

Kriyat Megillat Esther with Its Te'amim

One function of the *ta'amei hamkira* (cantillation marks or *trop*) 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:

וּבְהִגִּיעַ תֹּר־אֶסְתֵּר בֵּת-אָבִיחַיִל יָד מְרֻדְכַי
אֲשֶׁר לָקַח-לָוּ לְבַת

When the turn came for Esther daughter of Avichayil — the uncle of Mordechai who had adopted her as a daughter.
Esther 2:15

וּבְהִגִּיעַ תֹּר נִעְרָה וְנִעְרָה לְכוּא | אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ
אֲחַשְׁוֵרֹשׁ

When each girl's turn came to go to King Achashverosh.
Esther 2:12



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Whereas the other candidates in the harem arrived before the king with the *te'amim* of *pazer*, *tlisha*, *kadma v'azla*, and a *ligarmeim 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

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.

וַיִּכְתֹּב כָּכָל-אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה הַמֶּלֶךְ

and it was written, as Haman directed
Esther 3:12

וַיִּכְתֹּב כָּכָל-אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה מְרֻדְכַי אֶל-הַיהוּדִים
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 *muncachim* 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



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

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 keriyah* 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!

