

## The True Story of the Middle Dots

The dots that appear above or below Hebrew letters are vowels of various sorts or trope marks, but dots also appear in the middle of letters. When we first learn Hebrew we can get away with thinking of the middle dots as just part of the spelling because at that point we are busy assimilating more general aspects of the language. However, we cannot ignore them for long, since they do determine pronunciation and reflect important things that are going on in the underlying grammar.

Four types of middle dots appear in Hebrew letters. They all look just the same, but have different meanings and can have different sounds.

- |                                   |         |                     |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------------------|
| 1. Shurek ( שׁוּרֵק )             | אֶחָיו  | (our brothers)      |
| 2. Dagesh Kal ( דָּגֵשׁ קָל )     | דָּבָר  | (word, thing)       |
| 3. Dagesh Hazak ( דָּגֵשׁ חָזָק ) | דְּבָר  | (the word or thing) |
| 4. Mapik ( מַפִּיק )              | נַעֲרָה | (her lad)           |

The important thing is to be able to figure out what sort of dot we are dealing with, and how this affects the meaning and pronunciation of a given word. If you like rules, this is a lot of fun. The system is pretty straight forward.

### The Shurek

#### To identify:

The shurek always appears in a ך which has no other vowel after it (e.g., ך rather than ךִ).

#### Result:

The shurek is a long vowel, with a sound like oo in pool.

### The Dagesh Kal

#### To identify:

Dagesh kal dots appear only in the Begeid Kefet (בְּגֵיד כֶּפֶת) letters: ב ג ד כ פ and ת.

1. Any Begeđ Kefet letter within a word which is proceeded by a closed syllable gets a dagesh kal.
2. When a Begeđ Kefet letter comes at the start of a word, the letter will normally receive a dagesh kal. However, the dagesh kal is not inserted when the preceding word ends in a vowel sound (including words that end with consonants that are used as vowels, such as **מִשֶּׁה**) and the preceding word has a conjunctive trope (e.g., mercha ( **𐤌** ) or munach ( **𐤍** )). For example, the dagesh kal is missing in

וַיִּחַנּוּ בְּאֵתֶם (Bamidbar 33:6)

because the first word ended in the vowel וַ and it was marked with the conjunctive trope munach ( **𐤍** ). On the other hand, the dagesh kal is present in

וַיִּחַנּוּ בְּסִפְתָּי (Bamidbar 33:5)

because although the first word ends in the same vowel, it was marked with the disjunctive tipcha trope ( **𐤏** ).

### Result:

The dagesh kal has no effect on the meaning of a word. However, it does change the way **ב** **כ** and **פ** are pronounced. Without the dagesh, these letters are pronounced as **v** in **vine**, **ch** as in **Bach** and **f** as in **food**; with the dagesh, they are pronounced as **b** in **boy**, **k** as in **kitty** and **p** as in **park**. The dagesh kal does not change the pronunciation of **ג** **ד** **ת**.

## The Dagesh Hazak

### To identify:

The dagesh hazak or doubling dagesh can appear in any letter except for the gutturals ( **א**, **ה**, **ח** and **ע** ) and **ר**. It can be identified by elimination.

1. A dagesh in a begeđ kefet letter which is proceeded by a closed syllable must be a dagesh kal. Otherwise, we would end up with conjoined consonant sounds.
2. A dot in a וַ which has no other vowel is a shurek, and thus not a dagesh hazak.
3. A dot in a װ is a mapik, and thus not a dagesh hazak.

### Result:

A dagesh hazak doubles the letter, thus both closing the preceding syllable and starting the next syllable. Some results:

1. A sheva under a dagesh hazak is always a vocal sheva.
2. A kamets ( ׀ ) in an unaccented preceding syllable becomes a kamates katon, and thus is pronounced with an ‘o’ sound as in ‘row’ rather than as an ‘a’.

We have already seen that a dagesh hazak appears when the definite article is added to most words ( מַלְּךָ becomes הַמַּלְּךָ , with a dagesh hazak in the ם ). A dagesh hazak can appear for many other reasons as well, which we will see as we come to them.

## The Mapik

### To identify:

The mapik is a center dot in a הּ : הֵ .

### Result:

A mapik indicates that a הּ is being used as a consonant rather than a vowel. The most common usage is in the feminine possessive ending הּ ׀ :

נִיעֶרְהָ (her lad)

נִיעֶרְהָ (a lass)

When pronounced as a consonant, the הּ has a breathy sound, like the ‘h’ in ‘had’.