

Holy Punctuation

One-thousand page book delves into nuances, history of Torah trope

LARRY YUDELSON

Dr. Joshua Jacobson wrote the book on trope.

You know trope: The little squiggly curves and lines in the printed text of the Torah and haftarah that indicate the melody of its chant.

When you study to chant from the Torah for the first time, you can easily assume that the trope were added to make the bar and bat mitzvah more rite-of-passage worthy, the product of a committee that felt reading from a Hebrew text without vowels or punctuation wasn't hard enough.

In fact, says Dr. Jacobson, the trope are not arbitrary musical notation. They represent a multileveled system of punctuation, indicating connections and pauses between words that goes back more than a thousand years.

He spelled this out in detail in his book, "Chanting the Hebrew Bible,"

'The mellifluous cantillation of the Torah trope as we know it today is not simply musical, but among the earliest codified versions of grammar.'

published by the Jewish Publication Society in 2002.

At one thousand pages, just lifting it could be a rite of passage.

And it raises the question: How does one write a huge book on a handful of little symbols?

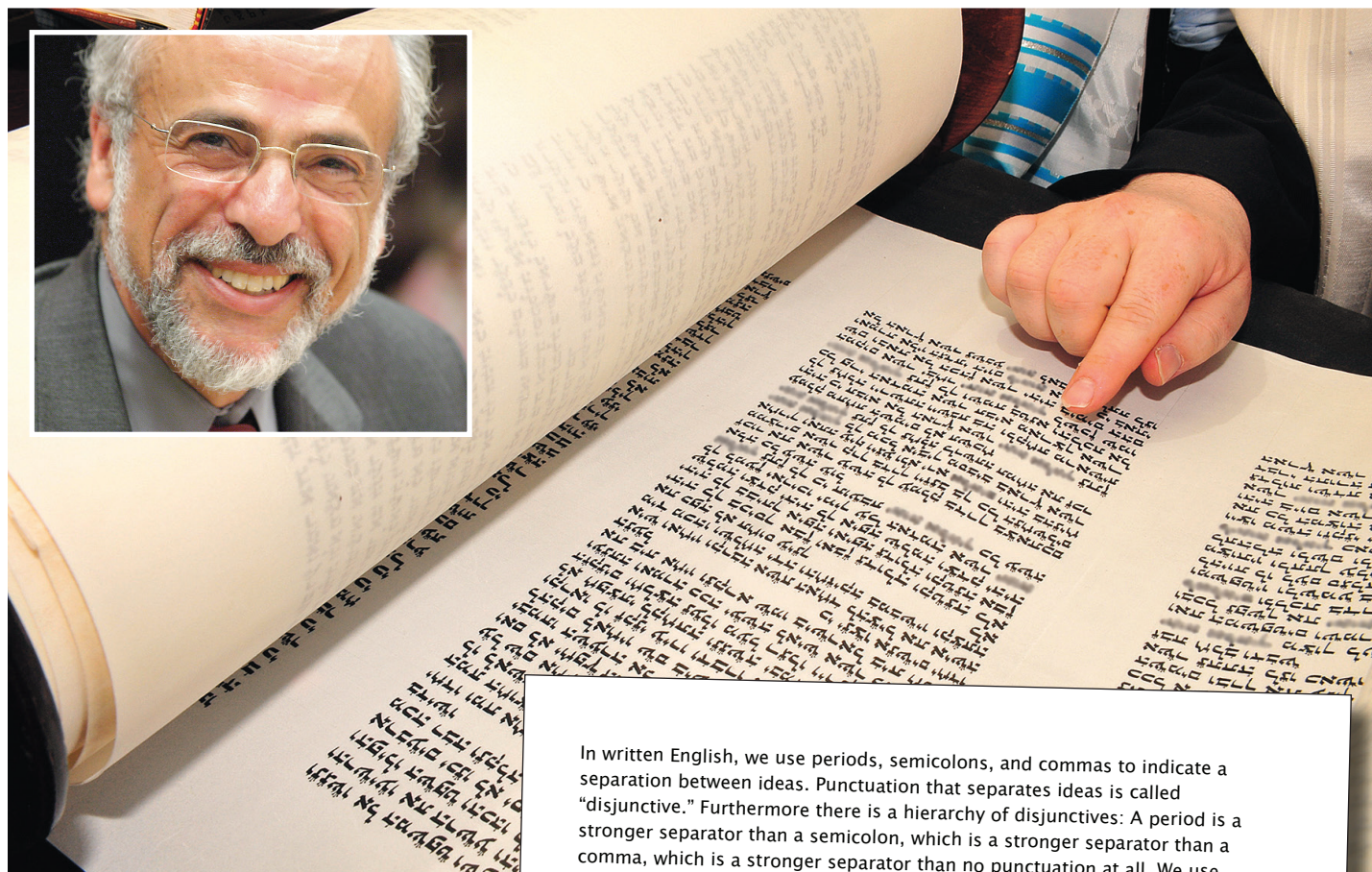
"We show the combinations of the ta'amim" — that's the Hebrew word for trope — "and how they make sense and how that can help you learn them," he said.

Many hundreds of pages are on "the predictability" of the trope if you understand the syntax of the Hebrew sentence they adorn.

"Most people don't really understand that there is a logic to the placement of ta'amim," he said.

Dr. Jacobson didn't either, until 20 years ago.

He had chanted from the Torah even



Inset, Dr. Joshua Jacobson, author of "Chanting the Hebrew Bible."

before his bar mitzvah, back in junior congregation. He continued to read from the Torah after his bar mitzvah, and later he started teaching it as well. Now a professor of music at Northeastern University, Dr. Jacobson also teaches cantillation to cantorial students at Boston's Hebrew College.

But all this time, he thought that the choice of which trope go with which words "was an aesthetic choice."

Then he learned that there was a system behind the trope.

"It turns out that it's a semantic thing, a form of elaborate punctuation."

It's not the notes that matter most, he said. It's the rhythm. Just as written English can indicate pauses with different punctuation; semicolons divide but don't end sentences, while commas pause them — and dashes bring a greater pause while joining other words — so too do trope serve to separate and connect words.

Accordingly, the trope indicate where words should be chanted together, and which need a pause afterward.

Understanding this system "makes you a better Torah reader," he said. "All of a sudden the chanting makes sense. The most important thing is doing a clear and expressive reading so people

In written English, we use periods, semicolons, and commas to indicate a separation between ideas. Punctuation that separates ideas is called "disjunctive." Furthermore there is a hierarchy of disjunctives: A period is a stronger separator than a semicolon, which is a stronger separator than a comma, which is a stronger separator than no punctuation at all. We use hyphens to connect words. Punctuation that connects words is called "conjunctive."

Let's see how this works in Hebrew. In the Book of Numbers, we read about the number of Israelites who died in the plague: וַיָּהִי הַמּוֹת בְּמִגְדָּה אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֶלֶף. But what is that number? Is it אֶלֶף אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים (four-and-twenty thousand, i.e., 24,000)? Or is it אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֶלֶף (four and twenty-thousand, i.e., 20,004)? To clarify such ambiguous phrases, the Tiberian scholars designated some of their accent marks as disjunctives (separators), and others as conjunctives (joiners). The accent merekha (מֶרְכָּה) is a conjunctive; it indicates that its word is connected in meaning to the word that follows. The accent tippeha (טִפְּחָה) is a disjunctive; it usually indicates that its word is less connected in meaning to the word that follows.

So אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֶלֶף indicates 24,000, while אֶלֶף אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים indicates 20,004.

It is also important for us to understand the hierarchy of the disjunctive accents. The accent tippeha (טִפְּחָה) is a disjunctive. The accent tevir (תְּבִיר) is also a disjunctive. But tippeha is a stronger disjunctive than tevir. See how important that is for a proper understanding of the following words (Exodus 21:15):

וּמָכָה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוֹמָת:

Usually I hear that verse read with a pause after אָבִיו and no pause after וְאִמּוֹ. The implications of that reading are ungrammatical and absurd.

Reading וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוֹמָת (pause) אָבִיו וּמָכָה would mean "If a person strikes his father, his mother will be put to death."

The proper phrasing is מוֹת יוֹמָת (pause) אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ. The actual meaning is, "He who strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death." These Tiberian accent marks are called ta'amim, or ta'amey ha-mikra. In classical Hebrew, the word ta'am means "sense" or "reason." These symbols help us make sense of the reading.

אֶלְמֹלֶא שְׂרָאִיתִי טַעַם הַמִּקְרָא, לֹא הֵייתִי יוֹדֵעַ לִפְרֹשׁ.

Had I not seen the punctuation of the ta'amim,
I would not have known how to interpret this verse correctly.

—Rashi (11th century)

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understand what you're reading about."

Not understanding the "pausal values" of the trope — which indicate a smaller pause, and which a greater one — can lead to mistakes. Dr. Jacobson gives the example of Exodus 21:15: "umakeh aviv v'imo mot yumat" — "One who strikes his father and his mother shall surely die." The etnachta under v'imo should always get the longest pause, which punctuates the sentence like this: "One who strikes his father and his mother: shall surely die." But the tvir trope under aviv is rarer than the etnachta, so it can be tempting to give it greater emphasis, and a longer pause afterwards. That would punctuate the sentence like this: "One who strikes his father: And his mother shall surely die." Ooops!

Dr. Jacobson doesn't expect 12-year-olds to read his book, or even the shorter students' edition, which focuses more on the practical, less on the theoretical, and is designed to be more "user friendly." He would like their teachers, however, to study it.

"So many of the people who teach bar mitzvah students teach the wrong things or ignore some important

things," he said.

"If the teachers are aware of the subtleties, they can model the right kind of chanting for their students."

One thing students can do is to understand the words they're chanting.

"If they understand the words, they can have it make sense. That's the most important thing: to have it make sense. You can't ignore the timing. As the comedians say, timing is everything. It's the same thing in reading the Torah," he said.

"Even people who are tone deaf, God forbid, can give an expressive reading, with inflection of the words, even if they don't 'hit the right notes,'" he said. "If they understand the words, they can have it make sense."

That's the task because the role of the Torah reader, he said, is to "channel these sacred words into the congregation."

"The cantor takes the prayers of the congregation and, if you will, sends them up to God. In this sense, when we chant from the Torah, we're taking the words of God and bringing them down to the congregation."

The secret origin of Torah trope

LARRY YUDELSON

Where did they come from, those little trope characters?

From the same place and time as the dots and dashes of Hebrew vowels: Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, between the 8th and 10th centuries.

Our oldest books of the Torah and Tanakh — as opposed to scrolls — are from about a thousand years ago. They have trope and vowels. Figuring out the proper vowels and tropes was a major project of Jews in that time and place — a group known as the Masoretes, from the word masorah, tradition. They used tradition as well as rules of grammar to figure out how to properly pronounce and chant the text. And they used symbols that they invented to record their decisions permanently.

In coming up with the symbols for trope, said Dr. Joshua Jacobson, they based themselves on hand signals used to prompt Torah readers on the trope "that had already been in use for quite a while."

"The Bible had always been chanted. Now it was being solidified and codified," he said.

Those oldest Bibles with vowels and trope "look remarkably similar to a modern Bible. You chant the Bible from this thousand year old book. It's extraordinary," he said.

You can check out a reproduction of the oldest such text, known as the Aleppo Codex, at <http://www.alep->

pocodex.org. Copied around 920 C.E., it was verified, including the trope, by Aaron ben Asher, the last of the dynasty that led the masoretic project. It ended up in Cairo, where Maimonides used it. It spent 600 years with the Jewish community of Aleppo, Syria. It was smuggled to Israel in 1958. (In 2013, journalist Matti Friedman gave the story its due in his book, "The Aleppo Codex: In Pursuit of One of the World's Most Coveted, Sacred, and Mysterious Books.")

But what about the actual tones of the trope? If they go back, why do Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities have different melodies?

For starters, Dr. Jacobson said, "There are many different Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions," not only one.

Despite the differences, "you can hear a lot of similarities" among them when you listen closely.

"It makes you think they're variations of an original version that goes back many years ago."

The earliest musical notation of the trope, he said, is from around 1500 — using a medieval German style of notation.

"Germans were influenced by the German music around them. Yemenites were influenced by the Arab music around them. But there's a common core that is discernible to be similar," he said.