Introduction .................................................................5

Exact Pronunciation – How? ..............................................7

The Superiority of the Yemenite Dialect.................................9

The Letters that have been Confused and their Correct
Pronunciations...............................................................14

   The Guttural Letters........................................................14

   The 'י' ‘Ayin...............................................................14

   The 'נ' Het..............................................................15

   The 'נ' Hei..............................................................17

   The 'ן' Alef............................................................18

Non-Gutturals....................................................................18

   The 'ו' Waw............................................................18

   The 'ט' Tet.............................................................20

   The 'ז' Tzadi..........................................................20

Kaf, Quf, and Gimmel.........................................................21

   The 'ק' Quf............................................................21

The Weak Forms of the Beged Kefet Letters.......................22

   Vet.............................................................................22

   The Weak Sound of Gimmel.........................................22

   The Weak Dalet........................................................23

   The Weak Tau..........................................................25
The Vowels that have Become Confused and Their Correct Pronunciations

The נ Patah and the נ Qamas

The Qamas Gadol

The Qamas Hatuf, or Qamas Qatan

The Segol and the Tzeirei

The Tzeirei

The Holam

The Holam Like a Tzeirei

The Shuruq and Qubbus

A Real Tongue Twister: Shortened and Swallowed Yud’s

The Dagesh Hazaq and Shwa Na’

Accenting the Correct Syllable

The Distinction Between Hiriq Gadol, Hiriq Qatan, and Shwa Na

An Explanation of the Hebrew Consonant System

The Derivation of the Beged Kefet Letters

The Intensive Forms

An Explanation of the Hebrew Vowel System

The Theory of Shwa Na’

Alef

Bet

Gimmel
Impossible Sounds .................................................................................................................. 56
Can I Suddenly Start Pronouncing Hebrew the Way You People are Telling Me To? ................................................................. 57
Personal Practice .................................................................................................................... 66
  The Vowels .......................................................................................................................... 66
Additional Considerations ..................................................................................................... 68
Credits .................................................................................................................................... 69
Introduction

The following contains a translation of a section of a work titled Heichal 'Avodath Hashem, a book about the laws pertaining to prayer and the synagogue. I chose this section because I have wanted, for some time now, to write a book that would explain how to pronounce Hebrew properly during prayer, as per the ruling of the Shulhan 'Arukh in Orah Hayim 53 and 61, but Rabbi Avraham Shalom Shaki, the author, apparently wanted to do the same, and beat me to it by a few decades, although his book did not become famous, and although many of the claims made therein have appeared in newer editions of the siddur and tikkunei sofrim used to prepare the Torah reading.

I feel that a few issues need to be addressed: First, for generations, Hebrew was not a spoken language, even among Jews, and every community subconsciously changed its inherited Hebrew dialect used for prayer and Torah reading, however slightly, to sound more like the local vernacular. Secondly, children learn the basics of the Hebrew language at the very first stages of their formal educations, with little attention paid to detail and the profound wisdom and near mathematical beauty inherent in the Holy Tongue (My favorite example of which are the phenomena of shorashim and binyanim which result in Hebrew having many sets of words of equal length and vowel structure - e.g., all feminine, past-tense, singular simple verbs have a vowel structure of qamas, schwa, and accented qamas, making them all rhyme and have the same length - making Hebrew a superior choice for musical and poetic composition. We will write more about this later.)

In my experience, it seems that many American Jews, for example, assume that true spoken Hebrew, which for the rest of this work I will refer to as L'shon HaQodesh, should have more linguistic similarity to English and the slang Yiddish they are familiar with, than to Arabic and other Semitic languages. In truth, we will show that in order to understand how to pronounce Hebrew properly, one must be objective and not assume that the way he learned Hebrew is the one correct way. As we will see later on, Rav Shaki believed that the advent of Modern Hebrew also did a disservice to the proper pronunciation of L'shon HaQodesh. Rabbi Shaki was of Yemenite descent. Objectively speaking, there may be one true way that L'shon HaQodesh should be pronounced, say the way Moses or King David would have done it, and intellectually-honest Ashkenazi and Sefaradi scholars of language would agree that the Tiberian system we have received from the Masoretes, including the trop and the common written vowel system, reflects one single system of pronunciation that is somewhere between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, with both sides being right on some accounts and wrong on others. For example, it is obvious that the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the Tau, should not be pronounced like the English letter S like Ashkenazim so often do, and that the patah and qamas should not be pronounced identically to each other, like Sephardim so often do. With regards to most of the consonants, Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions concur, but there do exist some not-well-known disputes, mostly concerning the nature of the Hebrew vowels and the principles of distinction between the two types of
schwas, commonly known as *š̱va’t*, the *na’* and the *nah*, the “mobile” or pronounced schwa and the “stationary” or silent schwa that denotes when a consonant closes a syllable.

When Ashkenazi tradition, based for the most part on that which we have received from the Vilna Gaon and R’ Yaakov Emden, differs from that which Rabbi Shaki wrote, I will note it. Afterwards, I will include some of my own essays elaborating on the nature of composite vowels and other interesting and often confusing areas of the Hebrew language.

I chose to write this so that I could share this information with those who would be interested to know the truth and those who may want to discuss these matters further. My goal is not only to present the varying traditions, but also to attempt to prove why certain traditions may in fact be closer to the truth than others. For example, that the weak *gimmel* is not pronounced like the English J, or that the *tzeirei* be pronounced like the American long A even though there are ancient traditions for the weak *gimmel* being pronounced differently or the *tzeirei’s* sound to be the short E sound.
Chapter 1

Exact Pronunciation – How?

Enunciation during prayer should be clear, precise, and in accordance with the rules of diqduq (Hebrew grammar), i.e. every letter pronounced according to its position in the word (e.g. whether rafah (“weak”) or d’ghushah (“emphasized”)), each vowel pronounced correctly and each word according to its niggun (cantillation or tune, i.e. with the correct syllable accented,) and every sentence or verse punctuated according to the applicable principles.

Similarly, the sages have instructed us to be precise (“l’daqdeq”) in the twice-daily reading of the sh’ma, during the public reading of the Torah, and during personal study. Imprecision leads to grammatical mistakes that involve blasphemy. For example, changing the Hebrew word יושב, nishba’, spelled and pronounced with an ayin at the end and meaning "swore", to יושב (nishba) with a silent hei, without an ayin, and meaning “captured”, [thereby changing the meaning from “Hashem swore” to “Hashem was captured”], or slurring the phrase חærת אף (‘w’ harah af Hashem), “and Hashem’s anger shall flare,” into חארף (‘w’ haraf Hashem), “he will antagonize Hashem,” or mistakes that alter the meaning some other way, like pronouncing זכר (tizk’ru), “you shall remember,” as שכר (tisk’ru), “you shall hire.”

To avoid such mistakes, one should pronounce each vowel and letter distinctly, especially with attention to the distinctions between the letters that are similar in pronunciation – alef and ayin, het and weak kaf, het and hei, and beth and pei. One should not swallow any letter because of its adjacency to another, for example, turning two consecutive words, the first of which ends with the same letter that begins the second word, into one word. Similarly, one should emphasize the strong d’geishim and pronounce the schwas that are mobile, for “any word that is not complete in form will not function or ascend favorably before the L-rd because it is not at all considered a word.” (Y’sod W’shoresh Ha’Avodah, 82)
Even though prayer is called “worship of the heart,” the point is that one still has to let his lips release every word from the standard text of the prayer. (Nefesh HaHayim)

[This chapter serves as an explanation as to what *diquq* in prayer requires.]
Chapter 2

The Superiority of the Yemenite Dialect

Only one dialect (of Hebrew still used by a Jewish community) is able to be described as being especially accurate [in Hebrew, m'qori, meaning close to L’shon HaQodesh] and precise: the dialect of the Yemenite Jewish community, which has preserved unique pronunciations for each individual letter and vowel, except for the segol [the short E sound in the English word “bet”], which Yemenites pronounce the same way they pronounce a patah[, the Hebrew vowel that all agree sounds like the short O in “pot”].

Rabbi Shaki is making the point that if a dialect has too many redundancies, that is, two or more distinct symbols encoding the same sound, like two Hebrew consonants being pronounced identically, or two vowels being pronounced identically, then it is a sign that the dialect in question is not so close to the original, which apparently had only one sound per symbol, or even, as we shall see later on, two or more sounds per symbol.

The Yemenite dialect has 28 distinctive and well-defined consonantal sounds, with one sound for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and six additional sounds for the weak forms of the letters 'ב' bet, 'ג' gimmel, 'ד' dalet, 'כ' kaf, 'פ' pei, and 'ת' tau, commonly referred to by their acronym ת"כ ב inconsistently referred to by their acronym ת"כ ב, “beged kefet.”

By comparison, the standard Modern Hebrew or the ritual Hebrew used by Ashkenazi Americans have only 20 consonantal sounds.

It should be noted that the nature of the beged kefet letters depends on their placement within a word. Normally, the letter assumes a regular, strong form, indicated by the presence of a dagesh, a dot placed within the letter. However, when the letter in question immediately follows an open syllable or a mobile schwa, it becomes weak, indicated by the absence of the dagesh. Weak sounds
can be infinitely extended, and are referred to as fricatives, whereas strong sounds are called stops, and can not be extended. This rule will be elaborated on in a later chapter.

The shin, 'ש', the penultimate letter of the Hebrew alphabet with a dot on top of its right stem, although it has a second form, commonly known as a sin, 'ש', which is distinguished from the shin by having the dot on its left stem, and pronounced differently from the shin, does not adhere to the principles of beged kefet.

Indeed, whether the shin appears in either form seems to depend on the particular shoresh, the consonantal root of the word, and it is not something that changes with conjugation. Both the sin and shin are considered to be inherently weak consonants, i.e. none of them are stops, and as such a strong/weak relationship can not exist between these two letters.

Interestingly enough, in most dialects of Hebrew, including the Yemenite dialect, the sin is pronounced identically to the samekh, 'ס!' This is basically the only redundancy, i.e. the only example of an inaccuracy, within the Yemenite dialect.

This writer invites any information that can explain this occurrence, although there are traditions that do distinguish between the two sounds.

Further, the proper pronunciations of the strong pei ‘פ’ (the P sound) and the weak bet ‘ב’ (the V sound) which are lacking in Arabic, the native language of Yemen, were preserved in this accurate, Yemenite dialect, and were not lost like they were among other dialects of Sephardi communities that were heavily influenced by Arabic. [Indeed, many mistakes have crept into our Ashkenazi dialects because of European influences.]

Rabbi Avraham Yizhaq HaKohen Kook, OBM, wrote in his responsum concerning changes in one’s pronunciation of Hebrew during prayer that “the main advantage of the enunciator is his exactitude in differentiating between all the letters (i.e. consonants) and vowels, and in this regard… the Yemenite dialect is the best of all the dialects because it makes very clear distinctions.”

Rabbi Yosef Zvi HaLewi, OBM, in his work Amirah N'imah, 1:188, wrote “with regards to pronunciation, the Ashkenazim and Yemenites are sort of close to the true way (of pronouncing the vowels), but the Yemenites are more correct, because from the time of our exile until now, they have remained in one place, but the Ashkenazim have wandered from diaspora
to diaspora and from country to country.” So too, in our generation, many scholars of our language [i.e. Hebrew] have testified concerning the Yemenite dialect’s precision and accuracy.

Still, the dialects of the rest of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora became corrupted with the alien inaccuracies inherent in the foreign influences of the nations. The European languages that have no sounds equivalent to those of the het and ayin caused those sounds to go lost from the mouths of Ashkenazim, and Arabic caused many Sephardi Jews to lose the proper strong pei and weak bet sounds.

Also, spoken Hebrew is ridiculous, and the full spectrum of assorted alien inaccuracies has been united in modern Israeli Hebrew, which has been renewed as our language of conversation and instruction in the schools.

This modern-day Hebrew was supposed to be a universal dialect, improved and free of inaccuracies, and because of that it was accepted by its creators that the basic Sephardi dialect, which was considered more precise than the Ashkenazi, would be its foundation, yet modern Hebrew is, in the end, not Sephardi, nor universal, nor an improvement. It is just a conglomeration of dialects, wherein the foreign linguistic influences of the European Jews dominate, and ruin the original facets of the language which remained among the tongues the Sephardim, the Yemenites, and the rest of the oriental communities.

Proof: those who came to Israel from Europe have, to this day, not adopted a single phoneme that can be considered as either Sephardi, oriental, or ancient, and they only “Sephardicised” their dialect by switching three minor pronunciations with another three they already had: they changed 'תפ', the weak tau, which they pronounced like an S, to the same sound as 'תפ', the strong tau or T sound, they changed the vowel qamas into a patah [and kept the patah as is], and changed their holam into what is really a qamas sound.

To Ashkenazim these changes appear to reflect the way Sephardim speak, but the flaw lies in the fact that true Sephardi m'daqd'qim, the exacting linguists, do differentiate between the weak and strong tau’s and all of the aforementioned vowels. Modern Hebrew is thus pronounced the way native Yiddish speakers attempted to emulate Sephardim, and the Modern Hebrew accent is really a Yiddish one.
The foreign influences are harmful to L’shon HaQodesh; of the 28 consonantal sounds in our language, eight have been lost due to confusion: ‘ח’ het, ‘ע’ ayin, ‘ק’ qof, ‘ו’ waw and ‘ט’ tet, and the weak forms of ‘ג’ gimel, ‘ד’ dalet and ‘ת’ tau[, and transliteration of the first six of these sounds into English is made difficult because the English equivalents are already used to transliterate other letters, and the latter two, although transliterateable, share one transliteration]! See the coming chapters.

These particular consonants have become equivalent to the more easily pronounced consonants that are related to them, causing many different words to become homonymy, even though their spellings and meanings have remained different, leading to further confusion.

In the following chapter, I will list the consonants and vowels whose pronunciations have become subject to confusion among the various dialects, and I will also try to describe how they should be properly pronounced. To illustrate the proper pronunciation, I will also make use of foreign letters, such as Greek and Arabic, but it is better for all, including those who know these foreign languages, to try to hear the proper pronunciations from those who have the native knowledge of how to pronounce those letters.

This does not mean that one can only know what something is supposed to sound like only if he has heard it. It is possible to recreate a sound based on written information describing the sound, much like a musician in America can play a tune composed in China if he sees the written sheet music.

Similarly, Maimonides writes (Peirush HaMishnayoth, Berachoth 2:2) “it is impossible to write all these matters in one book. Rather, obtain them orally from an instructor.”

I will also list words that had their pronunciations corrupted such that their meanings are confused, or examples of words from scripture and other liturgy that have blasphemous or heretical meanings when pronounced according to common, mistaken dialects. Note a relevant passage in the Talmud, M’gillah 24b, where Rabbi Hiya was instructed that when he would reach the verse “לוהי קתית ולוהי קתית” (w’hikkithi lashem), “I shall wait for the L-rd”, he should say it such that he does not sound like a blasphemer or
heretic, on which Rashi commented: “because Rabbi Hiya tended to pronounce *het*’s like *hei*’s, the word יְחִכִּיתִי (w’ hikkitiḥ), spelled with a *het*, would come out as יָחֲקִיתִי (w’hikkithi), with a *hei*, meaning “I will hit the L-rd.”

Know that we do all this not for knowledge of the theoretical halacha, but rather for practical halacha, so that once we explain and exposit all the severe difficulties and inaccuracies that we posses and have become ingrained within us and our ancestors because of our exile and the corrupting effect of dwelling among the various nations, we will be able to accomplish two things: 1. we will realize the value of every pure letter and vowel of our holy tongue which were preserved in the speech of many of the congregations of our people, and we will recognize them as such and help those congregations guard these traditions, and 2. every one of us will endeavor to practice and improve his pronunciation, to train his throat and lips to properly enunciate the consonants and vowels that were previously garbled, and we should try even more so to pass on to our children the information about how to speak Hebrew clearly.

Rabbi Ovadiah Hadaya, OBM, wrote in responsa *Yaskil Avdi* that: “… and it is obvious that this matter does not entail altering custom [something that might, according to some opinions, ordinarily be forbidden if not done for the sake of following actual halacha], nor does it imply anything defamatory about our predecessors, because the previous generations did not act that way because they specifically wanted to, rather they were helpless, because their birth and upbringing were in the lands of the nations… also, if they had been aware of this unadulterated language, they would have definitely changed their pronunciation according to the halacha.” We shall bring the rest of his words later on, and also a selection from those who concur with him.
Chapter 3

The Letters that have been Confused and their Correct Pronunciations

The Guttural Letters

Hei ג ' Ayin and י ', Het ח ', Alef א '.

The י ' ‘Ayin

The י ' ‘Ayin should be pronounced like the Arabic ع, ‘ayin, and there is nothing equivalent to it in the European languages. It is mistakenly pronounced as an א ' alef, a glottal stop or silent letter.

The sound of an alef is supposed to be weak, and its weakness is what makes it so pleasant, and conversely, the sound of the ayin is supposed to be strong and hard. The failure to distinguish between the alef and the ayin blurs the differences between many Hebrew words. For example, turning עַתָּה, now, into אַתָּה, you, they traveled, into נשׁא אָתָה, they carried, רֻאֵי, shepherd, into רָאָה, seer, קְרָא, ripped into, קָרַא, read, מַעְבָּר, the consumer, into מְבָאֵר, an explainer, and עוֹבֵד, worker, into אוֹבֵד, refugee.

On the heretical side, the verse in Psalms, “עלコレ בתרת, the L-rd has arisen with the sound of the trumpet” becomes “אָלָה אֲלֵיהֶם בְּרַחֲמֶיהָו, he has cursed the L-rd with the sound of the trumpet,” and “הָוִּי, the L-rd’s eye is to those who fear Him” becomes “האֵין, his eye is to those who fear Him.”
Eleh, the L-rd does not care about those who fear Him.” Some other common mistakes include turning the ayin into a ”yud (Y) like sound, like מְרִיב, ma’ariv into מַיִרְיֵב, mayriv, or into a hei ‘ד’ (H) like sound, for example, those who try to say נִשְׁבַּע, nishba’, in the sh’ma, with an ayin at the end, and end up merely saying נִשְׁבָּה, nishbah with a mappiq hei, a pronounced hei.

The 'ח' Het

The Het should sound like the Arabic letter ح ‘ha, and has no equivalent in European languages, except for Spanish, which uses the letter J to represent such a sound.

Indeed, I feel that for purposes of transliteration, using a J to represent a het would alleviate a lot of the ambiguity arising from the fact that we use H to represent hei and het, and J is no longer used in accurate transliteration systems, as there is no J sound in true Hebrew, (more on that later) but because of its novelty, it is more likely that using J would confuse too many readers.

It is mistakenly pronounced like ‘כ’, a weak kaf. This results in the confusion between מָשׁוּחַ, anointed, and מָשׁוּך, pulled, renter, and מֶשֶׁר, merchant, and מֶלֶך, kings, and מֶלֶיחַ, sailors. Further, the root ה-ל-ח, het-lamed-hei, which implies a form of prayer, is turned into ה-ל-כ, khaf-lamed-hei, implying annihilation, as in “משה וַיְחַל,” Moses supplicated before the L-rd,” becoming “משה וַיְכַל,” “Moses annihilated the presence of the L-rd.”

Pronouncing the het like a khaf and an ayin like an alef not only changes the meanings of a lot of words, but it also brings up an issue concerning forms of vowelization that were originally meant to aid the speaker, but became meaningless. This issue presents itself with regards to the phenomenon of the segolate nouns and the patah g’nuwa, which we shall see later on.

Some background: as a general rule in Hebrew, the last syllable of a word receives the accent. There are exceptions, like verbs that end sentences, certain past-tense, second person verbs, and individual words that directly precede a word that is accented on its first syllable, a phenomenon known as nasog achor, literally, stepping back. Another exception is the class of three-letter nouns and multi letter participles known as segolates, whereby the penultimate syllable is open and vowelized with a segol, tzeirei, or holam, and the last syllable is closed and vowelized with a segol. Examples include מלך melech (king), שבט sheivet (tribe) and אכל okhel (food). However, when the
last letter of the word is a strong guttural, like a het or ayin, the segol of the last syllable is changed to a patah in order to aid in the pronunciation, like in פֶּסַח (Passover), עֵץ geza' (stump) and מֶלַח (salt), with a het, and when the middle letter of the noun is an ayin or het, both vowels in the word turn to patah’s, e.g. שַׁעַר (gate) and נַחַל (stream). Although there are exceptions (e.g. לֶחֶם lehem (bread) should be לַחַם (laham)), the same rules seem to apply to proper names (e.g. קָרַח Qorah and כְּנַעַן K’na’an) and present-tense singular female participles (e.g. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ y'hoshua’ (knows) and שׁוֹכַחַת shokhahath (forgets)).

Patah g’nuva is an additional vowel that aids in pronouncing an elongated vowel that is supposed to be followed immediately by an ayin or a het, resulting in a word that has an additional, unaccented vowel at its end. Normally, the long vowels of hiriq, tzeirei, holam, and shuruq can be closed with any of the Hebrew consonants, as long as they are in the accented syllable. Examples: אוֹמְרִים o-m’RIM (they say), הֵם heim (them), דּוֹב dov (bear) and shaCHUL (bereaved). However when one of these vowels is to be closed with an ayin or het, the mouth assumes a position that makes it difficult to pronounce the next letter without starting a new syllable! Try saying “ee” or “oo” or “ei” or “oh” and then making an ayin or het sound. It’s very difficult! Although in Arabic they still manage to do it, in Hebrew we make it easier in one of two ways: The Ashkenazi way and the Sephardi way.

According to Sephardi tradition, the speaker follows through with the semi-vowel (yud or waw) formed from saying the main vowel, and gives it its own new vowel - a patah - which he then closes with the ayin or het. For example, תַּפּוּח tappuah, apple, ends with a shuruq and a het and should be pronounced tap-PUH, but to aid in pronouncing the het, we say תַּפּוּאַח tap-PU-ah, mash-GI-ah, ya-REI-ah, y’hoshua’ is y’ho-SHU-wa’ and lismoah (to be happy) is lis-MO-ah. Instructions to do this can be found in many new tiqqunim and siddurim common in non-Ashkenazi Israeli synagogues.

According to Ashkenazim, an alef vowelized with a patah is inserted after the end of the regular vowel, so תַּפּוּח tappuah is תַּפּוּאַח tap-PU-ah, mash-GI-ah, ya-REI-ah, y’hoshua’ is y’ho-SHU-a’, and lismoah is lis-MO-ah. The Vilna Gaon was an exponent of the Ashkenazi position. A proof for his position lies in the fact that when the vowel before the guttural letter at the end of the word is spelled fully, i.e. with a yud or waw, neither the yud nor waw are vowelized with a dagesh, which usually signifies that the letter with the dagesh is doubled, (e.g. the Hebrew word for Zion, ציון ziyon, has a dagesh in its yud, indicating it is pronounced as zi-YON) as it should be in these cases according to Sephardi custom. The fact that the dagesh is missing is in consonance with the Ashkenazi position. Words spelled with waws indicating completed holam’s
and shuruq’s do not bring a proof for either position, because the standard for writing a complete shuruq is a waw with a dagesh in any case, and the waw of holam, even when it also serves to start the next syllable, (e.g. הוה howeh, the present) does not receive a dagesh.

The problem is that if one is pronouncing his het’s like hei’s and ayin’s like alef’s, there is no reason to change the vowels in segolate nouns into patah’s, nor is there any reason for us to be inserting the patah g’nuva into some of our words. The existence of the patah g’nuva shows that our ancestors made a distinction between the het and khaf and between the ayin and the alef, and that they pronounced the het and khaf correctly.

There is a new word in Hebrew, דוח doh, (a report) spelled with a het and pronounced with a khaf and no patah g’nuva, which illustrates modern Hebrew’s lack of a use for the patah gnuva.

Also, het, as a guttural letter, cannot be vowelized with a shwa na. In conjugations where an ordinary consonant would receive a shwa na, a guttural letter receives a hataf patah. The alef, hei, and ayin are still vowelized properly because they have only had their pronunciations confused with other gutturals, but because the het has been replaced with the khaf, there are now cases where some have been pronouncing what is supposed to be a het with a hataf patah as a khaf with a shwa na.

Starting in Talmudic times, and even until the century after the writing of the Shulhan Arukh, there were places where the people confused the het sound with that of the hei, the simple H sound that we have in English, changing words like מחלל m’hullal, secularized, into ממלל m’hullal, lauded, and the shoresh מַלְכָּה מַלְכָּה, waiting, into מַלְכָּה, a queen! (Many would point out that the true root of “hitting” starts with the letter nun.)

The 'ה' Hei

Some mistakenly pronounce hei like an alef, especially in modern dialects and at the beginnings of words, turning words like ממהר מַמְהֶר m’heira, quickly, into מ’ירה, travesty, and often people fail to emphasize the hei when it is pronounced at the end of a word, noted with a dagesh called a mappiq, turning, for example, ממלכת מַמלְכָּת mal-KAH, meaning “her king,” into ממלכה מַמלְכָּה mal-KA, a queen.
The 'א' Alef

There are those who pronounce it like a hei, turning בֵּיָמָה b’eima, in trepidation, to בֵּהֵמָה b’heima, animal.

Further, many do not realize that the gutturals can be vowelized with silent schwas, i.e they can close syllables even in the middle of words. Especially surprising are the occurrences of alef’s and hei’s with schwas. When alef’s and hei’s are the natural endings of vowels, they appear with out any niqqud (vowelization), what is commonly called nah nistar. These nah-nistar letters have no effect on the pronunciation of the word because the word would be pronounced the same way with out those letters being written. Examples: רִאָשׁוֹן rishon, first, and the name פְּדָאצוּ P’dazur. However, in words like נֶהְגֶּה nehgeh, “we shall delve” and יַאֲדִיר ya’dir, “make great” the alef’s and hei’s effect the pronunciation, and one should exhale slightly after the first segol in נֶהְגֶּה nehgeh, and the patah in יַאֲדִיר ya’dir should be entirely disconnected from the dalet. Mappiq hei, a hei at the end of a word and marked with a dagesh, is distinguished from the normally silent hei’s at the ends of words by being pronounced as though it were again a mid-word hei vowelized with a schwa. Examples: מַלְכָּה malka, queen, and מַלְכָּת malkah, her king, as above.

Non-Gutturals

The 'ו' Waw

Its correct pronunciation is like the Arabic و waw and the English W. The typical incorrect pronunciation is like a weak bet, the vet, equivalent to the V sound.

The V sound does not exist in Arabic, and most Eastern European languages do not have a consonantal W sound. As a matter of fact, most Eastern Europeans, when faced with a foreign word spelled with a W, like “world”, end up pronouncing the word as though it were spelled with a V, “world”, and this is the reason why Ashkenazi Jewry, which spent centuries in Europe, pronounces waw like a V, and also the reason why the current common name for the waw is vav, although many Ashkenazim still pronounce waw as W when it is a semi-vowel conclusion to holam or shuruq.

Switching a waw to a vav results in the following mistakes: אבִיו awiv, his father; אבִיב iviv, his spring; חיָיו hayaw, his life; he is liable, גְּבִיָּה g’viyah, collecting; שוֹרְיָה sh’varim, oxen; שוֹרְיָם sh’varim, shards; and ע’נָוִים ‘anawim, the
humble, become grapes, which changes the meaning of quite a few biblical verses.

The confusion between the weak vet and the waw is the source of what some, like the Baal HaiItur, consider to be a mistake in the traditional blessing recited before the groom places the ring on the bride’s finger. In our printed siddurim, the text is “וְקִדּוּשִין חוּפָּה יְדֵי עַל” “who sanctifies his people Israel through the wedding canopy AND betrothal”, but they claim it was originally בְּקִדּוּשִין with a vet, meaning, “who sanctifies his people Israel through the canopy of betrothal.”

Interestingly enough, our Hebrew letter waw was the antecedent of the Latin letter U, which looked like our letter V, and served in the same capacity as the ancient waw: a consonantal W sound and a vowel sound of U. Later on, when the U was pronounced like a modern V, the V shape and W shape were introduced to distinguish between all the sounds that the U was used to represent. The W, as its name indicates, was merely two U’s, or V’s, written consecutively to represent a strictly consonantal sound. Around the same time, Jewish transcribers who did not use vowel points when they copied volumes of the Talmud and other manuscripts, innovated writing two waw’s together to signify that the intended letter represented a consonant and not a vowel. This continued in Yiddish, where a single letter waw represents a vowel and two represent the consonantal sounds of W or V, and this technique also has its examples in Modern Hebrew.

Either way, the fact remains that the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet should be pronounced like a W. A basic study of the principles of Hebrew and grammar bare this out. The writings of the Vilna Gaon and Rabbi Yaacov Emden take this as an assumption.

Consider the prefix used to represent the word “and” in Hebrew. Usually, it is a waw vowelized with a shwa, except when the word already begins with a hataf vowel, in which case the waw gets the main vowel of the hataf – a patah before a hataf patah, a qamas qatan before a hataf qamas, and a segol before a hataf segol (example: נשמה). When the word is accented on its first syllable and ends a series, the waw is vowelized with a qamas gadol, as in לדור ודור and ומחיר קול זמר, qal wa’ homer. (The waw, which represents changing the context of a verb from past tense to future and which is always vowelized with either a patah together with a dagesh in the next letter or just a qamas gadal when before letters that cannot receive a dagesh, does not signify “and.”) However, we see that when the word begins with either a letter (except for a yud) vowelized with a shwa na or one of the labial letters, any form of the letters bet, waw, pei or mem, then this waw prefix becomes a shuruq, although in the first type of case it would seem more logical to just vowelize the waw prefix with a hiriq qatan and close the syllable by turning the shwa na that starts the word into a shwa nah, and in the second type of case to let the waw stay as is. Examples:
This argument seems most compelling if one were pronouncing his waw’s like V’s. However, once one starts pronouncing his waw’s like W’s, he finds that changing the consonantal sound of the waw into a vowel aids in the pronunciation of words that already begin with labial letters and/or shwa na’s! This is another proof that in true L’shon HaQodesh, the sixth letter was a waw and not a vav.]

The 'ט' Tet

The Tet is not supposed to sound like a tau, which is equivalent to a modern English T which is not followed by an R or L at the beginning of a word (e.g. “to” as opposed to “tree”). Actually, it is supposed to sound like the Arabic ط ta. (Arabic has a tau in the weak and strong forms and a ta, and makes a distinction between all three sounds, just like true L’shon HaQodesh should.)

To us Americans, the tet sound is like the T in words like “want” and “latter” and the middle D in “unleaded” and “ladder”, a sound that only exists at the end of a syllable, and the tau sound exists only at the beginning of syllables. Indeed, in L’shon HaQodesh, the strong tau is not used to close syllables, and instead becomes a weak tau. The difficulty in having a native English speaker learn to pronounce a tet lies in pronouncing the tet at the beginnings of words and syllables.

The failure to make a distinction between a tau and a tet results in mistakes such as טְוֲֵבֵעַ tovei’a, drowns, becoming תּוּבֲֵעַ, soliciting, and טְחִינָה t'hina, grinding, becoming תּחִינָה, camping.

The 'צ' Tzadi

According to Yemenite practice, as well as in other Sephardic communities, the צ tzadi is pronounced like an Arabic ص, sad, which is basically an over-stressed samech/sin or “S”, which is close to the correct sound, while other Sephardim pronounce it identically to a samech, and Ashkenazim and present-day Israelis pronounce it as though it is a strong tau followed by a samech, which is incorrect [as we will show later on].
The 'ג' Quf

The Quf is supposed to sound differently from the strong 'ב' kaf[, which is the equivalent of the common K sound in western languages and the quf and kaf in modern Hebrew].

Some Yemenites pronounce the quf the way Ashkenazim pronounce the strong gimmel, a G sound, like in the word “good”, and pronounce the strong gimmel like the Arabic ج, jimm, which is like the J or G in the English words “large” and “joke.”

Later on we will see why this Yemenite tradition is inaccurate on this point.

Some Sephardic communities, including the Southern Yemenites, pronounce the quf like the Arabic letter ق, qaf, and the strong gimmel like a G. Some pronounce the quf like a weak gimmel, which is incorrect. We shall see later on which of these versions of the three letters are correct.

The majority nowadays pronounces the quf like a kaf, losing the distinctions between קילוקל qilqul, ruination, and קלקלו,kilkul, sustenance, קסית qeseth, ink well and קסית keseth, quilt, and קינים qinnim, nests, and קינים kinnim, lice.
Chapter 4

The Weak Forms of the Beged Kefet Letters

[Fortunately, all six strong forms of these letters have been preserved in every Hebrew dialect, but] only two of these letters’ weak forms are unanimously pronounced correctly – the weak bet, or vet, and the weak pei, or fei.

It is assumed that for grammatical purposes the weak and strong forms of a particular letter are still essentially one letter. It is difficult for us, who have separate letters for p & f and v & b to understand this concept, but all of Hebrew grammar and halacha and exposition indicate that they are the same letter anyway, except that Hebrew takes into account that certain letters are more easily pronounced at the end of a syllable or after an open syllable if the sound they make is softened.

Vet

Vet should be pronounced like the English V, which is the way waw is mispronounced. It mistakenly sounds like a strong bet in the mouths of those Sephardim who have been influenced by Arabic, which does not have this sound. There are some who pronounce it like a fei, f, thereby confusing words like אָב av, father and אַף af, nose.

The Weak Sound of Gimmel

The weak sound of gimmel should be like the Arabic ġ g’ayn, which has no English equivalent[but is, ironically the sound of the Modern Hebrew reish].

According to this writer’s system, the weak gimmel should sound like a voiced, weak kaf, which is what I have also heard from some speakers of Yemenite Hebrew.
Most dialects use the sound of the strong gimmel for the weak gimmel, with the vast majority of Ashkenazi Jews believing that gimmel has only the regular G sound!

The Weak Dalet

The weak dalet is pronounced like the Arabic ذ, dhal, and like the voiced “th” in English words like “although” and “this.” Most often the weak dalet is pronounced identically to the strong dalet, the regular D sound in English, and has the same recognition problems as the weak gimmel. Those who pronounce the weak dalet correctly are able to pronounce the word ידיד, one, properly, and not only that, but they can also extend the sound of the dalet as per the words of the Shulhan Aruh (Orah Hayim, 61:6) which is impossible if the weak dalet is pronounced like the strong dalet.

The Kaf HaHayim (ad loc., 27) wrote, “one cannot extend the dalet if it is not weak, and if he pronounces it in the strong form, the word becomes ידיד, which has the new meaning of ‘I will be happy’, … and concerning that which R’ Karo wrote that one should emphasize (יָדָגֶיש) the dalet, the intent is not that the dalet be read with a dagesh. Rather, that one should experience it properly.”

The Shalmei Zibbur also writes “it should not be read with a dagesh… rather it should be weak, because our G-d has given (the Torah) to us, and we can not change the words of the living G-d by emphasizing (with a dagesh) that which he has weakened.”

The Ben Ish Hai, R’ Yosef Hayim of Baghdad, wrote “even though we have said that one should extend the dalet of ידיד, one should be careful that he not let out the dalet too harshly, as though he was adding a נד da’ (i.e. an additional syllable) to the end of the word. Rather, he should extend the dalet in its weak form and not in its strong form.”

In his work Rav Paolim, the Ben Ish Hai wrote that his townspeople would pronounce the dalet of ידיד weakly, even though they normally did not distinguish between the weak and strong dalet’s. It is interesting to note that the Baal Hatanya in his code of law wrote that the intent of extending the dalet of ידיד is in one’s thought, to linger on the letter, and not in the pronunciation, “for any letter at the end of word which is not followed by
a vowel becomes completely swallowed,” i.e. a sound that is short and nah, like at the end of the vast majority of Hebrew words, and he wrote this because it seems that he was unaware of what the weak dalet should sound like, a sound that is infinitely extendable when closing a syllable, just like one can extend the vet in אָב av and the fei in אָף af without having to enunciate a phantom vowel after the word.

When the Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez writes that when one extends the dalet, the warm breath that he lets out goes up and penetrates the seven heavens and his prayer is accepted, the breath that he is referring to is only released when he says the weak dalet, and not the strong dalet. Similarly, according to the Maharitz Bayah, in the making of the incense for the Temple, there was some significance attached to the exhalation done when one says the letter hei (as opposed to an alef) and the weak forms of bet and pei: one who would grind the spices would constantly repeat “הֵיטֵב הָדֵק, heitev hadheq” because “the sound is good for the spices” (K'rithoth 6b and Maimonides, Laws of the Temple Appointments 2:5), because by saying this phrase, he exhales forcefully, and the heat of his breath helps dry out the spices, letting them be ground more finely. Note the following: the failure to pronounce a weak dalet properly causes other pronunciation problems that often lead to further problems. The most familiar examples are the words וַאֲבַדְּתֶּם wa'avadhtem, spelled with either an alef and ayin, and וְלִמַּדְּתֶּם w'limmadhtem in the sh'ma’, which are mistakenly pronounced as though their dalet's have shwa na’s, even though they are nah.

Rabbi Seraiah Divlitzky, in Zeh HaShulhan, even advised that one should pronounce the dalet’s as though they were vowelized with shwa na’s, because pronouncing the words as they are results in what sounds like multiple words: “תֶּם וַאֲבַדְּ waavad-tem”, or “תֶּם וְלִמַּדְּ w' limmad tem”. It seems that R’ Divlitzky did not consider that his advice results in a mistake that causes other mistakes. Considering that the masses pronounce the weak dalet like a strong dalet, when the dalet's in these words are read with shwa na’s, the words end up sounding like וַאֲבַדְּתֶּם waawad-d’tem or וְלִמַּדְּתֶּם w’ limmad-d’tem, which is problematic in three ways: the shwa nah becomes na, the dalet sound has been doubled, creating a new syllable, and the tau is pronounced strongly, even though it now follows a shwa na and should become weak! Although it is difficult to enunciate a strong dalet and tau consecutively, none of this would be an issue if the words were read with weak dalet sounds, because it is easy to say a weak dalet sound at the end of a syllable that precedes a strong tau.
The Weak Tau

The weak tau, thau, called a saf by Ashkenazim, is supposed to be pronounced like the Arabic ث, tha, and the “th” in English words like “thing” and “both.”

Indeed, decent transliterations of Hebrew words before the advent of contemporary orthodox publishers took this into account. Reading any Pentateuch from the previous generation will verify this. E.g. Meθuselah appears in old Hummashim, but Artscroll and The Midrash Says used Mcsushelach.

The Sephardim, other oriental communities, and those who speak the modern Hebrew dialect pronounce the ꠧ thau like an ordinary ꠧ tau, the T sound in English, and the Ashkenazim pronounce it like a ס samech, the S sound. Changing the tau sound to that of a samech seems to be the more severe mistake.

As is known, the letters τau, τet, Δalet, Λamed, and Νun form the group of letters that are pronounced with the tongue – the lingual letters. At least pronouncing the thau like a τau keeps to one phonemic family. It is, as we said, basically the same letter, just in a different form. However, the samech sound is in an entirely different letter-family: the dentals!

Pronouncing thau like a samech changes many words by slurring their sounds and changing their meanings. Every פֶּתַח pethah, opening, is a פֶּסַח pesah, passover, בְּתָרִים b’tharim, sections, are בְּשָרִים b’sarim, meats, and someone who eats with an appetite eats with סֵאָווֹן seiawon instead of תֵּאָווֹן thei’awon, although in their defense, they think that the τau in l’thei’awon is strong and not weak because they are unfamiliar with the rule that the beged kefet letters lose their strength after a shwa na]. There’s no difference between תֵּפֶּר ta-f’ru, they sewed, and סֵפֶּר sa-f’ru, they counted, and קְסִית k’sith, garment, becomes קְסִיס k’sus, like a horse. מִתְּחֵן m’thuqqan, refined, becomes מִסְקַן m’sukkan, dangerous, and if someone pronounces his quf’s like kaf’s, מְסֻכָּן m’sukkan, established, also becomes מְסֻקָּן m’thuqqan, dangerous, and נְתָחִים n’thahim, sacrificial parts, becomes נְסָכִים n’sachim, libations! In Aleinu, the prayer that ends most synagogue services, we pray that G-d לְסַכֵּן l’sakkein, endanger the world instead of לְתַקֵּן l’thaqqein, repair the world, and on Rosh HaShana, we say הָיוֹם הַרַס הָעָלָם hayom haras ‘olam, today is the destruction of the world, instead of הָיוֹם הָרַת הָעָלָם hayom harath ‘olam, today is birth of the world. Rabbi Yaakov Emden,
in his introduction to his *Siddur Beith Ya'aqov*, admits “to our shame, the weak *tau*, unlike our practice, is not supposed to sound like a *samech*.”

After I had written all this, I read in *Darkei Hayim W'Shalom* about how the custom of the Grand Rabbi Hayim Eliezer Shapiro was to pronounce לְתַקֵּן *l’taqqein* of the *Aleinu* prayer as though written with a strong *tau*, לְתַקֵּן *l’taqqein* olam, as well as in other instances where the *shoresh* נ ק ת tau-quf-nun is used, so as not to sound like he was saying them with a *samech*. From the Admor’s actions, attempting to pronounce *thau* like a *tau* when a *samech* would not do, we can figure out his opinion, namely that the *thau* should not be pronounced like a *samech*. 
Chapter 5

The Vowels that have Become Confused and Their Correct Pronunciations

Rabbeinu Bahya says that the vowels are to the letters as the soul is to the body.

The אַ Patah and the אָ Qamas

The patah is the sound one makes when he opens his mouth wide hence the name patah, open up, or as we say in English, “say ahh”. All dialects of Hebrew pronounce the patah properly. The English equivalent of patah is not common, but exists in words like “pot” and “rock” and “stop.” The vowels in English words like father, odd, and gone actually have what is equivalent to the Vilna Gaon’s qamas, which, ironically, is the way Californians have been pronouncing their qamas.

The Qamas Gadol

The qamas gadol, or the standard qamas, the major-vowel counterpart of the patah, is pronounced like it’s name indicates: by constricting the mouth, and it is supposed to sound like the way Sephardim and Israelis pronounce the holam in unaccented syllables, which has no English equivalent, but you have heard it if you know anybody Israeli. I would describe it as somewhere between the U sound in words like “but” and the “AW” sound in “law” and “for.”

This is how the Yemenites and non-American Ashkenazim also pronounce the qamas.

Ashkenazi Americans basically pronounce the qamas, whether long or short, like the U in “but”, which for lack of a better alternative to the letter A used to represent patah, will sometimes be referred to as “Uh.”
Some Polish and Galician communities pronounce qamas in open syllables like a shuruq or qubbus: בָּשָר basar is בֻּשָר busar, and פָּרִים parim, bulls, is פּוּרִים purim, lots.

Many Ashkenazim pronounce the qamas in word-ending, open syllables as segol (א'), and move the accent from the last syllable to which ever syllable they prefer, as though they were speaking Yiddish: נְשָמָה n'sha-MA becomes נְשָמֶה n'SHA-meh (or n'SHU-meh), גְּמוּרֶה g'MU-reh, etc. I have even heard some say words like עַמֶּךֶ a-ME-cheh and בִּתְהִילָתֶיךֶ bis-hila-SE-kheh.

The Qamas Hatuf, or Qamas Qatan

The qamas hatuf, or qamas qatan, appears only in closed, unaccented syllables, like קָדְשִי qodshi, my holy, and is said quickly[, hence the name, hatuf, quickly]. Sephardim (who do not mistakenly pronounce the qamas qatan like a holam) only pronounce the qamas hatuf with any sort of oral restriction, and end up pronouncing the qamas gadol like a patah.

Linguists believe that the failure to distinguish between the qamas gadol and patah is the continuation of a practice that has existed for centuries, yet one that is shown to postdate the sages of Tiberius who standardized our system of vowelization and who created separate symbols for the two vowels, resulting in Sephardi sages conceding that their typical pronunciation of the qamas is not correct.

Rabbeinu Bahya, in his commentary to Parashath Wa’eira, writes “… and even though it seems that the qamas and patah are the same vowel, it is not so. There is a distinction between them with regards to pronunciation.” The importance of the qamas is greater than that of the patah, so to speak, and that’s why the holy name invoking Hashem’s mastery, אֲדוֹנָי, is vowelized with a qamas under the nun. It is in order to differentiate it from the ordinary word, אֲדוֹנָי my masters, which is vowelised with a patah. Further, one who pronounces a patah like a qamas cannot escape from at least one problem out of two, by either changing the meaning of the word or saying something heretical. Examples: תִּסְפֶּה ha’af tispeh, “would you destroy,” if pronounced with a qamas under the hei, is meaningless, literally meaning the nose will destroy, and הַקֵּל ha’eil in Job, if
pronounced with a qamas, becomes heretical, because the word has been changed from a declarative sentence to a question. Two chapters later we shall see why many Sephardi grammarians were judicious about pronouncing the L-rd’s name with a qamas, and we will also further examine Rabbeinu Bahya’s words.

The Rashbatz also bemoaned the general Sephardi community’s failure to distinguish the qamas gadol from the patah. The author of L’Wayath Hen admitted that “only the Ashkenazim pronounce the qamas properly”, and the Ben Ish Hai wrote about his distress that his townsmen did not pronounce the patah properly. Parenthetically, the Jewish communities of Bukharia, Persia, Dagestan, and other areas switch between pronouncing the qamas properly and pronouncing it like a patah.

At the end of the day, it turns out that the qamas qatan and holam make one pair of vowels, and are meant to be similar, and the qamas gadol and the patah make another pair of vowels and are meant to be similar. All agree that the patah and holam are supposed to be very different. Yet traditionally, both types of qamas in any community have been represented by the same symbol, and often are pronounced identically to each other. What are we to make of the qamas? The answer lies in making fine distinctions along the vocalized spectrum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holam: O as in “go”</th>
<th>Qamas Qatan: AH as in “but”</th>
<th></th>
<th>O as in “pot”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;Throat and lips constricted &gt;</td>
<td>&gt;Open lips, but maintain throat constriction slightly &gt;</td>
<td>&gt; Open throat slightly &gt;</td>
<td>&gt; Open throat completely &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; Constrict lips &lt;</td>
<td>&lt; Constrict throat even more &lt;</td>
<td>&lt; Close throat slightly &lt;</td>
<td>&lt; Mouth and throat open &lt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From **holam** to **patah**

From **patah** to **holam**
**Holam:** O as in “go”

**Qamas Qatan:**

UH as in “but”

**AH** as in “father”

**O** as in “pot”

| i.e. a qamas followed by a waw. | i.e., a pure qamas sound. | i.e., a patah followed by an alef, which how the Vilna Gaon describes it. | i.e., a pure patah! |

We see that when we start out with the *holam* sound and progress to the *patah* sound, we increasingly open our organs of speech, visiting first the *qamas qatan* and then the *qamas gadol* along the way, and when we start with the *patah* and progress towards the *holam*, we increasingly constrict our organs of speech, again visiting the two types of *qamas* along the way, except in the reverse order. Constricting the throat is by definition pronouncing an *alef* sound, and constricting the lips is by definition pronouncing a *waw*.

That is how we would explain the phenomenon.

There is a plausible argument that one should pronounce both types of *qamas* in a unified manner. After all, the Masoretes did choose one symbol for both sounds. Practically speaking, although the difference between the two types of *qamas* exists, the modern way of pronouncing the *qamas*, “UH,” does not result in many problems. The harsh Israeli-Haredi/Old European *qamas* we mentioned earlier is too far on the side of the *holam*. However, just because the vowels share a symbol, it does not mean that they are equivalent. The Masoretes also chose to represent both types of schwa and *hirig* with a single symbol, and many cantorial marks’ meanings are encoded and differentiated by their contexts, even though there is plenty of redundancy among the symbols, e.g. the *pashta* and *kadma* share one symbol, although they are entirely different, and a *munah* has many separate tunes and functions.

An interesting historical note: years ago, when the Haredi school system in Israel started using modern Hebrew as its language of instruction, the problem presented itself: if the students started pronouncing the *qamas* like a *patah*, then the name of Hashem, whose last syllable is vowelized intentionally with a *qamas*, נָי, in order to differentiate it from the common word, אֲדַנַי, my masters, spelled with a *patah*, would become identical with that word and lose its uniqueness.
An additional problem arose when a student would utter a blessing on a cup of water using Modern Hebrew. The *qamas* he used to pronounce Hashem’s name sounds more like one of his *holams*. It just gets messier.

One solution was to make a further differentiation. The *holam*, in order to be distinguished from the *qamas* in Hashem’s name, would be pronounced like “uh-y”, just like it is pronounced in Yiddish and colloquial Hebrew words. Further, the weak *tau*, when encountered in prayer, would still be pronounced like a *samech*, in order to preserve some semblance to the usual Ashkenazi pronunciation.

Another *qamas*-related problem is that a lot of Americans and others have been educated to pronounce the *qamas* like a *patah*, like in modern Hebrew, but were not made aware of the incidences in which the *qamas* is *qatan* or *hatuf*, and should be pronounced more like a *holam*. Words like נָכְרִי nochri, foreigner, and תוֹכְנִית tochnith, program, and words like הֹוָק *hoq*, statute, קֻל *qol*, voice, and זָכוֹר z’chor, remember, which are normally vowelized with a *holam* that becomes demoted to a *qamas qatan* when connected to the next word, e.g. הָקַעַל *haq* and זָכוֹר נָא *z’char na*, have been pronounced as הַקָּו *haq*, engraved, קַל *qal*, light, זָכַר *z’char*, male.

Although this is quite problematic, if they would make the easy change over to pronouncing the *qamas* like regular Americans there would be no issue.

### The *Segol* and the *Tzeirei*

The Ashkenaim and Sephardim pronounce the נ *segol* like the English E (like in “bet” and “jet”), which is similar to the way Yemenites and many Sephardim pronounce the צ *tzeirei* (incorrectly), as has been established by the Tiberian vowel system (which distinguishes between the *segol* and *tzeirei*). Yet, many Yemenites pronounce the *segol* like a *patah*. This is an ancient practice, which is indicated by the earlier Babylonian vowelization system’s use of one symbol for both of what we call the *tzeirei* and the *patah*.

One could argue that the Babylonians did maintain a distinction between the *segol* and *tzeirei* even though it was not indicated in writing, just like until the modern day the Tiberian system made no distinction between the *qamas gadol* and *qatan*, the *hiriq gadol* and *qatan*, and the *qubus* and the *shuruq haseir*, even though vocal distinctions do exist based on context and syntax. Consider: the average Hebrew reader would be able to distinguish between which of the unified symbols should be *patahs* and which should be *segols* based on the position in the word and
context, especially when confronted with segolate nouns and participles, as we have explained earlier. Most readers will be able to properly vowelize the following words:

מִורְחָה נֱצֶה יִי שָׁעֶר כָּסֵף מִיס עֹבְדֵּךְ

i.e., no word ending with a silent hei is vowelized with a patah, netzah certainly has no patah under the nun, yayin never has a segol just like kesef never has a patah, etc.]

Amos Hakham, in his commentary to Job, points out that the word אע'נֶה a'aneh, “I will answer,” (32:17) would have normally been vowelized אע'נֶה e'eneh, but appears to be a relic of the older Babylonian system. Similarly, Libyan Jews would often pronounce the segol in closed, unaccented syllables like patah.

The Tzeirei

The Yemenites pronounce it like a short English E without a closing yud (Y) sound (i.e. the vowel in “bet” and “jet”, like everyone else pronounces a segol). For example, the Hebrew word for son, בֵּן, is pronounced “ben”, like it would be in English. The Sephardim also pronounce the tzeirei this way, without distinguishing it from the segol. The Ashkenazim do make a distinction between the segol and the tzeirei by pronouncing the tzeirei as a diphthong, a compound vowel, through the enunciation of a yud after the basic segol vowel, eh+y, or ei, as in the English words “say” and “game.”

Some Polish Jews pronounce the tzeirei like a patah followed by a yud, יָא, the Hebrew “ay” sound (which is close to, but not identical to the long I sound in English), resulting in בֵּן bein becoming יָה bayn and שַיש Shaysh, six or marble, becoming שַיש Shaysh, and they pronounce the tzeirei these ways even when the yud is not written.

Although Rabbi Shaki does not feel comfortable with the Ashkenazi approach, later we shall elaborate on how the Ashkenazi custom is to intentionally pronounce a yud after every tzeirei, even when the yud is not written.

The Holam

In the dialects of north and central Yemen, the holam has a unique sound, one that distinguishes it from the qamas and tzeirei: it is like the E in the French word “venire” and the preposition “le.” I also heard some Moroccan Jews pronounce the holam this way.
Some represent this sound as ö, i.e. an O with an umlaut. Indeed many Yemenites have told me that place their mouth in position to say qamas, then pronounce a segol, which is similar to the way dictionaries explain how to pronounce an O with an umlaut or a French E.

As we said earlier, the Sephardim (and modern Israelis) pronounce the holam like the Yemenite qamas. The Ashkenazim pronounce the holam as a diphthong.

In western countries, many of them pronounce the holam like the long O in English, as in “home” and “go,” which, thankfully, is still the transliteration standard for holam.

It seems that the majority of Ashkenazim pronounce the holam like a Sephardi or Yemenite holam with the addition of a yud sound at the end, “uhy,”

as in the common vernacular for gentile, “goy.” Unfortunately, for many who pronounce the holam this way, it is indistinguishable from the pronunciation of their qamas followed by a yud, resulting in Hashem’s name, when pronounced during prayer, having two identical vowels: ד אוֹד duhy and נ נּוֹו nuhy, even though the vowelization makes it obvious that they should be different! Although this results in few changes of meaning that are significant, it does render many principles of diqduq and niqqud moot.

Among Yekkies, there are those who pronounce the holam like a qamas or patah followed by a W or Yemenite waw: “aw” as in “law” or “ow” is in “allow,” respectively.

From the traditions and writings of the Vilna Gaon, it is evident that he felt the holam should be pronounced like the English O, and as we shall see, he has proofs for this position.

**The Holam Like a Tzeirei**

The Jews of Lithuania would pronounce the holam like a tzeirei with a noticeable yud sound at the end: “ei,” transforming, for example, the name חayim ציר Hayim Ozeir into חayim צייר Hayim Eizer. The Yemenites would also pronounce the holam like a tzeirei, except without the noticeable yud at the end. One who pronounces the holam like a tzeirei turns the word אוד ‘od, more, into אeid, witness, and בן b’no, his son, into b’nei, sons of, and עז ‘oz, might, becomes, עז eiz, goat, and the verse יושב ישראֶל בּעָשָׂו יְבֵשׂוֹת, “let Israel rejoice in his maker”, becomes יושב יְבֵשׂוֹת “let Israel rejoice in Esau!”
Know that pronouncing the *tzeirei* and *holam* like diphthongs (i.e. adding Y or W sounds to already existing vowels) is not something that is grammatically correct. Here are two proofs: 1. Four pairs of words that occur in scripture, each pair of words being connected to each other with connective *trop*: **בֵּן** אוֹ, *o vein* (Exodus 21:31) compared to **צָמֵא** כָּל **הוֹי** hoy *kol tzamei* (Isaiah 55:1), and **פַרְעֹה** חֵי, *hei phar‘o* (Genesis 42:15) compared to **בְּנְֵ** חַי, *hay b’neikh* (I Kings 17:23). Now according to the grammatical principle of the letters *beged kefet* losing their *d’geishim* when immediately following open vowels indicated by syllables ending in *alef, hei, waw* or *yud* that are *nah*, the word **בֵּן** *bein* in the first example becomes **בֵּן** *vein*, as it is immediately preceded by a word ending in a *nah*, silent, *waw*, which is the natural ending of a *holam*. If the word **וֹא** *o*, however, had been pronounced with some sort of additional *yud* afterwards, then the *bet* should have retained its *dagesh*, just like the word **כָּל** *kol* which follows the word **הוֹי** *hoy* retains its *dagesh*, because the word *hoy* has a pronounced *yud* appended to its already complete vowel. That *yud* at the end of *hoy* might as well be any other consonant. Those who pronounce the *holam* with a *yud* sound at the end pronounce **וֹא** as though it rhymes with *hoy*, yet we see that scripture took it for granted that they should be pronounced differently: that *holam* has no additional *yud* sound!

Similarly, with the third and forth examples: the *yud* in **יִּֽהְיָ֣ בַּל** *hei* is *nah*, because it is a natural part of the *tzeirei* vowel, and therefore the ensuing *pei* in **פָּרְעֹה** *pharaoh* loses its *dagesh* and ends up weak, yet **יִֽהְיָ֣ בַּל** *hay* which also ends in a *yud*, does not knock the *dagesh* out of **בְּנֵי** *b’neich*, because a *yud* appended to a *patah* is already as though any other consonant – yet there are still those who pronounce **יִֽהְיָ֣ בַּל** as though it ends with the same sound as **יִֽהְיָ֣ בַּל** *hay*.

See the chapter on the Vilna Gaon’s vowel theory for an explanation of which semi vowels go with which vowels.

The Talmud, in B’rakhoth 15b, establishes that in the reading of the *sh’mah*, one should separate between all consecutive word pairs where the first words ends with the same letter that begins the second word. This list does not include **בְּנֵי** יִשְׂרָאֵל *b’nei yisrael* (the Israelites)[, even though it should if the *yud* at the end of *b’nei* were pronounced, proving that the *yud* in **בְּנֵי** *b’nei* is unpronounced].
Rabbeinu Avraham, son of Moses Maimonides, in responsum 79:2, was asked about this issue, and responded that the words “B’nei Yisrael” only have an external resemblance to the other enumerated word pairs, because the yud in “B’nei” is not pronounced, i.e. it is not heard in the pronunciation at all, and it is as though the word B’nei ends with the letter Nun, vowelized with a mere tzeirei without a yud, and therefore, this is not a case of two consecutive identical consonants.

[Again, the Vilna Gaon’s answer to this question is different and more subtle, and we shall elaborate on it later.]

### The Holam Like a Qamas

The **holam** among many Yemenite Jews is in danger of being forgotten because many fail to distinguish it from the **qamas**, as they pronounce the qamas properly, and then they go and pronounce the holam like the rest of the Sephardim, which ends up being a Yemenite qamas! The failure to make this distinction results in בּוֹא bo, come, becoming בָּא ba, came, the רֵוִים ro’im, shepherds are רֵעֵים ra’im, bad, and מַלְכָּה malka, queen, the מַלְכָּה Malka, his king, becomes מַלְכָּה Malka, queen, the אֲדוֹנִים adonim, masters, are אֲדָנִים adanim, sockets, and בּוֹנַיִך bonayich, your builders become בָּנַיִך banayich, your children, changing the meaning of the well-known Mishna, and many more examples of where the only distinction between the second person possessive plural and singular is a holam instead of a qamas, eg. תּוֹרָתָם toratham, their Torahs, and תּוֹרָתָם toratham, their Torah.

### The Shuruq and Qubbus

**The shuruq and qubbus** should be pronounced like the U in the English word put, except that the shuruq is longer and the qubbus is rushed.

[According to the Ashkenazi authorities, the shuruq is like the the “oo” in “food” and the qubbus is like the “oo” in “good,” which are qualitatively different. See the later chapter for an elaboration and how to tell which one is which.]

Most people pronounce them fairly correctly, that is, unlike any of the other vowels, although often each one is confused for the other, which is not so bad, because they form a natural vowel pair in any event. However, some Ashkenazim, like those of Galician and eastern Hungarian decent,
and others, pronounce these vowels like a hiriq. This mistake is ridiculous; both disturbing and jarring at once, and stifles the ear as it eliminates the differences between all sorts of verbs and nouns in practically every and line and verse in our liturgy.

Some examples: the mighty attributes, גְּבוּרוֹת, g’vuroth, become nothing more than גְּבִירוֹת, g’viroth, mistresses, sukka, hut becomes סִכָּה, sicha, rubbing, a rock, צָרָה, tzur, becomes צִיר, tzir, brine, and the temple appointments, פְּקָדִים, p’kudim, become the 600,000 men whom Moses counted 600,000.

The Levites נְתוֻנִים, (Numbers 8:16) become like the Gibeonites, נְתִיָּנִים, because n’tunim becomes n’thinim (Yevamoth 78b). So too, have the barriers fallen between words with waw as the middle letter of the root conjugated in the simple future tense and the same words conjugated in the causative future tense, for example, יָקְם, yaqum, “will be upheld”, becomes יָקִים, yaqim, “he will uphold,” which changes the meaning of all the laws of vows, because there is no differentiation between vows that withstand on their own and ones that the father or husband have to uphold (Numbers 30).

According to this pronunciation, there is no difference between what Eliezer (identified by the Midrash, although his name does not appear in the text) asked of Rebecca, “is there place to stay-לָלִין?” with the intent for lodgings for one person, as reflected by the hiriq, and her response, “that there is place to stay-לָלוּן” for many people, as reflected by the use of the shuruq (Genesis 24:23-25). If Rebecca did pronounce לָלוּן like לָלִין how was Eliezer supposed to realize how good natured she and her family were and that they have the capacity to host many people? She did not respond in writing so that he could see that her response was pronounced with a waw!

This surprising question was posed by a student to his rebbe in some European cheider, and the rebbe answered that Rebecca, in this instance, purposely pronounced the word lalun like a Sephardi would. I heard this from an Ashkenazi scholar who was witness to this exchange.
The answer could have been simpler: Rebecca, as an Aramean, was Sephardi, and she pronounced the shuruq properly, whereas Eliezer, who spent all his time in Abraham’s yeshiva, pronounced the shuruq like a boy from cheider.

Further, pronouncing shuruq like a hiriq blurs many gender distinctions, starting with turning רֶוֶת, ru, him, into רֶוֶת, hi, her, and continuing through to the imperative conjugation, where any plural turns into female singular! (E.g., שְׁבַעַת becomes שְׁבַעַת.) Also, the communal prayers are ruined, because many requests for our needs, which end in the suffix יִ, nu, us, are now singular and selfish, ending with the suffix יָ, ni, a singular form. (Here in Israel, I have heard hazanim and ba’alei q’ria who, in a single word, would pronounce one shuruq properly and another like a hiriq.)

A Real Tongue Twister: Shortened and Swallowed Yud’s

Another shocking and distorting mistake heard from some negligent speakers: they are swallowing or omitting the yud at the end of syllables vowelized with either patah or qamas. They turn the name ישו, Yishai, into ישו, Yisha, ילי, eilay, to me, into ילה, eila, goddess, and ילי, my life, into ילה, eila, a beast, and ישו, isha, my fire offerings, into ישו, isha, a woman. Worst of all, the L-rd’s name now ends in נא instead of נא.

Concerning these mistakes, both the Hazon Ish and the Mishnah B’rurah wrote “one should emphasize the yud so that it be recognized in the pronunciation… and where is the fear and trepidation that a person is supposed to have when he mentions the name of Hashem if he did not say the name as it is supposed to be said?” (Az Nidb’ru, 79:4)

The Dagesh Hazaq and Shwa Na’

The dagesh hazaq and the shwa na’ are subject to much confusion and are practically absent in the standard Ashkenazi and modern-Hebrew dialects.

A shwa na’ causes the letter to be pronounced with half a vowel, so too speak, and connects it immediately to the next syllable.

For English speakers, the schwa na’ should sound like the “a” in “about” or the “the” in “I went to the store.”
For example, in the daily prayers, we are supposed to read שופטין as “sho-F’TEI-nu”, our judges, and not “shof-TEI-nu”, which sounds as though it has a qamas qatan, and means “judge us” in the imperative form, and changes the meaning of the prayer.

The dagesh hazaq is the basic point of differentiation between many verbs and nouns, and one who avoids the dagesh hazaq is like one who weakens a house by removing the foundation stones from beneath the house.

The word תטעי tit-t’i’ has a dagesh hazaq in the tet. One who who ignores the dagesh and pronounces the tet nah, that is, as closing the syllable, תטעי tit-i, is changing the meaning from the imperative female of “to plant” to the imperative female form of “to err.”

One who does not pronounce אוולה o-ch’LA, “I shall eat” in the poetic form, with a schwa na under the chaf turns the word in to אָכְלָה okh-LA, either an imperative form of “to eat” or the compound word for “her food.”

One of my favorite examples of the necessity of using dagesh hazaq is from Exodus. Scripture says that when Moses first descended from Mount Sinai with the first pair of tablets, he met Joshua on the way. Joshua, who was unaware of the incident of the Golden Calf that had unfolded in the Israelite camp while he and Moses were absent, thought that the commotion coming from the camp sounded like a battle was raging, to which Moses responded “it is not the sound of the hero answering the call of the weak, ענות a-NOTH, rather it is the sound of affliction, ענוה an-NOTH.” (Exodus 32:18) The commentators say that Moses included a veiled piece of rebuke: if you want to be a good leader, you have to be able to hear fine distinctions. The difference between the two words is that the first word in question has a dagesh hazaq in the nun (ענות), whereas the second does not (ענוה). Moses was making a pun.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 5b) mentions that the rabbis instituted an enactment against students issuing rulings because of an incident involving a student who failed to make a distinction between ביצים beitzim, without a dagesh and meaning “eggs,” and ביצים bitzim, with a dagesh, meaning swamps.
Accenting the Correct Syllable

As a general rule, most words in Hebrew are accented on the last syllable, but there are exceptions. In western languages, like English, it is usually some other syllable that is accented.

The stereotypically Ashkenazi practice of accenting last-syllable words on the first or middle syllables leads to worse infractions, like turning shwa na’s to nah’s and eliminating the need for dagesh hazaq:

SHO-m’rei SHAB-bath instead of sho-M’REI shab-BATH, and hokh-MA becomes HAKH-ma turning the first qamas, which is qatan, into a gadol, which as we said earlier, is closer to patah.

Further, many verbs have their meanings changed by accenting different syllables. Past tense third-person female singular verbs of the roots having waw as the middle consonant are only distinguished from their present tense counterparts by the accent, as in Genesis, when Rachel showed up at the well to meet Jacob, the difference between הָבוּ B-ah, came, and הָבַה ba-AH, coming (Genesis 29:6, 9), and many times in scripture, the future tense is merely the past tense with the last syllable accented instead of the middle syllable and the addition of a prefix waw, yet the western tendency to accent the middle syllable reverts the meaning of the word back to past tense. The most well-known example is in the sh’mà, where in the second verse it says וְאָהַבְתָּ w’A-hav-TA, you shall love, yet saying w’a-HA V-ta means “you loved.” The advantage is that once one recognizes that his version of Hebrew has been corrupted by his preconceived notions from foreign languages, it becomes easier for him to adapt further improvements to his Hebrew.

Native French speakers typically have a problem with accenting every word on the last syllable, making O-khel, food, into o-KHEL, the one who eats the food.

The Distinction Between Hiriq Gadol, Hiriq Qatan, and Shwa Na

Many know that sometimes the hiriq (אֱ) makes a long “e” sound, as in “beet” or “meat”, and sometimes it makes a short “i” sound as in “pin” or “in”. However, many Sephardim and modern Israelis pronounce every hiriq like the long “e” sound with out ever using the short hiriq. Further, among those who do pronounce a short hiriq, usually English speakers, the majority do not know the principles used to distinguish between the two, turning יִזְיָרֶא אֵי-יִזְיָרֶא EEM, goats, into יִזְיָרֶא ee-YI-ZEEM. This is because to most English speakers, it is natural to use the long “e” sound in open syllables and the short “i” sound in closed syllables, regardless of accentage. As we shall see, the rule is that only a hiriq in a closed, unaccented syllable is short. Further, practically every one pronounces the shwa na’ like the way a hiriq qatan is supposed to be pronounced. In actuality, a shwa na’ is different from a hiriq. It is וּו-יִמְר w’-im-RU and not וּו-יִמְר w’-eem-ru or וּו-יִמְר w’-ee-mi-ru.
The list of pronunciations of letters and vowels is concluded, but not completed, because we have omitted the confusion between the samech and zayin, the two types of shin’s, and the phenomenon of some pronouncing the yud or quf like alef, and other uncommon occurrences.
There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Six of the letters change their pronunciation slightly when placed at the end of syllables or immediately after open syllables, defined as syllables that do not end in other consonants. They are the letters כפ״ת beged kefet, and the principles that govern how they are verbalized are identical for each of the letters, i.e., if in one word there is both a strong bet and a weak bet, i.e. a vet, then if the same word were to be spelled with a dalet or tau instead of bet, the dalet or tau would be strong where they replace the strong bet and weak where they replace the weak bet. (In traditional jargon, the slight change in the letters is called “weakening.”) The shin, although it does not have a weak form, for some reason, when used in certain roots, makes a sound almost identical to a samech. No single word in L’shon HaQodesh is hypocritical enough to contain both a shin and sin or samech and sin, although shin may prefix a word that contains a sin. A samech and a shin may occur together; however, no word in Hebrew has a shin or samech vowelized with shwa nah (i.e., closing a syllable) and then followed by a new syllable starting with the other. This is interesting, for as we shall see later on, when L’shon HaQodesh wishes to close one syllable with a certain consonant and start the next syllable in the word with the same consonant, instead of writing that consonant twice, it is written only once but emphasized with a dagesh hazaq. Writing out the consonant twice would mean that the first instance of that consonant could not be nah (i.e., it could not end the syllable.) It seems that samech and shin, although different letters, also follow this rule as though they were one letter! As an illustration, say the word “Israeli.” It sounds as though it has two L or lamed sounds (i.e., one closing the “rael” syllable and another opening the “li” syllable), so if it were a Hebrew word, its lamed would have a dagesh, like the hebrew word אֵלֶּה EIL-leh, these. Now say “fish sticks” as a compound word. Yes. It is pronounced as though it were “fishticks,” as though the S that starts the second syllable has been incorporated to the consonantal SH at the end of the first syllable! The same would happen to such a Hebrew word like אַשְׁפַּסְחָא ash-sa. It would end up being pronounced אַשְׁפַּס asha. Or, try saying “horse shoe”. It ends up being pronounced “horshoe.” The Hebrew counterpart would be a word like אַשְׁפַּס as-sha or אַשְׁפַּס, which once again would be incorporated into one letter. Other than that, each Hebrew consonant is unique, all though there are some who claim that the difference between the samech and sin does exist, the samech being the simple “S” sound and the sin being a more complex sound, somewhere between the samech and tzadi.
In any language, certain sounds are produced entirely by the mouth without the aid of the vocal chords, and certain others require some form of vocalization. Take, for example, the “S” sound, which is made by the speaker blowing air through his clenched teeth. It is unvoiced. The “Z” sound is practically identical to the “S” sound, except one has to also vibrate his vocal chords. Hence, the “Z” is a voiced consonant, the counterpart of the unvoiced “S.” The “S” and “Z” sounds form an unvoiced-voiced pair of cognates. The same relationship exists between the “F” and “V” sounds. This point will be instrumental for proving how to pronounce the otherwise uncommon weak sounds of the tau, dalet and gimel.

According to tradition, there are five letter-groupings within the Hebrew alphabet. The letters alef, hei, het and ayin are the guttural letters. That is, they come from the throat. Alef and hei are commonly pronounced correctly; the ayin and het are not. Simply, put, one should make an effort to enunciate the het like the guttural letter it is. Although the sounds are uncommon, there are a few instances when they can even be detected in words commonly used by native English speakers. The het is pronounced when one blurts out an “H” word suddenly and loudly: if you scream out “how come?”, you’ll be pronouncing “How” with a het. Try it. The ayin can be made by saying the T’s in in the word “bottle” with a British accent.

One can train himself to say these letters with a minimum of practice.

The reader should also familiarize himself with the definition of the alef and hei sounds. The alef, according to linguists, is a glottal stop. Explanation: say “apple” or “Aharon” or “onset” or “under” or any other word that begins with a vowel. Now get ready to say it again, but don’t actually say it. That thing you felt in your throat right before you said the word was a glottal stop. Say שׁהָאֵ ha-eish. The alef is what you did in between “ha” and “eish.”

The hei is a simple breath. Don’t do it too strong, or it’ll become a het. Glottal stops and simple breaths occur automatically with any vowel, so a silent hei or alef can be used to represent the end of any open syllable in Hebrew, although hei is used very infrequently in the middle of words:

This comes as a surprise to many, but the guttural letters can not receive a shwa na; instead they receive a hataf vowel, and they can receive a shwa nah, meaning they end syllables with an audible sound. The het and ‘ayin often end words and are pronounced; they sound the same way when they close mid-word syllables: נישָׁבַעְתִּי nish-ba’-ti has an ‘ayin naha and נֶחְמָד nehmadh has a het naha ending its first syllable. Alef and hei, however, are rarely vowelized with a shwa nah in the middle of words. Examples of each from the daily prayers are יַאְדִּיר ya–dir and נֶהְגֶּה neh-geh. The alef in יַאְדִּיר serves to make the first syllable stay with an open patah disconnected from
the following *dalet*. In most cases either one of two things would happen: for יַא ya to be its own syllable, the *patah* would change to a *qamas*, the *alef* would be totally silent, and the *dalet* of the next syllable would be weak, יָאדִּ֨ר, or the *patah* would remain, the *alef* would be completely silent, and the *dalet* would be vowelized with a *dagesh hazaq*, יָאָדִִ֨ר, indicating that the first syllable ends with a *dalet* sound and the second one begins with a *dalet* sound. In this case, the first syllable remains open, the *patah* stays a *patah*, and the *dalet* does not receive a *dagesh hazaq*, although it does keep its *dagesh kal*, indicating it is a strong, as opposed to weak, *dalet*.

The letters י yud, ג gimel, כ kaf, and ק quf are the palatal letters. Most mistaken pronunciations of these letters at least stay in the family, e.g., a quf pronounced like a strong kaf. Soon we shall see how the gimmel’s relationship to kaf proves how to pronounce the weak gimmel.

The letters ד dalet, ת tau, ט tet, ל lamed, and נ nun are produced by the tongue. They are referred to as the lingual letters.

The letters ש shin, ס sin, ס samech, ר reish, ז zayin, and צ tzadi are produced by the front teeth and are known as the dental letters. The modern Israeli version of the *reish* is pronounced as though it were some sort of palatal letter. Obviously then, that is not the correct pronunciation. The Spanish “r” sound, which some use for the *reish*, is not a true dental sound either. It is almost a lingual sound. The American “r” sound, though, is a true dental sound: try saying “rough” without first putting your front teeth together. It’s a physical impossibility. It is for this reason I advocate pronouncing the *reish* like the American “r”, even if the speaker is not from America, although the Hungarian and Russian r’s are also dental letters. (According to Jastrow, the *reish* was frequently interchanged with the *lamed* in classical times, as both letters are liquids. This also shows that the classical *reish* was not pronounced like a modern *reish*.)

The letters ב bet, ו waw, מ mem, and פ pei are the labial letters, pronounced by various actions of the lips.

**The Derivation of the *Beged Kefet* Letters**

*Bet* and *pei* form a voiced-unvoiced pair in their strong forms (the B and P sounds). They also form a voiced-unvoiced pair in their weak forms, *vet* and *fei* (the V and F sounds). It turns out that *dalet* and *tau* form a similar pair, as do *kaf* and *gimmel*. Normally, the letters of *beged kefet*, when in their strong forms, are what linguists call stops, sounds that are produced by the mouth suddenly and that cannot be extended. The weaker forms, however, are fricatives, which are infinitely extendable sounds. Try it. The B and P are over instantly, but the V and F can be held for as long as the speaker can exhale. Just like the relationship between the *bet* and *pei* did not change when
the letters changed to the weak forms, so too, the voiced-unvoiced relationship between the *kaf* and *gimmel* does not change when the letters are weak. The weak *kaf* is unanimously pronounced like the K in English, and the strong *gimmel* like the English G, as in go. If the weak form of the *kaf*, the *khaf*, is pronounced the way we normally pronounce it, then the weak form of *gimmel* should merely be the voiced counterpart of the *khaf*. This is the sound that Rabbi Shaki was referring to earlier. Interestingly enough, it sounds oddly familiar to the Modern Hebrew *reish* we just mentioned. On the same note, pronouncing the weak *dalet* and *tau* like the English voiced “th” as in “that” and unvoiced “th” as in “both” preserves the relationship between the two letters. This pattern is an obvious proof to Rabbi Shaki’s position, and has no legitimate counter argument.

Being that all the stop letters in *L’shon HaQodesh* become fricatives at the end of syllables, it turns out that no syllable in real Hebrew ends in a stop. One might counter that we are taught that when a letter receives a *dagesh hazaq* and is subsequently doubled, both instances of the letter are in the strong form, e.g. *תָּבָּשׁ* shabbath, the sabbath, has a *dagesh* in the *bet*, and is therefore *תָּבָּשׁ* shab-bath, as many people pronounce it. Such words could very well be the exception to the rule. However, I hypothesize that it should be pronounced like *תָּבָּשׁ* shav-bath, without a break between the two syllables. Similarly, any example of a *beged kefet* letter with a *dagesh hazaq* should be pronounced first like the weak form, which ends the syllable, and then like the strong form, which starts the next syllable.

### The Intensive Forms

According to the linguists, the letters פ *quf*, צ *tzadi*, and ט *tet* are the intensive forms of the letters כ *kaf*, ס *samech*, and ط *tau*, respectively. These three letters/phonemes do not exist in western languages. It should be noted that according to my linguistic model, that no *L’shon HaQodesh* syllables end in stops, the ideal forms of *quf* and *tet* are not stops. Try it. The Q sound in “queen” is extendable, as is the D sound in “ladder.” Technically speaking, *tau* is to *samech/sin/shin* as *tet* is to *tzadi* and as *dalet* is to *zayin*. This relationship is manifest in the rules for conjugating roots that begin with *samech/sin/shin*, *zayin*, and *tzadi* in the hithpael form. Roots that do not begin with *zayin*, *tzadi*, *shin*, *sin*, and *samech* receive a prefix made of *hei* and *tau*, (e.g. *תְּפַלֵּל* hithpalleil, to pray) but because a *nah*, weak *tau* before any of those dental letters would be tricky to pronounce, words that begin with *samech/sin/shin* have the normally prefix-*tau* inserted after the *samech/sin/shin*. *תִּשְׁבַּח* yishtabbah, *תִּסְדָּר* yistaddeir, and *תִּסְרָרُי* yistareir sound better than *תְּשַׁבַּח* yithshabbah, *תְּסַדָּר* yithsaddeir, and *תְּסָרְרִי* yithsareir. When *zayin* starts the root, aside from putting the *zayin* before the prefix, it also sounds sort of weird to say *תְּמַלֵּם* yiztammein, because the *zayin* is voiced and the *tau* is not, so the *tau* becomes a *dalet*, טִּמְרֵד, *yizdammein*. 
This type of phenomenon explains why the suffix for plurals in English, S, is sometimes pronounced like a Z instead of an S. When the English word in question ends in an unvoiced consonant, the S retains its identity as unvoiced, like in “coats”, “oaths”, or “pops”, whereas when the word ends in a voiced consonant or vowel, the S is pronounced like its voiced counterpart, the Z, like in “zones”, “roads”, and “shoes.”

The tzadi is not pronounced quite like a samech, and because the tongue is more towards the inner part of the mouth when tzadi is said, it is easier to follow it with a tet instead of a tau, hence words like יִצְטַדָּק yistaddaq and נִצְטַמֵּק nistammeiq.

It is understandable why a native English speaker would be uncomfortable with the correct pronunciations of the weak gimmel and ayin, het, tet, tzadi, and quf, being that their sounds are completely foreign, but the proper sounds of waw and the weak tau and dalet are quite common in English, are quite easy to say, and should be readily adopted.
Chapter 7

An Explanation of the Hebrew Vowel System

There are three types of vowels: short vowels, long vowels, and types of *shwa*, also known as types of *hataf*. The short vowels are the basic pure vowels, the long vowels are the short vowels combined with slight semi vowels, and the *hatafs* are variations of *shwa na*, that are extra-short versions of some of the short vowels. Further, there are sounds which would be considered vowels in other languages, but in Hebrew are merely normal vowels in a syllable closed by a semi vowel, or what we call diphthongs. A long vowel may or may not be written with the pronounced semi vowel, what we call *k'thiw malei* or *k'thiw haseir*. Absence of the written additional placeholder *alef*, *hei*, *yud*, or *waw* does not change the pronunciation of the vowel. However, short vowels may not be written *malei*, except with certain instances in the Bible where tradition from the prophets indicates that short vowels be written *malei*. These are usually noted in the masoretic texts. Unpointed writings and Modern Hebrew often spell short vowels *malei*. For example, an extra *yud* usually appears in תְּפִלָּה, prayer, תְּפִלָּה, to illustrate the presence of a-not-so-obvious *hiriq*, but this practice is not necessarily proper.

The basic chart illustrating the vowels found in most Ashkenazi *tiqqunim* looks something like this:

אא or אא
וא
וא
וא
וא
וא
וא

The most common source for this is the *Tiqqun Mishor*, and the earliest source for this that I could find was in the *Diqduq Eliyahu*, Mossad Harav Kook edition.

The short vowels: *segol* נ (the short E sound in “bet” and “jet” and Hebrew words like “כֶּסֶף kešef”), the *hiriq qatan* נ (the short “I” sound in words like “in” and “spin” and Hebrew words like
מַיִם MA-yim and לִפְנֵי lif-NEI), the qubbus א (the short “oo” sound in “good” and “wood” and Hebrew words like כַּלֶם kellam and קדַשְׁה k’dushah), qamas qatan א (the “uh” sound in words like “gut” and “gun” and Hebrew words like קדושה k’dosho and טוכנית tochnith) and the patah א, the simplest vowel (as in רמב"ם Rambam and כנעני K’na’an “pot” and “lot”). Qubbus, hiriq qatan, and qamas qatan generally occur only in closed, unaccented syllables. Any closed, unaccented syllable has to have a short vowel. It turns out, though, that the segol and patah may be in both open and accented syllables, and are often upgraded to long vowels. According to some opinions, a qamas qatan occurs in an open prefix syllable appended to a word that begins with a guttural letter vowelized with a hataf qamas, e.g., the bet in בָּאוֹנִיּוֹת bo’onioth (Deuteronomy 28:68) has a qamas qatan in the first syllable, and it is open.

Patah is a form of onomatopoeia; it’s the “say ah” sound. The qamas qatan is made by closing the mouth further, the segol is made by closing the mouth even more, and so on for the qubbus and hiriq qatan. Each one is made by constricting the mouth even more than the previous vowel.

Mouth nearly closed א ——— א ——— א ——— א ——— Mouth wide open

How should a Sephardi differentiate between qamas gadol and patah? The answer lies in how long one pronounces the vowel. Take, for example, the word דָּם dam, blood, spelled with a qamas, and the construct form thereof, דַּם, vowelized with a patah. The original word can be thought of as having an alef between the dalet and mem, as though part of the pronunciation requires an intended pause between the vowel and the mem, whereas in the construct form, דֵּם, the mem comes right after the vowel, which is not extended.

The same holds true for making a distinction between the long hiriq in the word מִין min, species or kind, spelled with a yud, and the short hiriq in the word מִן min, from, spelled without a yud. (מ min is never an accented syllable. It is always connected to the next word and, hence, has a short vowel.) In the first case, the vowel is elongated and held out; in the second it is said quickly and shortened. So too, one should differentiate between the segol in closed syllables and the tzeirei in closed syllables by extending the sound, but one should not add a yud sound to the tzeirei.

A practical application: the Hebrew word אֲדוֹנַי adonay, my masters, should have its patah pronounced quickly in order to distinguish it from the L-rd’s name, אֲטוֹנָי, which has a qamas, and which is said with some length and separated from the closing yud, as though an alef were there: אֲדוֹנָאְי.
However, the respective names of the *qamas* and *patah* are descriptive. *Patah*, from the Hebrew word open, means one should open his mouth, as we say in English, “say ah!” The *qamas*, from the word to clench, means one should close his organs of speech some what, yet this explanation that one should hold out the *qamas* sound longer than the *patah*, makes the *qamas* more open, so to speak, than the *patah*, and *patah* more clenched than the *qamas*! This has led many Sephardi scholars, including R’ Ovadiah Yosef, to concede that the *qamas* should really be pronounced similarly to the way Ashkenazim or Yemenites do.

An argument along similar lines also is used as a proof to the Ashkenazi position that the *qamas* is qualitatively different from the *patah*, as opposed to quantitatively different, goes as follows: we know that in scripture, there are often times when a *patah* vowelizes a word’s accented syllable, like in יַנָּן, K’naan, and that such a *patah* is marked with a cantorial symbol that has a few notes, e.g., a *t’vir*, and when one reads that word, he ends up holding the *patah* for quite some time, and there are others cases where a syllable is unaccented and vowelized with a *qamas*, like the word יָבַש, w’ya-TZA, wherein the (first) *qamas* does not receive any musical notes. According to the Sephardi position, the *patah* we just described has in essence been converted into a *qamas*, and the *qamas* we just described has been converted into a *patah*. According to the Ashkenazi position, this is a non-issue, because the distinction between *qamas* and *patah* is not how long each is said; rather, they have distinctive sounds.

The same can be said concerning the *segol* and *tzeirei*. The Sephardi position maintains that the distinction is merely one of duration, the *tzeirei* being a longer form of *segol*, but we have many cases where words vowelized with *segol* on the accented syllable with a multi-note trop, like וְיָצָא *yeitzei* (Numbers 33:54), where the cantillation indicates that both syllables are said quickly, indicating that the *segol* in the former case should become *tzeirei* and the *tzeirei* in the latter case should become *segol*. Of course, no such changes are made, because as the Ashkenazi position maintains, the difference between the two vowels is not one of length. Rather, it is one of distinct quality, the *tzeirei* being a *segol* with the addition of a weak *yud* sound at the end.

This brings us to our main elaboration of the Ashkenazi version of the Hebrew vowel system: The long vowels are formed by adding the natural semi-vowel to the short vowel: the *segol* (אֶ) and אִ (אִ) are joined with a *yud* at the end to form the *tzeirei* אֵי (אֵי) and אִי (אִי). These vowels are naturally related to the palate, hence the additional of the palatal-letter *yud*. It's simple math: “EH” + “Y” equals *ei* as in “neighbor” and “way” or בְּנֵי or תֵצֵא כִּי theitzei. “I” as in “bin” + “Y” equals “ee” as in “tree” or “me” or כִּי or תֻּתִּים *tuttim*. This is a basic reality that is well known to speech and linguistic experts.
One will note that although tzeirei and hiriq are spelled in the full (malei) form with a yud, the hiriq occurs with the yud the majority of the time, and the majority of the time tzeirei is written deficiently. The reason lies in the fact that the vowelization symbol for the hiriq qatan is identical to that of the hiriq gadol and that the differentiation between the two vowels lies in decoding the context, whereas the symbol for the tzeirei is inherently distinguishable from that of the short counterpart vowel, segol. Often, the yud is the best clue as to if the hiriq is gadol or qatan, so the yud is the preferred indication of the hiriq more often than it is used to indicate a tzeirei. As we mentioned earlier, the hiriq qatan and segol may not be written malei, whereas the hiriq gadol and tzeirei may or may not be written malei, but either way the pronunciation is unaffected.

The qubbus אֻ and qammas qatan are joined with a waw sound to produce the shuruq ו and holam, respectively: “oo” as in “good” plus a “W” sound at the end results in the “oo” sound as in “food.” “Uh” as in “gut” and “tochnit” + “W” at the end yields “O” as “go,” “slow,” and עולם olam and תורה Torah. This is obvious. And that is another reason why I would advocate pronouncing the waw like a W: only then does it make sense to spell shuruq and holam with waw! If there were no relationship between those vowels and the W sound, then why not indicate holam with any other letter, like a gimmel for instance?

The patah, when combined with an alef at the end, i.e., a glottal stop that slowly closes the sound which the Vilna Gaon describes it as a patah followed through with a qammas qattan, yields the qammas gadol, which is as we said earlier, is equivalent to the “a” in “father”. Try it. Even the Sephardim agree with this part of the theory.

A shwa nah is unpronounced. Any letter that merely ends a syllable but does not end the word receives a shwa nah. Technically speaking, even letters that do end words could be vowelized with a shwa nah, but by convention they do not, except for the chaf sofit.

A shwa na’ is not supposed to be pronounced like the I in “spin”, i.e like a hiriq qatan. Further, it cannot be pronounced properly if accented. When accented, it becomes some sort of short vowel, with the exact type depending on the context. Remember: it’s like “the” in “the store” or “to” in “I want to talk to him” where the unaccented “to” is definitely not pronounced like “two” or “too” when “want” receives the accent.

What happens when we combine waw and yud with vowels other than their natural partners? The results sound like vowels, but grammatically speaking are treated like any other syllable ending in any other consonant:
• **Patah** plus a *waw* yields something similar, but not identical, to the “ow” sound in “cow” and “ounce.” Hence the Hebrew word for command, צו, commonly pronounced “tzav,” sounds like “sow.”

• **Qamas gadol** plus a *waw* yields the “aw” sound as in “law” and “talk.” Hence, בניה, his children, commonly pronounced “banaw,” is really “banaw.”

• **Hiriq**, **segol**, and **tzeirei** followed by *waw* have no English equivalents, but do exist in central European languages. Just pronounce the vowel and then a W. אביו, his father: *a-VIW*. The ninth month: קיסלו kisleiw.

• **Patah** with a *yud* makes the “ay” sound that we are all familiar with in Hebrew and as in English words like “guy.”

• **Qammas gadol** plus a *yud* sound yields the long I sound in English, as in “pie” and “high.”

• **Qammas qatan** plus a *yud* yields what Ashkenazi Americans commonly pronounce as the **qammas gadol** plus a *yud* and what contemporary yeshiva students pronounce as a holam: “uh” + “y” or “uhy,” as in the common pronunciation of the Hebrew word for a gentile, גוי, “guhy.” The L-rd’s name should not be pronounced as though it has a *patah* - that would be a different Hebrew word altogether, nor as though it has a *qammas qatan*. It should be pronounced “a-do-NIE” and not “a-do-NUHY.”

• **Holam** plus *yud* makes the “oy” sound as in “boy” or “toy,” and the properly pronounced Hebrew word for gentile, “goy.”

• **Shuruq** and **qubus** plus *yud* make sounds that do not really exist in English. There are some words that end with *shuruq-yud*, like וידוי widduy, confession, and גילוי gilluy, revelation, which are often pronounced as though there were an *alef* with a *hiriq* after the *shuruq*; wid-DU-ee and gil-LU-ee.

As we mentioned, this is the reason why holam and shuruq that end words have the capacity to knock the *dagesh* out of the ensuing beged-kefet letter (e.g. אַוֶה, לו, וָלָו) but words like בָּנָיו banaw and כִּסְלֵו kisleiw and גּוֹי goy do not. Similarly, words that end in *hiriq* and *tzeirei* have the power to weaken subsequent letters (e.g. שְפָתָי s’fathay, my lips, and גוי goy) do not. This explains why R’ Shaki was slightly mistaken a few chapters ago when he stated that the Ashkenazi pronunciation of holam is incorrect. His premise was that if *yud* or *waw* are
pronounced at the ends of words, they do not have the capacity to knock out the following d’gheishim, but the truth is that naturally pronounced yuds or waws will still knock out d’gheishim. Behold: a word like יֹוי hoy does not have the capacity to knock out a dagesh, but בּנֵי b’nei does. His explanation says that in b’nei the yud is unpronounced, and therefore, it is the open and pure vowel that has the power to remove a subsequent dagesh. However, I would say that even though b’nei’s yud is pronounced, it still can have the same power.

How come?

My answer is as follows: In words like hoy, where the long vowel is closed by another semi vowel, we basically have two straight nah consonants, making a completely closed syllable. All would agree that in such a case the subsequent dagesh is not removed. However, the nature of the addition of glottal stops to patah, yud to segol and hiriq, and waw to qamas and qubbus, i.e. the formation of the long Ashkenazi vowels, is fundamentally different from the additions of those semivowels to any other vowels, like yud to qamas, patah, holam and qubbus/shuruq, and waw to patah, qamas, segol, tzeirei, and hiriq. In the former cases, the position of the speaker’s mouth does not have to change for the speaker to enunciate the semivowel, whereas in the latter cases, the speaker has to make a conscious decision to change the position of his tongue or palate after pronouncing the opening vowel. Try it. Although, for example, both ṭן ei and ṭן ay have yud like sounds at the end, when one says ei, his mouth is already in the initial position to say the yud. The same is true for “ee.” However, when one says ay, he first says “ah” and then has to shift to the yud sound, and the yud is noticeably stronger than it was in the former case. Phonemes like “oy” and “uhl” are similarly unnatural. I would say the same thing for the natural “W” at the ends of “O” and “oo” as opposed to the unnatural W’s after “ow” and “aw.”

Finally, I feel the best refutation of the Sephardi position, and simultaneously, the best proof to the Ashkenazic position, is the Sephardic treatment of patah g’nuva at the ends of words. Recall that Sephardi practice is for the speaker to follow through with the semi-vowel (yud or waw) formed from saying the main vowel, and give it its own new vowel- a patah- which then closes with the ayin or het at the end of the word. If the Sephardim are not finishing their long vowels with semi vowels, what relevance is there in extending them into the next syllable? In actuality, every Sephardi pronounces a W sound after shuruq and a Y sound after hiriq, and I am merely advocating that the holam also be followed with a W just like the shuruq, and that the tzeirei be followed with a Y just like the hiriq. After all, both tzeirei and hiriq are spelled with yud, and both holam and shuruq are spelled with waw! Further, even if one were to still maintain that holam not be pronounced with a W and tzeirei not be pronounced with a Y, why then does Hebrew disallow the writing of waw naha after holam and yud naha after tzeirei in order to create these compound sounds? Sephardim agree that patah followed by a yud with a shwa, ṭן, is pronounced “ay”, so even if they insist on pronouncing this ṭן like “ch” and not “ei”, then at least they should concede that ṭן, specifically written written with a shwa under the yud and in the
middle of a word or at its end be pronounced “ei”! But no such examples exist, just like one can not find a single example of a holam syllable closed with a consonantal waw.

Rather, it is clear that because we never have a yud shwa’it after tzeirei, nor waw shwa’it after holam, we realize that the yud and waw are automatic and natural components of those vowels, and writing them in with shva would be superfluous.
Chapter 8

The Theory of *Shwa Na’*

The symbol *shwa*, what looks like a colon beneath a letter, ‘:’, can signify one of two things.

1. That the letter closes the syllable of the letter preceding it. The *pei* in *lifnei* לִפְנֵי has a *shwa*. It closes the syllable started by the *lamed*, *lif* לִל. The *shin* in *ashpa* אַשְפָּה has a *shwa*. It closes the syllable started by the *alef*, *ash* אָשָׁ.

2. A *shwa na’* said as a quick addition to the next syllable. *sh'MA b'NEI*. Shwa is never on the accented syllable, and should not be pronounced like a *hiriq qatan*. Sometimes at the end of a sentence, the letter with the *shwa* turns into the accented one, so the *shwa* turns into a full vowel. *Yo-m'RU* becomes *yo- MEI-ru* and *w'yi-r'U* becomes *w'y'i-RA-u*.

There’s a mnemonic device popularly used to remember the five cases of *shwa na’: “Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet hei”, which are the first five letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

**Alef**

*Alef*, as the first letter of the alphabet, hints to the rule that a *shwa* under the *first* letter of any word is *na*. This is obvious, because the lack of a previous letters leaves no syllable for the *shwa’s* letter to close.

According to Ashkenazi tradition, the addition of *shwa* prefixes to words already beginning with a letter with a *shwa*, like *kaf*, כ symbolizing “like”, and *bet* ב, symbolizing “in,” forms one new syllable vowelized with a small *hiriq*. The next additional prefix gets a *shwa*, but the first prefix remains joined to the first letter of the actual word. If a third prefix is added, it forms a closed syllable with the second prefix letter. Further, any *beged kefat* letters that lost their *d’geishim* in the process never regain them. As an illustration, take *k’tib*, a word borrowed from Aramaic meaning “written.” Its *tau* is weak and its *kaf* is strong and vowelized with a *shwa*. Add a *dalet* with a *shwa* as a prefix, ד, meaning “it is” or “of”, and the *kaf* becomes weak as it now closes a new syllable brought in by the *dalet*: *dikh-THIV*. Technically speaking, the *tau* no longer has to be weak because it is no longer preceded by an open syllable or *shwa na’,* but because it was already demoted, it stays that way. Now add a new prefix, another *kaf* with a *shwa*, כ, meaning “as”, and we get *k’dikh-THIV*, and the *dalet* is now weak and stays as part of the beginning of its own syllable. Adding another *shwa* prefix, ג, meaning “and”, we see it forms a single syllable with the *kaf*, which itself becomes weak: *k’dikh-THIV*. We see that this word commonly
encountered in the Talmud is not to be pronounced וְכְדְכְתִיב or some other way. Rather, it is only to be read as וּכְדִכְתִיב. Now, adding a waw with a shwa to a word that already begins with a shwa turns the waw into a shuruq. (The exception is when the word starts with a yud and the waw just gets a hiriq like any other letter, e.g., והיוּדָה wihuda, “and Judah”) This shuruq is pronounced like a qubbus, a short vowel, and the shwa is nah, forming one syllable. Pronounce it like the “oo” in “good.” Examples: וֹ qum and וּתְהִילָה uth-hil-LA.

A divergent tradition diverges from these rules in that the first letters retain their shwa na status, and the new prefixes are vowelized with full vowels, i.e. hiriq gadol and qubbus, making the previous two examples u-sh’MO and u-th’hil-LA, respectively. Minhag Lubavitch follows this tradition in this respect. Us: וּבְיוֹם uv-yom. Them: u-v’yom.

Bet

Bet, as the letter used in Hebrew to represent the number two, signifies the rule that when two consecutive letters in a word are both vowelized with shwa, the second has a shwa na. This rule is the one most often followed, because in most cases it seems obvious to the reader that the first shwa closes the previous syllable and the second shwa starts the next syllable. Examples שִׁבְתְָּ shiv-t’CHA and גָּרְנְָ gor-n’CHA.

Gimmel

Gimmel stands for t’nuah G’dola, a long vowel. L’shon HaQodesh abhors consecutive consonantal sounds, especially in unaccented syllables. However, L’shon HaQodesh still tolerates consecutive consonants at the end of accented syllables. At first glance, a word like א-ו-ר-ר-ו-ים seems to fit nicely when read as two syllables: om and RIM. However, when we break down the first syllable into its phonetic components, we see that the first syllable, the unaccented one, has a long vowel, a holam, which is pronounced as though ending in a weak waw (w) sound. If the syllable is then lengthened by the addition of the mem at the close, it would turn out that the first syllable ends with two straight consonantal sounds. That is why the correct pronunciation entails three syllables: O-m’-RIM. The long vowel in the last syllable is permitted to be closed because its syllable is accented. As a general rule: long vowels can not be in closed, unaccented syllables. If it is a long vowel and unaccented, the next shwa is na. This rule fits nicely with the way we explained the nature of the vowels, but I have no explanation for why this is so according to the tradition that says the great vowels do not sound any differently from the small vowels.

There is a problem. We have a pair of words here, וֹ קָדְש qodsho, his holy, and וּעָמְר a-m’ru, “they said.” The first letter of each is vowelized with a gammas, the second letter of each is vowelized shwa, and both are accented on the last syllable. The diqduq people tell me that qodsho
has a qammas qatan followed by a shwa nah, and a-m’ru has a qammas gadol followed by a shwa na. How did they know that? Maybe it is the reverse, or perhaps the words are meant to be pronounced similarly!?

There are two answers: contextually, one word is a noun, קדוש qodsho meaning his קדש qodsh, and the other is a verb, based on the participle אומר o-MEIR, he says or he is saying. Nouns that start with a holam get demoted to qammas qatan or other short vowels in conjugations, whereas verbs that start with holam maintain their long vowel properties. This is alluded to in the spelling of many related noun/verb pairs. For example, אוכל O-khel (food) is usually written hasîr, deficiently, (although I have written it here wrongly in order to illustrate the presence of the vowel) because in conjugations the holam is demoted, like in אוכל OKH-lo, his food, whereas the verb/participle אוכל O-KHEIL, one who eats, is typically written malei because the holam stays in subsequent conjugations. Secondly, in the Bible, the tradition indicates that for words like אומר a-m’RU, there is a cantillation mark indicating the primary accent, the last syllable, and an additional mark, usually a metheg (ֽ) or a munah (ᵏ), indicating that the first syllable has a secondary accent, whereas in words like qodsho, there is only one cantillation mark, and it marks the accented syllable.

**Dalet**

*Dalet* stands for Dageish hazaq. When a letter in the middle of a Hebrew word is vowelized with a both a shwa and a dagesh, the shwa is na. This rule is similar to the second rule. We know that a dagesh in a letter following a vowel means that the letter with the dagesh is doubled. In these cases, the first part of the doubled letter closes the previous syllable. Hence, the second part of the doubled letter starts a new syllable. Because it is vowelized with a shwa, the new syllable starts with a shwa. Take עמך ‘am-m’cha, your people, as an example. Without a dagesh it is עמך ‘am-cha; now it is ‘am-m’kha. One should also take care not to pronounce this word as ‘a-m’kha.

**Hei**

*Hei* stands for two of the same letter actually written consecutively in one word, regardless of whether they differ in vowel or strength (e.g. two straight taw’s, even though one is strong and the other weak, or two lamed’s, even though one is ordinary and the other with a dagesh). In such cases, if the first letter is vowelized with a shwa, the shwa is na. Take the word הלל ha-l’LU, give praise. It could be pronounced הלל hal-lu, but that could have been achieved by writing hal-lu ashei-lamed-waw with a dagesh in the lamed: הלל! Similarly, there is shin-bet-tau, שבת, pronounced shab-BATH, the sabbath. Some might suggest writing it shin-bet-bet-tau, ששבת, but no can do. That would result in ש’VATH, which has too many syllables.
Chapter 9

Impossible Sounds

When our people were faced with foreign words that began with two consecutive consonants, they transliterated them by separating the consonants into two syllables by the addition of a phantom vowel. Stadium and Spain, which both begin with compound consonants, became אִצְטַדְיוֹן is-tadh-YON (Bava Kamma 4:4) and אַסִפַּמְיָא as-pam-YA (Bava Bathra 3:2), respectively. This also explains why a tzadi should not be pronounced like “ts,” as that would be combining the tau and samech into one consonant. Further, one would note that no Hebrew word has the common English “CH” sound, as in “chance” and “choke”. Such sounds exist in Yiddish, but interestingly enough, words like “cholent” are spelled with a tau or tet and then a shin, because technically speaking the “CH” is the combination of the tau and shin into one consonant, and hence disallowed in true Hebrew. (The common Israeli tendency to pronounce יסף t’sha, the construct form of the number יסף teisha’, nine, as “cha” or “tsha” is incorrect.)

Another sound that is disallowed by Hebrew is the common English J, as in “job”, or the soft G as in “George” sound, which exists in other languages, such as Arabic and Amharic, which are related to Hebrew. The J sound is the voiced counterpart to the unvoiced “CH” sound, which we know is a combination of the tau and shin. Thus, the J sound should be composed of the voiced counterparts of the tau and shin. As we saw, the voiced counterpart of tau is dalet. The voiced counterpart of shin would be… not any known Hebrew letter, but would be the sound of the G in words such as “mirage” and “garage” and the J in “dijon”, commonly represented in Eastern European languages as “ZH.” Yiddish realized this problem, and to cope with words requiring the “J” sound, would write dalet-zayin-shin, presumably the zayin acting merely to lend its voice, literally, to the shin. It turns out that with the J sound being impossible in true Hebrew, it is not surprising that Rabbi Shaki advised earlier that gimmel, in any instance, not be pronounced like its Arabic cousin, the gimm ( ג) . Although in Modern Hebrew the gimmel is used often to represent the J sound, this has no indigenous source, and as such is marked with an apostrophe.
Rabbi Shaki continues:

When people started using modern Hebrew in schools and synagogues for ritual purposes, there were some objectors, and many responsa from the rabbis were publicized in order to address the issue of changing one’s traditional pronunciation used in prayer, Torah reading, and other holy matters: did it involve violating the talmudic injunction of “do not forsake the instruction of you mother”? Practically speaking, is there anything wrong with changing the way I have been speaking Hebrew until now?

Here are some answers.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, former Chief Rabbi of Israel
(From the monthly “Qol Torah”, Issue 1-2, Tishrei-Marheshwan, 5693)

… and from all that we have written, it is clear that there is no room to permit changing from one dialect to another… and especially one who changes from the Yemenite dialect, which according to the Yemenites is considered to be the most exact of the dialects from the earlier generations, it is definitely prohibited to do so… and even though here in the Land of Israel preference is given to the Sephardi dialect, this is only because it has a certain grace and beauty [and not necessarily because it is the more authentic]. The main advantage of one dialect over another is its precise distinctions between the consonants and vowels, and in this the Sephardi dialect cannot compare to the Ashkenazi dialect, [which has more distinctions,] and how much more so with regards to the Yemenite
dialect, which is the best dialect of all, which makes a distinction between every single consonant and vowel. Heaven forbid that one familiar with it should abandon it and replace it with some other, less-exact dialect when dealing with holy matters. Further, this issue is no worse than other issues regarding halachik rulings, where the general rule, “do not forsake the instruction of your mother,” applies to all communities in issues of issur w’heter and marital issues, whether resulting in leniency or stringency. Heaven forbid that we should cause breaches in this area, for guarding what we have received from our ancestors is a fulfillment of our holy Torah and the verse “ask thy father” (Deuteronomy 32:7)...therefore, I am writing this to strengthen the hands of those who perform the commandments to exert themselves with all sorts of encouragements and the words of sages, which are heeded in pleasantness, to not change their received dialects in any circumstance, and especially the holy congregation of our brothers, the Yemenites, as for them, switching dialects is the most severe, as we have written… it would be terrible for those messengers of holiness to switch from a superior, accepted dialect to another one. We can learn anything regarding this matter from those who have already done so against the will of the sages.”

Rabbi Benzion Hai Uziel:

“Even though the general Sephardi dialect, more or less, has been accepted as the language of choice for speech, Torah reading, recital of the sh’ma, and prayer, … we may not just choose which style appears nice or has the best ring to it… rather, we must find a solution to this quandary from halachik sources.”

After this introduction, he brought up R’ Kook’s opinion, and analyzed it, and brought various rebuttals. R’ Uzziel concluded that changing one’s dialect for use with Torah reading and other rituals does not involve “forsaking the the instruction of your mother,” especially regarding the modern Hebrew/Sephardi dialect that the new generation speaks, because that is the dialect that they were taught in school, and most of them are entirely unfamiliar with the Hebrew that their ancestors spoke!

To date, four generations of Israeli children, whether Sephardi, Ashkenazi, or whatever, have been brought up using the modern dialect. And yes, experience shows that many Israelis of Ashkenazi descent are shocked by Americans who pronounce the tau like a samech.
He concluded that “at the moment, we cannot reach a definitive decision regarding choosing one dialect over another, nor can we conclude that one who reads with a dialect other than the one he received from his ancestors and teachers has not discharged his obligations (when he reads the sh’ma or the Torah) or violated the dictum of ‘do not forsake’… this discussion does not absolve us from having to debate the laws of this matter to its fullest extent, and to establish, in a convocation of sages and those who are well-versed in these issues, all the proper dicta of the language when read, that it should be set aside specifically for use in all synagogues and study halls”, i.e. scholars of the language should unite to decide on a proper Hebrew for unanimous usage for all Jews.

Rabbi Y’hiya Yishay Halewi, Chief Rabbi of the Yemenite Jewish community, was asked if Reuven, a Yemenite Jew who immigrated to Israel could drop his pure dialect for an inferior one. After he illustrated examples of mistakes inherent in other dialects, he wrote that “do not try to answer from the verse ‘his banner of love flies over me’ (Midrash Rabbah on Song of Songs), that the word וֹדִגְל diglo, his flag, can be read וֹלִילַגְל liluglo, his gibberish, teaching that G-d loves all forms of Hebrew pronunciation, because that verse is specifically referring to a child or ignoramus who does not know any better and is beyond correcting. What can those who never learned the pure dialect do? Rather, now it is proper to educate their children with the pure dialect, as Israel used it in the land of the patriarchs prior to its exile among the nations, according to all the rules of grammar and diqduq… for the sages of Israel who were m’diqd’qim b’sifreihem, exacting with their writings, did not toil for naught… and it is one of the praises of Israel that they did not change their language over the centuries. Know that those who stammer, those who can not enunciate the letters properly, are not, G-d forbid, rebellious or treacherous, because it was Israel’s long exile that caused the pronunciation of the letters to become confused and lost… it is a great surprise that Reuven would desert his golden tongue and bend the upright words of the sages and the Torah reading.”

He concluded that “from all that is said in the works of the decisors, O”BM, it seems forbidden for Reuven to read the Torah, say blessings, or pray, even privately, in the language of the stutterers, and certainly he may not lead the services on behalf of a congregation that uses the pure dialect (if he is going to use inferior forms of speech), because he will not
Rabbi Ovadiah Hadaya was asked by Rabbi Shabbethai Buhbut of Beirut to explain his view on the previously cited responsum of R’ Kook, wherein R’ Kook explained that even though the Yemenite dialect is superior to all the others, he still established that the members of the various communities should stick to the dialects of their own ancestors. The question was: “I continue to be amazed that he agrees that the Yemenite dialect is the best only to the extent that it is forbidden for Yemenite Jews to diverge from it…” However, “if an Ashkenazi wants to switch to Yemenite speech it is forbidden. If we have really reached the point where we can assess the superiority of dialects, why has he blocked off the path to improving our language?”

R’ Hadaya answered: “there is no such trace of the prohibition (“do not forsake…””) to change one’s dialect for the better. On the contrary! He is fulfilling a commandment, and there is a requirement to do so, especially for those who pronounce alef like ayin and het like hei because those types of mistakes lead to blasphemy…notwithstanding that all of the dialects have mistakes here and there, it would still definitely be good if all the communities could unite in one language, after careful investigation into which tongue and language (i.e. dialect) is the most pure and straightforward, or to isolate the individual attributes of the best dialect from all the current dialects and to bring them into a new dialect by which’s light will go all the dispersed of Israel. It is obvious that doing this does not involve changing one’s custom, [which is generally forbidden,] nor does this involve disparaging the previous generations, because they did not practice this way because they wanted to. They did so because they could not help being born and raised in foreign lands, and even there they tried to preserve their spiritual language… for if these earlier generations had been aware of this pure dialect, they would have certainly changed their speech for the better.” (From responsa Yaskil Avdi, Volume II, Chapter 13, page 6.)

Rabbi Yehiel Ya’aqov Weinberg, O”BM, (Sridei Eish, Orah Hayim, Volume II, Chapter 5) was consulted on this matter, and allowed a bar mitzvah boy who was taught the Sephardi (modern) dialect to read the Torah on behalf of an Ashkenazi congregation because “the opinion of the experts, that the Sephardi pronunciation is superior in many ways to the Ashkenazi, has
been accepted by society, and it is well known that the Ashkenazi dialect is lacking many phonemes and letters. For example, the weak tau is pronounced like the samech, the het like the chaf, and the ayin like the alef… and Rabbi Henkin of New York has already pointed out that the letters that are mispronounced in traditional Ashkenazi usage should be pronounced the Sephardi way.” (See “Eiduth L’Yisrael” which was published by the Agudas Harabbanim of America.) Therefore “concerning the Sephardi pronunciation: we should not say that to us, it is considered mistaken, and it is obvious that even an Ashkenazi fulfills his requirements with this dialect… and we should not worry that allowing someone to use the Sephardic dialect in an Ashkenazi synagogue will distract the congregation, because we are all used to hearing it.”

We are going to add the opinion of Rabbi Ya’aqov Emden (the Ya’vetz), the most outspoken of all Ashkenazi decisors due to his scalding attacks, written in his introduction to his siddur, on the way his congregation pronounced Hebrew, to the previous four responsa that we listed, being that they all share a similar view concerning the correctness of improving one’s pronunciation, even at the expense of changing from that which his ancestors did. Rabbi Emden bemoaned “our shame” and “our regular transgression” and the inability to pronounce a weak tau properly. “I recognize that I cannot adorn myself with all these (proper pronunciations) because of my many sins. It is because of my cruel practice of mispronouncing the weak tau that I can not correct my speech as needed, aside from the fact that most Jews nowadays also are not knowledgeable in this.” You see from this that had the Ya’vetz a chance to encounter the Jews of Iraq or Yemen and hear from them how to pronounce a weak tau, he would have definitely adopted it, and he would not have seen an issue of “do not forsake” by discarding the mistaken pronunciation he inherited from his fathers, just like R’ Hadaya wrote, “for if these earlier generations had been aware of this pure dialect, they would have certainly changed their speech for the better.”

We will also include here the opinion of the Ben Ish Hai in his work Raw Poalim, Volume II, Question 25: “Here in Baghdad, we pronounce the weak bet (V) like the strong bet (B)… there should also be a distinction between the shwa, the segol, and the tzeirei… however, because of our many sins, this matter had been upset in earlier generations… and here in our city, they have no idea of this at all, and they do not know how to distinguish between… and patah and qamas. Even the cantors when they read the Torah (don’t distinguish between the various symbols). May the
blessed L-rd, in his mercy, grant us… that we may return the crown to its original place.”

We should also include mention of the personal practice of Rabbi Nathan Adler of Frankfurt, O”BM, who discarded his Ashkenazi dialect, the one of his ancestors, and prayed using the Sephardi dialect, after he had learned of it from a Sephardi rabbi over the course of three years.

Further, Rabbi Ovadiah Yoseif (Yabbia Omer, Volume VI, 11:5) ruled that changing one’s dialect did not involve “do not forsake,” especially when the change is an improvement.

I would like to add my own speculation that had Rabbi Adler heard the Yemenite dialect, he would, without a doubt, had preferred it over both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi dialects, and he would have exerted himself to learn it and further improve his personal pronunciation.

We reach four conclusions from all of the above:

1. According to all of the respondents that we cited, except for R’ Kook, changing the community dialect to a more exact one does not involve “do not forsake.” Further, making said changes might be a the fulfillment of a commandment, or even an obligation.

2. The Sephardi dialect is not all-encompassing, and even though it is considered more precise than the Ashkenazi dialect, it is not free of mistakes. So, “we can not just decide on our own what sounds nice or has a nice ring to it”.

3. Modern Hebrew, which is really not the Sephardi way of pronouncing Hebrew, is actually a composite dialect full of confused pronunciations.

4. In our times, the Yemenite dialect is the most exact, “and therefore, G-d forbid that one who has been accustomed to it should abandon it and exchange it for another of lesser precision when involving holy matters.”

Further, this dialect should be become the heritage of the entire nation, at least with regards to holy matters.

For Americans, it is worthwhile to review the opinion of Rabbi Moses Feinstein, O”BM, the foremost American decisor of the past generation. In Iggeroth Moshe, Orah Hayim Volume III, Chapter 5, he writes “concerning the matter of Ashkenazim and Sephardim changing their traditional pronunciations of Hebrew: it is definitely not allowed for us to change from the way
our ancestors read Hebrew for millennia...the authentic L’shon HaQodesh that our ancestors spoke would be the best choice for prayer... however, we do not know [emphasis added] which pronunciation is the true one, and therefore, we may not diverge from what our ancestors held to be the true L’shon HaQodesh... it is forbidden for us to change to “havarah sephardit” (lit., the Sephardic dialect, what R’ Feinstein called Modern Hebrew), and consequently we must teach the students in our countries to read Hebrew with the Ashkenazi pronunciation.”

There are a few difficulties with R’ Feinstein’s answer.

1. As pointed out concerning R’ Kook’s opinion, perhaps the previous generations pronounced Hebrew because of happenstance, and had they the ability or awareness, they would have changed their pronunciation for the better. Does R’ Moshe hold of the distinction between minhag, practice, due to habituation (e.g., pronouncing tau like an S because that’s what we do) versus specifically intended practices (e.g., we pronounce tau like S explicitly in order that it not sound like TH or T)?

2. It is well known that most L’shon HaQodesh words are to be accented on the last syllable. Many Ashkenazim are taught to read Hebrew by accenting which ever syllable feels comfortable, often based on what would feel comfortable had the words been part of the vernacular English. Would R’ Moshe hold that we must continue to pronounce words like שַׁבָּת and מְנוֹרָה as SHA-bes and me-NOR-rah because that is how we were taught? The same question could be applied to all the usual mistakes that we adapt early on in our schooling. I and everyone else with whom I attended elementary school were never taught a thing about, for example, shwa na and shwa nah, even though they are an integral part of the Hebrew language and one of the hallmark features of the classically-Ashkenazi version of the Hebrew pronunciation system. Does R’ Moshe’s response indicate that shwa na is unnecessary, or even forbidden to the current generation?

It is interesting to note that Yiddish does not have a long O sound, as in “go” and “snow.” R’ Moshe, whenever faced with the task of transliterating foreign words, used alef, which, in the Yiddish system, symbolizes the qamas, the “uh” or “aw” as in “saw” sound, similar to the Yemenite qamas. I asked his son, Rabbi David Feinstein, who serves in his father’s position, about this practice. Did R’ Moshe spell words like “Boro Park” and “Ohio” with alef, אָהַייָא and בָּארָא פַּארְק respectively, because the use of a waw as a holam, ו, would result in place names like “Boroy Park” and “Oyhioy” according to R’ Moshe’s pronunciation?

R’ David answered that the question assumes too much. His father pronounced the holam like an “ei”, as in “neighbor” or “way,” a practice that persisted in Lithuania and White Russia, with few surviving speakers. R’ David himself vacillates between pronouncing holam as “O” and “uhy” and doesn’t really ever say “ei.”
However, for many of us, R’ Moshe’s opinion carries the most weight. When R’ Moshe wrote “we do not know”, he meant that sincerely. If only we could find those who do know. This was echoed by the words of the Noda Bihudah when asked a question regarding the pronunciation of Hashem’s name. The Noda Bihudah responded “go ask a grammarian” (Responsa Noda Bihudah, Orah Hayim, 1:2). Concerning the last question, it seems that the proper way for an an Ashkenazi to speak Hebrew is not limited to the few principles he is taught in first grade, nor to what he picks up here and there in the beith midrash, what basically amounts to English, Yeshivish, and Yiddish. And, Praise G-d, we now have in our hands the compiled wisdom of many grammarians, and it is within our ability to pronounce Hebrew the way our ancestors did.

If an Ashkenazi does further investigation and research into the matter, he will discover the proper Ashkenazi pronunciations, and realize that they are not the stereotypical pronunciations. It is to this that R’ Moshe may have been referring. That is, even though we should not adopt Modern Hebrew, it does not mean that the Hebrew taught in every first grade class by Ashkenazi teachers is THE traditional Ashkenazic Hebrew. We need not modernize or update our version of L’shon HaQodesh. Rather, we have to stick to it. We have to know it. I would also like to offer that Rav Moshe was addressing a mostly homogeneous Ashkenazi American community of the mid-20th century, whereas the arguments put forth in this book are speaking to the modern reality of a heterogenous, post-exilic, reconstituted Jewish community in the Land of Israel, where in adherence to such divisive and differentiating practices can only serve to prevent Jews from viewing each others as complete equals. Would R’ Moshe’s ruling apply 200 years into the future, when two gentlemen, born and raised in Jerusalem after their families have been there for centuries, are told that they are obligated by halacha to pray differently because one’s grandfather was exiled in Lithuania four centuries prior while the other’s was simultaneously detained in Morocco? Or would it not make more sense to invoke the fact that even more centuries prior, their ancestors had been Eretz Yisrael, pronouncing L’shon HaQodesh a third way? Would it not make more sense for them and every other Jew to instead try their best to determine how the people of Israel spoke the holy tongue before they had been sent into exile? Indeed, many great scholars have advanced this position, and it is likely that in his humility, R’ Moshe would concede that for the reality addressed herein, a different ruling is necessary, and he was merely ruling for those who put forth the question at that time.

If someone wanted to be the best Ashkenazi m’daqdeiq that he could be without exchanging his father’s traditions for those of others, he should pronounce Hebrew according to the best Ashkenazi traditions, which include all of the Vilna Gaon’s vowels, and many of the consonants we would consider unusual: ג weak gimmel, ת weak dalet, ו waw as a W, נ het, ד tet, י ayin, צ tzadi, ק quf, and ﬀ weak tau. Although the proper sound of the weak gimmel can be derived from the rules of beged kefet, there is no positive Ashkenazi tradition about how to pronounce it. However, there are many Ashkenazi m’daqd’qim who kept the weak dalet and tau, and we can say that they are part of our tradition, although not used by the masses. The weak tau has an advantage over the weak dalet, because it was represented as TH in any good transliteration before the advent of
contemporary Orthodox publishers. The \textit{waw} has a similar basis in tradition. Ashkenazim who pronounce \textit{shuruq} like “oo” or, to a lesser extent, \textit{holam} like “O” or “ou” as in “ouch” are using the \textit{waw} as a W, and when we had to anglicize our European names like Dershowitz and Veinberg, we turned them in to Dershowitz and Weinberg. If there was no connection between the \textit{waw} and the W sound, then why did they do that? The answer is that it is obvious that Eastern European languages turn W's into V's, and our Jewish version of W, \textit{waw}, is no exception.

We have no positive tradition for pronouncing \textit{tet} distinctly form a strong \textit{tau}. The same is true for pronouncing the \textit{quf} differently from the \textit{kaf} and the \textit{tzadi} as its own unique sound. There were always some Ashkenazim who retained the \textit{het}, and again transliterations attest to this, in that they used to use H instead of CH or some alternative.

It is worthwhile to also note the opinion of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, as quoted by Joseph Faith: “The Sifri and the Talmud in Sanhedrin (17a) establish that one should elect \textit{dayyanim} to the Sanhedrin who are fluent in seventy languages. The Netziv explains that mastery of numerous 'languages' grants a \textit{dayyan} exposure to various cultures and forms of wisdom. The \textit{dayyan} described by the Netziv is a person who is open, well educated, and possesses broad horizons. This stands in complete contrast to a \textit{dayyan} who encloses himself in the 'four cubits' of halacha, to the extent that he is not even fluent in Hebrew, and when he reaches a comment of Rashi that deals with grammatical issues, he is accustomed to skip it, and I need not say more. Did this \textit{dayyan} never learn or hear about the resolute comments of the Gra in the 'Sifra Ditzniuta' on the great importance of delving into linguistics and in praise of the study of grammar?”

R’ Shaki quoted Mr. A. Malkiel who wrote about how Ashkenazi practice was to accent the wrong syllables, and how Ashkenazi and Hasidic tunes composed for the liturgy could only be sung according to mis-accenting most or all of the words. As an example, he cited the last verse and chorus of the poem \textit{L’cha Dodi} by R’ Shlomo Alqabes, wherein each word is meant to be accented on the last syllable, yet every Ashkenazi tune used in synagogues he attended in Israel accented the wrong syllables. If these men were to hear someone speak these words without the tune in the way they were accented, they would laugh.
I use the following dialect of my own design when ever I serve as the cantor or Torah reader in an Ashkenazi congregation. It has been received very well because of its mix of traditional Ashkenazi pronunciations and Yemenite improvements.

The consonants: all pronounced according to the Yemenite tradition, including the waw, tet, and quf and the weak forms of gimel, dalet, and tau.

The strong kaf and gimel and the quf: The strong kaf is pronounced like the Ashkenazim do (The standard K sound). The quf is pronounced according to the southern Yemenite tradition, the sound that only occurs in English words like “queen” and “quiet”). The strong gimel is pronounced the way the Ashkenazim and the southern Yemenites pronounce it (G as in “go” and “good”). I do it this way even though I am used to pronouncing it according to the Central- and Northern-Yemenite dialects.

The tzadi is pronounced the way the Ashkenazim do it (TS as in “pots”).

However, I do not believe the tzadi should be pronounced this way. Rather, it should be pronounced the way the Syrians pronounce it, as its own consonant.

The Vowels

Entirely according to the Yemenite system, including the holam. The holam is not pronounced like a Lithuanian or a Southern-Yemenite holam – anything that would sound like a tzeirei or having a yud-like sound at the end. Further, the segol is pronounced the way Ashkenazim and Israelis pronounce it (“Eh” as is “bet” and “get”), and not identically to the patah.

Of course, I again disagree, and encourage readers to pronounce the vowels according to the Vilna Gaon’s system, which is superior to the Yemenite system. Further, the system R’ Shaki uses does not distinguish between segol and tzeirei.
The shwa na is pronounced the Sephardi way, and enunciated quickly before the next syllable.

Cantillation marks: I use the traditional Ashkenazi melodies, except for the t’lisha q’tana, and darga, which are supposed to be connective to the following words. The traditional melodies are not connective enough for these marks, [i.e., each is too much of a cadence,] so I use the Yemenite melodies for them, as they do a better job at showing the connection between the words.

I also try not to linger on t’vir, because it is a disjunctive that is supposed to be less of a stop than the tifha that follows, yet the traditional melody seems to make it a greater stop.

My brother David always liked to point out that when an Englishman and an American speak to each other, each notes that the other has an accent. Indeed, there seem to be dozens of possible English accents. Could there be an unbiased dialect of English that has no accent?

Possibly. When certain New Yorkers meet individuals with accents, they have the ability to mimic those people, but not vice versa. It must be that everyone else has the accents! It seems to be true. This puts the New-Yorker English speaker at an advantage because it is easier for him to pronounce every part of true Hebrew, especially the vowels, exactly the way they should be.
In tractate B’rachot (15b), Rava gives a list of word-pairs that appear in the sh’ma that one should avoid slurring together, like where the first word ends and the second word begins with the same letter, e.g., a mem. Most of the examples are understandable, but how can any one slur together בְּשָדְָעֵשֶׂב? One ends with a vet, the other begins with a bet! The Tifereth Yisrael also pointed out the example of הָקָנָה פְּתִיל hakanaf p’thil as being illogical. Rav Ovadia Yosef answered that in any event, the letters pei and fei and bet and vet are similar to each other, and we are afraid that one may come to swallow the ends of the former words. This is also the basic theory of the m’daqd’qim. I have seen answers by great scholars that explain this and other points according to local and temporal dialects. For example, that where Rava lived, the vet was pronounced identically to the bet, or vice versa, but that just brings up more questions. In other dialects, like in the far east, לְבַבְכֶם al l’vavchem is a more glaring problem, because the Chinese hear a very clear difference between the strong L at the beginning of a sentence and the weak L at the end of sentence! They do not consider the two to be the same letter! Rather, all of Rava’s examples can be explained with the basic answer that the strong form of a letter and the weak form are basically the same letter. When one says the two words together, they have merged to form the equivalent of עֵשֶבְּשָדְָעֵשֶב, eisevb’sa-d’kha, which is a non-sensical word. My disputants wanted to point out that according to the vowel system I espouse, the phrase בְנֵי יִשְרָאֵל b’nei yisrael, can easily be merged into one word because b’nei is pronounced with a closing yud sound, whereas according to their system, b’nei ends in no such sound and is therefore not problematic.

My response is that, first of all, Rava’s list is merely examples, and not exhaustive, and secondly, indeed, b’nei yisrael ends up sounding like בְּנֵי יִשְרָאֵל, but is not an issue anyways, because the word b’nei is the construct form of בָּנִים banim, and meant to be joined to the following word, with the intended result sounding practically like a new compound word. Eisev b’sa-d’kha, or any of Rava’s other examples, however, are not meant to be compound words.

Some wanted to bring up the issue of the words אֲזַהְוִו otho-uzcharem in the sh’ma, because the first word ends with a waw and last word begins with the same letter, but it seems to be a non-issue for a number of reasons: 1. The words are separated by the cantillation marks, in this case the equivalent of a comma. 2. Even though אֲזַהְוִו ends in waw, Sephardim and many Ashkenazim do not pronounce the waw at all. 3. Even according to those who do pronounce some sort of waw, who are correct, the next word is read as though beginning with an alef, like any other waw that was supposed to voweledized with a shava and ended up prefixing another word already starting with a shava!
Credits

I would like to thank my esteemed Rebbe, Rabbi Abba Bronspigel, Rosh HaYeshiva of Beis Midrash L’Talmud in Kew Gardens Hills, New York, for his warm blessings and encouragements. It should be noted that R’ Bronspigel told me that there is nothing wrong with learning more about Hebrew and adjusting pronunciation accordingly. “Adderabba,” he said, “it’s a mitzva! We need people who study these things, just like all the other neglected areas of Torah study.”

As it is beyond the scope of any mortal composition to adequately express the appreciation due G-d and one’s parents, a sincere and heartfelt “thank you” will have to suffice.

I would also like to thank Rabbi Jonathan Cohen of the RIETS Kollel Elyon for obtaining a copy of his grandfather’s book, Heichal ‘Avodath Hashem, for me, and for being a good bar plughta.

My good friend, Rabbi Avi Block of Rehovot, helped me brainstorm these ideas for years before they were put to writing, and is also to be credited for inserting and vowelizing the Hebrew text.

My dear wife, Bat-Chen, contributed countless hours of her patience, guidance, and technical skills to see that this work would be complete. She be blessed for all her efforts.