One function of the ta’amei hamkira (cantillation marks or trope) is to provide a ta’am — a taste to the narrative. While one ought to consider how the te’amim provide musical interpretation throughout the Tanach, Megillat Esther in particular, is best understood in its musical context, for this medium expresses significant nuances in the dramatic tale.

The most striking demonstrations are when we consider verses which are identical in wording but differ only in their te’amim. Thus the reader must be sensitive to consider how the tune’s ascending or descending progressions communicate differences between the characters and events the words are describing. Here are two such examples from the Megillah.

The te’amim alone distinguish between the way Esther and the other candidates in the harem presented themselves before King Achashverosh:

וּבְהַגִּיעַ תֹּר-אֶסְתֵּר בַּת-אֲבִיחַ֣יִל דֹּ֣ד מָרְדֳּכַ֡י אֲשֶׁר֩ לָקַֽח-ל֨וֹ לְבַ֜ת

When the turn came for Esther daughter of Avichayil — the uncle of Mordechai who had adopted her as a daughter.

Esther 2:15

ךְ אֶל-הַמֶּ֣לֶ

When each girl’s turn came to go to King Achashverosh.

Esther 2:12

Whereas the other candidates in the harem arrived before the king with the te’amim of pazer, tlisha, kadma v’azla, and a ligarmei munach revii — a sequence that is theatrical and complex, Esther, came before the king but with one difference: a series of four munachim — subtle, gentle notes. Perhaps these te’amim indicate how those women came to Achashverosh with a flamboyant, forward, and loud demeanor which Achashverosh found to be intimidating and unwelcome — and thus chose to give the queenship to Esther, a woman who exuded a grace and tzniut in her presentation. Indeed, following his night with Esther, he “loved” Esther more than the other candidates and therefore crowned her as queen (Esther 2:17). Thus, it was the te’amim which explained why Esther was preferred over the other candidates.

Another instance of this phenomenon is when we consider how Haman and Mordechai’s edicts were written and sent.

וַיִּכָּתֵ֣ב כְּֽכָל-אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּ֣ה הָמָ֡ן

and it was written, as Haman directed

Esther 3:12

וַיִּכָּתֵ֣ב כְּֽכָל-אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּ֣ה מָרְדֳּכַ֣י אֶל-הַיְּהוּדִ֡ים

and it was written, as Mordechai directed, to the Jews

Esther 8:9

When Haman sent his edict calling for the annihilation of the Jewish people, there is a series of two munachim then a pazer above his name — a ta’am that calls for an ascending progression of notes. I heard from Rav Mordechai Willig that Haman hoped his edict would result in a social and political ascent which the Chachamim chose to demonstrate using the pazer note. Thus the pazer note on his name reflects his internal desire for upward promotion and personal achievement, even at the expense of the Jewish people.

Contrast that with Mordechai when he sends out an edict alerting the Jewish people that they have the right
to self-defense on the 14th of Adar.  
Like Haman, there is also a series of 
munachim and a pazer. However, the 
pazer does not appear above Mordechai’s name but rather on the 
word “hayehudim,” thereby indicating 
that Mordechai’s primary concern was 
the upward and outward growth of his 
people. Indeed, this marks Mordechai 
as a true leader — someone who is 
not concerned about his personal 
achievement but rather the needs of 
his people.

This difference also explains how 
the two edicts were sent. Whereas 
the te’amim change to Eicha trop on 
the words “haratzim yatzu dechufim 
bidvar hamelech” — The couriers went 
out hastily on the royal mission — 
when Haman sent his edict (Esther 
3:15), the ba’al koreh uses a special 
celebratory tune for those very 
words when introducing Mordechai’s 
edict permitting the Jewish people 
to self-defense (Esther 8:14). This 
celebratory tune is meant to introduce 
the following verse (which the kahal 
recites aloud) where Mordechai wore 
royal garb and Shushan was joyous 
(Esther 8:15). This distinction in tune 
shows how Haman’s leadership was 
cause for mourning while Mordechai’s 
was cause for joy and communal 
bonding. Speaking more broadly, 
the reader now hears how both the 
writing and sending of Haman and 
Mordechai’s decrees provide a lens 
into their intentions, personalities, 
and efficacy.

Perhaps more well known than the 
above mentioned examples is when 
we consider how the ba’al koreh 
diverges from Esther trop into tunes 
used at other times of the Jewish 
calendar. No less than seven times 
the ba’al koreh oscillates from Esther 
into Eicha (Esther 1:7, 2:6, 3:15, 
4:1, 4:3, 4:16, 7:4). Perhaps these 
somber spurts of Eicha trop reveal 
how Esther’s story is indeed serious, 
even sometimes chaotic and tragic, 
even if it might have otherwise 
seemed comedic and satirical.

Beyond the inclusion of Eicha trop, 
many ba’alei keriyyah diverge from 
Esther trop into the te’amim for the 
Yamim Noraim on the words “balayla 
hahu nadida shnat hamelech” — “on 
that night, the slumber of the king 
was disturbed” — to signal to the 
reader that this moment is akin 
to Yom Kippur, for on that night, 
Achashverosh read from his Sefer 
HaZichronot, rewarded Mordechai 
for his bravery and simultaneously 
humiliated Haman by forcing him to 
parade his enemy, Mordechai, around 
Shushan wearing royal garb. This shift 
into trop for Yamim Noraim indicates 
how, on that night, Achashverosh was 
modeling HaShem’s role as an arbiter 
who studies each person’s past to 
determine their punishment or reward — much like what HaShem does 
on the Yamim Noraim. Thus, these 
divergences from Esther trop into 
Eicha or Yamim Noraim musically link 
Esther’s narrative to other times in the 
Jewish Calendar.

Thus from these limmudim we hear 
how the ta’amei hamkra indeed 
provide a ta’am, a taste to this 
narrative by providing nuanced insight 
into the characters and undercurrents 
of the narrative. The above mentioned 
examples are but a few of many. May 
we be zocheh to find several more 
examples when our communities read 
Megillat Esther this year!