

# Proper Pronunciation of the Hebrew Language

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**I. Introduction.** The words of the Torah have remained unchanged over the course of Jewish history. A sefer torah in New York today is essentially identical to a sefer torah of a thousand years ago in France. That sefer torah is essentially identical to the sefer torah that Moshe Rabeinu completed writing at the end of his life (see Bava Basra 15a and Tosafot ad.loc.). [See, however, Kiddushin 30a, where it is pointed out that we are not experts in those letters that do not affect the pronunciation of the words.] This is a most amazing phenomena when we consider the fact that so many Jewish communities were completely severed from their brethren for hundreds of years. Somehow, this text remained the same and stood the test of time. While the survival of the written word is one of the great miracles of the Jewish people and its history, the pronunciation of those words has not enjoyed equal success. There are countless variations in the pronunciation of the Hebrew language. This is halachically significant in light of the fact that the Mishna in Berachot 15a teaches that one should be careful to read keriat shema with the correct pronunciation of all of the letters. (See Shulchan Aruch 62:1 that one does fulfill his obligation if he is not careful about the pronunciation, but ideally one is certainly required to be careful). Based on this background, the question begs itself: May a Sephardic Jew fulfill his obligation of keriat hatorah when he hears an Ashkenazic Ba'al Korei, or vice versa? What about kiddush and havdalah? This question is especially relevant to Sephardic boys who attend predominantly Ashkenazic yeshivos where they daven every day.

## **II. The Advantages and Disadvantages to Each Custom.**

### A. The advantages of the Ashkenazic pronunciation.

1. Responsa Minchas Yitzchak (3:9) points out that in common Ashkenazic pronunciation there is a clear distinction between a kamatz and a patach. With this difference in pronunciation we can easily identify the difference between the pronunciation of God's name (of Adnus which is spelled with a kamatz) and the pronunciation of the word that refers to a human master (which is spelled with either a patach or chirik). Rabeinu Bachya, who was a Sephardic rabbi, (Parshas Vayeira) also writes that there must be a distinction between a patach and a kamatz. He goes on to say that one who does not distinguish between the two may eventually become a heretic (presumably because he will be confused between the places that the torah refers to God and the places it refers to human masters). Rav Yakov Emden (siddur bais Yakov:sulam bais E-1:1) actually offers a special praise to God for not being born a Sephardi and being forced to confuse the name of God with the regular word referring to a human master. Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (Har Tzvi Orach Chaim #4) strongly urges Ashkenazic Jews to carefully pronounce the name of God in accordance with their tradition. Maharal (Tiferes Yisrael:66) goes to great lengths to prove that the Ashkenazic pronunciation of words is indeed the correct pronunciation.
2. The Ashkenazic pronunciation more clearly distinguishes between a "chet" and "heh" than many sefardic pronunciations do. The gemara (megillah 24b) records that R' Chiya was told that since he confuses these two sounds he may come to blaspheme the name of God when reading the passuk "v'chikisi l'Hashem" (Isiah 8:17) because he will pronounce it "v'hikisi l'Hashem" (I have smote God).<sup>1</sup>

### B. The advantages of the Sephardic pronunciation.

1. Minchas Yitzchak (ibid.) points out that one obvious advantage to the sephardic pronunciation is that true Sephardim differentiate between the sounds of the "ayin" and "alef". The gemara seems to suggest explicitly that there is a distinction between these two sounds. The gemara (Megillah 24b) states that people who come from certain locations where they mispronounce certain sounds may not recite the *birchat kohanim*. The *gemara* explains that these people pronounce the "alef" the same way they pronounce "ayin", and when they say the passuk "Ya'er Hashem Panav Elecha", they will pronounce the word

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<sup>1</sup> Based on this gemara the Vilna Gaon explained a passage in Talmud Yerushalmi which states that when R' Chiya saw a person violating the Shabbat, he waited until the next day and then wrote down the verse "u'mehaleleha mos yumas". The Vilna Gaon explains that R' Chiya did not simply say the passuk at the time, because he would pronounce the first word of the passuk "u'mehaleleha" (those who praise it) giving off the exact opposite impression.

“ya’er” as if it has an “ayin” which is a word that means to curse. It is most likely that the ashkenazic pronunciation, which equates the two sounds, originates in a corruption of the language. Indeed, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 53:12) rules that one may not be appointed as a shaliach tzibbur if he does not differentiate between his pronunciation of the “alef” and “ayin”. Magen Avraham (ad. loc.), however, points out that if everybody in that area pronounces these letters in that manner, he may serve as shaliach tzibbur.

2. Furthermore, Responsa Beit Ridvaz (27) points out that it is most likely that the sephardic pronunciation of words is more accurate because Ashkenazic Jews have been exiled to many different lands throughout the course of history. They were therefore more likely to have assimilated some of the sounds of their host country’s language into their pronunciation of Hebrew. Sephardic Jews, on the other hand, have not been exiled nearly as often and were therefore able to maintain a more accurate tradition of the Hebrew language.

### III. May a Person Change his Custom?

- A. The arguments against any change. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook zt”l (chodesh Av, shnas 5693) writes unequivocally that one may not change his family’s custom in the pronunciation of the Hebrew language. Rav Kook offers several reasons for this approach. Rabbi Yitzchak Yakov Weiss zt”l (Minchas Yitzchak 4:47) agrees with this approach and offers an additional reason of his own. The reasons not to change one’s pronunciation are as follows:
  1. “Al Titosh Toras Imecha” – Rav Kook points out that changing one’s pronunciation is the equivalent of abandoning one’s family tradition, and such activity is strictly prohibited by Jewish law. This is especially true since we have no clear proofs that either pronunciation is superior to the other.
  2. “Kara V’lo Dikdeik B’osyi’seha” – We mentioned earlier that the halacha requires us to be careful to pronounce all of the words correctly when we pray. If a person reads the words with a pronunciation that is not in line with his personal tradition of the correct pronunciation, it is the equivalent of not being careful with the pronunciations of the words.
  3. “Motzi La’az Al Ha’Rishonim” – Minchas Yitzchak (4:47) suggests that by abandoning one’s accepted pronunciation a person denigrates the reputation of his own ancestors who accepted their traditional pronunciation. Rav Weiss points out that this is especially true since this controversy has been so vehemently debated for hundreds of years.
    - a. Halachic conclusion. For all of these reasons Rav Kook used to encourage the Jews of Israel who come from Ashkenazic descent not to abandon their traditional pronunciation in favor of the more popular quasi-Sephardic pronunciation used in Israel today.
    - b. Fulfilling your obligation when listening to somebody who pronounces the words differently.
      - i. The stringent approach. Chazon Ish is reported to have taken this a step further and said that an Ashkenazic Jew who prays at a Sephardic shul cannot fulfill his obligation of krias hatorah due to the discrepancy in pronunciation (Leket Ha’kemach 128:123). [See, however, Responsa Yechave Da’at 6:19 who strongly questions how accurate this rumor about the Chazon Ish really is.] Indeed, Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (Mikra’ei Kodosh Purim #12) rules that while one may fulfill his obligation of kerias hamegillah with a pronunciation that runs counter to his own tradition, one would not fulfill keriat hatorah with such a pronunciation. The logic for this distinction is that keriat hamegillah may be done in any language (including one that is completely made up by the rabbis), but keriat hatorah must be read in lashon hakodesh, and not some foreign corruption of the language.
      - ii. The lenient approach. Rav Henkin (Sefer Edus L’yisrael) writes that each pronunciation is valid. He explains that chazal tell us of 12 gates in heaven that correspond to the twelve tribes, with each tribe having its own unique pronunciation. As long as one remains loyal to his own unique mesorah, argues Rav Henkin, he can be motzi others in their obligation of kerias hatorah. If, however, one mixes different aspects of varying traditions, he is not yotzei

according to any single tradition, and cannot be motzi others in their obligation. (Shearim Metzuyanim B'halacha 18:5).

- B. The argument for a change in pronunciation. Responsa Mishpitei Uziel (Orach Chaim:1) takes issue with the position of Rav Kook (it is interesting to note that Rav Kook wrote an approbation to this sefer even though the very first response in the sefer was an attempt to argue on Rav Kook's opinion) and maintains that reading with a different pronunciation is not at all similar to reading keriat shema without being careful to pronounce all of the words properly. When the Mishna speaks of not being careful in reading it refers specifically to one who reads in a way that is unacceptable to everyone. If, however, one reads in a way that is accepted by half of world Jewry he has not diminished the true pronunciation at all. Furthermore, Sefer Derech Hanasher (1:45a) reports that Rav Natan Adler (the famed rebbe of the Chasam Sofer) invited a Sephardic rabbi to Frankfurt and he learned the intricacies of Sephardic pronunciation from him. After their encounter, Rabbi Adler gave up his traditional Ashkenazic pronunciation and would only read with a Sephardic pronunciation (even when he served as shaliach tzibbur in Frankfurt, Germany!). [Minchas Yitzchak (4:47) writes that we cannot accept the custom of Rabbi Adler as a guide for the rest of us because Rabbi Adler was an extraordinarily complex individual who may have had motives that we cannot understand in rejecting traditional Ashkenazic pronunciation.] The Chida (Responsa Yosef Ometz 20:2) points out that the Arizal was also from an Ashkenazic family, and yet he always prayed along with Sephardim and heard keriat hatorah from them.
- C. Occasionally veering from one's custom. It seems clear that one should not reject his family's custom, regardless if the custom is to read with Ashkenazic or Sephardic pronunciation. However, sometimes a circumstance may arise where one is encouraged to veer from his custom. Rabbi Yechiel Yakov Weinberg zt"l (Responsa Siridei Eish 2:5) rules that a bar mitzvah boy who was trained to read with Sephardic pronunciation may read the parsha in an Ashkenazic shul. The bar mitzvah boy does not have to struggle to relearn the parsha with a pronunciation that is foreign to him. Rabbi Weinberg reasons that reading with the Sephardic pronunciation (for an Ashkenazic Jew) can be no worse than mispronunciations of words which do not change the meaning of the word for which we do not require a bal korei to repeat himself (see Rama Orach Chaim 142:1). Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg shlit"a (Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 7:28:2) has a similar ruling regarding one who is asked to recite kiddush with the Sephardic pronunciation. Rabbi Waldenberg rules that even one who normally uses the Ashkenazic pronunciation, and will continue to do so after reciting the kiddush, may recite the kiddush with the Sephardic pronunciation.

**IV. Conclusion.** We have discussed the various opinions of the poskim that relate to verifying which custom of pronunciation is more accurate. We have also discussed the issue of changing one's traditional pronunciation. While there are certainly slight variations of each tradition (i.e. German, Litvish pronunciations) that are valid, it goes without saying that inventing a new pronunciation that serves as some sort of compromise between the classic Sephardic and Ashkenazic pronunciations as a practice that is frowned upon by all poskim. Minchas Yitzchak laments the fact that Israeli society has accepted the Sephardic pronunciation of a kamatz, yet has somehow rejected the Sephardic pronunciation of the letter "ayin", thereby choosing the worst of both worlds. It is important that we teach our children to read in the way of our family traditions and not reject thousands of years of mesorah for what may be the popular stance of today.