

Point of Grammar

*Notes on Hebrew Morphology, Syntax and Grammar
to Aid Ba`alei Qeri'a (Torah & Haftara Readers), Shelihei Tsibbur (Service Leaders) and
Gabbaim at BEKI.
Updated and Revised 2013*

1 The Conjunctive vav

BUMP: The conjunctive prefixed letter *vav* (at the beginning of a word) is *usually* a *shuruq* וּ (pronounced as *u* instead of *ve*, *va*, or *vi*) when it precedes the letters *bet/vet*, *vav*, *mem* and *pe/fe* פּ וּמַפּ and when it precedes a word that begins with a *sheva* (the vowel written as two dots arranged vertically). Remember this as the “BUMP” rule.

So we read *u-va`ad*, *u-mipnei*, *u-far`o*, *u-veneï yisrael*, and also (before words beginning with *sheva*) *u-qeshartem*, *u-khetavtem*, *u-le`avdo*, *u-reitem*.

Gabbaim note: If a Torah reader pronounces this incorrectly, it usually is not necessary to correct the reading, as this error does not affect the meaning or intelligibility of the text.

This rule applies to names as well: וּמְרִים

Torah readers note: Now that you know this rule, you can almost always get this correct. Please strive for complete accuracy.

Gabbaim note: Usually an error in this instance does not change the meaning of the word or phrase, so it usually does not need to be corrected.

2 Qamatz Qatan and Hataf-Qamatz

The *qamatz* is the *a* vowel that looks like a small letter *t* written under a letter: אַ.

There are two variations on this vowel that affect pronunciation. One is the *qamatz qatan* or “small *qamatz*” which, unfortunately, is written the same way as a “regular” *qamatz* in most books. Siddur *Sim Shalom* writes it uniquely as a horizontal line with a dot under it; Siddur *Rinat Yisrael* writes it as a double-size *qamatz* (perhaps a bit confusing as this “small *qamatz*” is written large!).

The other variation on this vowel is the *hataf-qamatz* which is written as a *qamatz* with a *sheva* next to it: אָ:

Both the *qamatz qatan* and *hataf* vowel are pronounced more like the long *o* as in “correct” or “vote.”

The *qamatz qatan* can be identified as a *qamatz* that appears in a closed, unaccented syllable. A closed syllable is a syllable that ends in a consonant (consonant-vowel-consonant). An open syllable, in contrast, is one that ends in a vowel (consonant-vowel). Thus in the word-pair “*kol Yisrael*” (which happen to be two words attached by a hyphen, treated as one word), the *qamatz* in the word *kol* is pronounced *o* (and not *a*). Similarly in the word *qorban* the first *qamatz* is pronounced *o* since it is in a closed unaccented syllable.

Biblical forms such as *va-ya-qom*, which are accented on *ya*, often will have a closed unaccented final syllable, in which the *qamatz* is pronounced *o* (and not *a*).

The *hataf* vowel is easy to spot and appears in the words *hodashim* and *oniya* among others.

Gabbaim note: If a Torah reader pronounces this incorrectly, it usually is not necessary to correct the reading, as this error does not affect the meaning or intelligibility of the text.

3 Sheva` : Silent and Vocalized

The vowel *sheva`* is written as two dots arranged vertically under a letter: ם

There are two variations on the sheva. One is pronounced as the vowel *shewa* (that’s what it is called in English) as the *u* in *circus* or the *e* in *deposit*. The other is silent.

The *sheva`* is usually vocalized in one of several circumstances. Here are the four most common.

- א The **first** letter of a word or syllable, such as *benei Yisrael* or *kas-pe-khem*
- ב The **second** of two *shevas* in a row, as in *qiq-reu* (under the *q* and *r*)
- ג Under a letter following a *tenu`a gedola* (long vowel) such as under the *mem* in *shomerim*
- ד Under a letter with a *dagesh* (dot) in it such as in *siperu*

(The long vowels are *qamatz gadol* [regular *qamatz*], *tserei*, *hiriq gadol*, *holam* and *shuruq*.) You can remember this as the alef-bet-gimel-dalet rule (*alef*=first letter, *bet*=second of two shevas, *gimel*=*gadol*, *dalet*=*dagesh*).

Gabbaim note: If a Torah reader pronounces the *sheva`* incorrectly, it usually is not necessary to correct the reading, as this error does not affect the meaning or intelligibility of the text. However, if a reader confuses a *sheva`* and another vowel, it may change the meaning of the word, and would have to be corrected. The vocalized *sheva`* in *shema* must not be confused with a *patah* (or *qamatz*), which would render the word *shama`* “heard” instead of *shema`* “hear!”

4 Pausal Forms

Sometimes in Biblical or poetic Hebrew the vowels of a word in pause (i.e. at the end of a phrase or verse, most often at an *etnahta* or *sof pasuq*) or a word in construct (*semikhut*, that is, attached to an adjacent word, often indicated by a hyphen in a vocalized text), the vowels will shorten.

Thus *va-yomar* = *va-yomer*, *arets* = *erets*, *lekha* = *lakh*.

Gabbaim note: If a Torah reader pronounces this incorrectly, it usually is not necessary to correct the reading, as this error does not affect the meaning or intelligibility of the text.

5 Stress, Meteg, Maqaf and Taamei HaMiqra (Trope)

In most Hebrew words, the stress is placed on the final syllable (*milra*, מלרע oxytone). When the stress is to be placed on a syllable other than the last, many books, such as our siddur and humash, indicate the syllable to be stressed with a *meteg*, which appears as a vertical (|) line under the letter. Some books also include a *meteg* on a stressed final syllable in cases of ambiguity or common error. In the *tiquin* and *humash*, when the stress is indicated by the *taamei hamiqra*, sometimes a small vertical line will be included to indicate a *secondary* stress.

When two or more words are joined by a maqaf – a hyphen (-) – they are treated, for purposes of stress, as if they were a single word. Thus in the word pair *kol-Yisrael*, the main stress is on the final syllable “*el*,” and the word *kol* is not stressed.

Some *taamei hamiqra* are always written at the end of the word. When those *taamim* are to be pronounced on a syllable other than the last, they are, in some books, written a second time, on the syllable to be stressed. Examples: *pashta*, *telisha-qetana*. The *pashta* can be distinguished from the *qadma*, as the *pashta* is always written above and after the last letter of the word, whereas the *qadma* is indicated at a point before the end of the word.

Some *taamim* are always written on the stressed syllable. Examples: *etnahta*, *tevir*.

Some *taamim* are always written at the beginning of a word. When those *taamim* are to be pronounced on a syllable other than the first, they are, in some books, written a second time, on the syllable to be stressed. One example is *telisha-gedola*. The *yetiv* can be distinguished from the *mapah*, as the *yetiv* is always written before the first letter of the word, whereas *mapah* is written after it.

Common errors include the following.

ולא שָׁמְנוּ כמשפחות האדמה In the opening line of “Aleinu,” the word “sa•ma•nu” should be accented on the “ma” syllable, as indicated by the meteg. In the next line, the word וגוֹרְלָנוּ should properly be accented at the *lamed tsere*, “ve•go•ra•le•nu.”

וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כְּלֵי־הָאָרֶץ In the closing line of “Aleinu,” this passage from Zekharya 14:9 begins with “ve-ha•ya,” which should be accented on the final syllable “-ya,” not on the syllable before it.

אֲשֶׁר בִּידוֹ מַחְקֵי־אָרֶץ In this line from Psalm 95, which is included in the Qabbalat Shabbat service, the word “a•rets” should be accented on the “a,” not on the final syllable. Depending on the melody, this may require that an additional “beat” be added, musically, to the syllable “-qerei.”

ה' מֶלֶךְ ה' מֶלֶךְ ה' יְמֶלֶךְ In this familiar line from the Torah service, the word “me•lekh” is accented on the first syllable, but the word “ma•lakh” should be accented on the final syllable.

מִמֵּי־מַיִם In the second *berakha* of the *amida*, the word “me•mit” should be accented on the final syllable.

אָתָּה & אָתָּה When the word “ata” comes in pause, such as at the end of a sentence in the *qedusha*, the accent is shifted to the first syllable, as in מֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל וְקָדוֹשׁ אָתָּה . Just look for the *meteg* (vertical line) under the *alef*, which indicates the stressed first syllable.

כִּי הוּא יוֹם תְּחִלָּה In the Shabbat evening *qiddush*, note that the correct accent on the word “tehi•la” is on final syllable.

הוֹשִׁיעָה In Hallel we have “ho•shi•a” accented on the penultimate syllable but in the next line הַצְּלִיחָה “hats•li•ha” accented on the *final* syllable.

If you make a point to accent these words correctly, you will quickly become habituated to doing so, and it will feel “natural.”

Gabbaim note: If a Torah reader stresses a word incorrectly, it usually is not necessary to correct the reading, as this error does not affect the meaning or intelligibility of the text. However, in the few cases when the word would have a different meaning when stressed incorrectly, the reader should be corrected; for example, *ba'a* (I [f.] am coming) and *ba'a* (she came).

6. The *Patah Genuva* – Furtive *Patah*

When a word ends in *mapiq-hei* הֵי (letter *hei* with a dot in it, i.e. a consonantal *hei*), *het* הֵט or *ayin* עֵי with the *patah* vowel (ֵ), the *patah* is pronounced **before** the consonant. In such a case, the *patah* is not part of the usual word pattern but is added due to the presence of the guttural at the end of the word. Compare *ledaber*, *leqadesh*, but *leshabe-ah* לִשְׁבַּחֵהּ. The words *magbiah* מַגְבִּיחָהּ, *yodea* יוֹדַעֵהּ, *ruah* רוּחָהּ and *yareah* יָרַחֵהּ also have a furtive *patah*.

One of the names for the deity is אֱלֹהֵי. It is related to the Arabic “Allah” الله. The Hebrew name is pronounced *Elo-ah*, with the accent on the “o” and with the *patah* vowel pronounced *before* the consonantal *hei*. It is **not** pronounced like the Hawaiian “Aloha.” Unfortunately, the transliteration of this word in our Mahzor (in the “*al heit*” confessional) is incorrect.

7. Masoretic Notes: *Ketiv & Qeri*

Sometimes the written text of the TaNaKh includes words that are “misspelled” or written in non-standard form, or words that are considered too vulgar or sacred to pronounce in public (cp. The “Seven Dirty Words” in English). In public liturgical settings (that is, Torah readings and Haftara readings), these words are pronounced or replaced by the words indicated in the Masoretic notes.

In the *Etz Hayim* Humash, the written form is represented in smaller letters without vowels, after which the word as it is to be read aloud is represented as normal text. (See p. 1253 v. 2, for example.) In the large haftara book in the sanctuary, the word as it is to be pronounced (read) is printed in the text, so you can ignore the footnotes.

In the Hertz Humash and some editions of the Tiquin Qor'im, the notes appear as footnotes below or to the side of the Hebrew text. The printed text will represent the word as it appears in the scroll, but with the vowels of the word that is to be read; it is marked by an asterisk. For example, see Hertz p. 972, bottom, v. 2. The word as written is the “f” word, which is considered too vulgar for public pronunciation. So we read the word as indicated in the footnote.

Torah readers and Haftara readers, please be sure to check the footnotes; we don't want any of the ladies to faint upon hearing a shocking Biblical Hebrew vulgarity.

The most common example of a *ketiv* / *qeri* substitution is the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton. In most instances, it is pronounced “Adonai,” in which case the vowels under the four letters are the vowels for the word “Adonai” (and hence the source of the erroneous

pronunciation of the sacred name as “Ja—hovah,” as the vowels belong to the word “Adonai”). In some instances, most often when the tetragrammaton follows the word “Adonai” (alef, dalet, nun, yud), it is pronounced “Elo—him,” in which case the vowels under the four letters are the vowels for the word “Elo—him.” This is shown below.

(Because of the sanctity of the Divine name, we cannot represent it directly. The four letters below are separated by a “plus” sign and ellipses so as to not form the name.)

ה+ן+ה+...? – The *qamatz* vowel sign under the letter *vav* tells us this is read “A—do—nai.”

ה+ן+ה+...? – The *hiriq* vowel sign under the *vav* tell us this is read “E—lo—him.”

8. Other Common Errors

Common reading errors in our congregation are listed.

At the end of “Yishtabah” in Shaharit, the phrase מלך א-ל הַי העולמים the penultimate word is pointed with a tsere.

In the introductory line to weekday Maariv, the word עֹז is pronounced “a-von.”

In the Torah service, the final section for replacing the Torah, the section begins with וּבְנַחֵהּ which should be read “uve-nu-**ho**” (not “uve-nu-ha”).

In the superscript to the Psalm commonly called *Ashrei*, the phrase is תְּהִלָּה לְדָוִד which should be read “tehil-**la** le-Da-vid” (not “tehilat”).