

In Genesis 2:7, it states, “And God formed the man of dust from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being.” Though man was formed from mundane, earthly matter, The Zohar, a work of Jewish mysticism, explains that the breath blown into man was blown from God Himself, thereby endowing Man with God’s divine essence. It is this soul that makes Man a living being, which Onkelos, a second century commentary on the Hebrew Bible, defines as a *speaking spirit*. Onkelos continues by explaining that a rational soul, which includes the ability to form intelligent speech, is uniquely human and is the defining factor that separates man from animal. Onkelos views this ability as a responsibility and sees it as an individual’s duty to use this intelligence in the service of God [1].

Prayer is a daily part of Jewish practice that involves the correct usage of speech, specifically when reciting the original biblical Hebrew. Rav Shimshon Pincus, a contemporary author of Jewish thought, explains that *lashon haKodesh*, the language of Hebrew, is regarded as extremely holy, so much so that every letter expresses worlds and reveals the depths of its subject matter [2]. Though speech may appear transient, Jewish theology describes its nature as something of unequivocal importance, and it is as such that there are rules regarding articulation of specific prayers. By understanding some of the *halachic* sources, sources of Jewish law, that involve proper articulation and how it relates to clinical phonetics, one can attain an appreciation for the wisdom inherent in the various texts and prayers.

In Maseches Megillah (24b), the Gemara, a work of rabbinic literature that often deals with the intricacies of Jewish practice, describes the blemishes that disqualify a Kohen, a Jewish priest, from blessing the people. These blemishes include those that can be found on one’s face, hands, or feet, as well as dialectal manner of articulation:

We do not send down before the ark to lead the prayers men from Beis She’an, or men from Haifa, or men from Tivonim because they pronounce and *alef* as an *ayin* and an *ayin* as an *alef*, and thus confuse the words of prayer.

Because part of the Northern Israeli dialect included interchangeable pronunciation of the vowels *alef* and *ayin*, Kohanim from such areas were disqualified. Such mispronunciation would change the meaning of critical words in the Priestly Blessing. Even though there are some individuals, particularly those of the Sephardic tradition, who maintain the difference in articulation, the Beur Halachah (53), Rabbi Meir Yisroel Kagan’s tangential commentary to the Mishna Berura, explains that today, most people do not produce these two sounds differently, and that, practically, such men may lead prayers [3]. Such

individuals pronounce the *alef* as /a/, the low back unrounded vowel, and *ayin*, in a similar fashion, but with an emphasis on glottal articulation, produced by building pressure behind the vocal folds before releasing air [4]. Though perhaps this exact pronunciation is no longer immediately relevant, nevertheless, the Gemara pays careful attention to nuances in and the importance of the manner of articulation.

Further, the Mishna Berura, a work of halacha written by Rabbi Ysroel Meir Kagan which deals with daily aspects of laws regarding Jewish life, clearly explains the *halachos*, laws, involved in the recitation of the prayer of *Shema* and cites common phonological errors that would likely occur with hasty speech. Simplification processes occur regularly in conversational speech and the Mishna Berura cautions those who speak in that way to be aware of this. The *halachos* of the recitation of *Shema*, an important Jewish prayer, include rules that mandate at which point in the recitation of *Shema* that one must pause so as not to change the meaning of certain words. Such examples include the mandated pause between the words *nishba* and *ad-onai*, so that the final consonant in the first word will not be deleted, and between the words *khara* and *af*, so that elision, which is the deletion of a weak syllable within a word or word combination, does not occur. In these cases, such simplifications would alter the meaning of the text to the point that, in some cases, one may unintentionally recite something heretical. Careful attention is also paid to the voicing of specific consonants as well, such as the /z/ in the word *tizkeru*; if devoiced and replaced with an /s/, the word pronounced would be *tiskeru*, which changes the meaning of the word from the imperative to remember to the imperative to lie or, alternatively, to be rewarded [5].

In a world that is constantly increasing its pace, Jewish theology reminds those who practice it to slow down and focus on detail. Dialects change over time and words can be slurred together in speech while still being intelligible, but there is value in proper articulation and pronunciation. The Jewish sages have left behind a legacy that reminds humanity of the elevated status it was endowed by the power of speech and the ability to use that speech to converse with the divine. Such a privilege is to be taken with utmost care and clarity.

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References

- [1] *Bereishis* 2:7 (Artscroll, Stone edition)
- [2] Pincus, S. D. (2004). Siddur HaTefillah.
- [3] Megillah 24b²,note 15 (Artscroll, Schottenstein day yomi edition)
- [4] Nadav Goldberg, personal communications
- [5] Mishnah Berura, 61