

## MUSIC AND MEANING IN TORAH CANTILLATION

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The cantillation of the Torah, the notation system of the music by which the Torah is chanted in the synagogue, codified an oral tradition which had existed for some hundreds of years before it was consolidated and formalised in writing by the Masoretes around the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. Each word, or group of words, has a musical rendition according to the *ta'am*, the symbol placed above or below it. These *te'amim* serve a number of well understood purposes apart from simply denoting the music to be used when the Torah is chanted. The Torah, as still written on parchment for synagogue use, has no punctuation at a lower level of granularity than the paragraph and the *te'amim* tell the Torah reader not only where each sentence begins and ends, but the detailed phrasing within it. This is achieved through the fact that some of the *te'amim* denote a major pause, others denote minor pauses; some have an inevitable close partner which joins it to the succeeding word or word group and some can only stand alone. Thus the 27 *te'amim* provide the punctuation and, by their exact placement on a selected letter of the word, also indicate where the stress falls.

As a by product of the fact that the choice of *te'amim* determines the phrasing of the sentence, the *te'amim* clearly play a part in the interpretation of the text – a specific phrasing, as indicated by the *te'amim*, may make a difference to the meaning, as it can in other languages. E.g. the sentence “Most of

the time travellers worry about their luggage” means one thing if I phrase it “Most of the time, travellers worry about their luggage” but something quite different if phrased “Most of the time-travellers, worry about their luggage”.

In Exodus 4:23 Moses is to warn Pharaoh about the slaying of the firstborns.

וְאָמַר אֵלֶיךָ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיַעֲבֹדוּנִי וְתִמְנָאן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַנֶּה אֶנְכִּי הֲרֹג אֶת־בְּנֶךָ  
בְּכֹרֶךָ:

The phrasing of the *te'amim* translates to “And I said to you, let my people go and serve me, *but you refuse to let them go*; Lo I shall slay your firstborn son”

- Pharaoh has already refused so the firstborns will be slain. Had the *te'amim* been...

וְאָמַר אֵלֶיךָ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיַעֲבֹדוּנִי וְתִמְנָאן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַנֶּה אֶנְכִּי הֲרֹג אֶת־בְּנֶךָ  
בְּכֹרֶךָ:

the meaning would then have been “*And I said to you, let my people go and serve me; and if you refuse to let them go, lo I shall slay your firstborn son*”.

Much work has been done by scholars such as Wickes, Price, Jacobson and Tunkel showing how the phrasing of the sentence is achieved by the use of the *te'amim* in sometimes an elaborate hierarchy 4 deep but, however valid this is, it does not explain the specific choice of the *te'amim*, as there are multiple ways an identical phrasing can be achieved through the use of alternatives sets of *te'amim* - yet the musical sound will be quite different. To illustrate this here's how Genesis 20:4 could have been accented:

וְאַבְיִמֶלֶךְ לֹא־קָרַב אֵלֶיהָ וְיֹאמַר אֲדֹנָי הֲגֹי גַם־צְדִיק תִּהְרֹג:

I'll translate that and use the same *te'amim* in the English:

'Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said: O Lord, Wilt Thou slay even a righteous nation.'

Now here's how it actually is accented:

וְאַבְיִמֶלֶךְ לֹא־קָרַב אֵלֶיהָ וְיֹאמַר אֲדֹנָי הֲגֹי גַם־צְדִיק תִּהְרֹג:

'*Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said: O Lord, Wilt Thou slay even a righteous nation.*'

It is true that it is not possible to substitute readily like this in every case, but even short half sentences which, allow of much less flexibility, may achieve equivalent phrasing through quite a number of alternative *te'amim* sets. For example the second half of Genesis 32:6:

וְאִשְׁלַחַהּ לְהַגִּיד לְאָדֹנָי לְמַצְאֵתוֹ בְּעֵינָיו:

without damaging the phrasing could have been accented in many different ways such as:

וְאִשְׁלַחָהּ לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדָנָי לְמִצְרָיִם בְּעֵינָיִךְ

וְאִשְׁלַחָהּ לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדָנָי לְמִצְרָיִם בְּעֵינָיִךְ:

וְאִשְׁלַחָהּ לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדָנָי לְמִצְרָיִם בְּעֵינָיִךְ:

וְאִשְׁלַחָהּ לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדָנָי לְמִצְרָיִם בְּעֵינָיִךְ:

and indeed other possibilities as well.

So, the authors of our chant did have choices, frequently not wholly determined by the demands of producing a specific phrasing.

This paper seeks to explore the questions “can it be shown, that the particular *te’amim* chosen, indicate an intention to express meaning and, if so what sorts of styles and approaches are there in so doing?”

That there was an understanding that the choice of *te’amim* influenced meaning may be seen from the *te’amim* for the reading of the ten commandments. Two alternative sets are provided – *ta’am ha’elyon* (the high *ta’am*) for proclaiming in the synagogue, and *ta’am hatachton* (the low *ta’am*) for reading privately. The *ta’am haelyon* has a more powerful and dramatic sound than the *tachton*.

Here first of all is the commandment not to make a graven image - in the low form:

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה לָךְ פֶּסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת

וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: הֵיאֵל־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם

Now listen to it in high accentuation for reading in the synagogue:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לָךְ פֶּסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת

וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם

You can see from this that the *te’amim* carry varying degrees of excitement - it is not just my rendition that makes them sound that way.

There is one very unusual *ta’am* - the *shalsholet*. The word *shalsholet* means chain. The name reflects what it looks like and it is sung as a long, drawn out note, usually up and down, three times. It occurs only 4 times in the Torah<sup>1</sup> and each time would seem to reflect a meaning of hesitation - this is clear cut in one case where it occurs on the word “and he hesitated”, וַיִּתְמַקְהָה, fairly convincing in two more and, subject to rabbinical interpretation, in the fourth.

But, does such a selection approach as in the ten commandments and this rather special *ta’am*, indicating a relationship between the significance of the text and the choice of *te’amim*, extend beyond these rather special cases?

My contention is **yes, it does** and, indeed, I see a number of different phenomena at play in the specific choices of the *te’amim*.

The first and perhaps the most interesting, is the choice of more elaborate *te’amim* to **intensify the meaning** of particular texts. Here is an example from Exodus 14:27

“*Moses stretches out his hand over the sea; towards morning the waters come back full strength and the Egyptians chase after them. God shakes up the Egyptians in the middle of the sea*”.

It could have been accentuated quite low key: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנֵי הַיָּם וַיִּמְצְרוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וַיִּמְצְרוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם

but the *te’amim* actually chosen are much more dramatic:

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לִפְנֵי הַיָּם וַיִּמְצְרוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וַיִּמְצְרוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם

Similarly, Genesis 50:17, when Joseph’s brothers fear that, with Jacob now dead, he will wreak revenge on them, they send a message to him: “*Thus shall you say to Joseph. Forgive now, pray, the transgression of your brothers and their sin*” ...which could have been simply accentuated like this:

כֹּה־תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנָא שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אֶחָיִךְ וְחַטָּאתֶם

and now hear the entreaty in the way it actually is accented:

כֹּה־תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנָא שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אֶחָיִךְ וְחַטָּאתֶם

It may be noted that the only other occurrence of the word אֲנָא, which is an expression of entreaty, in the Torah - Ex 32:31 also carries two *te’amim* on this very short word - in this case אֲנָא - again emphasising the entreaty.

Exodus 33:13 creates the same effect of entreaty with different words by the choice of the *te’amim* “*Now therefore I pray thee, if I have found favour in your eyes...*”

וַעֲתָה אִם־נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ

An example of which I am particularly fond, but where perhaps the intention is less clear cut, is in the story of Balam and his ass. Balam’s ass sees the angel of God confronting them but Balam does not realise what is going on. The same words are used each time for the ass seeing the angel but, the first time we hear:

וַתִּרְא הָאָתוֹן אֶת־מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה

Another example I like, is in Genesis 27:33 when Isaac realises that the person to whom he has given his blessing may not have been Esau as he was tricked into believing.

“And Isaac trembled very much, and said, Who then is he who hunted venison, and brought it to me, and I have eaten of it all before you came, and have blessed him?”

וַיִּחַדּוּ יִצְחָק הַרְדָּה גְדֹלָה עַד מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אֵפוֹא הוּא הַצֹּדֵד צִיד וַיָּבֵא לִי וְאֵכַל מִכָּל בְּטָרִם תְּבוּאָה וְאַבְרָכָהּ

Another phenomenon I have noticed in the choice of *te'amim*, I am calling “theme-ing” where a particular word or set of words recur as a sort of theme in a text pointing up something judged significant.

My first example of this also relates to the crossing of the red sea. In four separate sentences of the 37 that describe the crossing of the Red Sea<sup>2</sup> the text states that the children of Israel would or did walk on dry land in the middle of the sea. The words are slightly different but listen to the sound...

Exodus 14:16 וַיִּבְּאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּתּוֹד הַיָּם בַּיַּבֶּשֶׁה

Exodus 14:22 וַיִּבְּאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּתּוֹד הַיָּם בַּיַּבֶּשֶׁה

Exodus 14:29 וַיִּבְּנוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלְכוּ בַיַּבֶּשֶׁה בַּתּוֹד הַיָּם

Exodus 15:19 וַיִּבְּנוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלְכוּ בַיַּבֶּשֶׁה בַּתּוֹד הַיָּם

To me, the triumphal nature of the declaration is unmistakable.

Another example of “theming” is a little less clear cut but nonetheless convincing. In Deuteronomy, Moses’ long peroration to the children of Israel, eleven times the word בארץ occurs as Moses makes reference to things that should happen **in the land** which you are crossing to possess, or which God is giving to you, or other similar expression of the same sentiment. In 3 of the 11 occurrences the phrasing is such that it is not possible<sup>3</sup>, but in 64 out of the remaining 8 occurrences the word בארץ has the same *ta'am* - a *zakef gadol* בְּאַרְצֵךְ which is a disjunctive *ta'am* - one which does not join on to a fellow *ta'am* or *te'amim* in the word or words following. It is one of the least common of disjunctive *te'amim* with just over 1% of the disjunctive occurrences in the Torah<sup>5</sup>, so it is noticeable that it keeps recurring on this particular word in this context. For me this expresses Moses repeatedly wagging his finger at the children of Israel warning them that this is a special land they are coming to and their behaviour must be equally special.

Another example is the use of the same set of *te'amim*, the relatively unusual *zarqa segol* combination, when indicating affordability. Three occurrences of exist in the Torah all notated similarly:

Lev 5:7 וְאִם־לֹא תִגְיעַ יָדוֹ דֵּי שֶׁה

Also Lev 12:8 וְאִם־לֹא תִמְצָא יָדוֹ דֵּי שֶׁה

and Lev 25:28 וְאִם לֹא־תִמְצָא יָדוֹ דֵּי הַשֵּׁיב לוֹ

The key word is יָד - sufficient - and the only other time this word occurs<sup>6</sup> the phrasing does not allow of the *zarqa segol* notation.

Another interesting phenomenon I have noticed

I am calling “reinforcement” where the same set of *te'amim* are repeatedly used for equivalent or identical sentences or phrase groups indicating the consistent, repeated nature of the content. A simple example of this is in Numbers 13:4-15 which details the names of the princes of each tribe chosen to be part of the delegation spying out the land of Israel.

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹתֵם לְמַטֵּה רְאוּבוּן שְׁמוּעַ בְּרֹזְכוּ: ה לְמַטֵּה שְׁמֹעוֹן שְׁפֹט בְּרֹחוּ: ו לְמַטֵּה יְהוּדָה כָּלֵב בְּרֹזְבֵנֶה: ז לְמַטֵּה יִשְׂשָׁכָר יִגָּאֵל בְּרִישֵׁי: ח לְמַטֵּה אֶפְרַיִם הוֹשֶׁע בְּרִינוֹ: ט לְמַטֵּה בִנְיָמִן פִּלְטִי בְּרִדְפוּ: י לְמַטֵּה זְבוּלֹן גְּדִיאֵל בְּרִסּוּדֵי: יא לְמַטֵּה יוֹסֵף מְנַשֶּׁה גְּדִי בְּרִסּוּסֵי: יב לְמַטֵּה דָן עַמִּיאֵל בְּרֹגְמֹלֵי: יג לְמַטֵּה אֲשֶׁר סִתוּר בְּרִמְיָכָאֵל: יד לְמַטֵּה נֵפְתָלִי נַחֲבִי בְּרֹזְפוּסֵי: טו לְמַטֵּה גָּד גְּאוּאֵל בְּרִמְקֵי:

All but Ephraim and Menasheh, who are actually subtribes of Joseph and naturally therefore a little different, follow exactly the same form.

This usage of the same *te'amim* for lists like these, occurs regularly. A more elaborate example of the same sort is in reporting the result of the census in Numbers 26. Here the format of the text and the format of the *te'amim* are virtually identical for 6 of the tribes and with striking similarities in the detail for the others. I will illustrate this with the beginning of two of the 6 sets. Here first is the tribe of Shimon:

בְּנֵי שְׁמֹעוֹן לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְנַמְוִיאֵל מִשְׁפַּחַת הַנְּמוּאֵלִי לְלִמְיֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַקְּמִינִי לְלִמְיֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַיְכִינִי: יג לְרַח מִשְׁפַּחַת הַזֶּרְחִי לְשֵׁאוּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשְּׂאוּלִי:

Now in the identical format is the tribe of Gad.  
טו בְּנֵי גָד לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְצַפּוֹן מִשְׁפַּחַת הַצְּפוּנִי לְחֵלִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֲלִי לְשׁוּלִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הַשׁוּלִי: טז לְאֶזְרִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאֶזְרִי לְעָרִי מִשְׁפַּחַת הָעָרִי:

More interesting, and perhaps more meaningful is how the *te'amim* of the text that describes how the various appurtenances of the tabernacle were actually made, sentence by sentence, reinforce the descriptions in the earlier chapters, that described how they *should be* made.

Here by way of a taster, Exodus 35:6-8, is Moses relaying to the children of Israel God's detailing of the *materials* to be used:

And blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats' hair,

And rams' skins dyed red, and goats' skins, and shittim wood,

And oil for the light, and spices for anointing oil, and for the sweet incense

ו ותבילת וארנמן ותולעת שני ושש ועגום: ז וערת אילם מאדמים וערת תחשים ועצי שטים: ח ושמן למאור ובשמים לשמן המשחה ולקטורת הסמים:

It parallels exactly God's actual words to Moses recorded 10 chapters earlier:

ד ותבילת וארנמן ותולעת שני ושש ועגום: ה וערת אילם מאדמים וערת תחשים ועצי שטים: ו ושמן למאור בשמים לשמן המשחה ולקטורת הסמים:

As to the detail of the making of the individual items, the same repeated patterning occurs in most of the 100 or so verses that deal with the individual items. The text of the section that describes how the items were made<sup>7</sup> differs from the text of the separated section describing how they should be made<sup>8</sup>,

in the order of what is described

and occasionally in small details

and throughout in the tense

- "and he made" rather than "and you shall make" but the *te'amim* are identical.

A perhaps more approachable example is in Abraham's negotiation with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 18:28 - 32

And he spoke to him yet again, and said, Perhaps there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do it for forty's sake.

And he said to him, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak; Perhaps there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there.

And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord; Perhaps there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake.

And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once; Possibly ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake

The *te'amim* reinforce the steadfastness of both Abraham's entreaty and God's response:

כט ויסף עוד לדבר אליו ויאמר אולי ימצאון שם ארבעים

וילאמר לא אעשה בעבור הארבעים:

ל ויאמר אל-נא יחר לאדני ואדברה אולי ימצאון שם שלשים

וילאמר לא אעשה אם-אמצא שם שלשים:

לא ויאמר הנה-נא הואלתלי לדבר אל-אדני אולי ימצאון שם עשרים

וילאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרים:

לב ויאמר אל-נא יחר לאדני ואדברה אד-הפעם אולי ימצאון שם עשרה

וילאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרה

One final phenomenon I would draw your attention to, I am calling **parallelism**. Here the text and the narrative move on, but the *te'amim* show the connection and establish a rhythm.

My first example is taken from the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. At the beginning of their encounter there is a conversation that is in effect a negotiation. Judah sees her, thinks she is a harlot

**And he said**, Now, I beg you, let me come in to you; for he knew not that she was his daughter-in-law.

**And she said**, What will you give me, that you may come in to me?

**And he said**, I will send you a kid from the flock.

And she said, Will you give me a pledge, till you send it?

**And he said**, What pledge shall I give you?

**And she said**, Your signet ring, and your bracelets, and your staff that is in your hand.

וילאמר תבנה נא אבוא אלך בי לא ידע כי כלתו היא

ותאמר מה-תתן-לי כי תבוא אלי:

וילאמר אנכי אשלח גדי-עזים מו-הצאן

ותאמר אם-תתן ערבוני עד שלחך:

וילאמר מה הערבוני אשר אתן-לך?

ותאמר ותתן-י ופתילך ומטתך אשר בידך

Each of the three "and he said and she said" pairs begin with the same *te'amim*.

And he said...And she said - *pashta*

And he said...And she said - *zaqef gadol*

And he said...And she said - *rvia*

Another example is in Exodus 14:19 and 20, as the children of Israel leave Egypt and are led to the Red Sea.

And the angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them;

And the pillar of cloud went from before

their face, and stood behind them;

And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel;

וַיֵּשֶׁע מִלֶּאֱדָה הָאֱלֹהִים קְהֵלָה לְפָנָיו מִחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגַלְדּוֹ מֵאֲחֵרֵיהֶם

וַיֵּשֶׁע עֲמוּד הָעֵנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאֲחֵרֵיהֶם:

וַיֵּבֵא בָּנָיו מִחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבָנָיו מִחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל

Here we have a progression rather than a conversation and the te'amim carry the momentum of the action forward.

So, I have introduced you to examples of the *te'amim* **intensifying** the text, pointing up **themes, reinforcing similarity** and indicating parallelism but let me be clear, this relationship between the *te'amim* and the meaning, while occurring many times more than the examples I have quoted, is far from universal. I can not say that it amounts to any consistent system. For the majority of the text the *te'amim* simply play their part in delineating the phrasing and, through this, showing their understanding of the meaning - though not without some quirks and anomalies which I do not have time to deal with here.

What all this says to how the music to chant the text by was originally created, I can only speculate. Given that there was no written notation of this music for many hundreds of years from the time it was first performed - at best there were hand signals indicating the *te'amim*, provided by a **somech** a person standing alongside the person who was doing the chanting - it would be a natural aide memoire to have the same sounds for the same text wherever it occurred. Also, there is no doubt that the use of dramatic expression also aids the memory - as I know from my own preparation for chanting sections of the Torah in the synagogue - but why then is it not more consistent and more pervasive? Did the reading of the text ever happen without such chanting? Was the music composed all at the same time or did it develop over a prolonged period? Was it composed by a mixture of different people or groups of people with different ideas? Was the musical rendition of the Torah ever considered as an entity before its standardisation by the Masoretes. I know of no evidence to help us reach answers to such questions so I am left just to speculate and ponder.

## Notes

1. Genesis 19:16, Genesis 24:12, Genesis 39:8, Leviticus 8:23
2. Exodus 13:17 to 14:31
3. Deuteronomy 5:25, 6:1, 12:6
4. Deuteronomy 4:14, 12:1, 15:4, 19:14, 28:8, 30:16
5. See Price p. 6
6. Deuteronomy 15:8
7. Exodus 35:1 to 38:20
8. Exodus 25:1 to 27:19

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