

There are ten vowels in the Hebrew language, five long and five short. Each long vowel (tenua gedola) has a corresponding short vowel (tenua ketana). The kamatz gadol (◌ָ), tzeire (◌ֵ), chirik malei (◌ִ), cholam (◌ױ) (◌ׁ), and melafum (◌ׂ) are the long vowels corresponding to the patach (◌ַ), segol (◌ֶ), chirik chaseir (◌ִ), kamatz katan (◌ֻ)¹, and kubutz (◌׃). A shuruk refers to a melafum or a kubutz.

long	short
◌ָ	◌ֻ
◌ֵ	◌ִ
◌ִ	◌ִ
◌ױ	◌ִ
◌ׁ	◌ִ

A chirik malei (◌ִ) is pronounced “ee” because the י is part of the chirik malei vowel and does not have a “y” sound. Example: וְלִירוּשָׁלַיִם is pronounced v’lee’rushalayim, not v’l’y’rushalayim.

Shvas (◌◌) are not considered vowels and therefore don't count as syllables. There are three kinds of shvas: shva nach is silent, shva nah is pronounced, and shva meracheif is in between the two. Some texts place a horizontal line above a letter with a shva nah or use thicker dots (◌◌ vs. ◌◌).

A chataf patach (◌ַ), chataf kamatz (◌ָ) and chataf segol (◌ֶ) have the status of a shva nah and are governed by all of the same rules. A chataf kamatz is always a kamatz katan.

A shva at the beginning of a word is almost always or always² a shva nah.

Examples: Genesis:12:1 לָךְ, Deuteronomy: 6:4 שְׁמַע

A shva at the end of a word is always a shva nach.

Example: Exodus:18:9 וַיִּחַד

When there are two shvas in a row in the middle of a word, the first shva is nach and the second is nah.

Examples: Genesis:12:18 אֲשַׁתְּךָ, 17:10 תִּשְׁמְרוּ (the letters with no vowels have a shva nach)

When two shvas appear consecutively at the end of a word, both are shva nachs.

Example: Genesis:25:34 וַיִּשָּׂא

Most authorities hold when a letter which should have a shva nach is followed by the same letter, the shva nach changes into a shva nah or chataf patach to make it easier to pronounce.

Examples: רַגְנוּ or רַגְנוּ, הִלְלוּ or הִלְלוּ

The long vowels are complete syllables and don't need to be "closed" off while the short vowels do. Shva nachs are generally used to close off syllables. Therefore, a shva following a long vowel is usually³ a shva nah (pronounced) while a shva following a short vowel is usually³ a shva nach (silent).

Examples of a shva nah: שָׁמְרוּ, לָמְדוּ, אָמְרוּ Examples of a shva nach: יִלְמְדוּ, יִבְחָרוּ, יִבְדּוּ

Example which shows importance: וַיִּירָאוּ (they feared) vs. וַיִּרְאוּ (they saw)

Two shvas can never appear consecutively at the beginning of a word. When this happens, the first shva changes into a vowel. For example, the word שָׁכַם should become בָּשָׁכַם when saying “in שָׁכַם.” However, since this would cause the word to begin with two letters with two consecutive shvas, the ב becomes בּ, making the word pronounced בָּשָׁכַם. Similarly, we don't say בְּתִשְׁוֹבָה, rather בְּתִשְׁוֹבָה. When the letter is a ו which should be וּ, it will change to ו, usually considered a tenua gedola.

Examples: (Deuteronomy 5) וּבְכַל becomes וּבְכַל, וּבְלִבְתְּךָ becomes וּבְלִבְתְּךָ, וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם becomes וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם

In these cases, the shva is called a shva meracheif and it is a dispute whether it should be pronounced or not. According to the גר"א, it is nach³ while according to R' Zalman Henna (and R'Wolf Heidenheim), it is nah.

The letters ת, פ, כ, ד, ג, ב, collectively known as פתח, can take a dagesh kal. This causes the ב (“v” sound) to become a ב (“b” sound) and so on, depending on your tradition. If a כפתח letter appears at the beginning of a syllable, it will get a dagesh kal. If a כפתח letter comes following a shva nah, it will usually lose its dagesh while if it comes after a shva nach, it will get a dagesh kal. A כפתח letter which is at the beginning of a word will lose its dagesh kal if the previous word ends with a vowel sound (like a, e) AND is connected to that word.

Examples: Genesis:1:2 הַיְהִי תְהוֹם, הַיְהִי תְהוֹם. Compare with 2:6 אֶת-כָּל-פְּנֵי (consonant ending), 1:27 וַיִּקְבְּהָ בָרָא (not connected)

All letters can receive a dagesh chazak with the exception of 4(5) – א, ה, ח, ע.³ A dagesh chazak is a dot in the middle of a letter which indicates that the letter should be pronounced doubled, as in the letter “n” in the word unnecessary. In other words, it's like placing the same letter with a shva nach before it.⁴ As mentioned, a short vowel needs to be closed off. Although not its main function, a dagesh chazak accomplishes this as well.

Examples: אָתָּה pronounced as אָתָּה, reading the double ת very quickly; יָקָח pronounced as יָקָח, reading the double ק very quickly

Examples which show importance: הַטּוֹב (the good one!) vs. הַטּוֹב (the good one?), נִידָה (wanderer) vs. נִידָה (menstruant)

If a letter with a dagesh has a shva under it, that shva is a shva nah except if it is at the end of the word.

Examples of exception: Exodus:18:9 וַיִּשָּׂא, וַיִּחַד

A **מתג** (meseg; a vertical line under a letter - ם) is an accent indicator. In Biblical texts, the **מתג** is placed by a minor accent because the cantillation⁵ serves the additional function of identifying the main accent. It also comes with a kamatz gadol to indicate that it is a kamatz gadol and the shva following it is a shva nah. In most other texts, the **מתג** indicates the main accent. A **מתג** usually indicates that the shva following it is a shva nah.

Generally, words in Hebrew are accented at the end of the word⁶. A ך at the beginning of a verb can be used to change the tense from past to future or future to past. This ך (vav hahipuch) will have a patach/kamatz under it when changing a word from future to past.

Examples: Genesis:1:3 וְיִהְיֶה (shall be) and 1:5 וַיְהִי (was), Exodus 19:19 וְדַבֵּר (he shall speak) and 20:1 וַיְדַבֵּר (he spoke)

In past tense verbs with at least 3 syllables, the accent usually appears at the penultimate syllable. However, when a ך changes the meaning from past to future, the accent moves from the penultimate syllable to the end.

Examples: וְאַהֲבָתָּה (you loved) and וְאַהֲבָתְּךָ (you shall love), וְלָקַחְתָּ (you took) and וְלָקַחְתָּךְ (you shall take)

If the word has one or two syllables, it is impossible to tell if the ך is changing the tense from past to future except from context.

Examples: וְאָמַר, וְאָכַל – These words are always accented at the penultimate syllable. (Remember, a shva isn't a syllable.)

A ה which comes at the beginning of a word, before the root, either means "the" (ה'הידיעה) or is asking a question (ה'השאלה). Generally, ה and ה mean "the" while ה signifies a question. Usually there will be a shva nah following a hei hayedia ("the") with either a **מתג** under the ה or a dagesh chazak in the letter following the ה.

Remember that ה is considered vowelized with a shva so it will change to ה if the letter following it has a shva.

Examples of ה'הידיעה: Genesis:1:1 הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ, 1:2 הַמַּיִם

Examples of ה'השאלה: Genesis:4:9 הַשּׂוֹמֵר אֶת-הַשָּׂדֶה, 18:26 הַשּׂוֹפֵט, 34:31 הַקְּזוּנָה (note the change to avoid two shvas at the beginning of a word)

A ה at the end of a word is called a mapik ה and is pronounced with an "uh" sound. It often means "her(s)".

Examples: אִשָּׁה (woman) vs. אִישָׁה (her husband), שְׁלָה (hers), Genesis:24:16 לְקַרְאָתָהּ (to call her), 24:18 יָדָהּ (her hand)

The letters א, ה, ח, and ע are guttural letters. If one of these letters appears at the end of a word with a ם under it, the ם is called a patach genuva and is pronounced before the letter. This means that ה at the end of a word sounds like ach, not cha. In other words, it's like placing א in front so it would become אה.

Examples: No'ach (נֹחַ) instead of Nocha and Elo'ah (אֱלֹהִים) instead of Eloha. (These words are actually spelled נַח and אֱלוֹהִים.)

1. In order to avoid confusion, some modern texts have the kamatz katan longer and narrower than a kamatz gadol (א vs. א).

Examples of kamatz katan: Genesis:2:15 לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׂמְרָהּ, Exodus:4:8 וַיִּקַּח, Exodus:12:2 לְהַדְרִישִׁי

2. The words שְׁתִּי and שְׁתִּים may be exceptions. It is beyond the scope of this work to explain further.

3. There are exceptions but it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss them.

4. A dagesh chazak can appear at the beginning of a word but it is beyond the scope of this work to elaborate further.

5. At the end of a פסוק, there appears a siluk which looks like a meseg. Today, we also use a colon to indicate a פסוק.

6. There are instances where changing the accent will affect the meaning of the word, so make sure to accent all words properly.

GENERAL RULES (there are exceptions)	
Shva beginning of syllable (beg. of word or after long vowel); has dagesh	Shva nah (pronounced shva)
End of word (even with dagesh) or after short vowel (without dagesh)	Shva nach (silent shva)
Two shvas in a row, middle of a word	1 st – shva nach; 2 nd – shva nah
Two shvas in a row, end of word	Both shva nachs
ש, שׁ, ק, קׁ, צ, צׁ, ס, סׁ, נ, נׁ, ל, לׁ, י, יׁ, ז, זׁ, ט, טׁ with dagesh	Dagesh chazak
כּפּת with a dagesh at beginning of word OR following shva nach	Dagesh kal
כּפּת with a dagesh following short vowel	Dagesh chazak (letter doubled)
Past tense verb (3+ syllables) with accent shifted to the end	ך changes to future tense
Future tense verb	ך or ך changes to past
ע, ה, ח, א at end of word	Pronounced as if אע, אה, אה, אא