

## On the proper pronunciation of Hebrew

Every language has its own mixture of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features that, taken together, constitute its unique character and identity. For the most part, these features are of interest only to a small minority of professionals and geeks; the better part of mankind remains obliviously content, interested only in how to practically manipulate the language so as to generate and absorb meaning. This is as true of Hebrew as it is of any other language.

There is, however, one feature of Hebrew that protrudes so obnoxiously that it cannot escape the attention of the most minimally thoughtful person, whether he be a native speaker or a foreign student. On the one hand, Hebrew has one of the most phonetically regular alphabets of any language, a fact that is particularly remarkable since this alphabet has remained unchanged for at least 2,100 years. There are scarcely any Hebrew words that cannot be deciphered with complete accuracy, providing, of course, that the *nikud* is added. On the other hand, this phonetically regular alphabet has an abundance of completely redundant letters whose sole purpose seems to be to confuse people trying to spell.

So far, we have said nothing remotely controversial. Everyone, from the native speaker to the *ulpan* student, religious and secular, will freely comment on this odd feature of Hebrew and its ability to generate all sorts of amusement and confusion. However, this friendly atmosphere is instantly shattered the second anyone suggests a blindingly obvious thesis, namely that *this feature of Hebrew is not a feature at all, but a mistake. Each letter in Hebrew exists for a reason, to indicate a unique sound. If two letters make the same sound, then you are pronouncing at least one of them wrong.*

Voicing this idea has an almost magical ability to make anyone present regurgitate garbled renditions of *cliches* drawn from linguistics and postmodern liberalism. You will be told that languages naturally evolve, that there is no such thing as authentic Hebrew, that we can't really know what is correct, and that no version of a language can be judged as preferable to any other. You will hear this not only from liberals, for whom, at least, one can say that such arguments are a natural fit, but from religious and nationalist Jews who suddenly become fonts of relativism when forced to confront the possibility that a *v* is not a different way of drawing a *n*. The purpose of this essay is, first, to demonstrate that all these arguments are either false or irrelevant and, second, to defend the rather banal thesis that we should, to the best of our abilities, attempt to pronounce Hebrew correctly.

Before beginning, however, it is necessary to review what we mean by pronouncing Hebrew letters correctly. This is not the place to review the myriad different proofs for the authentic pronunciation of each letter. I will simply repeat what all those who have studied the subject seriously have concluded, noting in the footnotes where there is some reasonable grounds for debate:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A general point that is important to remember is that while every Hebrew letter is supposed to indicate *at least* one unique sound, it is not necessarily the case that it is supposed to indicate *only* one sound. It may be the case that some Hebrew letters can be pronounced in two different ways, just like *th* in English. This appears to have been the case, particularly, at an early stage of Hebrew's evolution. The picture then becomes more complicated because, at different stages, the proportion of, say, *ayins* that were pronounced in a particular way changed. For these reasons, full recovery of an authentic Hebrew pronunciation may be a not only impossible, but incoherent, goal. None of that, however, serves as an

- In modern Hebrew, ך and ם without a *dagesh* are both pronounced as a voiceless uvular fricative, like *j* in Spanish. However, ך should be pronounced as a voiceless pharyngeal fricative, like the Arabic letter ح.<sup>2</sup>
- In modern Hebrew, ן and ך without a *dagesh* are both pronounced like the English letter *v*. However, ן should be pronounced like the English letter *w*.<sup>3</sup>
- In modern Hebrew, ק and כ with a *dagesh* are both pronounced like the English letter *k*. However, ק should be pronounced as voiceless uvular stop, like the Arabic letter ق.
- In modern Hebrew, ך and ן are both pronounced as a silent letter, but ך should be a glottal stop while ן should be pronounced as a voiced pharyngeal fricative like the Arabic letter ع.<sup>4</sup>
- In modern Hebrew, ט and ת are pronounced like the English letter *t*, but ט should be pharyngealized like the Arabic letter ط.

This is bad enough, but we still haven't exhausted the topic. Every speaker and student of Hebrew knows that ב, כ, and פ change their sound depending on the presence or absence of a *dagesh*. This rule is known as בגיד כפ"ת (*begeid cefet*), an acronym of the six letters to which it applies. However, three of these letters don't exhibit this property in modern Hebrew! If they did they would be pronounced as follows:

- As in modern Hebrew, ת with a *dagesh* makes the same sound as *t* in English, but without a *dagesh* it makes the sound *th* as in *thing*.
- As in modern Hebrew, ד with a *dagesh* makes the same sound as *d* in English, but without a *dagesh* it makes the sound *th* as in *then*.
- As in modern Hebrew, ג with a *dagesh* makes the same sound as *g* in English, but without a *dagesh* it makes the sound *g* as in *thing* or like the Arabic letter غ.

We could go further and mention that most scholars agree that ן should be pronounced as an alveolar trill rather than a voiced uvular fricative as it is today and that ך should be pharyngealized. However, it is enough for our purpose to observe that of the 28 distinct sounds that used to be present in Hebrew, 8 (that is 29%) have been lost entirely. Not only is this *not* a typical phenomenon in the history of language, it is, in fact, completely unique.

Let us take English, for example. It is true that certain words have silent letters, such as the *b* in *climb* or the *k* in *knock*. In almost all cases, this is a result of Anglo Saxon words undergoing transformation under the influence of French while retaining their original spelling. However, there are precisely *zero*

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argument for having completely redundant letters when we can revive at least one of the correct pronunciations of a different letter.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that ך also includes the voiceless velar fricative, found in *loch ness monster* as pronounced by speakers of Scots English.

<sup>3</sup> The history of ן is actually quite complicated and while its earliest pronunciation is certainly *w*, it may have gone through periods where it was pronounced as *v*, including some of the periods in which classic Hebrew texts were produced. During these periods, and probably anyway, ך must have been pronounced not as *v* of English, but like that of Spanish.

<sup>4</sup> The pronunciation of the ן may actually be stronger than this, either a voiced epiglottal or a pharyngealized glottal stop. It seems likely that ן actually covers a range of pronunciations. This is why ע"י was transliterated into other languages as *Eli*, but ת"ע was transliterated as *Gaza*.

examples of one letter being lost and assimilating into another.<sup>5</sup> It is true that in other languages we can find cases where over the course of hundreds of years the pronunciation of one or two consonants has changed, *but never so that it becomes the same as another already existing consonant*. This is simply not part of the normal change that occurs in a language.

The only place where we find any such thing are in creoles, where, in those derived from English, the two sounds of *th* typically assimilate into *d* and *t* respectively. It is important to understand *why* this happens, namely because groups of people who took up English were unable to pronounce some of the phonemes that they did not have in their African or American languages. One who tries to justify the omission of eight consonants in modern Hebrew is effectively arguing that it is a sort of creole spoken by outsiders to the origins of the language. How one can believe that and remain a Zionist is not clear to me. However, even by this standard, modern Hebrew fails because the *scale* of phonemic deformation is far beyond that found in even the most wacky and way out creoles anywhere on Earth.

In fact, we know very well how Hebrew came to lose nearly a third of its phonemes and it was nothing like the 'natural' processes glibly referred to by defenders of the status quo. After the destruction of Jewish civilization by the Romans in response to the Bar Kochba revolt, Hebrew ceased entirely to be a spoken language and became a language of prayer and study only.<sup>6</sup> The Jews who preserved this language in the synagogue and study hall were dispersed among different nations, whose languages differed in their phonology from Hebrew, often drastically so. Jews themselves either spoke the languages of their host countries, or formed their own new languages based upon them such as Ladino and Yiddish. After only a few generations, those who never heard the sound of a *ṛ* or a *ṣ* in ordinary speech lost the ability to pronounce them, choosing the closest sound they knew instead.

This deformation of Hebrew in exile was not equally distributed. Jews in Iraq and Yemen spoke versions of Arabic whose phonology is substantially similar to that of Hebrew and so preserved all but two or three consonants intact and entire. The Jews of Europe, however, were in a thoroughly alien linguistic environment and lost all the consonants which are distinctively semitic. Even here, the process was not uniform. The Jews of Spain, for example, lost the ability to pronounce *ṣ* since there is not a *sh* sound in Spanish, and then recovered it following the expulsion of 1492.

What concerns us, however, is the pronunciation of Hebrew that developed among the Jews of Eastern Europe. Before the Holocaust, *Ashkenazim* constituted the overwhelming majority of Jews around the world and, most crucially, they were the source of the Zionist movement and the pioneers of the revival of Hebrew. The Hebrew they started with was that which they had learned at the synagogue or *Cheder*, but they were well aware of its 'exilic' qualities, alien to the revived Jewish commonwealth

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<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps something of an overstatement, there are sounds that existed in some dialects of English, which have not been preserved in what became the dominant dialect. In such cases, dialectal words that entered the dominant dialect necessarily had certain sounds converted into their closest equivalents.

<sup>6</sup> This formula is trotted out frequently, but it is not always made entirely clear that this means not that Hebrew was actually spoken in study, but that Hebrew texts were studied and that learned texts were written in Hebrew. Even this description actually somewhat understates the 'deadness' of Hebrew. The text most frequently studied was the Babylonian Talmud, which is about 60% Aramaic. When writing, Jewish scholars of the early middle ages typically used Aramaic then Arabic, but in the later Middle Ages Hebrew became universal since, with the rise of European Jewry, Jews lacked any other common language. Even this, however, it should be said, was a heavily Aramaicised pidgin.

they wished to build. In order to rectify this, they consciously set out to correct their Hebrew pronunciation.

The problem was that the criteria they used to do this were confused where they were not simply wrong. In place of the positive goal of authentic pronunciation, they substituted, if not entirely consciously, a negative one of making their revived language sound as unlike Yiddish as possible. From the variety of pronunciations that existed among Middle Eastern Jews of the age, they selected changes that were easy for them to make, while also transforming the language in a way that made it sound new and modern. The Zionists succeeded in their goal of creating a gulf between their pronunciation and that of traditional Jews in Europe, if this actually improved the language, however, it was entirely by accident and, on occasion, it made things even worse.

The most obvious example of this is the letter ת. As we have already seen, in classical Hebrew this makes two sounds: a *t* when given a *dagesh* and an unvoiced *th* without. *Ashkenazi* Hebrew preserved this distinction, but transformed the *th*, absent in Eastern European languages, into a *s*. This is undoubtedly a terrible mistake, but it at least preserves the *begeḏ cefet* distinction. Instead of correcting this mistake and reverting to the *th* sound, which had been preserved by the Jews of Yemen, Persia and Iraq, the Zionists adopted the even more defective pronunciation of North African Jews who simply pronounce the ת as a *t* in all cases. They could have learned from these same Jews the correct pronunciation of ת or ט, but that was too much like hard work. In fact, and to our eternal shame, Jews who returned to Israel in the 1940s and 50s from the Islamic world had their superior pronunciation mocked out of existence by the Zionist society they joined.

As we said before, the closest analogy to the deformation of Hebrew that occurred during the years of exile is the creation of creoles when peoples of Africa and the Americas adopted European languages. The Zionist Hebrew spoken today is actually the result of a two-step creolisation. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, the result of *Ashkenazi* Jews doing a bad impression of *Sephardi* pronunciation. We can only compare it to what might happen if a Trinidadian decided to ape a Cockney accent under the impression he was imitating RP, and then made a complete mess of it. Again, though, even that is an understatement because the scope of the deformation in modern Hebrew exceeds that of any real-world creole. All in all, the formation of modern Hebrew phonology has the same relationship to organic linguistic development as a cancerous tumour does to healthy growth.

We have now dispensed with the lie that modern Hebrew phonology is a normal or natural development of the ancient language. What, though, do we say to the committed relativist who does not believe that the categories of right and wrong apply to language at all? Perhaps, even if we admit that the process by which modern Hebrew pronunciation came to be was abnormal, even sordid, we might still say that what came out the other end has as much right to respect as anything else. What harm does it really do?

As it happens, we can easily point to harmful consequences of losing nearly a third of the Hebrew alphabet. Modern Hebrew has hundreds of fake homonyms brought about by the conflation of what should be distinct letters and this makes the language pointlessly harder to learn and spell. It also impedes foreign language acquisition because Israelis have to learn 'new' sounds that they would know already if they spoke their language correctly. This is most obviously the case with Arabic, in which almost all Israeli Jews lack even the most basic proficiency, but by happenstance, is also a major

problem in learning English. Israelis struggle terribly with the two sounds of *th*, *w*, and the soft sound of *g*, impeding all aspects of English learning, for no good purpose whatsoever since all these sounds exist in Hebrew too. Given that phonemic awareness is generated in small children by their being exposed to different speech sounds, the truncated phonetic range of the Hebrew alphabet is equivalent to imposing a learning disability on Israeli children.<sup>7</sup>

If that seems too extreme, consider the inability of the vast majority of Israelis under the age of 40 to even *recognise*, let alone to pronounce, the sound *h*. Around the world, the letter ה is pronounced by Jews, correctly, as an *h* sound. So it was at the founding of the state of Israel and for many decades afterwards, and so it is still by much of the older generation. For that reason, I omitted it from the already long enough list of lost letters in Modern Hebrew above. In 2019, however, we stand near the end of a decades-long trend in which the *h* sound was first dropped, then forgotten entirely. Today, it is almost universally pronounced as a glottal stop, which is how, the attentive reader will remember, an א should be pronounced. This places Modern Hebrew in the truly absurd position of having three separate 'silent' letters and causes daily, maddening frustration for English teachers whose pupils cannot be induced by any combination of carrot and stick to tell the difference between *hat* and *at*.

The sorry story of the ה tells us something important. On one point, at least, the proponents of linguistic relativism are correct: languages really do change. But they do not all change in the same way. An already broken language has its own momentum, towards further decay and rot. We see this also, for example, in young Hebrew speakers' bizarre assimilation of the first and third person future (אני יתן) facilitated by the absence of any glottal quality in the א. At what point in this process of hacking off parts of the language is it fair to say that the House of Jacob has become a people of barbarous tongue? The very question of course, will excite the rage of linguistics experts, who tell us that creoles are no less sophisticated, complex, interesting and whatever else than the languages from which they sprung. Let us, for the sake of argument admit that this is so. Let us even leave aesthetics to one side. Can we at least agree that a creole of a language is not the same thing as the language itself?

And this brings us, finally, to the real nub of the issue. If all languages are equally good, they are not all equally *Hebrew*. The Israelite language was dormant and revived as an act of will. It did not have to be. For a start, no Jewish state in the Levant had to be established at all, but even if it had been, Yiddish, English, German or Arabic could, each with its own advantages, have been adopted as the language of the Zionist project. The decision to invest enormous effort and resources into Hebrew was made because it was felt that, without the Hebrew language, any revival of Hebrew nationhood was plastic and fake, perhaps not even a revival at all. What then do we say of a Hebrew that has been revived only as a severely mutilated golem? We do not need here to rehearse all the arguments for resurrecting Hebrew, we only need observe that to the extent that any of them are valid, they are an argument for

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<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia claims that Modern Hebrew 'has 25 to 27 consonants and 5 to 10 vowels, depending on the speaker and the analysis.' However, this is seriously misleading. It lists א, ב, and ה as separate sounds despite very few Israelis actually pronouncing them separately. It also includes the sounds *ch*, *j*, *z* and *w* which are used in foreign loan words. While it is true that the importation of these sounds is a saving grace of the language from the pedagogical perspective, this hardly counts as a plus mark for modern Hebrew. A vigorous language would have its own words for *penguin*, *chips*, *giraffe*, and *beige* rather than mangled versions of the English words. The fact that one gaping flaw in Modern Hebrew partly cancels out the negative consequences of another can hardly be said to vindicate the language.

*actually resurrecting Hebrew*, not a parody of it. Here, as anywhere else, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.