of otherness.

The Space Between

The *vav ketia* creates a unique phenomenological space—a gap within the letter that is neither presence nor absence but something else entirely. This space can be understood as a form of *bein* (between)—the relational dimension that exists neither in the self nor in the other but in the space of encounter.

In the therapeutic relationship, this *bein* space becomes the locus of healing. Neither physician nor patient alone can create the conditions for transformation; healing emerges from the quality of attention that develops between them. The broken *vav* suggests that this therapeutic space is not simply a neutral meeting ground but a sacred fracture—a place where the normal boundaries between self and other, known and unknown, become permeable.

The *vav ketia* also establishes an aesthetic principle that might be called "the beauty of imperfection." Unlike the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, which finds beauty in natural imperfection, the broken *vav* suggests that some forms of beauty can only be achieved through deliberate fracture—that wholeness requires the conscious integration of brokenness.

This aesthetic has implications for how we understand both physical and emotional healing. Rather than seeking to eliminate all traces of illness or trauma, the *vav ketia* suggests that true healing involves learning to integrate brokenness into a larger pattern of meaning. The scar becomes not a sign of failure but a mark of survival; the therapeutic relationship becomes not a cure but a form of sacred companionship.

The Scribal Tradition

The preservation of the *vav ketia* across centuries of scribal transmission represents one of the most remarkable features of the Masoretic tradition. Unlike other scribal errors, which are corrected, the broken *vav* is carefully maintained, passed down with precise instructions about where the break should occur and how it should be formed.

This preservation suggests that the *vav ketia* is not a mistake to be corrected but a mystery to be preserved—a reminder that some truths can only be transmitted through brokenness. The scribes understood that the fractured letter carries theological weight that would be lost if the text were "corrected" to conform to conventional expectations of wholeness [10].

The *vav ketia* establishes a hermeneutical principle that might be called "the hermeneutics of repair"—the idea that meaning emerges not from the resolution of textual problems but from sustained attention to textual brokenness. This approach invites readers to dwell within the fracture rather than rushing to heal it, to allow the broken letter to teach what wholeness cannot.

This hermeneutical stance has implications beyond textual interpretation. It suggests that in human relationships, therapeutic encounters, and spiritual practice, the most profound insights often emerge not from solving problems but from learning to live creatively within them.

The mystical tradition often interprets the vav as representing the masculine divine principle—that connects the upper and lower worlds. In this reading, the vav ketia represents a severing of the connection between divine and human realms that must be repaired through human action [11].

This interpretation offers important insights into the nature of covenantal relationship. The broken vav suggests that the divine-human connection is not naturally given but must be constantly renewed through human effort. The fracture in the letter represents not divine absence but divine vulnerability—the recognition that even God's capacity to connect depends on human response.

The tradition of tikkun (repair) suggests that the broken vav is not a permanent condition but a task to be accomplished. Each act of healing, each moment of genuine connection, each gesture of compassion contributes to the gradual repair of the cosmic fracture represented by the vav ketia.

This understanding transforms both medical practice and marriage into forms of mystical work. The physician's attention to suffering becomes a form of tikkun, gradually healing the rupture between body and soul, hope and despair. The couple's commitment to work through conflict becomes a form of cosmic repair, slowly mending the fracture between isolation and connection.

The Eschatological Dimension

The mystical tradition suggests that the vav ketia will ultimately be repaired in the messianic age, when the cosmic fracture will be healed and the connection between divine and human realms will be restored. This eschatological dimension prevents the theology of brokenness from becoming a form of resignation or despair—the fracture is real but not final.

In the context of medical practice, this eschatological hope provides a framework for understanding how healing can be meaningful even when cure is not possible. The physician's work contributes to a larger process of cosmic repair that extends beyond individual success or failure. Each act of compassionate care, each moment of genuine presence, participates in the gradual healing of the world's brokenness.

Similarly, in the context of marriage, the eschatological dimension of the vav ketia suggests that each couple's work toward deeper intimacy participates in a larger process of cosmic repair. The difficulties and conflicts of married life are not obstacles to be overcome but opportunities to participate in the healing of the fundamental fracture between self and other.

This understanding transforms the everyday challenges of marriage into forms of spiritual practice. The couple's commitment to work through misunderstanding, to forgive betrayal, to maintain connection across difference becomes a form of tikkun olam—repairing the world through the repair of relationship.

Contemporary Applications

The broken vav has particular relevance for contemporary medical ethics, where questions of life and death, healing and harm, often resist simple resolution. The vav ketia suggests that ethical decisions in medicine must account for the irreducible complexity of human existence—that sometimes the most healing action is to acknowledge the limits of intervention.

In palliative care, for example, the broken vav offers a framework for understanding how meaning can emerge from the space of medical limitation. When curative treatment is no longer possible, the therapeutic relationship shifts from connection through intervention to connection through presence—a vav that connects not through action but through accompaniment in the face of mortality.

The vav ketia offers specific insights for clinical practice, particularly in contexts where cure is not possible or where the therapeutic relationship itself becomes the primary intervention. The broken vav suggests that the physician's presence within the space of limitation can itself be therapeutic, even when technical intervention is ineffective.

This understanding has particular relevance for palliative care, psychiatry, and other medical specialties where the relationship between physician and patient is central to the therapeutic process. The broken vav teaches that healing can occur within the space of acknowledged limitation, that meaning can emerge from the integration of brokenness rather than its elimination.

In the clinical encounter, the space between physician and patient can be understood as a makom panuy—a vacated space charged with potential. The broken vav suggests that this space is not empty but full of creative possibility precisely because it acknowledges the limits of what can be done. The physician operates within this paradox: present to suffering while accepting the boundaries of healing, connecting to patients while maintaining professional distance.

This understanding transforms the therapeutic relationship from one of simple repair to one of accompaniment within brokenness. The physician becomes not merely a healer but a companion in the space of tzimtzum, witnessing the patient's struggle while holding space for both presence and absence, connection and separation.

Teaching Through Brokenness

The vav ketia establishes a pedagogical principle that challenges conventional approaches to education and formation. Rather than presenting wholeness as the goal to be achieved, the broken vav suggests that learning happens most profoundly in the space of acknowledged limitation and uncertainty.

In medical education, this principle suggests that the most important lessons may come not from successful cases but from encounters with the limits of medical knowledge and intervention. The broken vav teaches that the physician's formation involves not just the acquisition of technical skills

but the development of the capacity to remain present within uncertainty and to find meaning within the space of medical limitation.

In medical education, the *vav ketia* offers a framework for understanding the supervisory relationship between attending physicians and residents. The broken *vav* suggests that the supervisor's task is not to eliminate all uncertainty but to teach the capacity to function effectively within the space of medical limitation.

This involves modeling how to remain present to suffering while acknowledging the boundaries of intervention, how to make decisions within uncertainty, and how to find meaning within the inevitable failures of medical practice. The broken *vav* teaches that the most important lessons may come not from successful cases but from encounters with the limits of medical knowledge.

Similarly, in rabbinic education and spiritual formation, the *vav ketia* suggests that the curriculum should include not just the study of wholeness but the cultivation of the capacity to dwell creatively within brokenness. This involves learning to read texts that resist interpretation, to live with questions that have no clear answers, and to find meaning within the space of theological uncertainty.

Ethical Principles

The *vav ketia* establishes ethical principles that challenge perfectionist approaches to moral life. Rather than seeking to eliminate all moral ambiguity, the broken *vav* suggests that ethical action must account for the irreducible complexity of human existence. The most ethical response may not be the one that achieves perfect outcomes but the one that remains faithful to relationship within the constraints of finite existence.

In medical ethics, this principle suggests that the physician's primary obligation is not to cure but to accompany—to remain present to suffering while acknowledging the limits of intervention. The broken *vav* teaches that the most ethical response to illness may be to create space for meaning within the experience of limitation rather than to pursue cure at all costs.

The *vav ketia* also has implications for political theology and social ethics. Rather than seeking to create perfect social systems, the broken *vav* suggests that justice emerges from the capacity to remain committed to relationship across difference and conflict. The most just society may not be one that eliminates all sources of tension but one that develops institutions capable of holding creative tension.

The Broken Vav and Religious Pluralism

The *vav ketia* has implications for interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism. Rather than seeking to eliminate religious differences, the broken *vav* suggests that authentic interfaith encounter requires the capacity to remain connected across the space of theological disagreement. The fracture in the letter becomes a space for creative engagement with otherness

rather than a barrier to relationship.

This understanding challenges approaches to interfaith dialogue that seek to minimize differences in favor of common ground. The broken *vav* suggests that the most profound interfaith encounters may occur not through the elimination of disagreement but through the development of the capacity to remain committed to relationship across difference.

The *vav ketia* also offers resources for developing a theology of religious difference that neither relativizes religious claims nor eliminates the possibility of relationship across religious boundaries. The broken *vav* suggests that religious truth may be most fully revealed not through the elimination of difference but through the creative tension that emerges from authentic encounter with otherness.

The broken *vav* speaks with particular power to our contemporary moment. In a world where black and white, good and evil are forever blurred, where spirituality lies between wasteland and rare moments of divine inspiration and sense of wonder, we must read this brokenness as essential to our own self-image and recovery/*teshuva*.

The *vav ketia* offers what might be called "the healing text of brokenness"—not a promise of simple repair but recognition that our sacred texts understand "the broken heart, the very fragmentation of our lives, the impossibility of anything but surrender, the unmanageability of the scale of things, the overpowering nature of the violence within." Yet despite this, our tradition claims there can be *shalom*—"albeit fractured, but nevertheless integrated".

The Psychology of Integrative Wholeness

Contemporary psychology recognizes what the *vav ketia* has always taught: we are "split in so many ways, so many selves, so many roles. We find little time for wholeness." The broken *vav* offers a third grammatical category beyond connection (*chibbur*) and separation (*chiluk*)—that of integration, "maintaining the integrity of separate disparate selves yet holding them, albeit in tension".

This integrative understanding transforms therapeutic goals from the elimination of internal conflict to the development of the capacity to hold paradox. The broken *vav* teaches that psychological health may consist not in achieving perfect unity but in learning to live creatively within multiplicity.

Reb Shlomo's teaching about the month of Iyar provides crucial context for understanding when and how the work of the broken *vav* unfolds. If Nissan represents "the fixing of the head" (liberation from the slave mentality that listens only to external authority), then Iyar represents "the fixing of the heart"—learning to read the divine letters that God sends to each of us in every moment.

The tribe of Issachar, associated with Iyar, "knows what to do in the moment." This is the spiritual skill that the broken *vav* cultivates: not just knowing what God wants from all Jews or all humanity, but discerning "what is He saying to me?" The

vav ketia teaches us to read the signs, to develop the spiritual literacy that recognizes divine communication within the fractures of ordinary experience.

The vav ketia represents this deeper level of consciousness—the place where "nothing foreign gets to the inside of my heart" because one has learned to connect directly to divine truth.

The broken vav offers a framework for understanding recovery and teshuva that honors rather than bypasses the reality of damage. "The Pinchas internalized in all of us must confront the Zimri and the whoring nation, and the Tikkun of the Bris and its shleimus, its wholeness, ironically depends upon its awareness of brokenness and fracture".

This suggests that spiritual repair cannot occur through denial or transcendence of brokenness but only through its conscious integration. The vav ketia becomes a symbol of what we might call "integrative recovery"—a process that includes rather than excludes the wounded parts of the self.

The tradition teaches that the zaddik has already bridged the gap in the vav, having learned to see God within apparent absence. This offers hope not through false promises but through the recognition that some human beings have developed the spiritual capacity to live creatively within limitation.

The zaddik's example suggests that the work of the broken vav is possible—that one can learn to inhabit the space of fracture without being destroyed by it. As the teaching concludes: "In my connecting to the zaddik I hold out the hope for recovery from the splitting and fracturing of the soul and for all of us".

This hope is not based on the eventual elimination of brokenness but on the development of the spiritual skills necessary to transform brokenness into blessing, limitation into possibility, and fracture into sacred space.

Wolfson's Phenomenology

Wolfson's analysis of "the concealing-revealing intertwining of divine Infinity and divine Nothingness" as the "groundless ground" of the world [12] directly parallels the theological understanding of the broken vav as representing the space where presence and absence intersect.

This phenomenological insight transforms the vav ketia from a textual curiosity into a fundamental principle of mystical experience. The broken letter becomes a representation of what Wolfson calls "the paradox of divine manifestation"—the recognition that the divine can only be encountered through the acknowledgment of its hiddenness [13].

Wolfson's groundbreaking work on "the phenomenology of the nonphenomenalizable" and "the unseeing that enframes every act of seeing" [14] provides crucial theoretical grounding for understanding how the vav ketia creates a space where divine presence can be encountered precisely through absence. This phenomenological approach suggests that the broken vav is not simply a symbol of absence but a structural necessity for

authentic encounter with the divine.

In the therapeutic context, this understanding transforms the clinical encounter from a simple meeting between physician and patient into a space of mutual unknowing where healing can emerge from the acknowledgment of limitation. The broken vav teaches that the most profound therapeutic encounters may occur not through the elimination of uncertainty but through the creation of space for meaning within the experience of unknowing.

Wolfson's interpretation of tzimtzum as "the infinitesimally reduced point of pure emptiness where Infinity withdraws into itself, opening a space for the world's changeful multiplicity of beings to arise" [15] provides the cosmological framework for understanding the vav ketia as a textual representation of the primordial contraction. This understanding suggests that the broken vav is not simply a scribal anomaly but a fundamental structure of created reality.

The therapeutic implications of this understanding are profound. If the space of healing is understood as a makom panuy (vacated space) created through divine withdrawal, then the physician's task becomes not to fill this space with intervention but to maintain it as a space of possibility. The broken vav teaches that the most healing presence may be one that acknowledges its own limitations while maintaining commitment to accompaniment.

In *Through a Speculum That Shines*, Wolfson argues that "the experience of a vision is inseparable from the process of interpretation" and that "the study of texts occasioned a visual experience of the divine located in the imagination of the mystical interpreter" [16]. This insight has crucial implications for understanding how the vav ketia functions as both textual anomaly and lived reality.

The broken vav becomes not simply an object of interpretation but a structure of experience—a way of encountering reality that acknowledges the interpretive dimension of all experience. In the therapeutic context, this understanding suggests that healing occurs not through the simple application of medical knowledge but through the interpretive encounter between physician and patient, where meaning emerges from the creative tension between knowing and unknowing.

Wolfson's exploration of "the dialectics of absence and presence in the sources" in *Language, Eros, Being* [17] provides crucial theoretical grounding for understanding how the vav ketia creates a therapeutic space of encounter. This dialectical understanding suggests that the broken vav is not simply absent but present in its absence—creating a space that is simultaneously empty and full, broken and whole.

This understanding has profound implications for both medical practice and marriage. In the clinical encounter, the physician's acknowledgment of limitation becomes not a failure but a form of presence—a way of being with the patient that honors both the reality of suffering and the possibility of meaning. In marriage, the couple's ability to maintain connection across

difference becomes a form of sacred practice, participating in the ongoing repair of the cosmic fracture.

Wolfson's concept of the "groundless ground" provides a framework for understanding how the *vav ketia* creates the conditions for authentic encounter without providing a foundation that would eliminate the risk of relationship. The broken *vav* suggests that the most profound connections emerge not from shared certainty but from the willingness to remain present within the space of mutual vulnerability.

This understanding transforms both the therapeutic relationship and marriage into forms of mystical practice. The physician's commitment to remain present to suffering without guaranteeing cure becomes a form of spiritual discipline. The couple's willingness to work through conflict without eliminating all sources of tension becomes a form of *tikkun*, contributing to the gradual repair of the world's brokenness.

Wolfson's phenomenological approach to mystical texts offers the methodological precedent for reading the *vav ketia* as both symbol and lived reality. His work suggests that the broken letter is not simply a textual phenomenon but a structure of experience that can be encountered in various contexts—therapeutic, marital, liturgical, and spiritual.

This methodological insight has implications for how we understand the relationship between text and experience in religious tradition. The *vav ketia* becomes not simply an object of study but a way of engaging with reality that acknowledges the interpretive dimension of all experience while remaining open to the possibility of encounter beyond interpretation.

Conclusion

The theology of the *vav ketia* offers no easy answers to the challenges of healing and relationship. Instead, it provides a framework for understanding how meaning can emerge from the space of acknowledged limitation, how connection can be maintained across the reality of difference, and how peace can be achieved through the integration rather than the elimination of brokenness.

The broken *vav* stands as a testament to the profound truth that wholeness and brokenness are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same reality. In medical practice, this means learning to find meaning within the space of limitation, to offer presence rather than cure, to accompany rather than fix. In marriage, it means creating sacred space within the reality of human finitude, transforming conflict into intimacy, and choosing connection across the space of difference.

The *vav ketia* teaches us that peace (*shalom*) is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative tension—the capacity to hold brokenness and wholeness in dynamic relationship. This understanding has profound implications for how we approach healing, relationship, and spiritual practice. Rather than seeking to eliminate all sources of pain or difficulty, we are called to learn the art of integration, to find ways of living

creatively within the fracture.

This theology of sacred brokenness offers hope not through the promise of perfect healing but through the recognition that meaning can emerge from the space of acknowledged limitation. The *vav ketia* remains broken in our Torah scrolls, a permanent reminder that some truths can only be transmitted through fracture, that some connections can only be made through disconnection, and that some forms of peace can only be achieved through the integration of brokenness.

In a world marked by trauma, division, and limitation, the theology of the *vav ketia* offers not false comfort but genuine hope—the hope that emerges from learning to live creatively within the reality of brokenness, to find connection across the space of difference, and to discover that the most profound forms of healing often occur not through the elimination of suffering but through its transformation into blessing.

The broken *vav* calls us to become skilled in the art of living within paradox, to develop the capacity for what might be called "theological triage"—the ability to discern when to intervene and when to accompany, when to heal and when to witness, when to connect and when to separate. This is the path of the *vav ketia*: not the elimination of brokenness but its integration into a larger pattern of meaning, not the avoidance of limitation but the discovery of possibility within constraint.

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