

The Cantillation of the Decalogue¹

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introduction

My use of the word "decalogue" in the title of this paper rather than the more familiar "ten commandments," is deliberate. My motivation, however, goes beyond the mere thrill of using a polysyllabic euphemism.

First of all, whenever I say the phrase "The Ten Commandments" I can't help but think of the Cecil B. DeMille movie. Secondly, as is well known, "dibrot" doesn't mean "commandments," but rather "Divine utterances."²

Even the word "decalogue" (from the Greek for "ten words") may not be appropriate, since not everyone agrees that there are *ten* commandments, or how to count the ten.³ The Samaritans count our second *diber* as the first and add an altogether different tenth, based on the injunction to carve the laws on Mount Gerizim. According to the *Sefer HaChinuch* there are fourteen *dibrot*!⁴

Where does the first commandment end and the second commandment begin? The writings of both Josephus⁵ and Philo⁶ reflect an opinion that the decalogue begins with the words *לא יהיה לך* and that the second *diber* begins with the words *לא תעשה לך פסל*. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Shelomo Norzi wrote that the second *diber* begins with the words *לא תשא*. Even in the masoretic text itself there are two different traditions: in one the second *diber* begins with *לא יהיה לך*, and in the other with *לא תעשה לך פסל*.

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered at the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies at the Park Plaza Hotel, Boston, December 20, 1994.

² Although there are several opinions as to the singular form of the word "dibrot" (not to mention the term "devarim"), I shall use the term "diber" rather than the colloquial form "dibrah," in this paper. See Jeremiah 5:13.

³ In the Pentateuch the decalogue is originally referred to, without a number, as *הברית* or as *הדברים האלה*. Only well after the Sinaitic theophany is the phrase *עשרת הדברים* utilized (Ex . 34:28, Deut. 4:13 and Deut 10:4).

⁴ *Seifer HaChinuch*. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976 (first publication Venice, 1523), pp. 76 ff.

⁵ *Antiquities*, Book III, section 5.

⁶ *The Decalogue*. 66 and 156.

The cantillation signs, the ta'amey hamikra, serve as a guide to reading the scriptural text as it was understood by the Rabbinic authorities in Tiberias some one thousand years ago. These intonation patterns can assist us in understanding how the dibrot were counted by the Masoretes who set the text in the form in which it has been known for the past millennium. Furthermore, the te'amim hold the key to understanding the history of the corruption of the masoretic text of the decalogue.

The functions of the te'amim

The te'amim are graphemata placed under, over or between words in the masoretic text. The three functions of the te'amim are, in brief:

1. The te'amim indicate a melodic motif to which the attached word is to be chanted.
2. Most of the te'amim indicate syllabic stress—which syllable of the word will receive the unique pitch level (usually higher, sometimes lower) and tonic lengthening that lends it greater prominence.⁷
3. The te'amim also function as an elaborate system of punctuation, symbols for parsing each verse into a hierarchy of syntactical components.⁸ The te'amim are a guide to the recursive dichotomy inherent in every verse. For example, the siluk⁹ is the equivalent of a period, indicating the end of each verse. The etnachta marks the main dichotomy of each verse. The zakef and/or tipcha indicate the next subdivision within the etnachta clause, and so on.

⁷ The exceptions to this rule are the pre-positive and post-positive te'amim, which are fixed in their position (either at the end or the beginning of the word) and therefore cannot indicate syllabic stress.

⁸ I am utilizing the parsing system devised by Michael Pearlman in his series which was initiated with the publication of *Dapim LeLimud Ta'amey HaMikra* (7 vols. Jerusalem: HaMachon HaYisra'eli LeMusikah Datit, 1962). See also the present author's article, "Ta'amey Hamikra: A Closer Look" in *The Journal of Synagogue Music*, vol. 22, pp. 76-90.

⁹ The siluk is a small vertical line placed underneath the first letter of the stressed syllable of the last word in each verse. It is sometimes called "sof-nasuk."

The cantillation of the decalogue is problematical. Even in the pre-masoretic period there must have been two distinct traditions of chanting, both of which were canonized by Ben-Asher. In the ensuing centuries yet another tradition became so prevalent that the masoretic cantillation was tampered with to suit this other interpretation.

Here is a brief example of how changing the te'amim can radically change the meaning of the consonantal text. Te'amim are either conjunctive or disjunctive. A conjunctive ta'am indicates that the word is joined in meaning to the word which immediately follows. A disjunctive ta'am indicates a syntactic separation following the word. Without punctuation the following verse could be given at least three different meanings:

Example 1: Genesis 24:34.

וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אַבְרָהָם אֲנִכִּי.

(1) with a disjunctive accent on עֶבֶד:

A servant said, "I am Abraham." וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אַבְרָהָם אֲנִכִּי:

(2) with a disjunctive accent on אַבְרָהָם:

Abraham's servant said, "It is I." וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אַבְרָהָם אֲנִכִּי:

(3) with a disjunctive accent on וַיֹּאמֶר:

He said, "I am Abraham's servant." וַיֹּאמֶר עֶבֶד אַבְרָהָם אֲנִכִּי:

The third version is the masoretic punctuation.¹⁰

the te'amim of the decalogue

The next example shows the decalogue from the twentieth chapter of the book of Exodus, as it appears in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, which is based on the Leningrad Codex, written in 1009 c.e.¹¹

Example 2. The Decalogue in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*

¹⁰ Note that the strong disjunctive etnachta changes the syllabic stress and final vowel in the word וַיֹּאמֶר.

¹¹ Note that many of the examples in this article contain the sacred Tetragrammaton. Please treat these pages with the same respect that is accorded to a Chumash.

20 1 וַיִּדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֵאמֹר: 20
 2 אֲנִכִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים: 2
 3 לֹא יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים ^{עַל־פְּנֵי} 4 לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ פֶסֶל 5
 6 וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִפֶּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאֶרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם 6
 7 מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ 7 לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה 8
 9 אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֶקֶד עֵינָי אֲבֹת עַל־בָּנִים עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רִבְעִים 9
 10 לְשֹׂנְאֵי: 10 וְעָשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֵלִפִּים לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי: 11 לֹא 11
 12 תִּשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּא כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֵה יְהוָה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא 12
 13 אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוּא: 13 8 וְזָכֹר 8 אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ 9 שֵׁשֶׁת 9
 10 יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלָאכְתְּךָ 10 וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה 10
 11 אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וַאֲמָתְךָ 11
 12 וְבַהֲמוֹתֶיךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ 12 כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־ 12
 13 הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי 13
 14 עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ: 14 כִּבֵּד אֶת־ 14
 15 אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוֹן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה 15
 16 אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ: 16 לֹא תִרְצָח: 17 לֹא תִגְאָף: 18 לֹא 18
 19 לֹא תִנָּשֵׂא: 19 לֹא תַעֲנֶה בְרַעְיָךְ עַד שֹׁקֶר: 20 לֹא 20
 21 תַחֲמֹד בֵּית רַעְיָךְ לֹא־תַחֲמֹד אִשְׁתִּי רַעְיָךְ וְעַבְדּוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ וְשׁוֹרֹךְ 21
 22 וְחִמְלּוֹ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לְרַעְיָךְ: 22

ח"י מסופ לא לא לא ח
 רחוק מן כפי מסופ דלי
 1201 לא ו לא 1201

This passage looks confusing because there are two sets of te'amim, superimposed one on the other. Both sets were canonized by the Masoretes. There are three places in the Bible where we find this phenomenon: the two occurrences of the decalogue (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) and the expurgated saga of Reuven (Genesis 35:22).¹²

The two sets of te'amim are called ta'amey ha-elyon and ta'amey ha-tachton: the upper accents and the lower accents.

ta'amey ha-elyon and ta'amey ha-tachton

¹² I will focus my analysis on the first version of the decalogue, found in the twentieth chapter of the book of Exodus.

Why did the Masoretes notate the decalogue with two sets of te'amim? They reflect two different performance practices. The generally accepted custom today is to use the ta'amey ha-tachton for all private study of the text, and the ta'amey ha-elyon for all public recitation.¹³

Compare the two versions as laid out in example 3. The ta'amey ha-elyon arrange the decalogue into ten verses—one verse for each commandment. This structure lends the public performance a certain theatrical *verismo*. The ba'al keriya recreates the sound of the theophany at Sinai. As a result of this division there are some very long verses (2 and 4), and some very short verses (6, 7, 8). On the other hand, the ta'amey ha-tachton represent the normal reading, leaving the text of the decalogue in verses of more-or-less average length, not too short, not too long. There are twelve verses. The two very long dibrot (the second and fourth) comprise three and four verses, respectively, while the four short dibrot (the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th) are combined into one verse.

For this reason, Rabbi Shelomo Zalman Henna (1687-1748) wrote that the ta'amey ha-elyon are to be thought of as analogous to the “ketiv”—an unnatural reading that is to be looked at but not vocalized. The ta'amey ha-tachton are analogous to the “keri”—a more logical, natural reading intended for use any time the words are actually read aloud.¹⁴ Note that this interpretation is the opposite of the accepted practice.

¹³ Formerly, the Ashkenazic custom was to use the ta'amey ha-tachton not only for private study, but also for public reading during the regular Sabbath cycle (Yitro and Ve'Etchanan), and to use the ta'amey ha-elyon only for the public reading on the festival of Shavu'ot. This system has a certain logic in the case of the decalogue in Exodus which is read twice during the year: once during the Sabbath cycle and once on Shavu'ot. But it raises the obvious question of why have two sets of te'amim on the deuteronomic decalogue, which is read only in the Sabbath cycle. The Ashkenazi custom nowadays is in accord with that of the Sephardim. See Mordecai Breuer, *Keter Aram Tsova VeHaNusach HaMekubal Shel HaMikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976), p. 57.

¹⁴ Jacob Weinfeld, *Ta'amey HaMikra* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1972) p. 82. I am grateful to Avraham Nannach for bringing this source to my attention.

Example 3: The two masoretic versions of the decalogue (Exodus 20)

ta'amey ha-'elyon

1

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:

2

לֹא יִהְיֶה-לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנַי
 לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה
 אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּמַמְעַל גֵּאֲשֶׁר בָּאֶרֶץ מִתְחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם וּמִתַּחַת לָאֶרֶץ
 לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא
 פֶּקֶד עֹון אָבֹת עַל-בָּנִים עַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים לְשֹׁנָאִי
 וְעָשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים לְאַהֲבִי וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי:

3

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשֹׁנָא
 כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׂא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשֹׁנָא:

4

זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ
 שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלָאכָתְךָ
 וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלָאכָה
 אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וּבְהֶמְתְּךָ וְגִרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ
 כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם
 וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בִּרְךָ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

5

כָּבֹד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְךָ
 לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוֹן יְמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ:

6

לֹא תִרְצַח:

7

לֹא תִנָּאֵר:

8

לֹא תִגְנוֹב:

9

לֹא-תַעֲנֶנֶה בְּרַעַךְ עַד שֹׁקֶר:

10

לֹא תִחְמֹד בֵּית רַעֲךָ
 לֹא-תִחְמֹד אִשְׁתְּ רַעֲךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹרׇךְ וַחֲמֹרׇךְ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרַעֲךָ:

Exodus 20 — ta'amey ha-tahton

1

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים
לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פָּנַי:

2

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה
אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאֶרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאֶרֶץ:

3

לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קָנָא
פֶּקֶד עוֹן אָבֹת עַל־בָּנִים עַל־שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רִבְעִים לְשֹׁנָאִי:

4

וְעָשִׂה חֶסֶד לְאֶלְפִים לְאֹהֲבָי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי:

5

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשֹׁנָא
כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשֹׁנָא:

6

זָכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקֹדֶשׁ:

7

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלָאכְתֶּךָ:

8

וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה
אֹתָהּ וּבִנְיָהּ וּבִתְּךָ עֹבֶדְךָ וְאֹמְתְךָ וּבַהֶמְלֶךְ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

9

כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם
וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:

10

כִּבְר אֶת־אֲבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ
לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוֹן יָמֶיךָ עַל הַדָּמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:

11

לֹא תִרְצַח לֹא תִנָּאֵף לֹא תִגְנוֹב לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בְרַעַךְ עַד שֹׁקֶר:

12

לֹא תַחֲמוֹד בֵּית רַעֲךָ
לֹא־תַחֲמוֹד אִשְׁתִּי רַעֲךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׁוֹרְוֹ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרַעֲךָ:

The New International Version of the Bible divides the decalogue into sixteen verses. This division is arrived at by counting every verse ending: both the elyon and the tachton.

Example 4: The decalogue (Exodus 20: 11-17) in the NIV.¹⁵

Exod. 20:2	"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
Exod. 20:3	"You shall have no other gods before me.
Exod. 20:4	"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.
Exod. 20:5	You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,
Exod. 20:6	but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.
Exod. 20:7	"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
Exod. 20:8	"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
Exod. 20:9	Six days you shall labor and do all your work,
Exod. 20:10	but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.
Exod. 20:11	For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
Exod. 20:12	"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
Exod. 20:13	"You shall not murder.
Exod. 20:14	"You shall not commit adultery.
Exod. 20:15	"You shall not steal.
Exod. 20:16	"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
Exod. 20:17	"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible*. New International Version. The International Bible Society. 1973.

When comparing the ta'amey ha-elyon and ta'amey ha-tachton in their vocalized versions, one can notice some subtle differences, some of which affect the pronunciation of the text:

Example 5: Differences in Pronunciation

	טעמי העליון	טעמי התחתון	
a	עַל־פָּנֵי	עַל־פָּנֵי	vowel
b	מִתְחַת	מִתְחַת	vowel
c	וַעֲשִׂיתָ כָּל־מַלְאכֶיךָ	וַעֲשִׂיתָ כָּל־מַלְאכֶיךָ	dagesh
d	לֹא תִרְצַח	לֹא תִרְצַח	dagesh
e	לֹא תִנָּאֵךְ	לֹא תִנָּאֵךְ	dagesh
f	לֹא תִגְנוֹב	לֹא תִגְנוֹב	dagesh

These variant pronunciations are the result of the two different systems of accents. For example (ex. 5f), a disjunctive accent (tipchah or me'alya) on לא requires a dagesh on the first letter of תגנוב, but a conjunctive accent (munach) on לא causes the tav to be rafeh.

When the accent (ex. 5b) on מתחת is etnachta then the word takes the pausal form, and the patach on the second syllable becomes a kamats.

Since the halachah is quite clear on the importance of the correct pronunciation of each and every word, the Rabbinic authorities were understandably concerned about identifying which version was appropriate for the public reading.

The terminology of elyon and tachton

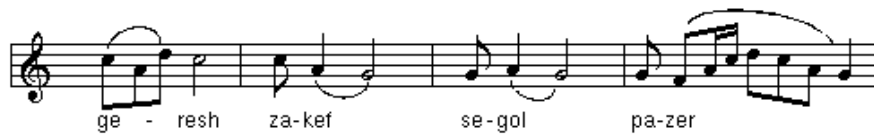
There are several explanations for the origin of the terminology “elyon” and “tachton” in reference to the accents.

1. According to Rabbi Shelomo Zalman Henna (in his book *Sha'arey Tefillah*, 1725) the ta'amey ha-elyon (higher accents) indicate the intonation of the words in imitation of the manner in which they were uttered by God (Eyl

Elyon). The ta'amey ha-tachton (lower accents) are for the normal recitation by mortals.¹⁶

2. According to Rabbi Jacob Ben-Tsiyon Emden (1697-1776) (in *Lu'ach Eresh*, 1768): the ta'amey ha-elyon are the "high accents"—those which encompass a higher tessitura, while the ta'amey ha-tachton, "the low accents," are generally in the lower pitch range.¹⁷

Example 6a. Some of the "high accents"



Example 6b. Some of the "low accents"



3. The same author also points out that the ta'amey ha-elyon (upper accents) are for the most part symbols that are placed above the letters, while the ta'amey ha-tachton (lower accents) are placed below the letters.¹⁸

Example 7a. Some of the "upper accents"

פֹּזֵר זָקֵף סִגּוּלִי גִּרְשׁ

Example 7b. Some of the "lower accents"

סְלוּק תְּבִיר שְׂפָחָא

¹⁶ Weinfeld, p. 100.

4. Rabbi Wolf Heidenheim (in his *Eyn HaSofeir*) points out that most of the ta'amey ha-elyon are accents that are found at a significant distance from the etnachta,—in other words, near the beginning of a long clause. Here the word “elyon” is used in the same sense as the word “mil'eyl.” “Mil'eyl” means near the beginning (the top) of a word, “elyon” means near the beginning of the verse. The accents on the first words (those furthest from the end of the etnachta clause) might be zarka, segol, geresh, pashta, zakef, etc.¹⁹ In the following example the etnachta (the main division of the verse) falls on the eleventh word. Because of the length of the clause we find an abundance of these “upper” accents.

Example 8. The predominance of “upper accents” in Exod. 18:22

וְשָׁפְטִי אֶת־הָעָם בְּכָל־עֵת וְהָיָה כָּל־הַדָּבָר הַגָּדֹל יָבִיאוּ אֵלַי וְכָל־הַדָּבָר
הַקָּטָן יִשְׁפְּטוּ־הֶם וְהָקֵל מֵעַלְיָי וְנִשְׁאַוּ אִתִּי:

The ta'amey ha-tachton are the accents found near the end (i.e. bottom) of a clause and will be common in short verses, in which there are no words at a great distance from the end of either the etnachta or the siluk clause. In example 9 there are only three words in the etnachta clause. The “upper” accents are completely absent.

Example 9. The exclusive use of “lower accents” in Exod. 18:22

וַתֵּבֶט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נֹצֵיב מְלָח:

Rabbi Heidenheim's explanation is based a salient feature of the decalogue according to the ta'amey ha-elyon: the extreme length of the verses for the second and fourth dibrot—43 words, apiece. The extreme brevity of the sixth, seventh and eighth dibrot (two words each) was apparently overlooked.

Where does the first diber end?

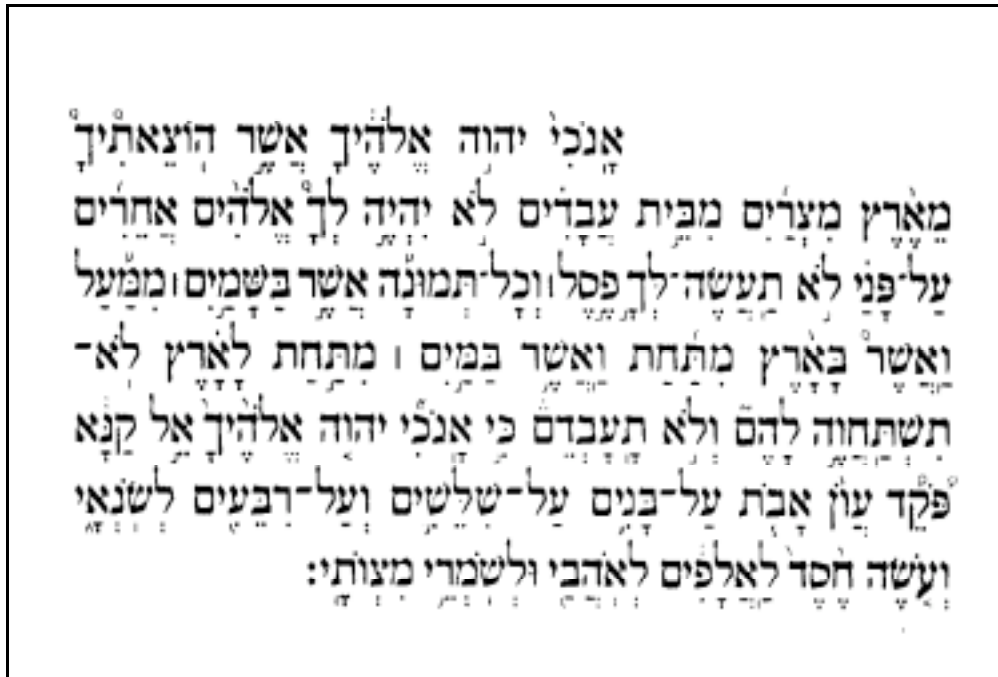
¹⁷ Weinfeld, p. 85 (citing the work of Rabbi Y. Ben Chaviv in *Eyn Ya'akov*).

¹⁸ Weinfeld, p. 85.

¹⁹ Weinfeld, n. 91.

A close reading of the first two dibrot reveals a problem of some complexity. Most modern Jewish Pentateuchs and prayerbooks that show the ta'amey ha-elyon combine the first two dibrot into one very long verse.

Example 10. The first dibber from the Koren Bible (ta'amey ha-elyon).



This would seem quite odd if the aim of the ta'amey ha-elyon is to present the dibrot as ten verses, one verse for each dibber. According to these sources, a congregant listening to the ba'al keriyah on Shavu'ot would hear only nine dibrot. Where did this strange variation originate, and how was it perpetuated and enshrined in tradition?

Here is the first dibber as it appears with both ta'amey ha-tachton and ta'amey ha-elyon in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (a transcription of the Leningrad manuscript of 1009):

Example 11. The first diber from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.



The disjunctive word עַבְדִּים is punctuated with both a siluk and an etnachta. The preceding word, מִבֵּית (obviously a conjunctive because of its construct state) has both mercha and munach.

How do we know which accent belongs to ta'amey ha-elyon and which belongs to ta'amey ha-tachton? To answer that question, let us look at the short dibrot. Here is the sixth diber:

Example 12a. The sixth diber from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.



In the ta'amey ha-elyon, the two words of this diber must stand alone as a complete verse, therefore the word תִרְצַח must have a siluk as its accent. There are two accents under the tsaddi: siluk and tipcha. Siluk is on the left and tipcha is on the right. Since we know that siluk must be the ta'am ha-elyon, we may hypothesize that the ta'amey ha-elyon are written on the left and the ta'amey ha-tachton on the right, when they appear under the same letter. The accents under the word לֹא show the same pattern. The required conjunctive for the siluk is tipcha (or me'alya); it is written on the left. The required conjunctive for tipcha is mercha which is written on the right.

Similarly, in the seventh diber, on the right we find ta'amey ha-tachton: munach and etnachta, and on the left we find ta'amey ha-elyon: tipcha (or me'alya) and siluk.

Example 12b. The seventh *diber* from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.



Look at another example, the word *מתחת* from the second *diber*. In the *ta'amey ha-elyon*, because of the length of the verse, the accent is *geresh*, placed above the *tav*. According to the *ta'amey ha-tachton*, which divide the *diber* up into smaller verses, there would be an *etnachta* under the *tav*, effecting the pausal form, altering the *patach* to *kamats*. In BHS both *patach* and *kamats* are found under the *tav*. Note that the vowel for the *ta'am ha-elyon* is written to the left of the vowel for the *ta'am ha-tachton*.

Example 13. *מתחת* from the second *diber* in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.



The pattern is clear: if a word has two accents, both of which fall below the same letter, the *ta'am ha-tachton* is written on the right and the *ta'am ha-elyon* is written on the left.

Let us return now to the first *diber* (Ex. 11). The *siluk* on the word *עֲבָדִים* is written to the left of the *etnachta*. Therefore according to the *ta'amey ha-elyon* the first *diber* should end on the word *עֲבָדִים*. This punctuation is consistent in the four masoretic codices (the Leningrad MS of 1009 c.e., British Museum MS 4445 (c. 925 c.e.), the Sassoon 507 MS and the Sassoon 1053 MS (both probably 10th century)).

²⁰

Furthermore, in MS Sassoon 507, there is an interesting sidebar. The editor has placed in the margin the incipit for each *diber* according to the *ta'amey ha-tachton*. The first three markings look like this:

²⁰ Breuer, n. 59.

Example 14. A transcription of marginalia from MS Sassoon 507.

אנכי טעמ' קדמ'	אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ
לא-תעשה לך טעמ' קדמ'	מצרים מבית עבדים לא יהיה לך אלהים
לא-תשתחוה טעמ' קדמ'	אחרים על פני לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה
	אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר
	במים מתחת לארץ לא תשתחוה להם ולא
	תעבדם כי אנכי ה' אלהיך אל קנא פקד עון
	אבת על בנים על שלשים ועל רבעים לשנאי
	ועשה חסד לאלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי:

The marginalia imply that, according to the ta'amey ha-tachton, the second verse begins with **לך תעשה**; if so, the first verse ends on the words **על פני**. Therefore the siluk on **עבדים** cannot be ta'am ha-tachton (the siluk for ta'am ha-tachton is on **על**), and so must be the ta'am ha-elyon.²¹

At the end of the book of Exodus there is a masoretic note stating that there are 1209 verses in the entire book. This works out only if one counts the decalogue as 12 verses (the enumeration according to ta'amey ha-tachton). At the end of parashat Yitro the number of verses in that one parashah is given as 72. We come to that number only if we count the decalogue as 10 verses (the enumeration according to the original ta'amey ha-elyon). So the masoretic word-counters made allowances for both traditions—the decalogue as ten and as twelve verses. None of the masoretic enumerations works if one counts the decalogue as nine verses.²²

Rabbi Wolf Heidenheim found one more bit of evidence in support of the authenticity of the siluk on **עבדים**.²³ Heidenheim claimed to possess a very old machzor dating from 5018 (1258 c.e.). The torah reading for the first day of Shavu'ot was written out according to the ancient custom of public reading: each verse of the Hebrew Scripture was followed by its Aramaic translation (Targum Yonatan). The first verse of the decalogue ended unmistakably with the word **עבדים** and there were ten verses for the ten dibrot.

²¹ Breuer, p. 59.

²² Quoted in Weinfeld, pp. 98-99.

²³ Weinfeld. 97.

When and why did the text become corrupted?

The question then arises, at what point and why did the text become corrupted?

Rabbi Mordecai Breuer cites the Rabbinic Bible (*Mikra'ot Gedolot*) printed in Venice 1524-25 as the first source for the corrupted version.²⁴ The text is identical to that of most contemporary Rabbinic Bibles.

Example 15. A transcription of the first nine words of the decalogue from the Venetian *Mikra'ot Gedolot* (1524-25)

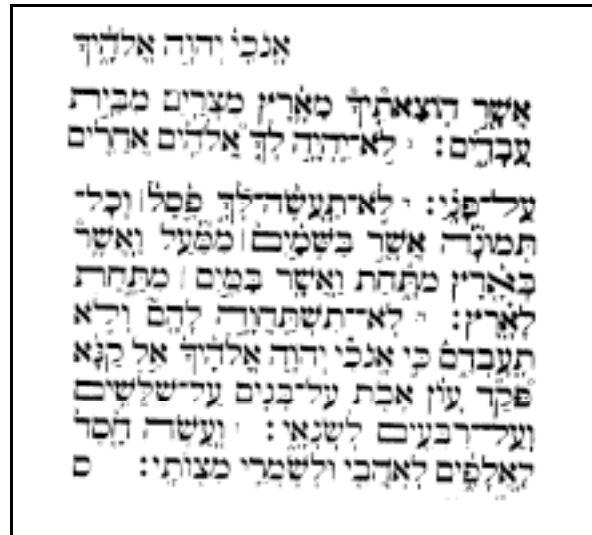
אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים

(The example shows only the te'amim, not the nekudot.)

Comparing example 15 with example 11, we notice two important changes on the word עַבְדִּים. Originally the siluk had been written to the left of the etnachta, now it is written to the right. (The conjunctives on the word מִבֵּית have also been switched to match the new order of their disjunctives.) The new arrangement implies that the ta'amey ha-tachton—not the ta'amey ha-elyon—end the verse on the word עַבְדִּים. The other implication is that in the ta'amey ha-elyon the first diber would not end on עַבְדִּים, but would extend all the way to the word מִצְוֵי.

²⁴ Breuer n. 61.

Example 16. The first dibber of the decalogue from a contemporary edition of *Mikra'ot Gedolot*.



Was there a deliberate attempt to revise the text so that the first two dibrot would be combined in the dramatic public reading? Rabbi Shelomo Norzi (1560-1616), quoting the thirteenth century French Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach, wrote,

With regard to the dibrot אנכי and לא יהיה לך, there is a “neginah gedolah” [i.e. ta’amey elyon?] to combine the two of them into one verse, in recognition of the fact that they were both uttered as one (בדבור אחד). How is this done? ... the word עבדים is punctuated with revī’a.²⁵

Norzi is referring to the fact that in these two dibrot (and in only these two) God is speaking in the first person; in the rest of the decalogue, God is referred to in the third person. To cite the Babylonian Talmud (Makkot 24:a), מפּה הגבורה שמעוּם, the first two dibrot were heard directly from God’s mouth.

Those who regarded the decalogue as “ten commandments” and not “ten pronouncements” had difficulty explaining the verse beginning with אנכי. While some, such as Philo and Josephus, considered that verse an introduction to the decalogue, others joined it to the next verse to create one long commandment against idolatry.

Example 17. The first two dibrot, combined into one.

<p>אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי ה' אלהיך אל קנא פקד עון אבת על בנים על שלשים ועל רבעים לשנאי ועשה חסד לאלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי:</p>	<p>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p>
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Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089 -1164) wrote in his commentary to Exodus 20:2, “I question how the verse אנכי can be counted in the decalogue, since it is neither a positive (מצוות עשה) nor a negative commandment (מצוות לא תעשה).” Others, however, refuted that argument. If one considers the decalogue as a covenant (ברית) between God and Israel, then the first diber (אנכי) presents God’s obligation to His people, while the next nine dibrot present Israel’s obligation to God.²⁶ Maimonides (1135-1204) even goes so far as to state that אנכי really is a commandment.

The first positive commandment — this is the one in which we were commanded to believe in the Divinity, to believe that there is a First Cause and a Primal Purpose, the Prime Mover of all existence. This is what the Exalted One said, אנכי ה' אלקיך.²⁷

The arrangement of the decalogue into paragraphs (parashot) in our standard Torah scroll also seems to contradict the masoretic punctuation. There are ten paragraph endings in the decalogue (eight setumot and two petuchot), but not all of them correspond to the ten dibrot. The first paragraph ends on the words

²⁵ Shelomo Norzi, *Minhat Shai*. Mantua 1742-44. Reprinted as a commentary to the text in *Mikra'ot Gedolot*. Tel Aviv: Yatso. (n.d.) (n.p.) The problem of the replacement of etnachta with revi'a will be dealt with shortly.

²⁶ *Encyclopedia Mikra'it* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954), vol. 2, p. 595, s.v. “Dibrot: Aseret Hadibrot.”

²⁷ Maimonides. *Sefer Hamitsvot* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1958). n. 11.

ולשמר²⁸ מצותי (not on עבדים, the end of the first diber). The last diber (לא תחמד) is divided into two paragraphs.²⁸ Indeed, many eminent scholars, among them Ibn Ezra, argued for a reordering of the decalogue in which each לא תחמד is a separate diber.²⁹

Example 18. The decalogue in the Torah Scroll.



Switching the order of the etnachta and the siluk on the word עבדים served to combine the first two dibrot of the ta'amey ha-elyon into one long commandment, but it also posed a syntactic problem. The rules of the masoretic punctuation dictate that etnachta, the major dichotomy, can appear only once in each verse. As can be seen in example 16 above, it now appears (in ta'amey ha-


²⁸ Maimonides, noticing this division in the Aleppo MS, considered it an error. This parashah division is not found in the Leningrad MS, in which the two לא תחמד phrases are combined into one paragraph.

²⁹ Asher Weiser (ed.), *Ibn Ezra: Peyrushey HaTorah LeRabeynu Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976), p. 1231.

elyon) twice in the newly elongated first verse—once on עבדים and once on שונאי. Since this was incompatible with the system, one of the etnachta had to be downgraded to the status of a lesser disjunctive. The solution to this problem was to change the first etnachta to revī'a. At first the editors were hesitant to tamper with the masoretic punctuation—the revī'a was added but the etnachta was not removed (see example 16, above).

Eventually, however, the etnachta was removed altogether, leaving only the revī'a as the ta'am ha-elyon on עבדים. Then the words אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים, which had originally been a tipchah clause in both elyon and tachton (see ex. 15), became a gersh clause to accommodate the new revī'a clause.

Example 19: The first nine words of the decalogue (ta'amey ha-elyon) from the Koren Bible.



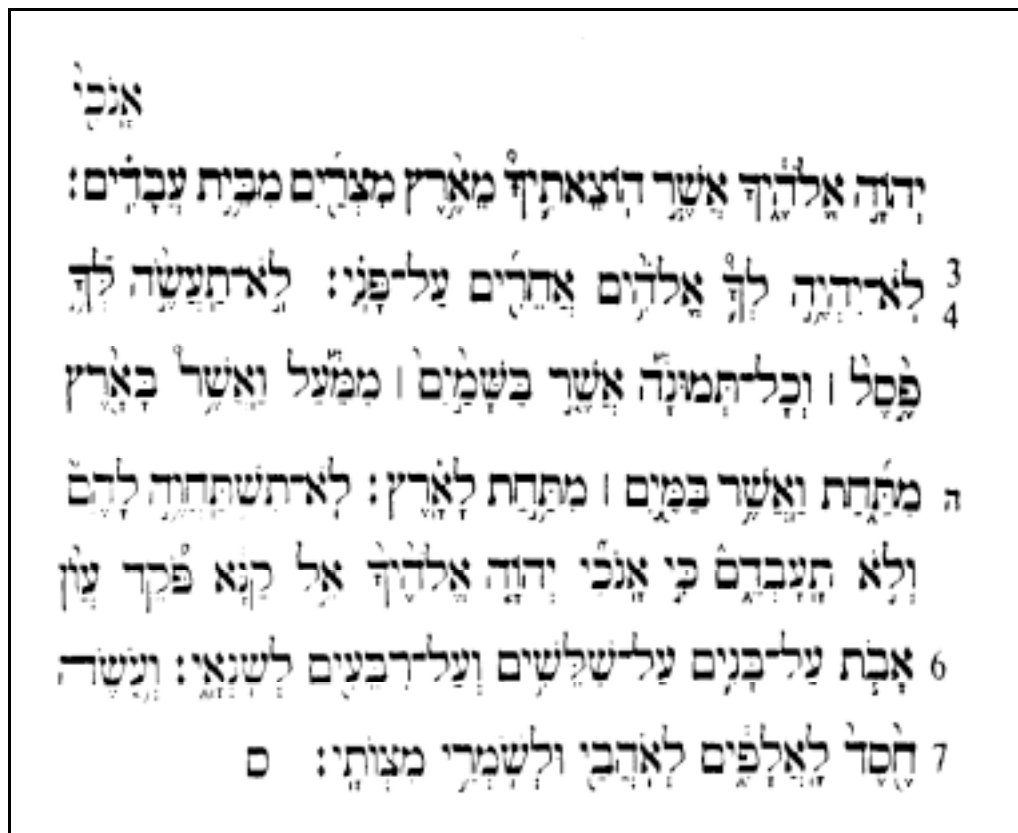
For hundreds of years this seems to have been the generally accepted Ashkenazic practice for reading the decalogue. The original punctuation was forgotten. Rabbi Wolf Heidenheim may have been the first scholar in modern times to question the validity of the punctuation in the Rabbinic Bible (Mikra'ot Gedolot).³⁰ Heidenheim recommended that in public the first nine words be chanted according to (what he assumed was) the ta'amey ha-tachton, thus ending the first verse on עבדים. While this did not correct the ta'amey ha-tachton, it at least resulted in a correct reading of the ta'amey ha-elyon.

Today, even with the general availability of the early masoretic sources, most contemporary editions of the Pentateuch published for synagogue use still perpetuate the corrupted form of the decalogue with its reversal of the elyon and tachton.³¹

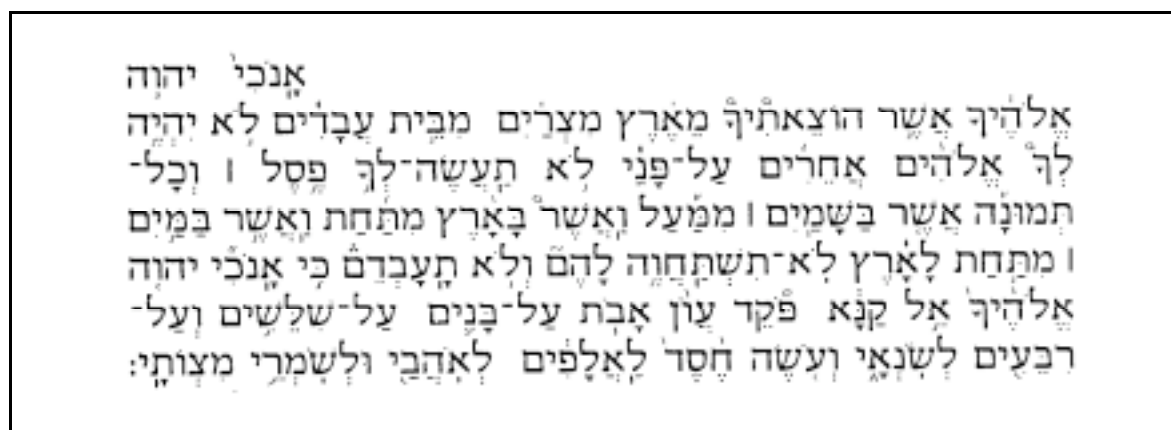
³⁰ Heidenheim, *Eyn HaSofeir* (Rödelheim, 1818-21), quoted in Breuer, 65-66.

³¹ One notable exception is the Birnbaum Machzor.

Example 20a. The first diber in the Soncino Hertz Pentateuch.



Example 20b. The first diber in the ArtScroll Machzor for Shavu'ot.



Perhaps this article may contribute in some small way to a revival of the original masoretic cantillation of the decalogue.