

PRONUNCIATION RULES

A Biblical Hebrew in antiquity was written with only consonants, leaving the reader to supply the vowels and other vocalization based on the context. To eliminate a measure of ambiguity some long vowels were marked by the letters ו, י, and ה, known as *matres lezionis* or “mothers of reading.” The name David was formerly spelled דוד (see Sam and Kgs) and later דויד (see Chron), thus, דוֹד and דוּיִד in the Masoretic Text. While this helped it also means sometimes ו and י are consonants and sometimes vowels, and ה is sometimes a consonant and sometimes a vowel marker. In the early medieval period elaborate systems of vocalization were designed, including vowels markings, accents, and other reading signals, to preserve the right reading of the text. The Masoretic system of vocalization that has come to us preserves the consonantal text as it was received, and has its vocalization signals, including vowels, above, below, and within the letters.

B The **begadkephat** letters, namely, ב, ג, ד, כ, פ, ת, have **dagesh lene** (weak) (דגש קל) dagesh qal) in them when they are the first letter of the word (i.e., ב, ג, ד, כ, פ, ת). A dagesh in a בְּגַדְכֶפֶת (begadkephat) letter is a lene if it is preceded by a consonant and forte (strong) if preceded by a vowel. In three cases the dagesh affects pronunciation.

ב	b	כ	k	פ	p
ב	v	כ	kh	פ	ph

C All letters except the gutturals, namely, א, ע, ה, and ח, and the letter ר, can take a dagesh forte (e.g., שׁ). A **dagesh forte** (דגש חזק) dagesh hazaq) means the letter is actually doubled, that is, אשׁא is made up of the consonants אשׁא.

D A **furtive pathach** occurs in a word that ends with ח or ע and a vowel under it. The vowel is pronounced before the consonant in these cases, e.g., רוח is pronounced *ruah*.

E An **open syllable** is consonant-vowel (cv). A **closed syllable** is consonant-vowel-consonant (cvc). Thus, קַטַּל *qa-tal* has an open and a closed syllable. For our purposes vocal shevas count as full syllables (*contra* Ellis, 22-25; *contra* Weingreen, § 5 [p. 9]; *contra* Kelley, 19-20), for example, we will count two syllables in אֶשְׁוֹ, *she-va*. Long vowels are usually in open and short vowels in closed syllables.

F The final syllable of the word is usually stressed. The accent or **tonic** syllable is preceded by the **pretonic** syllable which is preceded by the **propretonic** syllable. Two words connected by a **maqeph** are pronounced together. Thus the syllables of אֶל-מוֹשֶׁה are pronounced *el-mo-sheh*, with no accent on *el* because it is propretonic.

G **Shevas** are tricky. In general a vocal sheva (אֵשְׁוֹ) begins a syllable, and a silent sheva (אֶשְׁוֹ) closes a syllable.

1 **When is a sheva vocal?**

- (a) If it is under the first consonant in a word,
- (b) if it is the second of two consecutive shevas,
- (c) if it is under any consonant with a dagesh,

(d) if it follows a long vowel. The diphthong (vowel combination) patach-yod יֶֿ functions as a long vowel in that a sheva following it will be vocal,

(e) if it separates two of the same consonants (otherwise they would have been merged by a dagesh),

(f) if the consonant after the sheva is a begadkephat letter and does not have a dagesh.

## 2 When is a sheva silent?

(a) If it is preceded by a short vowel,

(b) if it is at the end of a word,

(c) if it is the first of two consecutive shevas (מִשְׁפָּטִים /mish-pe-tey/ [*judgments of*]). Two shevas in a row can be silent at the end of a word קָטַלְתָּ /qatal/ (*you killed*).

3 Examples? In the phrase לֵךְ-לְךָ the first sheva is silent because it closes a syllable and the second sheva is vocal because it opens a syllable, thus it is pronounced /lek-l<sup>e</sup>-ka/ (*Go! only used in Gen 12:1 and 22:1 [lit. go-for-you]*), or in the word יִזְרְעֵאל the first sheva is silent and the second is vocal; thus, the pronunciation is /yiz-re-‘e’l/ (*Jezreel*).

4 The sheva signifies the absence of a vowel. The sheva symbol ׀ resembles the *sof pasuq* : which marks the end of each verse; the similarity is especially close in the case of the silent sheva that marks the end of a mid-word closed syllable. Follow the rules on vocalization above (G.1, 2) and know that some differences of opinion remain on ambiguous situations (e.g., Joüon, 8, leans toward silent shevas, and Hoffer toward vocal shevas, see *Supplement*, D [p. 6], S2.12).

H There are several **diphthongs** (vowel combinations) that have distinct sounds: יֶֿ sounds like /ai/ in aisle; יֶֿֿ still sounds like /a/ in father but held slightly longer toward /ou/ in ought or /ai/ in aisle; יִֿ sounds like /oy/; יֶֿֿֿ sounds like /av/, and יִֿֿֿ - 3ms noun suffix the יִ is silent so it sounds like /av/; יֶֿֿֿֿ sounds like /ei/ as in eight; and יִֿֿֿֿֿ sound like /ew-ie/ or /ü-ie/ as in bouy (see Joüon, 6d, 7c n.1; 8d).

I The qamets gadol (qamets) ׀ and qamets qatan (qamets hatuf) ׀ look identical. Whereas **qamets gadol** is pronounced like patach, **qamets qatan** is pronounced like holem and occurs *only in closed, unaccented syllables*. The rule is: A syllable which is closed and unaccented must have a short vowel (Weingreen, 2, 7; Gesenius, 26.5). The vast majority of the time ׀ signifies the qamets gadol sound. The cases in which ׀ signifies qamets qatan are: when sheva follows as a syllable divider הַקָּמָה /hok-ma/; when a closed syllable is formed by dagesh forte הַנְּנִי /honneni/; when a closed syllable loses its accent because of a maqqeph כֹּל-הָאָדָם /kol-ha’adam/; in a closed final syllable without an accent וַיַּיָּקֹם /vayyaqom/ (Gesenius, 9u; see note on 8.1e; for exceptions see Joüon, 6,l). The **meteg** (מֵטֵג *bridle*)—small vertical line to the left of ׀ (i.e., ׀ֿ)—signifies that ׀ is a qamets gadol and that the sheva under the next consonant is vocal. For example, שָׁמְעוּ (they listened) is pronounced /sha-me-’u/. Meteg is a sort-of half-accent and often occurs in propretonic syllables.

## RELATED MATTERS

- J One of the difficulties in learning Hebrew is that the vowels change frequently, and consonants shift at times, in the course of speaking/writing, causing words to look and sound different than the “normal” form which are learned for vocabulary quizzes. The inflectional elements are a big part of what students need to learn and overcome.
- 1 Shifts in vocalization occur in the course of speaking in English, shifts which are akin to the kind we find in Hebrew. For example, when *modern* becomes *modernity* the o goes silent and the e is barely vocalized, thus, if spelled according to pronunciation it would look like /m'd<sup>e</sup>rnitee/.
  - 2 Ancient written Hebrew did not have vowels. The vocalization of the text included the vowel sounds that were a part of spoken Hebrew. The vowel pointing was added in the medieval period by the Masoretes to preserve the pronunciation of the scriptural language. Thus, the vowels do not have meaning per se. Rather the vowel points show the traditional pronunciation of the consonantal text.
  - 4 It is recommended that the student not rely heavily upon sound associations in vocabulary memorization because of the frequency of phonetic shifting.
  - 5 The student should be patient and expect many idiosyncrasies. Memorize the “normal” elements, and even the “normal exceptions,” even while knowing that the exceptions are many. In short, the student who expects few constants will avoid some of the frustrations of learning biblical Hebrew.
- K Spoken and written Hebrew changed in antiquity, like any other language. Judges 12:6 illustrates pronunciation differences in regional dialects: the people of Gilead said שִׁבְּלֵת *shibboleth* and people of Ephraim said סִבְּלֵת *sibboleth* (see Ross, 1.3.3). The study of biblical Hebrew today refers to the Hebrew represented in the Masoretic Text published in *BHK*, *BHS*, and *BHQ* (the text of codex EBP. I B 19a of the Russian National Library, St. Petersburg; formerly known as the Leningrad codex).