TA'AMEY HAMIKRA: A CLOSER LOOK

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What's wrong with these tunes?

Example 1

\[
\text{ta-rud to cha-sar la-nu, ve-al yech-sar la-nu}
\]

Example 2

\[
\text{ka-katuv ve-a-chal-u ve-sa-vat-u ve-rah-ta}
\]

Example 3

\[
\text{Sho-cen ad ma-rem ve-ka-dish she-mi...}
\]

In the first example the word la-nu was changed by the composer to la-nu. La-nu means "to us;" la-nu means "they stayed overnight."

In the second example the same composer changed the words ve-a-chal-ta and u-vey-rach-ta to ve-a-cchal-ta and u-vey-rach-ta. Ve-a-chal-ta and u-vey-rach-ta mean "you shall eat" and "you shall bless;" ve-a-chal-ta and u-vey-rach-ta mean "you ate" and "you blessed."

In the third example we see how the careless application of nusach to this text changes its meaning from "He who abides for eternity, exalted and holy is His Name!" to "He who abides for eternity is exalted, and holy is His Name!"

Well, who cares about such linguistic nit-picking? and what does all this have to do with ta'amey hamikra, anyway?

Ta'amey hamikra refers to the Jewish traditions of scriptural cantillation: the system of motifs that are assigned to the text and the

graphic symbols that represent those motifs. The three functions of ta'amey hamikra are (1) to enhance the aesthetic quality of public reading by providing the texts with melodies, (2) to indicate the syllabic stress of each word and (3) to clarify the syntactical sense by parsing each verse.

As Jewish music professionals, we are most often concerned with the first two functions: how to chant the Torah, the haftarah and the megillah with appropriate alliteration of the motifs.

According to traditional Jewish practice, one is obliged to be scrupulous about pronunciation when reading scripture in public. If ha'at k'riyot makes an error in cantillation that results in a change of meaning, he is to be interrupted, the correct reading is to be pointed out and he is to repeat the phrase with the correction.

The Shulchan Aruch, a sixteenth-century code of Jewish law compiled by Joseph Caro in Venice, stipulates:

In the first place, the reader is obliged to read with absolutely correct 'amim and pronunciation, so that he does not confuse voiced swa with unvoiced swa and so that he knows which letters take daggey... If he makes an error in the reading, even in the pronunciation of a single letter, he is obliged to repeat it and pronounce it correctly.

The Mishnah Berurah, a nineteenth century commentary on the Shulchan Aruch by the Chozicz Chayyim, elaborates on this passage.

If the reader makes an error in the melody of the te'amim, and that error results in a change in the sense of the text (for example, if he chanted a word with a conjunctive ta'am in place of a conjunctive ta'am), he is obliged to repeat [the phrase].

Unfortunately, many of those who are scrupulous about observing the correct word stress in cantillation are not always as careful when chanting the liturgy and singing hymns. As we saw in the first two examples cited above, a change in a word's stress can change a word's

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2 Most te'amim (except the prepositional, postpositional and interlogic signs) indicate where in the word we should sing the "body of the trope" (to borrow Prof. Binder's term). Those who are confused about where to place the proper stress on words which have prepositional and postpositional tropes should consult the Koren editions of the Bible. The editors have consistently adhered to the policy of placing a secondary tropal sign on the stressed syllable of any word in which the trope falls on an unstressed syllable.

3 Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayyim, §142 (the present author's translation).

4 Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chayyim, §142 (the present author's translation).
meaning. Example four shows Louis Lewandowski's well-known setting of the verses included in the zecharot portion of the Rosh HaShanah service:

Jer. 2:2

Ezek. 16:60

Note the difference in accentuation of the word צַחַרְתִּי. In the verse from Jeremiah, the word is צַחַרְתִּי, "I remembered." But in the verse from Ezekiel the word appears with "vav consecutive" (וּמְצַחַרְתִּי) as צַחַרְתִּי, "I shall remember," the accent has shifted and the tense is changed. Was Lewandowski aware of this distinction when he composed his setting?5

Example 4: Two excerpts from Zacharti Lach by Lewandowski.

Ta'amey hamikra also function as an elaborate system of punctuation, indicating the placement of major and minor pauses in the reading, as well as groupings of words which are to be syntactically connected. Every word in scripture is marked with a masoretic accent, or "ta'am." Te'amim are either conjunctive or disjunctive. A conjunctive ta'am indicates that the word is joined in meaning to the word which immediately follows. A disjunctive ta'am indicates a syntactic separation following the word. The masoretes instituted the te'amim as a means of clarifying the meaning of the sacred texts at a time when the Jewish people were no longer fluent in the use of the Hebrew language.

Without punctuation, a verse could be open to more than one interpretation. For example, this short verse from Gen. 24:34, יִהְיֶה נָפְלָיו נָפְלָיו could be read in any of three ways:

(1) with a disjunctive accent on נָפְלָיו:
A servant said, "I am Abraham." יִהְיֶה נָפְלָיו נָפְלָיו
(2) with a disjunctive accent on נָפְלָיו:
Abraham's servant said, "It is I." יִהְיֶה נָפְלָיו נָפְלָיו
(3) with a disjunctive accent on נָפְלָיו:
He said, "I am Abraham's servant." יִהְיֶה נָפְלָיו נָפְלָיו

The third version is the masoretic punctuation.

Another verse from the same chapter serves to further illustrate the point. Observe this phrase from Gen. 24:65.

The servant said, "he is my master." יִהְיֶה נָפְלָיו נָפְלָיו

One who is careless about the te'amim, making the "insignificant" error of confusing a mer'cha (a conjunctive ta'am) with a tipcha (a disjunctive ta'am), might easily pervert the sense of this verse, rendering it:

He said, "the servant is my master." יִהְיֶה נָפְלָיו נָפְלָיו

Another interesting example is this enigmatic verse from 1Sam. 3:3.

5 I realize that it is tremendously difficult to impose new rhythm on a hymn that the congregation has been singing in its own way for years (although I confess I am one of those noisy congregants who bellow against the tide, bellowing out the correct pronunciation of ba-arch, no-deh and a-rah in En Kolenu). Out of respect for the composer's ideas and in the interest of correct performance practice, I reject the idea of changing "wrong" text rhythms in the classical compositions of Lewandowski and others. Would one consider correcting the playfully "incorrect" text rhythms in Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms or Poulenc's Gloria? However, there is no excuse for incorrect pronunciation in rhythmically free nuwach. And, furthermore, composers of the liturgy need to be scrupulous in the pre-compositional practice of ascertaining the correct pronunciation of the text about to be set.
At first glance we might translate this verse as “The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the Temple of the Lord where the ark of God was.” However, the masoretic interpretation is quite different, and takes into account the fact that the young Samuel would never have been allowed to sleep in the sanctuary. The ta'am enchatata on the word נַעַר indicates the main dividing point in the verse. The phrase ending with the enchatata must therefore be treated as a parenthetical phrase. The adverbial phrase “in the Temple...” modifies “gone out,” not “sleeping.”

“The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out (while Samuel was sleeping) in the Temple of the Lord where the ark of God was.”

At times an improper inflection in the reading can lead to a heretical interpretation. In Isaiah 6:2 we encounter the following four words: שְׁרֵפָּמִים וּמַעֲלֵי מִסְפָּרִים לֹא. Connecting the last two words מְסַפְּרִים וּמַעֲלֵי would result in the unacceptable translation, “Seraphim are standing above Him.” Isaiah’s vision surely would not have allowed any creatures to appear superior to the Deity. The masoretic interpretation places the disjunctive ta’am pashya on the word מְסַפְּרִים, separating it syntactically from the word מַעֲלֵי: “Seraphim are standing on high for [to serve] Him.”

In the liturgy for the High Holidays we frequently encounter the phrase: הַנַּחֲלָה נַעֲרֵי. In chanting this phrase, should we pause after the first word or after the second word? According to the masoretic interpretation, the latter would be more correct. The source of this phrase is Exod. 34:5: נַעֲרֵי הַנַּחֲלָה יִנְשָׁפְנוּ אֶל שְׁמֵהֶם בִּשְׂמִי בִּשְׂמִי הַנַּחֲלָה: “The Lord came down in a cloud; He stood with them [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name Lord.” According to Ibn Ezra, ה is the subject of the verb נַעֲרֵי; God uttered His own name to teach Moses how to invoke Him.6

Note that Sulzer’s original setting of the text shows that he was quite sensitive to the correct accentuation and phrasing.

6 Note that this is how the verse is translated in the new JPS Tanakh (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
7 Tanakh.
8 Note that in this case Rashi disregards the masoretic and follows instead the Targum, interpreting the subject of נַעֲרֵי as Moses.

Contrast this verse with Genesis 12:8:

Here the conjunctive ta’am mer’cha on the word ונַעֲרֵי indicates that the word is in construct form (s’michut), implying that Abram is calling “in the name of the Lord.” The disjunctive ta’am tipcha on the word ונַעֲרֵי causes a daggersh to appear in the first letter of ונַעֲרֵי.

Another commonly misread verse is the quote from Jeremiah 31:11 which we chant in the ma’ariv service: יְרוּם הָאָרֶץ בָּאָרֶץ וּמַעֲלֵי מִסְפָּרִים, חָלְתָּה נַעֲרֵי. “For the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem him from one too strong for him.” The ta’am tipcha indicates a slight pause after the word חָלְתָּה, while the mer’cha on מַעֲלֵי indicates that it is connected syntactically to the word חָלְתָּה. The common practice of pausing between חָלְתָּה and מַעֲלֵי contradicts the sense of the text.

In the Torah service, we often hear the fourth verse from Psalm 34 chanted as:

Example 4

But observe the biblical text: וַיַּחֲלָתָה נַעֲרֵי יְרוּם הָאָרֶץ בָּאָרֶץ וּמַעֲלֵי מִסְפָּרִים. The presence of a disjunctive ta’am on the word חָלְתָּה might suggest the following alteration:

Example 5

Note that Sulzer’s original setting of the text shows that he was quite sensitive to the correct accentuation and phrasing.

9 Note that the ta’amim for the book of Psalms are different from those of the twenty-one prose books.
Example 6, Salomon Sulzer, Gad'lu

We would also do well to follow more closely Sulzer's original setting of the "Yehalelu" from the Shabbat Torah service. From an examination of the te'amim we observe that there should be a slight pause after (not before) the word "אֱלֹהִים".

"Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name is sublime—His alone."

Example 7: Salomon Sulzer, Yehalelu

Up until this point the emphasis has been on demonstrating how the te'amim can serve as a guide to the correct pronunciation of individual words and the proper inflection of verses. But we can also reverse the process. By applying the principle of "continuous dichotomy" to a verse of scripture we can analyze the sentence structure and thereby predict the te'am for each word.

Let us examine a simple verse: "וַחֲרַת אֱתֶם מִטְהָרָה פְּלִי לְגֹיָּה, אָמָה הָיָה וְלָבָּךְ אֶצְבָּע הַפְּלִי."

"His wife looked back and she became a pillar of salt." (Gen. 19:26)

The main syntactic division of the verse separates the two predicates וַחֲרַת and אָמָה.

9 Note that the te'amim for the book of Psalms are different from those of the twenty-one prose books.

10 Continuous dichotomy refers to the process of dividing a scriptural verse into two parts according to the syntactical structure, then further subdividing each part into two smaller parts, and continuing until the smallest indivisible syntactic unit is reached. While this process was probably originally derived from the parallel structure of Biblical poetry, it was later applied to the prose books as well.

Each of the two halves of the verse can then be further subdivided. According to one of the basic rules of syntactic subdivision, a phrase that begins with a verb is subdivided before its final complement. 

In the second half of the verse we apply the principle that two words in construct state must remain together as a syntactic unit. Since דְֶּבֶר and מִפְרָשׁ must remain together, the division must come before the word מֵפָרְשָׁ.

Now that we have successfully parsed the verse down to its smallest possible units, we next insert the te'amim appropriate to each syntactic position. The disjunctive te'am marking the last word in a verse is šiluk.

The disjunctive te'am marking the last word in the first half of a verse is etnachta.

The disjunctive te'am marking the next subdivision is tipcha.

The conjunctive te'am "serving" tipcha is mer'cha.

11 A complement (וַחֲרַת) can be subject, object or modifier.
The conjunctive ta'am serving siluk is also mer' cha.

The verse is now fully accented.

Let us examine a slightly more complex verse.

כוסך אחר תורונת ביבר נשבך אל ליער מ שס כסם סמאחתיינו.
“We have brought in our hands other monies with which to buy food; we do not know who put the money in our bags.” (Gen. 43:22)

The primary dichotomy separates the two predicates והר and ידענו.

In the first half, we mark the primary subdivision before the final complement.

The second half of the verse subdivides before the compound complement.

The object itself is a phrase which further subdivides before its final complement.

We now apply the te’amim according to the hierarchical structure of the parsed verse. The final word of the verse is marked with the disjunctive siluk, and the final word of the first half of the verse is marked with the disjunctive etmachtà.

In the first half-verse we mark the last word of the first sub-division with the disjunctive tipcha.

The last word in a phrase which is subordinate to tipcha is marked with the subordinate disjunctive, t’vir.

We can now mark the conjunctives which “serve” the disjunctives. Before tipcha—mer’ cha.

Before t’vir, since there are two intervening unstressed syllables—darga.

The second half-verse is accented in a similar fashion. The final phrase before siluk must end with the disjunctive, tipcha.
The first subdivision, since it is on a higher level than tipcha, must be the disjunctive, zakef.

The conjunctive which serves tipcha is mer’cha.

The conjunctive which serves zakef is munach.

The verse is now fully accented.

With knowledge of the rules of parsing scripture and of the hierarchy of the te’amim, one can apply this method to any verse in the Bible. Although this procedure may seem complex when revealed in such a cursory fashion, a practiced reader studying the subject with a step-by-step approach can become rather proficient.

Regrettably, this method of analysis is not well known outside of Israel, where it is taught to young children in many schools. The benefits of this knowledge to a ba’al k’riyah should be obvious. The ability to predict patterns of te’amim can greatly facilitate the process of what often seems to be rote memorization. The introduction of this method of analysis into the curriculum of our day schools and Hebrew high schools could potentially improve the students’ ability to understand the Hebrew Bible and could even increase the number of skilled ba’al ey k’riyah in the next generation. Ta’amey Hamikra does not have to be taught as a purely musical pre-confirmation exercise. It can and should be integrated into the curriculum of Bible study.

Unfortunately, there are no textbooks in English that adequately treat this subject. Binder’s text is an excellent resource but is limited to musical interpretation of the motifs. Cantor Samuel Rosenbaum’s books on Torah and Haftarah chants reflect an earnest attempt to present the techniques of cantillation in a logical manner, but contain a number of errors. Pinchas Spiro has a sound pedagogical approach, but his book is riddled with inconsistencies. Maurice Gellis and Dennis Gribetz’s book presents many grammatical rules which are extremely helpful to the ba’al k’riyah. Yet none of these authors explains the relationship of the te’amim to the grammatical structure.

Solomon Rosowsky’s revered tome is many things. It is an extremely thorough treatise on every possible permutation of the ta’amey hamikra as they would appear in Western notation. It even presents a method for cantillating the Bible in Swedish translation. While Rosowsky does deal with grammatical aspects of the te’amim, he does so primarily from the antiquated concept of the “chain of command” (emperors, kings, dukes, and so forth). There is no attempt to correlate the te’amim to grammatical parsing of the text.


In Israel, many scholars have delved into the complex functions of the te’amim. Rabbi Mordecai Broyer has written a thorough explanation of the subject in his Ta’amey HaMikra. There is one author, however, who, until his untimely death last year, stood alone in his single-minded dedication and his ability to present the complexity of ta’amey hamikra in a clear and understandable way. Michael Perlman, of K’vutsat Yavneh,

Divine Presence demands that our public prayers and reading of scripture be formulated in the ancient sacred language. We now have the opportunity and the sacred obligation to lead our communities with this knowledge.

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*All of Michael Perlman’s books and tapes are available through Zimrat Publications, K’vusat Ma’aleh Gilboa, Doar Na Gilboa 19145, Israel.

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