

Where is the Accent?

The hypothetical reader asked:

When reading Torah, how does one know which syllable of a word gets the accent?

The Old Torah Reader replied:

For most words, the answer is simple: For most trope marks, the syllable that has the טַעַם, the trope mark, on it gets the primary accent; and if any other syllable happens to have a vowel with a מְתַגּ mark by it, it gets a secondary accent. You may ask, what about words that have more than one trope mark on them? This is almost always a case of a מְנַח or a קְדָמָא preceding the main trope, and in that case those preceding syllables marked by them get a secondary accent.¹

The previous rule has six trope-mark exceptions. Depending on type, these are always placed at the very end of the word, farther to the end than an ordinary trope mark on the last syllable would be found; or they are placed at the very beginning of the word, farther to the beginning than an ordinary trope mark on the first syllable would be found.² The six are (with examples): פְּשָׁתָא (רֵאשׁוּ), יְתִיב (עַל), זְרָקָא (הַעִיץ), סְגוּל (הַגִּזְּ), תְּלִישָׁא-קְטַנָּה (אֶשֶׁר), and תְּלִישָׁא-גְדוּלָה (דְּשָׂא). The פְּשָׁתָא, זְרָקָא, סְגוּל and תְּלִישָׁא-קְטַנָּה are always placed at the end of the word; the יְתִיב and תְּלִישָׁא-גְדוּלָה are always placed at the beginning of the word.

Two of these exceptional trope types pose no difficulty when determining the accent position. They are the פְּשָׁתָא and the יְתִיב. Any word with a פְּשָׁתָא, it is true, will always have a פְּשָׁתָא mark falling at the extreme end of the word. However, if the accent of the word does not fall on the last syllable, another פְּשָׁתָא mark will be placed over the accented syllable (looking like a קְדָמָא). Therefore, when you see two פְּשָׁתָא marks over a word—as for example, הָאֵלֶּה—you know the accent is on the syllable under the first פְּשָׁתָא, and otherwise it is on the last syllable. (If a word has a single trope mark that looks like a פְּשָׁתָא but it is not in the extreme end location, as for example, וַיִּקְרָא, the mark is not a פְּשָׁתָא; it is a קְדָמָא, an entirely different trope.)

1. For this rule we consider a series of simple words connected by a מְקַף, (i.e., a hyphen) as one word.

2. For this rule we do not consider a series of simple words connected by a מְקַף, (i.e., a hyphen) as one word.

The יְתִיב, which is always placed at the beginning of a word also poses no accent problem. This trope is only used when the accent falls on the first (or only) syllable of a word.

This leaves the four remaining exceptional trope types that are placed either at the beginning or ending of a word but not over the accented syllable. With these four trope types, some books follow the same procedure that is standardly followed with the פְּשֵׁתָא: that is, a second image of the trope is placed over the syllable that has the accent if the accent is not on the last syllable, or in the case of the תְּלִישָׁא-גְדוּלָה, not on the first syllable. Here are some examples:

וּלְכֹל-חַיֵּת הָאָרֶץ in בְּרֵאשִׁית 1-30 and וְכָכָה תֵּאבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ in שְׁמוֹת 12-11.

Therefore, if you have access to such a book, congratulate yourself; you should have no problem in knowing where to place the accent when reading the Torah.

On the other hand, if you don't have such a book, these four exceptional trope types can give you problems, especially if you're not well versed in biblical Hebrew. For a little bit of help, in some books, particularly difficult accent decisions are resolved by footnotes. For example, in such a book the word וְכָכָה of the text quoted above from שְׁמוֹת 12-11 has a footnote saying, "מלעיל", which means that the accent is before the last syllable. If you see a footnote saying, "מלרע", it means the accent is on the last syllable. But these footnotes are rare - even in books that occasionally have them.

There are rules that can help a lot in determining the accent location. Unfortunately, they are not something that can be explained without extensive background knowledge that is too much to present here. One simple rule, however, is that an accent cannot fall on a syllable whose vowel is a שְׁוָא or a חֻטָּף type. Therefore, you should know that the accent of the word כָּבֵל in the phrase, ... כָּבֵל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה in בְּמִדְבָּר 9-5 is not on the first syllable but on the remaining one.

If you are a native Israeli Hebrew speaker, you might think that your accustomed way of accenting will guide you correctly. This is not always true. Consider the phrase, וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-הַמִּצְוֹת in שְׁמוֹת 12-17. You might think that the accent of וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם is on the next to the last syllable and the זִרְקָא is at the end because it is always at the end. However, in biblical Hebrew according to Mesorah, the accent of such verb forms is almost always on the last syllable, unlike in modern Israeli Hebrew. I must admit, though, that you probably would never get called on it.