

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Lech Lecha

Concept: How Vowels Reveal the Character of a Word in Torah

Our Parsha relates how Sarah, after being childless for many years, suggests to Avraham that he take her maidservant, Hagar, as a wife, which he proceeds to do. The verse then states:

וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הָגָר וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד כִּי הָרְתָה וַתֵּקַל גְּבוּרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ:

He came unto Hagar and she conceived, she saw that she had conceived and her mistress (Sarah) became light in her eyes.

Background: Notes Which Give Us Pause

There is actually something very unusual about this verse, although admittedly, it is not something we would automatically notice. As we know, there are times when the *nikkud* (vowelization) of a word changes. This will happen when the word appears either

- At the end of a verse, or
- At the strongest pause within the verse.

This is known as the pausal form. Frequently in such case, a *patach* will change to a *kamatz*. A simple illustration of this idea can be seen in a verse at the beginning of our parsha,¹ which reads:

וַיֵּצְאוּ לָלֶכֶת אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרְצָה כְּנָעַן:

They set out to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan

¹ 13:5.

We note that the word כנען in the middle of the verse has a *patach* under the letter *nun*, while the same word at the end of the verse has a *kamatz*.

In light of the above, let us consider our verse. The strongest pause is the *etnachta* under the word וַיִּתְּחֵן, which is roughly equivalent to a semi-colon. In keeping with the idea of the pausal form, this word should have had a *kamatz* under the letter *heh*, but instead it remains with a *patach*. How can we explain this?

Before we allow ourselves to get too upset over this anomaly, we should note that the problem is actually compounded; for there is in fact a word in the verse whose *nikkud* changes. This is the word הִרְתֵּהּ, which has a *kamatz* under the *reish*, while it should really have a *shva*. The problem is that the note consisting of two dots on top of this word, known as a *zakef*, is roughly equivalent to a comma, and is weaker than an *etnachta*.

Thus, the full problem in our verse is one of *complete reversal*, whereby the stronger pause (*etnachta*) does not receive the pausal form, while the weaker pause (*zakef*) does!

Now we can be upset.

Having noted the grammatical upheaval within the verse, to where can we turn for insight into its meaning?

Rabbeinu Bachye's Principle: An Inner Look at the Vowels

I believe the answer to this question can be found in fascinating comment of Rabbeinu Bachye,² where he discusses the significance of the vowels in the Torah. The purpose of the vowels, says Rabbeinu Bachye, is not merely to instruct us how to pronounce the words; rather, *the vowels give us insight into the character of the words*. To this end, he quotes one of the early Kabbalistic works, the Sefer Habahir, which states that the relationship of the letters to the vowels is parallel to that of the relationship between the body and the soul.

Indeed, says Rabbeinu Bachye, this is the real reason behind the change of *nikkud* in the pausal form. As surely as a *kamatz* is more elevated than a *patach*, so too, it

² Commentary to Bereishis 18:3.

reflects elevated within the word. An “ordinary” *patach* word that appears at the end of a phrase or sentence brings with it a measure of completion to that idea, and hence attains greater significance. As such, it becomes “upgraded” from a *patach* to a *kamatz*!

Moreover, this concept can also explain situation where the opposite occurs and a *kamatz* changes to a *patach*. This happens when the word is “of” something or someone, known as the construct form. For example, the Hebrew word for “hand” is “יָד”, with a *kamatz*. However, if we wish to say e.g. “the hand of Moshe,” we will say “יָד מֹשֶׁה” with a *patach*. Why the change? Because in such a situation the word does not fully communicate its meaning; it relies on the word that follows. Since it has lost its independence, it becomes “downgraded” from a *kamatz* to a *patach*.

The Day the Rules of Grammar were Broken

Once we appreciate that the vowels reflect the character and quality of the word, which can help us *explain* the rules of grammar, we can now come to consider a case where this principle *overrides* the rules of grammar.

The beginning of Shmuel II recounts how David and his camp anxiously await news of Shaul Hamelech, who had gone to war against the Philistines but had not returned. They are approached by someone whom the verse refers to as a Ger Amaleki, who was with Shaul in the battle and who claimed that he killed him. This was not true, as Shaul had in fact taken his own life. However, the Ger Amaleki thought that by claiming to have killed Shaul he would curry favor with David, whom he presumed would rejoice over the death of his enemy. The Ger’s description of his act is presented in the verse with the words:³

וַאֲעַמַּד עָלָיו וְאַמְתַּתֵּהוּ

I stood over him and I killed him.

Without going into too much detail, there is a grammatical anomaly in these words: When the letter *vav* acts as the *vav hahipuch*⁴ and precedes the letter

³ Shmuel II, 1:10.

⁴ Known as the conversive, where the *vav* at the beginning of the word changes it from future to past tense (e.g. changing יִדְבַר – *he will speak*, to וִידְבַר – *he spoke*).

aleph, it always takes a *kamatz* (as indeed is the case with the word “וַיֵּעַמְד”). As such, the *vav* in the follow-up word “וַיֹּאמֶתְתֶהוּ” should likewise have been accompanied by a *kamatz*, yet it is written with a *patach*. Rabbeinu Bachye explains that the reason is because since this word expressed a lie – as that individual did not actually kill Shaul – it is inherently deficient; hence, it does not receive the elevated *kamatz* vowel; rather, *it is demoted on moral grounds to a patach!*

It is truly fascinating to see a situation where the inner meaning of the vowels “takes over” and asserts itself over the rules of grammar themselves.

Hagar’s Pregnancy: Objective and Perceived Reality

With all this in mind, let us return to Hagar’s pregnancy which, as the verse indicates, occurred very soon after marrying Avraham. This is in stark contrast to Sarah who had been married to him for many years and had not yet conceived. The Midrash⁵ has the following to say about this imbalanced situation:

Thorns and thistles are neither tended nor sown, they sprout up by themselves. When it comes to wheat, however, how much effort and investment is required until it grows!

The Midrash informs us that the speed with which Hagar conceived was actually a reflection of the lack of quality of her offspring. This is in contrast to Yitzchak, a product of the highest quality, the emergence of whom required much more time and investment. Now we can understand why the word “וּתְהָרָה” describing Hagar’s pregnancy, which in terms of the rules of grammar should have a *kamatz*, nevertheless has a *patach* instead. Since her speedy conception was entirely due to her offspring’s lack of quality, the word which describes it cannot have a *kamatz* – a vowel which represents significance and elevation! Once again, the rules of grammar are overridden, with the character assessment of Hagar’s progeny reflected by a “dis-honorary” *patach*, telling us all we need to know.

On the other hand, Hagar herself naturally does not interpret the situation in this way; for she sees her speedy conception as a sign of her worth, as is evidenced by the flippant and disrespectful way in which she proceeds to treat Sarah. This brings us to the second grammatical upheaval in the verse, for in describing *what*

⁵ Bereishis Rabbah sec. 45.

Hagar saw, the Torah presents it *in the way that she saw it*. Therefore, the word “הרתה” is written with a *kamatz*, denoting the elevated significance that she ascribed to these events.

And so, through an inner appreciation of the vowels, we come to see that our verse effectively presents Hagar’s situation on two diametrically opposed planes: one of the reality and the other of her distortion thereof, and all of this by moving the leg of a *kamatz* two centimeters to the left.