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

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: “And the number of Israelites who died in the plague was 24,000. Or is it 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 tippeḥa (טִפְּחָא) is a disjunctive: It usually indicates that its word is less connected in meaning to the word that follows. The accent mārēkhā (מַרְּכָה) is a conjunctive: It indicates that its word is less connected in meaning to the word that follows.

So 24,000 indicates 24,000, while four-and-twenty thousand indicates 20,004. It is also important for us to understand the hierarchy of the disjunctive accents. The accent tippēḥa (טִפְּחָא) is a disjunctive. The accent tēvr (תֵּבְר) is also a disjunctive. But tippeḥa is a stronger disjunctive than tēvr. See how important that is for a proper understanding of the following words (Exodus 21:15).

The phrases “four-and-twenty thousand, i.e., 20,004?” Or is it four and twenty-thousand, i.e., 24,000? Indicate different punctuation marks: An accent point is a stronger disjunctive than a hyphen. The implication of that reading is that one birosh (בַּמַּגֵּפָה) is a conjunctive. It indicates that its word is less connected in meaning to the word that follows. The accent mārēkhā (מַרְּכָה) is a conjunctive: It usually indicates that its word is less connected in meaning to the word that follows.
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."