

# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

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כ"א תמוז תשפ"ד

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From the Chaburah  
By: Adam Friedmann

### Switching Hebrew Pronunciation - Part 2

Last week, we began looking at the question of whether someone can choose to change the way they pronounce Hebrew. As we noted, this is something that happened historically in the early days of the State of Israel. At that time, many Ashkenazim switched to the Sephardic pronunciation that was favored by the Zionist establishment. Last week we examined the view of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook on the matter. In his *teshuvah*, published in the year 5693 (1933), he forbade any Jew from changing their Hebrew pronunciation.

Rav Kook based his argument on the halachah that the Shema must be pronounced precisely (*dikduk be'otiot*). He made the following points:

1. The halachah of *dikduk be'otiot* requires reading the Shema with as much linguistic precision as possible. Every aspect of the pronunciation must be included, even things that don't affect the meanings of the words.
2. One who reads the Shema without proper pronunciation fulfills the mitzvah. Nevertheless, this halachic requirement is absolute. It's not a nice thing to do to make the mitzvah more complete. According to one view (the *Sefer Hachinuch*) if letters are mispronounced extremely enough the person may not fulfill reading the Shema at all.
3. Every Jew is obligated to maintain their ancestors' tradition of Hebrew pronunciation. This means that even though today Jews from a variety of ancestries live together, Ashkenazim must maintain Ashkenazi pronunciation, Sephardim must maintain Sephardic pronunciation, and so on. One is not allowed to deviate from their ancestral practice.
4. As a result, if an Ashkenazi Jew reads the Shema with Sephardic pronunciation, they are actually mispronouncing the words relative to what they're obligated to do. Therefore, they would be considered to have failed to fulfill the halachah of *dikduk be'otiot*.

An opposing perspective on this question is presented by two other chief rabbis of Israel. Rabbi Ben - Zion Meir Chai Uzziel, a contemporary of Rav Kook, and Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog, writing a couple of decades later, take issue with Rav Kook's position.

Rav Uzziel (*Mishpetei Uzziel* 1, *Orach Chaim* 1) begins by questioning Rav Kook's second premise. Pronouncing the Shema clearly is obviously important. But how obligatory is it?



Rav Uzziel concludes that while pronouncing everything clearly is the ideal way of reading the Shema, it's not a fundamental obligation. He cites Rabenu Chananel (*Otzar Hage'onim*, *Berachot* 15) who notes that the Talmud (*Berachot* 15b) says that the reward for a person who pronounces the Shema clearly is that *Gehinom* is cooled down for them. Rabenu Chananel writes that since this outcome is something we should aim for, we should read the Shema carefully. According to Rav Uzziel, the implication is that pronouncing the Shema clearly is an ideal, but failing to do so is in no way a violation of a prohibition. He makes similar inferences from the texts of the *Sefer Hachinuch* and the *Mishneh Torah*.

The second objection to Rav Kook's argument relates to his third premise. Is it really forbidden for a Jew to switch to a different tradition for pronouncing Hebrew? Both Rabbis Uzziel (*Mishpetei Uzziel*, *ibid.*,) and Herzog (*Heichal Yitzchak*, *Orach Chaim* 3) note a responsa from Rabbi Shmuel di Medina (Maharashdam) (*Responsa of Maharashdam*, *Orach Chaim* 35). He was asked about an Ashkenazi shul which had succumbed to the majority local custom and changed its services over to the Sephardic practice. Is this allowed? Maharashdam replies that it is. This is because deviating from ancestral traditions is a problem only in cases where the tradition has something to do with violating a prohibition. For example, this would apply to traditions relating to the laws of Kashrut. But in the case of prayers, where there is no concern for violating a prohibition, it's permissible to change practices.

We may add that some authorities question whether the concept of "ancestral practice" even exists in halachah at all. For example, Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch (*Siach Nachum* 86) notes that the primary sources that deal with the laws of traditional practice (*minhag*) all revolve around the concept of local custom (*minhag hamakom*), not ancestral practice (*minhag avot*). As a result, he concludes that in new settlements in Israel that include Jews from many different ancestral backgrounds there is no obligatory *minhag*. Rather, the community must work towards forging a new one. Presumably, this would apply to Hebrew pronunciation as well.

On the basis of these and other arguments both Rabbis Uzziel and Herzog conclude that it's permissible for Ashkenazim to change their pronunciation to the Sephardic, or some other, tradition. Interestingly, they both take other historical factors into account in their rulings. Rabbi Herzog allows changing pronunciations in Israel (see *Heichal Yitzchak*, *Orach Chaim* 1), but opposes it outside of Israel where this can be seen as an endorsement of Reform Judaism (*ibid.*, *Orach Chaim* 3). Rav Uzziel notes that, at least in Israel, the widespread acceptance of the Sephardic pronunciation was already an established fact. Even if one accepted Rav Kook's position, it was too late to instruct Jews who had grown up using this pronunciation to switch back to their ancestral practice. It seems reasonable that the historical facts on the ground, more than purely halachic considerations, are what led the Religious Zionist community to reject Rav Kook's position and favor that of Rabbis Uzziel and Herzog.

**Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life**  
**By: Dovid Campbell**

## **Berachot 6:2 — The Continuity of Creation**

In last week's mishnah, we saw how the laws of *berachot* reflect a unique approach to categorizing the natural world. Unlike modern taxonomy or other biological approaches to classification, the Torah's approach is aimed at developing moral sensitivities to the diverse gifts of nature. There is an experiential difference between the way we enjoy fruit trees, which continuously offer produce with little human involvement, and the way we enjoy crops or garden vegetables that must be tended and replanted yearly.

This week's mishnah continues this theme by describing a hierarchy within this halachic taxonomy. We are taught that if one mistakenly recited *bore pri ha'adamah* on a tree-fruit, he has nevertheless fulfilled his obligation. However, in the reverse case, when one recites *bore pri ha'eitz* on a ground-fruit, he has not fulfilled his obligation. The rationale for this, as explained by the Gemara, is that a tree is fundamentally an extension of the earth. Though it is a unique creation with a distinct nature, a tree's fruit can technically be considered a product of the earth itself.

Approaching the natural world in this way yields a special awareness of its interconnectedness. We can appreciate this approach best by contrasting it with other systems of classification. Modern phylogenetics attempts to situate an organism within an evolutionary timeline by analyzing genetic relatedness and the emergence of novel traits. Though sophisticated, this approach fundamentally alienates us from the natural world by denying our common-sense perceptions of life. For example, since a salmon is more closely related to a cow than to some other species of fish, we must either call a cow a fish or abandon the concept of fish entirely.

Other approaches to classification place a special emphasis on morphology. This is seen in older approaches to taxonomy, stretching back to Carl Linnaeus in the 18th century. This approach is excellent for differentiating species, and the laws of *kilayim* are similarly based on an assessment of distinct appearances (see Rambam, *Hilchot Kilayim*, chapter 3). But it does not highlight for us the remarkable continuity of living things.

Specifically in the domain of *berachot*, our declarations of reality's pleasures and wonders, the Torah asks us to reflect on where these species come from. A plant is not simply a plant; it is a “fruiting of the earth” and is thus equivalent to all other plants, even those trees that seem to have a more independent existence. Ultimately, all life shares one Source, and this concept is beautifully expressed in the final line of our mishnah: On any food, if one said the blessing *shehakol nihayah bidvaro*—that all came into being through His word—he has fulfilled his obligation. Fundamentally, the astonishing diversity of life is all bound together, the wondrous expression of Hashem's creative word.

## The Covenant of Pinchas — Rewarding Zealotry or Accepting a Mistake?

“Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace’” (*Bamidbar* 25:12).

Following his heroic slaying of Zimri and Kozbi, Pinchas receives Hashem's brit shalom, His covenant of peace. But what exactly was this covenant, and why was Pinchas uniquely deserving of it? The commentators' diverse answers to these questions reveal both the importance and the ambiguity of this dramatic episode in Chumash.

Rashi and Ralbag see a “measure for measure” aspect to this reward. Pinchas had assisted Hashem, so to speak, by restoring peace between Him and His people. Hashem therefore returned the favor by granting Pinchas a special covenant of peace. Sforno explains that this reward manifested itself in an extraordinarily long lifespan, since death only comes when there is a lack of peace and harmony between the various components of the body.

Other commentators see a more protective quality to this covenant. Ibn Ezra, Bechor Shor, Daat Zekeinim, and others explain that there was a real danger that the family of Zimri, and perhaps also of Kozbi, would seek revenge against Pinchas. The *brit shalom* therefore served as a promise that no harm would come to him.

Chizkuni suggests an additional concern that Pinchas might have had based on halachic considerations. In general, a kohen who commits murder is prohibited from performing the *birkat kohanim*. Perhaps Pinchas' zealotry had disqualified him from any future service as a kohen. Hashem therefore assured him that since his slaying had been *l'shem shamayim*, he would not be disqualified.

It seems valuable to conclude with a more recent (and radically different) interpretation of this story. R' Mordechai Yosef Leiner, the Ishbitzer Rebbe, was one of the most important Hasidic thinkers of the early 19th century. In his *Mei HaShiloach*, R' Leiner argues that when a person is on a high spiritual level and has done all he can to avoid a sinful temptation, he can be assured that any remaining desire is an expression of the pure *ratzon Hashem*. Zimri was such a person, and his relationship with Kozbi was therefore divinely sanctioned. Pinchas did not realize this about Zimri, and his slaying of the pair was unfortunate. However, since the act was *l'shem shayamim* according to his limited understanding, Hashem treated him with love and approval.

This is certainly a surprising approach, and it seems to fly in the face of our traditional understanding of this episode. Nevertheless, R' Leiner's *Mei HaShiloach* remains a widely-studied commentary and has even gained in popularity in recent years. What might this imply about the flexibility granted to great rabbis in offering novel interpretations? What aspects of the story make more or less sense when we entertain R' Leiner's approach?