

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Masei

A Matter of Emphasis

Concept: How Stressing a Different Syllable can Affect the Meaning of a Word

וְנָסַב לְכֶם הַגְּבוּל מִנֶּגֶב לְמַעַלְהָ עֵקֶר בָּיִם וְעָבַר צִנָּה

The border shall go around south of Maaleh Akrabim and shall pass toward Tzin¹

INTRODUCTION: IT HAPPENED IN JERUSALEM...

Our Discussion this week begins with an incident that occurred in the house of R' Velvel Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav. In his later years when he was too frail to go to shul, a minyan would convene in his house in Yerushalayim. On one occasion, it was Shabbos morning of Parshas Masei and the Rav was listening to the Torah reading from his room. At a certain point, the baal koreh got a message from the Rav that he needed to repeat a certain verse. Not sure which verse he had read incorrectly, the baal koreh went to the Rav's room to clarify.

The Rav responded: In the section dealing with the borders of Eretz Yisrael, the verse says that the border shall pass toward Tzin. The word in the verse which denotes "toward Tzin" is "צִנָּה" and, accordingly, should be pronounced TZI-nah, with the emphasis on the earlier syllable. You, however, put the emphasis on the final syllable, reading tzi-NAH. Normally, such a shift in emphasis doesn't affect the meaning of the word, but in the case it does, since the word tzi-NAH in Hebrew means a shield, as in the verse in Tehillim 'צִנָּה וְסִחְרָה אֲמַתּוֹ – His truth is shield and armor.'² Since the shift changed the meaning of the word, you need to repeat the verse correctly."

This incident illustrates the importance of laying emphasis on the correct syllable in the word, for it can sometimes turn it into a completely different word, even though all the vowels remain the same. Indeed, one of the primary functions of *taamei hamikra*, the cantillation notes accompanying the words, is to indicate which syllable should be emphasized by being placed above or below that syllable. In general, the final syllable of the word is emphasized (known as *mi'Ira*), but there are numerous reasons which will dictate that the stress is on the earlier syllable, known as (*mil'el*). In these cases it will move back to the penultimate syllable.³

1 Bamidbar 34:4.

2 91:4.

3 For a comprehensive presentation of the rules that determine whether a word is *mi'Ira* or *mil'el*, see Pathways

IN RASHI'S COMMENTARY

This basic idea is mentioned a number of times by Rashi in his commentary. A classic is the pronunciation of the word “באה”, where the syllable emphasized will denote whether the word is in the past or the present tense. For example, in Parshas Vayetzei, when Yaakov is talking with the shepherds, they tell him that Lavan’s daughter Rachel “is coming with the sheep”. The verse reads “וְהָיָה רִחֵל בָּתוּרָה עִם־הַצֹּאֵן”.⁴ The taam on the word “בָּאָה” is under the letter aleph, so that it should be read “ba-AH”. In contrast, three verses later,⁵ it says, “וְרִחֵל בָּאָה”, with the taam on the letter beis, which is read BA-ah and denotes the past tense, indicating that Rachel had arrived.⁶

Elsewhere, Rashi notes how the location of the taam in the word shows, not just what tense the word is in, but what the word itself means. In Parshas Vayishlach, concerning Shimon and Levi’s actions in Shechem, the verse states “שָׁבוּ וְיָבִיאוּ”.⁷ The Hebrew word “שָׁבוּ” can either denote returning⁸ or capturing,⁹ depending on which syllable is emphasized. In this case, the *taam* under the letter *beis* indicates that the word is sha-VU, “they captured”. If it were to be read as SHA-vu, it would mean “they returned”, which would change the meaning of the word.¹⁰

IN OUR DAILY EXPERIENCE: READING THE SHEMA

The area in our daily experience where this matter would be of greatest significance is in the reading of the Shema, which is a Torah mitzvah. The Shema itself begins with the basic mitzvah of loving Hashem: “וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ”.¹¹ The correct way to pronounce the word “וְאַהַבְתָּ” is with the emphasis on the final syllable – “ve-a-hav-TA”, which means, “You shall love,” in the future.¹² Were the emphasis to be on the earlier syllable – “ve-a-HAV-ta”, it would mean “you loved” in the past¹³ and would thus not denote a mitzvah, but a historical fact.

This is of particular relevance for Ashkenazim who tend to emphasize the earlier syllable on most Hebrew words when they speak. Although according to R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach,¹⁴ we would not say that a person who pronounces it “ve-a-HAV-ta” did not fulfill his obligation, nonetheless, it is certainly worthy of our attention as we endeavor to perform the mitzvah of reading the Shema in the optimum fashion.

of the Prophets by Rav Yisroel Reisman *shlit"a*, pp. 326-335.

4 Bereishis 29:6.

5 Ibid. verse 9.

6 Rashi to verse 6, s.v. ba'ah. See similarly Rashi to Bereishis 15:17 s.v. ba'ah, and ibid. 46:26 s.v. kol. See also in this regard Rashbam to Bereishis 30:1.

7 Bereishis 34:29.

8 As in “*lashuv* – to return”.

9 As in “*lishbos* – to capture”

10 Regarding this particular word, it is interesting to refer to Melachim I 8:48, where the word “שָׁבוּ” appears twice in the same verse, with each time reflecting a different meaning of the word, indicated by the location of the *taam*.

11 Devarim 6:5.

12 When the emphasis is on the final syllable, it indicates that the word “וְאַהַבְתָּ” has been changed from the past to the future tense via the letter *vav* acting as *vav hahipuch* (*vav* conversive). Indeed, when the *vav* assumes this reversing function it does not denote “and”, so that the correct translation of the word “ve-a-hav-TA” is simply, “you shall love”.

13 In this case, the *vav* would not serve to reverse the word to the future tense and hence it would remain in the past tense, with the *vav* simply acting as *vav ha'chibur* (*vav* conjunctive) denoting “and”.

14 Quoted in Halichos Shlomo chap. 12 note 34. Cf. Responsa Teshuvos ve'Hanhagos (R' Moshe Shternbuch *shlit"a*) vol. 1 sec. 58.

IN THE PRAYERS: THE MEANING OF THE WORD “BINAH”

Moving into the world of prayer, a most interesting example of this idea is mentioned in the name of R' Chaim of Volozhin.¹⁵ He first states generally that a person should be particular regarding emphasizing the correct syllable if to not do so would change the meaning of the word. As an example, he mentions the word “*binah*” – understanding, which we ask for in the fourth blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei. How should the word be pronounced?

Here, too, the meaning of the word will depend on the syllable that is emphasized. The Hebrew word for the concept called “understanding” is “bi-NAH”. By contrast, if the first syllable is stressed – “BI-nah” – then it denotes a call to someone to understand something, as we say in the selichos, “בינה הגיגנו (BI-nah ha-gi-GEI-nu) – discern our thoughts”.¹⁶

IN LECHA DODI: “OH-RI” OR “OH-RI”?

A final example for our consideration is from Friday night, in the song *Lecha Dodi*, where we address the city of Yerushalayim and say:

הַתְּעוֹרְרִי הַתְּעוֹרְרִי כִּי בָּא אֹרֶךְ קוֹמֵי אֹרֵי

Awaken, awaken, for your light has come, rise up and shine.

The phrase “קומי אורי” is based on the verse Yeshayahu,¹⁷ with the word “אורי” being an exhortation that Yerushalayim should shine and give forth light. As such, it should be pronounced “OH-ri,” stressing the first syllable, with the *yud* at the end denoting Yerushalayim being addressed in the feminine form. If the second syllable were to be stressed, saying “oh-RI”, the meaning would shift to “my light,” which is obviously not what the word here means. Of course, in this context, one cannot not talk about whether one “fulfills his obligation” in the song of *lecha dodi*. Additionally, on a practical level, it is probably fair to say that question of which syllable in this word is emphasized will be determined by which tune the chazzan chooses to sing *lecha dodi*, thereby leaving nature subject to art.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is certainly worthwhile to be aware of what the words mean, as well as how that meaning emerges from the way they are said.

Needless to say, the goal of this discussion is not to provide a detailed list of all the instances where this idea occurs. Rather, it is to present some classic examples that highlight the idea itself, as well as leading toward appreciation of one of the primary roles of the *taamei hamikra*.

May we merit soon in our times to see Yerushalayim rise and shine forth light to the entire world!

חֹזֶק חֹזֶק וְנִתְחַזֵּק

15 Quoted in *Keser Rosh*, sec. 40.

16 Based on Tehillim 5:2.

17 60:1.

18 See, regarding this phenomenon, Responsa *Noda b'Yehuda, Mahadura Kama, Orach Chaim* sec. 2.