

Studies in the Masoretic Tradition of the Hebrew Bible

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**“SOME FANCIFUL MIDRASH
EXPLANATION”: *DERASH* ON THE
TE‘AMIM IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND
EARLY MODERN PERIOD**

Benjamin Williams

Among the multitude of *te‘amim* ‘cantillation marks’ that adorn the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, the accent *shalsholet* attracts attention due to its conspicuous zig-zag shape and its sung recitation as a trill or tremolo. Because of its rarity—it occurs just seven times in the twenty-one prose books of the Hebrew Bible—medieval and modern readers have attributed special significance to the passages in which it appears. In his 1887 treatise on the accentuation, William Wickes related medieval explanations to the effect that the accent conveys information about the events narrated not otherwise explicit in the biblical text, such as the prolonged repetition of a particular action, or even angelic intervention in the proceedings. Such aggadic interpretations were not to the taste of sober-minded Wickes. Fearing that a similar interpretation might underlie the Masoretes’ own use of *shalsholet*, Wickes pronounced that the accent’s original meaning, if it could be recovered, would not be worth the reader’s attention: “For we may be sure that we should have had some fanciful

Midrash explanation, which we can well afford to dispense with” (Wickes 1887, 85).

The purpose of this study is to examine the history of the idea that the shapes, names, and sounds of the *te'amim* convey information about biblical narratives. Medieval commentators who relayed the *peshat*, the plain meaning of the text, regularly employed the accents to identify pausal forms, stressed syllables, the relationship between consecutive words, and the structure of the verse. But a number of interpreters, including Tobias ben Eliezer, Joseph ibn Caspi, Baḥya ben Asher, and Moses Alsheikh, also used them to formulate narrative details that are not explicit in the text, including twists and turns in the plot, the thoughts and motivations of the characters, and the manner in which direct speech was delivered. The present study examines this technique first by analysing the midrashic method of deriving such information from the graphic features of the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible. I will then turn to medieval anthologies of midrash and commentaries that favour the *derash*, where unusual and irregular cantillation marks, including *shalsholet*, are interpreted in a similar way. Finally, examples from the commentaries of Moses Alsheikh of Safed (d. 1593) will show how sixteenth-century Sephardi interpreters not only focused on exceptional *te'amim*, but treated the masoretic system of accentuation more broadly as a source of information concerning biblical narratives. As will be shown in the conclusion, medieval *derash* on the *te'amim* has inspired several contemporary expositors of the biblical text. It is hoped that an impartial enquiry into the origins of this exegetical method, which neither defends the interpretations

nor dismisses them as “fanciful,” will enable an understanding of a distinctive interpretive approach to the Masora that has, once again, become popular.

In Isaac Heinemann’s classic study of the midrashic method, *Darkhe ha-’Aggada*, the significance accorded by the rabbis to the shapes and sounds of the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible is designated as “creative philological” exegesis. Though Heinemann focused on the interpretation of letters, words, sentences, and sections, he acknowledged that other graphic features of the text, including its division into paragraphs, were also the subject of “philological” exposition (Heinemann 1970, 100). Interpretations of the *puncta extraordinaria* in Sifre Numbers 69 illustrate this exegetical method. Among the passages expounded is the reunion of Jacob and Esau in Gen. 33.4, where Esau fell upon his brother’s neck and kissed him. The letters of וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ are written with supralinear dots:¹

- (1) וַיִּרַץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַיַּחְבְּקֵהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צְוֵאָרוֹ וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ:
 ‘Esau ran to meet him. He embraced him, fell upon his neck, and kissed him, and they wept. (Gen. 33.4)

The midrash reads as follows:

- (2) כִּיּוּצָא בּוּ וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ, שְׁלֵא נִשְׁקוּ בְּכָל לְבוּ. ר' שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָי אָו' וְהֵלֵא בִּידוּעַ
 שְׁעֵשׂוּ שׁוֹנָא לִיעֻקֵּב אֵלֵא נִהֲפֵכוּ רַחֲמִיּוּ בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה וְנִשְׁקוּ בְּכָל לְבוּ.
 ‘...An analogous case is “and kissed him.” [The presence of points above the word indicates] that [Esau] did not kiss [Jacob] wholeheartedly. Rabbi Shim’on ben Yoḥai said, “Is

¹ Unless otherwise noted, biblical texts are cited from the BHS. The consonants of the *qere* are printed in brackets.

it not certain that Esau hated Jacob? But at that particular moment, his disposition changed and he kissed him wholeheartedly.” (Sifre Numbers 69, ed. Kahana 2011–2015, I:167)²

According to the first interpretation, the dots cast doubt on the sincerity underlying Esau’s action. Shim’on ben Yoḥai, by contrast, suggests that the dots reinforce the significance of Esau’s kiss as an indication of a profound change of heart. New insights into the motivations and actions of biblical characters may, according to these views, be disclosed by expounding the text’s graphic features. This interpretation illustrates the relationship Heinemann (1970, 13) held to be implicit between “creative philology” and the resulting “creative historiographical” insights into the narrative, since, according to the midrashic method, “the interpretation of documents serves as a basis for the description of history.”³

Though the exposition of graphic features of the Hebrew Bible’s consonantal text is well-attested in rabbinic literature (Fishbane 2013, 17–21), a small number of references to masoretic signs can be found in late *midrashim*. An example comes in the first part of Exodus Rabbah (2.6), which Avigdor Shinan

² Cf. Genesis Rabba 78.9. Midrash Tanḥuma (printed) *Va-yishlah* 4 explains the insincerity of Esau’s action by suggesting that, rather than seeking to kiss Jacob (from the root נש"ק), he wished to bite him (from נש"ך). See also Liebermann 1962, 43–46; Shinan 1994; Martín-Contreras 2003.

³ The full quotation reads: שני מיני פעילות אלו קשורים זה בזה כבר במדע: פירוש התעודות משמש בסיס לתיאור ההיסטוריה, ורק על רקע הקורות יש להבין את הטכסטים.

(1984, 23) has dated to the tenth century CE. The exposition of Exod. 3.4, when God called Moses from out of the Burning Bush by repeating his name, draws attention to other occasions when patriarchs and prophets were similarly addressed. In the case of Abraham, Jacob, and Samuel, the repeated proper nouns are divided in the pointed Masoretic Text by a vertical bar (*paseq*).⁴ The midrash explains why the sign is not used in the case of Moses:

ויאמר משה משה. את מוצא: אברהם אברהם יש בו פסק, יעקב יעקב יש בו פסק, שמואל שמואל יש בו פסק, אבל משה משה אין בו פסק. למה? כאדם שהוא נתון תחת משאוי גדול וקורא: פלוני פלוני, קרב פרוק משאוי זה מעלי! דבר אחר: עם כל הנביאים הפסיק מלדבר עמהם, ועם משה לא הפסיק כל ימיו.

“And [the Lord] said, ‘Moses Moses’” (Exod. 3.4). You find in the case of “Abraham, Abraham” (Gen. 22.11) that there is a *paseq*. Likewise, there is a *paseq* in “Jacob, Jacob” (Gen. 46.2) and also in “Samuel, Samuel” (1 Sam. 3.10). But in the case of “Moses Moses”, there is no *paseq*. Why is this so? It is like a man who was laden with a heavy burden and shouted, “So-and-so so-and-so, come over here and take this load from me.”

Another interpretation (*davar ’aḥer*) is that God spoke intermittently with all [other] prophets, but never stopped [speaking] with Moses throughout his whole life. (Exodus Rabbah 2.6, ed. Shinan 1984, 116–17)

⁴ See also Dotan (2005). An eleventh-century dating of this part of Exodus Rabba has been advanced by Bregman (2003, 171–72). Cf. t. Berakhot 1.14; Sifra *Nedava* parasha 1.12 (Weiss 3d); Genesis Rabba 56.7; Tanḥuma (Buber) *Noaḥ* 1, 6, *Va-yera* 46, *Shemot* 15; Tanḥuma (printed) *Va-yera* 23, *Shemot* 18, *Ṣav* 13.

In good midrashic style, the *darshan* expounds Exod. 3.4 in the light of verses throughout the biblical canon which exhibit a similar syntactic formulation. Alternative explanations are proposed, which, as indicated by the term *davar 'aher* ‘another interpretation’, are not mutually exclusive (Fishbane 2013, 16, 21–23). But, unusually for a midrash, the interpretation refers to the masoretic pointing. The *darshan*’s observations correspond with the text in the Leningrad Codex (dated 1008/9 CE), where a *paseq* divides אַבְרָהָם | אַבְרָהָם ‘Abraham, Abraham’ in the account of the Akedah (Gen. 22.11), יַעֲקֹב | יַעֲקֹב ‘Jacob, Jacob’ before the migration to Egypt (Gen. 46.2), and שְׁמוּאֵל | שְׁמוּאֵל ‘Samuel, Samuel’ when God called to the young prophet at Shiloh (1 Sam. 3.10). The lack of a *paseq* when God called Moses’s name twice in Exod. 3.4, therefore, invites an explanation (Freedman 1998, fols 12a, 28b, 32b, 151b; Khan 2013, 10). According to the first interpretation, the absence of the division that would indicate a slight pause in the recitation means that God addressed Moses as hurriedly as someone shouting for urgent assistance with a heavy load (Yeivin 1980, 216, no. 283). The alternative explanation refers to the primacy of Mosaic prophecy, as Moses alone received divine inspiration without interruption (cf. Leviticus Rabbah 1.14–15; Exodus Rabbah 21.4). By means of these explanations, the *darshan* shows how the nature of the revelation at the Burning Bush can be grasped through the midrashic interpretation of features of the masoretic codex.

Expositions of the cantillation marks as sources of narrative information can be found in the *masora* of tenth- and eleventh-century manuscripts. The *masora magna* of the Aleppo Codex (ca.

930 CE) and of the Leningrad Codex compare the accounts of the capture of two kings of Judah, Amaziah and Zedekiah, in 2 Kgs 14.13 and Jer. 34.21, respectively:

(3) וְאֵת אֲמַצְיָהוּ מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה בֶן־יְהוֹאָשׁ בֶּן־אֲחִזְיָהוּ תִפְּשׂ יְהוֹאָשׁ מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּבֵית שֶׁמֶשׁ...

‘And as for King Amaziah of Judah son of Jehoash, son of Ahaziah, King Jehoash of Israel captured [him] at Beth-Shemesh...’ (2 Kgs 14.13a)

(4) וְאֵת־צִדְקִיָּהוּ מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה וְאֵת־שָׂרָיו אֶתְּנֶן בְּיַד אֹיְבֵיהֶם וּבְיַד מְבַקְשֵׁי נַפְשָׁם
וּבְיַד חַיֵּל מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל הָעֹלִים מֵעַלְיָכֶם:

‘And as for King Zedekiah of Judah and his officials, I will hand [them] over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has retreated from you. (Jer. 34.21)

Though the first parts of the two verses are similarly worded, the masoretic pointing differs. The initial וְאֵת in the account of Amaziah is pointed with the accent *telisha*. The וְאֵת in the prophecy of judgement on Zedekiah, however, is joined by *maqef* to the following word and so lacks any accent and is pointed with the short vowel *segol* rather than *şere*. The masoretic note at 2 Kgs 14.13 in the Leningrad Codex explains the discrepancy by relating Amaziah’s fate to the name of the accent *telisha*:

הראשון תלש והשני חטף. הראשון נתלש מן הממלכות וחזר למלכות.
צדקיהו נחטף מן המלכות ולא חזר למלכות.

The former [i.e., Amaziah] [God] plucked (*talash*) and the latter [i.e., Zedekiah] [God] snatched quickly. The former was plucked (*nitlash*) from his kingship but returned to the

kingship. Zedekiah was snatched quickly from the kingship, but did not return to the kingship. (Freedman 1998, fol. 211b)⁵

According to this interpretation, the masoretic pointing communicates an element of the narrative. In 2 Kgs 14.13, the *telisha* indicates that Amaziah was temporarily plucked (*talash*, *nitlash*) from the throne. In Jeremiah, the short vowel on the word זְדַקְיָהוּ and its connection to זְדַקְיָהוּ ‘Zedekiah’ show that Zedekiah’s downfall was quicker than Amaziah’s, since he was deported to Babylon (2 Kgs 25.6–7) and never restored to the throne (Loewinger 1960, 91–92; 1972, 603; Revell 2000, 72; Dotan 2009, 65–66; Ofer 2019, 261–63).

By the end of the tenth century, therefore, the midrashic exposition of graphic features of the Hebrew Bible was no longer limited to those of the consonantal text. Late *midrashim* interpret masoretic signs, though not, to my knowledge, the names or shapes of *te’amim*. The *masora* itself derives narrative information from the accents, though the verses discussed above are not expounded in extant *midrashim* (Friedeman 2021). But from the late-eleventh century, certain midrashic anthologies and commentaries developed insights into a small number of biblical narratives by explaining unusual *te’amim* or anomalous patterns of

⁵ See also the *masora magna* of the Aleppo Codex at 2 Chron. 25.33, fol. 235b.

accentuation.⁶ Several explain the account of Potiphar’s wife’s attempt to seduce Joseph at Gen. 39.8, which begins with the rare accent *shalsholet*:⁷

(5) וַיִּמָּאֵן | וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲדֹנָי הֵן אֲדֹנָי לֹא-יִדְעַ אֶתִּי מֵהַבַּיִת וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-
 יֵשְׁלוּ נָתַן בְּיָדִי:

‘But he [Joseph] refused and said to his master’s wife, “Look, my master has no concern, because of me, for household affairs, for he has entrusted everything he owns to me.”’ (Gen. 39.8)

The earliest *derash* I have found on this *ta’am* is in the late-eleventh-century *Leqah Tov* of Tobias ben Eliezer, the Greek-speaking exegete associated with the Byzantine city of Kastoria (Ta-Shma 2005, 259–94; Mondschein 2009, 270–72; Cohen 2020, 166–67, 176–90). According to this explanation, the *ta’am* reveals the manner in which Joseph refused the advances of Potiphar’s wife: “But he refused.” Refusal upon refusal *ad infinitum*,

⁶ On the interpretation of further features of the Masora, see Penkower (1982, xi, 31–40); Mondschein (2009, 270–72). On the interpretation of *tagin* and irregular letters in the *Sefer Torah*, see Razhabi (1978, 90–94, 120–23); Caspi (2015, 403–46). My thanks to Jen Taylor Friedman for drawing my attention to Caspi’s study.

⁷ In addition to those discussed below, see also Gellis (1982–2014, IV:94), and BnF MS Hébreu 5, fol. 1r. On the latter, see Wickes (1887, 85) and del Barco (2010, 42). On the interpretation of the Joseph narrative in rabbinic texts, see Kugel (1990).

as it is written with *pesiq* and *shalsholet...*' (Ben Eliezer 1884, I:198)⁸

As Aron Dotan (1967, 164–65, 343–44) and Nurit Reich (2006) have shown, *shalsholet* is also called *mar'im*, *mar'id*, and *mesulsal* in the Masora, names which characterise it as a distinctive raising of the voice or as a trill or tremolo.⁹ Its association with a loud or repetitive melodic motif would explain the comment in the *Leqaḥ Ṭov*. The *shalsholet* on וַיִּמְאַן 'and he refused' therefore indicates not only how the cantor should recite the word, but also how direct speech was originally delivered and that Joseph himself spoke with prolonged and insistent determination.¹⁰

Several later exegetes used a similar method to explain the verse. The fourteenth-century Provençal commentator Joseph ibn Caspi (1280–ca. 1340), better known for his philosophical interpretations of the Bible, included *derash* on the *te'amim* in his *Mašref la-Kesef* (Mesch 1975; Twersky 1979; Herring 1982, 125–

⁸ "וימאן. מיאון אחר מיאון הרבה פעמים, דכתיב בפסיק ובשלשלת. בדבר עבירה ממאנין, בדבר מצוה אין ממאנין". On the second part of the comment, 'Regarding a sin, one must refuse; regarding a commandment, one must not', see Genesis Rabbah 87.5 and Yalquṭ Shim'oni 145 (ed. Hyman, 1973, 750). On the *paseq* that always accompanies the *shalsholet* in the twenty-one prose books, see Yeivin (1980, 188–89, no. 229).

⁹ The *shalsholet* is also discussed in Goren (1989; 1995, 66–77, 151–56); Morgenstern (1994).

¹⁰ The comment is closely echoed in the Midrash *Šekhel Ṭov* (Ben Solomon 1900–1901, I:239). On this work, see Cohen (2020, 193–205), the afterword in Ta-Shma (2005, 253–94), and Mondschein (2009, 272–77).

26; Ben-Zazon 2017, 87–95; Sackson 2017, 161–69).¹¹ He wrote that the *shalsholet* in Gen. 39.8 represents not determination, but rather Joseph’s hesitation and wavering resolve in the face of great temptation:

וימאן גם טעם השלשלת הוא מפרושי אנשי כנסת הגדולה שלמדו ממשה וכבר כתבתי זה על ויתמהמה ואין בן על וימאן אשר ביעקב שני פעמים. ואין תמה אם יוסף החכם פוסח בזה הענין המסוכן אם לפנים אם לאחור כי בן ראוי לכל חכם ואולי זולתו ששמו כשמו לקח דרך אחרת ומה היה נעלם מרבתי[נו] ז"ל שאמרו על יהודה שמלאך י"י דוחה אותו וביוסף אמרו ביקש עצמו ולא מצא. אשרי מי שידע להכיר מעלת דבריהם.

“And he refused.” The accent *shalsholet* is also among the explanations that the Men of the Great Synagogue learnt from Moses, about which I have already written regarding the word וַיִּתְמַהֲמַה ‘and he hesitated’ (Gen. 19.16). [The accent] is not above the word וַיִּמְאָן on the two occasions it refers to Jacob (Gen. 37.35; 48.19). There is no cause for surprise if the wise man Joseph hesitated (פוסח) with regard to this perilous matter, whether one way or the other, for this befits every sage (and maybe his namesake took another approach!).¹² For how could anything be concealed from our rabbis, of blessed memory, who said regarding Judah that an angel of the Lord was compelling him, but regarding Joseph that he checked himself and found that he could not [have intercourse]. Happy is the one who can fully comprehend their sublime words!

¹¹ On Ibn Caspi’s treatment of the *te’amim*, see Rock (2007, §2.4). I am grateful to Dr Rock for kindly providing a copy of her dissertation.

¹² As suggested in the editions of Last (1905) and Rock (2007), this may be a self-deprecating reference on the part of the commentator.

(Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg MS Levy 8, fol. 32b)¹³

By crediting the transmission of the cantillation marks to the Men of the Great Synagogue¹⁴ while also endowing them with Mosaic authority, Ibn Caspi presents them as an authoritative source of information regarding the biblical narrative. To understand the significance of the *shalshelet* in question, Ibn Caspi refers the reader back to his interpretation of Lot's hesitant flight from Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19.16), where the word וַיִּתְמַקְּמָה 'and he delayed', is pointed with the same accent. There he explains that the *shalshelet*'s meaning lies in its shape (ענינה בצורתה) and that Lot's indecisiveness was manifested physically as he "was contorting his body (עושה תנועה מעוותת) forwards and backwards."¹⁵ The presence of the accent in Gen. 39.8 underlies Ibn Caspi's attribution of the same vacillation and tortuous hesitation to Joseph, who, according to the interpretation in Midrash Tanḥuma and Genesis Rabbah, was saved from transgression only

¹³ This manuscript underlies the editions of Last (1905) and Rock (2007), though the former prints a slightly different reading (ed. Last 1905, II:87–88).

¹⁴ Ibn Caspi frequently refers to the Men of the Great Synagogue when explaining the accents, including in his comment on Gen. 1.1. The attribution is in accordance with the rabbinic association of the events of Neh. 8–9, including the reading of the Torah in such a way that it was understood (Neh. 8.8), with the activities of the Men of the Great Synagogue. See b. Nedarim 37b, b. Megillah 3a, and the texts examined in Schiffer (1977). Cf. Baḥya ben Asher's assertion of the Mosaic origin of the cantillation marks cited below.

¹⁵ MS Hamburg 8, fol. 23b; cf. *Mishneh Kesef* (ed. Last 1905), II:57.

through divine intervention, as the miraculous appearance of his father’s image rendered him impotent.¹⁶ Ibn Caspi excuses Joseph for his wavering resolve, recalling the principle that sages are particularly susceptible to the evil inclination.¹⁷

A third explanation is that of Ibn Caspi’s contemporary, Baḥya ben Asher of Saragossa.¹⁸ Baḥya not only expounded the *shalsholet* in Gen. 39.8, but also supplied an explanation for his methods:

וימאן ויאמר אל אשת אדניו הן אדוני. תחלת דבורו אמר לה: הן אדני,
 כלומר והלא אדני מצוי לך ומה את עושה לי. והטעם שבמילת 'וימאן'
 מורה על אסור הדבר ועל היותו נמנע אצלו ממאן בו בתכלית המיאון,
 שהרי מתוך הטעמים שבתורה אנו מבינים מה שלא נכתב בה, כענין
 התנועות שבאדם שמתוכם נדע כוונת לבו

“But he refused and said to his master’s wife, ‘My master is here [...]’ [Joseph] began by saying to her, ‘My master

¹⁶ This is related to the statement that “there was no man (אין איש)” present in the house with Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39.11) in Tanḥuma (printed) *Va-yeshev* 9 and Genesis Rabbah 87.7; cf. b. Sotah 36b and Rashi on Gen. 39.11. Cf. Levinson (1997, 279–81). Ibn Caspi contrasts Joseph’s lack of resolve with that of his brother Judah, who, according to Genesis Rabbah 85.8, approached Tamar only reluctantly and through the coercion of the angel appointed over desire. Cf. the interpretation in Solomon ibn Parḥon’s *Maḥberet he-ʿArukh* (1160–1161) of the *shalsholet* on Gen. 19.16 as an indication of confusion (בלבול). Ibn Parḥon (fol. 5a); Berlin (1991, 85).

¹⁷ See b. Sukka 52a and also the *ʿaggadot* of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Akiva, who were almost overcome by lust for the woman who turned out to be Satan in disguise (b. Kiddushin 81a). Cf. Boyarin (2009, 258–66; Clenman (2014); and Rosen-Zvi (2011, 112–19).

¹⁸ On Baḥya, see Walfish (1993, 216–17).

is here,' which is to say, 'Is my master not available to you? What need do you have of me?' And the cantillation mark on the word וַיִּקְאַן shows that the matter was forbidden and that he held himself back, refusing point blank. This is because we gain an understanding of what is not written in the Torah from the cantillation marks, just as one may perceive a person's inner intention from his movements (תנועות). (Ben Asher, ed. Chavel 1966, I:321)¹⁹

According to Baḥya, Joseph rejected Mrs Potiphar's advances by pointing to the immediacy of Potiphar's presence with the words *hen 'adoni*, "My master is here." Potiphar's availability to his wife obviated any need of Joseph.²⁰ His determination in refusing her advances is indicated by the *shalsholet*. Baḥya then details his method of expounding the *te'amim* as sources of supplementary narrative information. His explanation hinges on a word play on תנועה, which refers both to 'movement' and 'direction' as well as to the 'vowels' and 'accents' (Wolfson 1989–90, 1, 3; cf. Martini 2010, 61–65). Just as actions may speak louder than words, so the accents that transform the biblical text into a dynamic melodic motif disclose meanings that would not otherwise be apparent.²¹

¹⁹ Part of this comment was incorporated into the *Minḥat Shay*, possibly as an addition; see Norzi (2005–2006, 135).

²⁰ Cf. Genesis Rabbah 87.5 and Tanḥuma (printed) *Va-yeshev* 8.

²¹ Baḥya also justified his interpretation of the two *te'amim* on הִנֵּה 'this one' in Gen. 5.29 as follows:

Do not think this matter is insignificant, since the whole Torah is replete with allusions and matters of a philosophical nature (ענינים שכליים). These were set forth providentially in anticipation of the one who investigates the divine

Besides interpreting unusual *te'amim* by means of *derash*, our three commentators all refer to the accents' conjunctive and disjunctive functions and use them to determine stressed syllables.²² This is their principal significance in Rashi's commentary,²³ where they are frequently used to identify stressed syllables, as well as the grammatical and syntactic functions of particular words.²⁴ Abraham ibn Ezra likewise used the accents to

Torah. In this regard the sages explained that the cantillation marks in the Torah were also handed down from Sinai, and they demonstrated this from what is written, “Giving the sense so that they understood the reading” [Neh. 8.8]. They expounded this as follows: “Giving the sense” refers to the verses. “They understood the reading” refers to the cantillation marks.’ (b. Nedarim 37b) (ed. Chavel 1966, I:98).

On Bahya's exegetical use of the method of *šekhel*, see Walfish (1993, 201–2); Talmage (1999, 319); Van der Heide (1983, 153).

²² See *Leqah Tov* on Exod. 13.11 (cf. Cohen 2020, 194–95); Ibn Caspi on Gen. 1.1, 27; 3.23; 9.6; 18.21; and Bahya on Gen. 1.1; Exod. 25.38; Lev. 10.9 (on 1 Sam. 3.3); Lev. 23.16; Deut. 25.19; 32.5. As has been shown by T. Cohen (1997–1998, 26, 43), even the accent *shalsholet* is accorded no special significance in Ibn Caspi's comment on Isa. 13.8, where he follows David Kimḥi in noting its disjunctive function (see the texts in M. Cohen 1996, 98–99). I am grateful to Tamir Cohen for providing a copy of his dissertation.

²³ Existing studies include Englander (1939, 402–3; 1942–1943); Shereshevsky (1972; 1982, 86–92); Kogut (1994, 42–54, 78–88, 148–90); Himmelfarb (2004; 2005); Banon (2006).

²⁴ It cannot be established with absolute certainty that Rashi did not treat the *te'amim* as sources of *derash* due to the lack of clarity regarding the correct text of his commentary (Grossman 2012, 75–78; Lawee

parse words and explain syntax in accordance with his commitment to grammatical exegesis,²⁵ and there are numerous such interpretations in the commentaries of David Kimḥi.²⁶ In contrast to this common exegetical approach to the accents, *derash* on the *te'amim* is a relatively unfamiliar medieval method of exegesis, being employed only in expositions that favour the *derash* and

2019, 15–20). However, the 45 comments on accentuation that I have examined in *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer'*, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich MS Cod. hebr. 5, and Fredman's edition of the commentary on Proverbs confirm that Rashi resorted to the accents to resolve questions of grammar and syntax. Examples include Gen. 18.20; 29.6; 41.35; 42.21; 46.26; Num. 11.8; Deut. 11.30; Ezek. 40.18; Hos. 11.6; Ps. 10.3; 150.5; Job 18.20; Eccl. 3.16. The apparent lack of *derash* on the accentuation could be explained by the absence of such interpretations in Rashi's sources of rabbinic exegesis. Cf. Kamin's (1980, 24) argument that, in Rashi's biblical commentaries, "the root [דר"ש] in its various forms indicates the source of the interpretation as taken from the Sages"; see also Kamin (1986, 136–57); cf. Grossman (2017; 2021, 112–14, 125–32, 256–81). Among the many studies of the relationship between midrashic interpretations and the plain meaning of Scripture (פשוטו של מקרא) in Rashi's commentary, see Gelles (1981, 9–27, 42–65, 114–16); Ahrend (1997); Touitou (2000); Grossman (2017, 84–96); Cohen (2020, 95–126; 2021).

²⁵ For instance, see his comments on Exod. 5.7; 18.3, 26; 29.35 (all in the Long Commentary); Mic. 4.8; Nah. 1.1; Ps. 20.10; 45.6; 64.7. The preface to Ibn Ezra's commentary on the Torah includes criticism of the methods of the *Leqah Tov* (1977a, I:7, 10); cf. Mondschein (2009, 271–72). See also Wolfson (1988–1989, 3), and §6 of Ibn Ezra (1977b, 111). Cf. Kogut (1994, 90–94, 196–230).

²⁶ For instance, see his comments on Jdg. 6.16; 11.25; Isa. 28.17; 44.15; Jer. 8.5; 9.18; 22.14; 22.20; 31.7, 36.20; Ezek. 15.4; 33.6; Ps. 35.19; 116.6. Cf. Kogut (1994, 56–57, 95–102, 231–38).

with reference to exceptional accents, such as the rare *shalsholet*.²⁷

Bahya’s statement that one may “gain an understanding of what is not written in the Torah from the cantillation marks” was most likely known to Moses Alsheikh of Safed, who read and cited Bahya’s commentary on Genesis,²⁸ and who made full use of this exegetical principle. Born around 1520, Alsheikh was of the second generation of the Sephardi community that settled in the Ottoman Empire (Alsheikh 1563, author’s introduction) following the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula in the 1490s. As shown in his many responsa, he was a student of Joseph Karo, a communal rabbi, and a preacher. But Alsheikh is celebrated for his biblical commentaries, an extensive corpus of exegesis that covers almost the entire Hebrew Bible. His discursive, homiletic style, and abundant use of midrash, have endeared him to generations of readers, and his commentaries remain popular to this day (see Shalem 1965–1966).

²⁷ Another example is the account of Lamech naming Noah, where two accents appear on the word הַיֵּהוָה ‘this one’ in Gen. 5.29 (Ben Eliezer 1884, I:32, and Bahya’s commentary, as noted above, n. 25). The two accents on קִרְבֵּי ‘come near’ in Lev. 10.4 are expounded in interpretations attributed to Judah the Pious and Eleazar of Worms; see the editions of Konyevsky (1978–1981, II:225) and Lange (1980, 42). On mystical interpretations of the *te’amim*, see Wolfson (1988–1989; 1989–1990); Dan (1968, 70). On the interpretation of the accent *shalsholet* in the thirteenth- or early-fourteenth-century *Sod ha-Shalsholet*, see Idel (1988, 56–61); Fishbane (1994, 31).

²⁸ See Alsheikh’s comments on Gen. 45.22; Prov. 30.29; Job 28.19; and Song 5.8.

Like Tobias ben Eliezer, Joseph ibn Caspi, and Bahya ben Asher, Alsheikh considered the meaning of the *shalsholet* in the Joseph narrative. Ever the dutiful preacher, he formulated a moralising interpretation that exhorts the reader to determined refusal when faced with temptation, lest excuses or explanations be undermined by the wiles of the tempter:

על כן ותמאן (וימאן) וילפת בשומעו כשלשלת שעל התיבה. והנה יוסף התנהג בחכמה והוא כי דרך אנשים בבא רשע או אשת כסילות לפתותו לדבר עברה והוא לא כן ידמה כי יתן טענות נגד המפתה להשתיקו אך לא זו הדרך להציל את נפשו מעשות רע כי יקרה יהיה המפתה איש לשון שבשפת חלקות ישחית דברי הנפתה הנעימים וילכד ברשתו אך אשר מוח לו בקדקדו לא יעשה כן כי אם מיד יחליט אומר למאן ולומ[ר] שלא יעשה בשום פנים גם כי ינוצח ואחרי כן אם ירצה יסדר ג[ם] כ[ן] טענות נגד המפתה וזה היה ענין יוסף כי ראשונה החליט וימאן כמי שקושר עצמו בשלשלת ואח[ר] [כ] [ד] אמ[ר] טענות... וזהו הן אדוני כו' ולא חשך כו' ואיך אעשה הרעה הגדולה הזאת להיות כפוי טובה לבשר ודם שאם כה אעשה אהיה גם כפוי טובה לה' וזהו וחטאתי לאל[ה]ים כאשר נרמז באומ[ר] [ו] וימאן בטעם שלשלת כאומר ברמז שהוא נותן שלשלת עון בצוארו

“But he refused.” This means that he shook²⁹ when he heard it, like the *shalsholet* upon the word. Indeed, Joseph behaved wisely. This is because it is human nature, when an evil man or a foolish woman (cf. Prov. 9.13) comes to entice [someone] to a sinful action that he does not intend to do (cf. Isa. 10.7), that he will counter the tempter with

²⁹ On the meaning of וילפת (Ruth 3.8), see Alsheikh’s comments on Deut. 3.29–4.1; Prov. 10.8; 12.17; Ruth 3.8; Job 6.18; and the introduction to the commentary on Ecclesiastes. Given the definition in b. Sanhedrin 19b (cf. Targum Ruth 3.8) and the context of Joseph’s seduction, there is also the possibility of double entendre. On humour in Alsheikh’s commentaries, see his interpretations of Deut. 22.4–5 and Ps. 49.2.

objections in order to silence him. But this is hardly the way to save oneself from doing evil. For it might so happen that the tempter is a smooth talker (cf. Ps. 140.12) who, with flattering lips (cf. Ps. 12.3–4), will sway the fine words of the one who is tempted, and he will be caught in his net. But the one who has a brain in his head will not act in this way, but rather will immediately resolve to refuse and say that he will not do so under any circumstances, even if overpowered. Thereafter, if he so desires, he can also list the objections to counter the tempter. This is what happened in Joseph’s case. First, he made the resolve and “he refused,” like one who binds himself with a chain (*shalsholet*). [Only] afterwards did he give the objections... This is the meaning of, “Look, my master [has no concern, because of me, for household affairs, for he has entrusted everything he owns to me. He is not greater in this house than I am,] nor has he withheld [anything from me except you, because you are his wife.] How could I do this great evil [and sin against God (*l-elohim*)?]” (Gen. 39.8–9) being ungrateful to a human being, and thereby also being ungrateful to the Lord. This is what is meant by “and sin against God.” The same is indicated when it says “and he refused” with *shalsholet*, to indicate that he puts the chain of iniquity (*shalsholet* ‘*avon*) around his neck. (Alsheikh 1593, fol. 65b)³⁰

Alsheikh begins by suggesting that the shape or melody of the *shalsholet* indicates Joseph’s reaction to Mrs Potiphar’s advances—he trembled at the very thought. The ensuing explanations hinge on the meaning of the word שלשלת ‘chain’. Alsheikh associates Joseph’s exemplary decision to refuse temptation out-

³⁰ The corrected reading גימאן is from the 1710 edition, fol. 58a.

right with the accent, suggesting that he resolved to reject Potiphar's wife as if bound by this 'chain' to his chosen course of action. Alsheikh finally turns to Joseph's commitment to proper behaviour not only towards his master, but also towards God, likening him to one who puts the שלשלת עון 'chain of iniquity' around his neck. This is the phrase that Rashi used to explain the word קולר in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Shevu'ot 31a), which refers to the burden of personal responsibility that would be assumed by a witness who testifies in a fraudulent case (see Berkowitz 2006: 149, 278, n. 128; Sinai 2007). In suggesting that Joseph's words amount to a testimony, Alsheikh echoes midrashic expositions of Gen. 39.9, "How could I do this great evil and sin against God (*l-eholim*)?" as an oath by which Joseph committed himself to shun the opportunity for sin.³¹ The *shalshet* or 'chain' in the biblical text is the testimony to his vow before the divine judge.

For all the creativity and ingenuity of his interpretations, Alsheikh's focus on the rare accent *shalshet* as the key to understanding the narrative resembles the exegetical approach of the medieval interpreters of Gen. 39.8 examined above. But Alsheikh and other sixteenth-century Sephardi commentators of the Ottoman Empire, including Abraham ben Asher and Solomon Alkabetz, did not limit their expositions to a few exceptional

³¹ See the interpretation of Gen. 39.9 as an oath in Tanḥuma (printed) *Va-yeshev* 8; Genesis Rabbah 87.5; Leviticus Rabbah 23.11; Ruth Rabbah 6.4.

te'amim.³² Rather, they saw the accentuation more broadly as a source of information about biblical narratives. In order to examine this exegetical approach to the Masora, we will turn to three comments in Alsheikh's commentary on the book of Ruth, entitled *'Ene Moshe* and first printed posthumously in Venice in 1601. The commentary is structured as a series of discourses on extended pericopes. Each begins with a list of שאלות 'questions' or קושיות 'difficulties' which Alsheikh subsequently resolves. This technique, for which Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) is well known, is ubiquitous in late-medieval and early-modern Sephardi commentaries and homilies.³³ A barrage of questions arouses the reader's curiosity about whether the text really makes sense and whether the exegete can solve all the problems he has made for himself. Alsheikh does so by examining the minutiae of the biblical text, points he calls דקדוקים. His aim is to show that seemingly trivial details, when properly understood, contribute to overarching harmonious interpretations.

Alsheikh resorts to the *te'amim* to solve exegetical problems in the very first verses of Ruth:

- (6) וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁפֹט הַשְּׁפֹטִים וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וְלֵדָּא אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה לְגוֹר
בְּשָׂדֵי מוֹאָב הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו: וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נַעֲמִי

³² On Abraham ben Asher's interpretation of the *zaqef qatan* in Gen. 12.1, presented in the course of his exposition of Midrash Genesis Rabba 39.1, see Williams (2016, 75). On Solomon Alkabets, see his comments on Ruth 1.11; 3.13, 17 (Alkabets 1992, 22, 188, 206).

³³ See Bland (1990); Saperstein (2014a); Williams (2015); Lawee (2008).

וְשֵׁם שְׁגִיבְגִיּוֹ | מַחֲלוֹן וְכִלְיוֹן אֶפְרַתִּים מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי־מוֹאָב
 וַיְהִי־שָׁם:

‘And it came about (וַיְהִי) in the days when the judges judged that there was (וַיְהִי) a famine in the land. So a man of Bethlehem of Judah (מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה) went to reside in the fields of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife was Naomi, and his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah (מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה). They came to the fields of Moab and were there.’ (Ruth 1.1–2)

Alsheikh begins by enumerating no fewer than ten ‘difficulties’ regarding these verses, asking why וַיְהִי ‘and it came about, there was’ and בֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה ‘Bethlehem, Judah’ are repeated, and why the family members are introduced once anonymously and then again by name. The eighth difficulty focuses on how Elimelech is introduced in verse two:

הנה מהראוי להבין במקרא... ח' אומרו ושם האיש והיה די יאמר [ר] ושמו
 אלימלך...

The following must be understood in this passage of Scripture... 8. The statement ‘the man’s name [was Elimelech],’ as it would have sufficed to say ‘his name was Elimelech.’ (Alsheikh 1601, fol. 3a)

Alsheikh here calls attention to an apparent tautology. Revealing his conception of Scripture as marked by perfect felicity of expression, in which no detail is superfluous, he asks why Ruth 1.2 states וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי־מוֹאָב וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ when שְׂדֵי־מוֹאָב אֱלִימֶלֶךְ would have been more concise.

Alsheikh’s explanation revolves around two concerns: Elimelech’s social status and the halakhic question of the circumstances in which one is permitted to leave the land of Israel. This latter is discussed with reference to the book of Ruth in b. Bava Batra 91a. On the one hand, Elimelech’s departure at a time of famine suggests that scarcity of food is a permitted reason to leave the land of Israel. On the other hand, he and his sons die in the next three verses, suggesting that departure even in the direst of circumstances is forbidden.³⁴ Alsheikh seeks an explanation partly in the talmudic principle that “the Holy One, blessed be He, is exacting with his righteous ones to the extent of a hair’s breadth” (Cf. b. Yevamot 121b; y. Sheqalim 48d (5.1), y. Betsa 62b (3.8); b. Bava Qamma 50a). Thus, even if departure from the land of Israel is tolerated in particular circumstances, Elimelech’s social status meant that he was held to particularly high standards. But to demonstrate this, Alsheikh must show that Elimelech was indeed important or righteous, a detail not explicit in Scripture. He alludes to the rabbinic interpretations that Elimelech and his sons were “great men of their generation” and “leaders of their generation” (b. Bava Batra 91a; Ruth Rabbah 1.4) and adds insights of his own:

אל תתמה על החפץ כי הלא אדם גדול היה כי ושם האיש כלומר האיש
 הרשום שהוא תואר איש שהוא גדול ככל אנשי[ם] שבמקרא וגם בה"א
 הידיעה וגם אלימלך כמ[ו]ן ש[אמר]ו ז"ל שהיה אומר אלי תבא מלכות
 שעל רוב שלמותו היה אומר שאין ראוי למלכות ישראל כמוהו ולרמוז

³⁴ See also Sifra *be-Har* parasha 5.4 and Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim u-Milhamotehem* 5.9–12. Cf. *Encyclopedia Talmudica*, s.v. ‘Erez Israel’, III:47; Safrai (2018, 78–79); Kanarfogel (1986); Saperstein (2014b, 281).

רוממותו הוא טעם פז"ר גדו"ל... שעל ידי בן הקב"ה מדקדק עמהם עד
גדר ש... נשפטו משפט מות וזהו וימת אלימלך וכו'...

Do not be surprised at the matter, for was [Elimelech] not a great man? This is because ‘the name of the man [was Elimelech]’ (וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ) means ‘the designated man [was Elimelech]’. This is a way of describing a man as ‘great’, like all [who are styled] אנשים in Scripture. The use of the definite article also [indicates this], as does [the name] Elimelech. [This is] as the sages said, ‘[Elimelech] would say, “Kingship will come to me (אלי... מלכות).”’ Because of his pre-eminence he would say that no one was better suited for the monarchy of Israel than he was. And to indicate his exalted position is the cantillation mark *pazer gadol*... On account of this, the Holy One, blessed be He, was strict with them to the extent that... they were sentenced to death. (Alsheikh 1601, fol. 4a)

Alsheikh demonstrates that each word of the phrase וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ indicates Elimelech’s high standing. שֵׁם shows that he is singled out as an important individual. Midrashic interpretations of the word אִישׁ treat individuals so designated as particularly righteous, such as the exposition in Genesis Rabbah 30.7 of Noah, the “man righteous and wholehearted” (Gen. 6.9).³⁵ Elimelech’s name itself indicates his aspirations. Alsheikh relates the interpretation in Ruth Rabbah 2.4 that revocalises his name to show

³⁵ “Wherever the word *’ish* occurs, it refers to a righteous man who forewarned [his generation]” (Theodor and Albeck eds. 1903–1936, 272). Cf. Numbers Rabbah 16.5. For Alsheikh, the same applies to אִשָּׁה, and he interprets the designation of Rebekah as הָאִשָּׁה with the definite article in Gen. 24.39 (*ad. loc.*) as an indication of her importance.

that he positioned himself to become Israel’s first king by claiming that “kingship is mine”, אֵלַי מְלִכוּת.

Alsheikh supports these interpretations by referring to a feature of the biblical text itself: the *ta’am* on Elimelech’s name. Though the disjunctive accent *pazer* is not unusual (it occurs 858 times in the prose books of the Hebrew Bible), it appears only here in Ruth (Price 1996, I:5, IV:831). In the public recitation of the book, the melodic motif unique to this verse and the pause indicated by the accent draw attention to Elimelech’s name at the moment he arrives on scene. Alsheikh refers to this accent as *pazer gadol*, a name which holds the key to the interpretation that it “indicates [Elimelech’s] exalted position”: a ‘great *pazer*’ heralds the entrance of the great Elimelech.³⁶ It thus helps to explain the significance of the expression וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ and supports the overarching interpretation that, due to his importance, he was held to high standards and punished for leaving the land of Israel even at a time of famine.

Alsheikh resorts to the *te’amim* again in his comment on the narrative of Ruth gleaning in the field in chapter 2:

(7) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעַל לְנַעֲרוֹ הַנֹּצֵב עַל-הַקְּוֹצְרִים לְמִי הַנַּעֲרָה הַזֹּאת: וַיַּעַן הַנַּעַר הַנֹּצֵב עַל-הַקְּוֹצְרִים וַיֹּאמֶר נַעֲרָה מְאֹבֶיָּהּ הִיא הַשְּׂבָה עִם-נַעֲמִי מִשָּׂדֶה מְאֹב:

³⁶ In his commentary on Lev. 23.27, Alsheikh similarly designates the *pazer* on the word אֶף as *pazer gadol*; he does not use the term to refer to *qarne farah* (see Yeivin, 1980, 212–13, nos. 274–76). The interpretation of Ruth 1.2 is analogous to that of Est. 6.7, where the *zaqef gadol* on the word וְשֵׁם indicates the great importance of the individual concerned.

‘Boaz said to his servant who was stationed over the reapers, “To whom does this young woman belong?” The servant stationed over the reapers answered and said (...וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר), “She is a young Moabite woman, the one who returned with Naomi from the fields of Moab.”’ (Ruth 2.5–6)

Alsheikh begins with the characteristic litany of questions. Among them, he asks why two verbs introduce the servant’s reply, וַיַּעַן and then וַיֹּאמֶר, when one would suffice:

וואָף גאַם מלֵת ויען תראה מיותרת והיה די לומר ויאמר נערה מואביה כו’
 ...In addition, the word ‘and he answered’ (וַיַּעַן) appears to be superfluous as it would have sufficed to say, ‘And he said (וַיֹּאמֶר), “She is a young Moabite woman.”’ (Alsheikh 1601, fol. 17a)

This question prompts an elaboration of the narrative. Alsheikh explains the role of the servant, his relationship to Boaz, and the particulars of their exchange. Because the servant was appointed or stationed “over” the reapers, Alsheikh describes him as standing on a platform to survey the harvest. He also develops interpretations from the Babylonian Talmud (b. Shabbat 113b) and Rashi’s commentary (on Ruth 2.5), that Boaz asked about Ruth not because he habitually enquired whether young women were single, but because he noted how carefully she observed the halakhic regulations about gleaning. In the hands of Moses Alsheikh, this rabbinic interpretation germinates into an extended narrative in which the servant misinterpreted Boaz’s intentions and so embarked upon a character assassination of Ruth

to prevent his master from becoming entangled with a Moabite woman.³⁷

ויען הנער וכו' הנה דרך בעלי שדות להעמיד איש נצב על הקוצרים בל יתרפו במלאכתם ולהעמידו במקום גבוה יראה את כלם לבל ישמט איש מהם אשר לא יראנו ולבחור אותו מכל נעריו איש אשר כח בו להרים קול לקרובים ולרחוקים ומה גם בשדות גבר כבועז גדול ועצום בעושר ונכסים כי רבים אשר אתו קוצרי קצירו ואמר כי להשיב לו הרים קול לספר בגנות רות וזהו ויען הנער מלשון הרמת קול כמו וענית ואמרת ויען איוב ויאמר יאבד יום וכו' וקצת סעד לזה הוא הטעם אשר עליו מלמעלה הוא הרבי"ע וזהו ויען

“And the servant answered and said...” The practice of field owners is to station a man appointed over the reapers so that they do not get lazy in their work. [They] station him in an elevated place [from which] he can see them all, so that no one will let [any grain] drop without him seeing it. [Owners] choose this individual from among all their servants, someone who has the strength to raise their voice to those near and far. This is particularly [important] in the fields of a great man like Boaz who had immense wealth and property, for many [people] were reaping his harvest with him. And it says that, in order to reply to [Boaz], he raised his voice to denigrate Ruth. This is the meaning of ‘and the servant answered [and said]’ (וַיַּעַן... וַיֹּאמֶר). The expression indicates that he raised his voice, just as in the case of, “And you will answer and say (וְעָנִיתָ) [before the Lord your God, ‘An Aramaean was seeking to destroy my father...’]” (Deut. 26.5) and, “And Job answered and said (וַיַּעַן אִיּוֹב וַיֹּאמֶר), [‘Let the day on which I was born perish...’]” (Job 3.2). And a little support for

³⁷ Contrast with the overseer’s words in Ruth Zuta 2.7 and Targum Ruth 2.6, where he points out that Ruth is a convert.

this may be [drawn from] the cantillation mark on the penultimate syllable, which is *revia*^c. This is the meaning of וַיַּעַן. (Alsheikh 1601, fols 17b–18a)

According to Alsheikh, the two verbs וַיִּאמֶר and וַיַּעַן indicate that the overseer spoke loudly. Deut. 26.5 and Job 3.2 both introduce direct speech in this way, and Rashi's commentary explains on each occasion that the phrase indicates a raising of the voice.³⁸ Alsheikh appeals to the *ta'am* on וַיַּעַן to show that this interpretation holds true in the verse in question. This is one of several occasions in his commentary where he focuses on the melodic function of the disjunctive accent *revia*^c. Elsewhere he describes it as כּמגבּיה קול ואומר 'like one who raises the voice' to communicate a particular interpretation.³⁹ Here it appears on the first word of the verse and introduces direct speech. Alsheikh therefore suggests that the accent indicates how the ensuing statement was delivered and that the servant shouted out an urgent warning to Boaz. This interpretation is in accordance with the exegetical technique observed above in the *Leqah Tov*, which treats the cantillation marks both as musical signs for the cantor and as indications of how direct speech was originally delivered by biblical characters. By supporting the interpretation that the overseer was shouting, the *revia*^c helps Alsheikh to formulate a narrative that answers his initial question about an apparent tautology. He

³⁸ See the 1546–1548 Rabbinic Bible (Venice: Bomberg), fols 216b, 785a, and the texts discussed in Smelik (2013, 58–67).

³⁹ See, for instance, Alsheikh's comment on Gen. 24.7. Cf. Rashi's commentary on Gen. 1.1 and 37.20, where significant phrases 'speak' to the expositor, saying דרשני 'expound me' (Ben Isaac, 1982, 2, 134); regarding the latter, cf. Tanḥuma (Buber) *Va-yeshev* 13.

shows that there is no redundancy in the use of both וַיֵּעַן and וַיֹּאמֶר, as the accent on the former reveals its distinctive shade of meaning.⁴⁰

A final comment on the *te'amim* concerns the exchange between Ruth and Naomi after the harvest. The third chapter of Ruth begins:

(8) וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נָעֲמִי חַמּוּתָהּ בְּתִי הֲלֹא אֲבַקֶּשׁ לָךְ מְנוּחַ אֲשֶׁר יִיטְבֶּלְךָ: וְעַתָּה הֲלֹא בָעוּ מִדַּעְתְּנוּ אֲשֶׁר הָיִית אֶת־נַעֲרוֹתַי הַנְּהִיָּה־הוּא זָרָה אֶת־גֵּרְךָן הַשְּׂעָרִים הַלְּיָלָה: וְרַחֲצִי | וְסַכְתִּי וּשְׁמַתִּי (K) וְשָׁמַתָּ (Q) [שמל]תך (K) שְׁמַלְתֶּיךָ (Q) עָלֶיךָ [וי]רדתי (K) וַיְרַדְתָּ (Q) הַגֵּרְךָן אֶל־תּוֹדְעִי לְאִישׁ עַד בְּלִתּוֹ לְאָכֵל וּלְשָׁתוֹת:⁴¹

‘Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter (בְּתִי), should I not seek security for you, that you may be well? Now is not Boaz, with whose young women you were, our kinsman? He is about to winnow the barley at the threshing-floor tonight. Now wash, anoint yourself, put on your cloak and go down to the threshing-floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.’ (Ruth 3.1–3)

Among the קושיות, Alsheikh lists the following:

⁴⁰ A variant pointing of the word with the accent *darga* is attested in a number of manuscripts; see Wright (1864, 9 [second pagination]). However, the explicit reason for Alsheikh’s reference to the accent of וַיֵּעַן is to support his account of the overseer’s actions, rather than to assert the correct reading of the text.

⁴¹ As printed in the 1546–1548 Rabbinic Bible (Venice: Bomberg), fol. 831a. See the footnote below regarding the pointing of בְּתִי.

...וגם מה בצע להגיד לנו שקראה בתי כי אין ספק לא שת לבו שמואל
הנביא ברוח קדשו לכתוב לנו רובי דברים אשר אין לסיפור בהם חפץ

...Furthermore, what is the use of telling us that [Naomi] called [Ruth] “my daughter” (בְּתִי)? For without a doubt the prophet Samuel did not intend, by means of the holy spirit, to write lots of words for us which serve no purpose for the narrative. (Alsheikh 1601, fols 28a–28b)

Alsheikh here makes explicit a key assumption underlying his interpretations. Referring to the talmudic attribution of the book of Ruth to Samuel (b. Bava Batra 14b), he accords it the status of an inspired prophetic writing. This means that nothing is redundant and, as he asserts, every textual detail contributes to the book’s narrative. In the comment that follows, this principle is applied both to the word בְּתִי and to its accent.

Alsheikh refers to a kabbalistic interpretation related by Naḥmanides and the *Midrash ha-Ne‘elam* on Ruth. When Naḥmanides expounded Onan’s failure to raise up offspring for his late brother, he referred to levirate marriage as “one of the great secrets of the Torah.” Concealing the nature of this “secret” from the casual reader, Naḥmanides referred allusively to Ruth 4.17 and stated והמשכיל יבין ‘and the wise will understand’ (commentary on Gen. 38.8 in Ben Naḥman 1959, I:214–15; see Idel 1983; Wolfson 1989; 1993; Yisraeli 2006). This is a reference to the women of Bethlehem, who celebrated the birth of Obed by saying not “a son is born to Ruth” but rather “a son is born to Naomi.” As explained in the *Midrash ha-Ne‘elam*, this indicates that Ruth’s son was in fact the reincarnation of her late husband Mahlon (*Midrash ha-Ne‘elam* on Ruth, ed. Margalio, 2007–2008,

89d–90a).⁴² The “great secret” of levirate marriage, it would seem, is that the soul of the deceased is reborn in the child begotten of the union.

Because Ruth’s marriage to Boaz would secure Mahlon’s re-incarnation, Naomi had a vested interest. This calls into question her motivation in arranging the rendezvous at the threshing floor. Alsheikh defends Naomi’s altruism by explaining the word בְּתִי and its accent:

על כן באה רוח הקדש להעמידנו על האמת ויאמ[ר] ותאמר נעמי כלומר
 אשר היא נעימה במעשיה עשתה כשמה עם היותה חמותה שאין דרכה
 לחזור אחר תועלת כלתה וזהו ותאמר לה נעמי חמותה והן זה הורת לה
 בנועם מיליה באמור אליה בתי וכו' וגם ידוקדק היות טעם זקף גדול במלת
 בתי כרומז לה עליה בתואר זה והוא לומר אל אהיה בעיניך באשר אני
 מצוה אותך כחמות עם כלתה כי לא כלתי את בעצם כי אם בתי כלומר
 כי רוח בני בקרבך וכבת לי תחשב ולמה לא אבקש הנאתך

Therefore, the holy spirit came to show us the truth of the matter and said, “Naomi said”. This indicates that she was as pleasant (נעימה) in her actions as her name suggests even though, being [Ruth’s] mother-in-law, it was not in her nature to pursue the benefit of her daughter-in-law. That is the meaning of, “Naomi her mother-in-law said to her.” [Naomi] demonstrated this to [Ruth] with her pleasant words (בנועם במיליה) when she said to her, “My daughter (בתי)...” The cantillation mark *zaqef gadol* on the word בתי must also be examined precisely (ידוקדק) because it [like-wise] indicates that Naomi had such [an attitude] towards Ruth. It is as if to say, “When I instruct you, do not think

⁴² Cf. Zohar *Mishpatim* 2.99b and Zohar *Va-yeshev* 1.188a–b (ed. Matt, Wolski, and Hecker 2004–2017, III:148–50; V:38; XI:263–65). See Mopsik (1987, 16–21); Hallamish (1999); Fine (2003, 304–14); Werblowsky (1997, 112–15, 234–56).

of me as a mother-in-law [talking] to her daughter-in-law, for you are not in fact my daughter-in-law, but my daughter. This is to say that the spirit of my son is inside you, and you should be considered as a daughter to me. Why would I not seek your benefit?" (Alsheikh 1601, fol. 28b)

This comment is an atomistic reading of the words נַעֲמִי תְּמוּתָהּ בְּתִי. Naomi's name is mentioned explicitly in order to evoke the etymology in Ruth Rabbah that she was "pleasant (נעימה) in her actions" (Ruth Rabbah 2.5; 3.6). Her kind-heartedness prevailed over what Alsheikh considers to be the nature of the mother-in-law, who does not pursue her daughter-in-law's best interests.⁴³ This insight is supported by the word בְּתִי and its accent. In interpretations similar to that of the aforementioned *revia*^c, Alsheikh likens the *zaqef gadol* in his commentaries on Eccl. 9.10 and Est. 6.7 to "one who raises the voice" to declare a particular interpretation. In this case, the disjunctive accent on the initial word of Naomi's speech focuses attention on the expression that captures the true relationship between the women. Alsheikh rewrites Naomi's words to show that she considers Ruth her daughter and treats her accordingly. The word בְּתִי and its accent thus support the interpretation that Naomi arranged Ruth's liaison with Boaz purely out of concern for Ruth's wellbeing rather than as a selfish means to secure Mahlon's rebirth.⁴⁴

⁴³ On the portrayal of the mother-in-law in rabbinic texts, see Ilan (2017, 120–22).

⁴⁴ A variant pointing of בְּתִי with the accent *revia*^c is attested in a number of manuscripts and printed editions, though, as noted in the case of וַיֵּן above, Alsheikh draws no attention to the different reading. See Gins-

By means of these three comments on the accentuation of Ruth, Alsheikh has opened up remarkable new vistas on a well-known narrative. Elimelech’s *pazer* reveals his high social status. A *revia*‘ shows that Boaz’s servant was stationed on a platform, shouting to the harvesters and, in an unfortunate misunderstanding, even to his master. And a *zaqef gadol* shows that Naomi shunned selfishness and spoke to Ruth out of maternal compassion. These *te’amim* disclose information about the narrative that is not otherwise indicated in the text. In this respect, Alsheikh’s comments resemble the aforementioned interpretations of Gen. 39.8, in which the *Leqaḥ Tov*, Ibn Caspi, and Bahya ben Asher derived the details of Joseph’s refusal of Potiphar’s wife from the accent *shalsholet*.

An important difference between Alsheikh and his predecessors is that, rather than explaining peculiarities as he encounters them, he goes in search of *te’amim* that might serve as useful sources of narrative information. The accents he selects in Ruth are not unusual in themselves, though in a particular verse, *pazer*, *revia*‘, and *zaqef gadol* stand out from the most familiar sequences of *te’amim*.⁴⁵ Alsheikh ascertains their meanings from their names

burg (1926, 579); Wright (1864, 16 [second pagination]). In the Lenin-grad Codex (fol. 422a), the word is pointed with *gershayim*. This is also the reading of the 1601 edition of Alsheikh (1601, fol. 27b), in which the biblical text printed alongside the commentary obscures the meaning of Alsheikh’s interpretation. On the significance of the accents and Zoharic references to the masoretic pointing among early modern Kabbalists, see Penkower (2010); Dweck (2011, 151–69); Rubin (2011).

⁴⁵ *Revia*‘ occurs 8910 times in the prose books; *zaqef gadol* 1655 times (Price 1996, I:5).

and their melodic functions. But his discussions also draw on insights from *midrashim*, Rashi's and Nahmanides's commentaries, and the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*. Alsheikh uses the accents to support these explanations by showing that they may be derived directly from features of the biblical text. One reason for this is evident in the comment on the word בְּתִי, where Alsheikh states that the *zaqef gadol* should be “examined precisely (ידוקדק היות טעם זקף) (גדול)”. As mentioned earlier, forms of לְדַקְדַּק are used by Alsheikh and other contemporary Sephardi commentators to refer to the scrutiny of the biblical text to find answers to the קוּשְׁיוֹת, the questions raised in the pericope. That Alsheikh used the *te'amim* to this end was already apparent in his comments on the *pazer* on Elimelech's name and the *revia* on וַיֵּץ. Both respond to questions about seemingly superfluous words. But the interpretation of בְּתִי makes explicit that Alsheikh counts the accents among the minutiae of the biblical text which, properly understood, demonstrate its overall coherence.

By appealing so readily to the *te'amim*, Alsheikh treats the accents as an essential and fundamental means by which biblical narrative is expressed. No longer are they a paratextual guide to the grammar and syntax of the words; nor are they occasional indicators of unexpected interpretations. Now they are treated as an integral part of the text itself, conveying information that is necessary to understand the narrative with clarity. The reader of the biblical text must therefore be constantly alert to the bearing that every accent, however commonplace, might have on the course of events in any given passage. This manner of reading the Hebrew Bible was enabled in many editions of Alsheikh's works

that were issued in Venice by Giovanni di Gara, including the 1601 *editio princeps* of the commentary on Ruth, by the provision of a vocalised and accented text alongside the commentary.⁴⁶ This *mise en page* allows the reader to move from an encounter with the accented words of the biblical text to Alsheikh’s questions regarding their significance and coherence, and finally to a problem-solving exegetical discourse that shows how studying the details of the accented text allows one to grasp its full meaning.

The idea that the *te‘amim* indicate not only grammar and syntax, but also narrative information has resurfaced in several recent expositions of the Hebrew Bible. In their homilies on the Joseph narrative, Louis Jacobs, Jonathan Sacks, and Jonathan Magonet find common cause in interpreting the shape and quivering tone of the *shalsholet* in Gen. 39.8 as an indication of the protagonist’s inner conflict, struggle, torment, and *crise de conscience*. For Jacobs (2004, 59–60), the *ta‘am* “expresses vacillation where we would expect firm resolve” and, for Magonet (2004, 27–28), Joseph was “fighting against the temptation to accept.” Sacks (2009, 109–15) ascribes his interpretation to an

⁴⁶ Partly through the efforts of Alsheikh’s son Ḥayyim, Di Gara issued Alsheikh’s commentaries on Daniel (1591), Song of Songs (1591; 1606), Proverbs (1601), Ruth (1601), Lamentations (1601), Qohelet (1601), Job (1603), and Psalms (1605) with the biblical text printed alongside. This typographical complication was omitted from the earlier editions of the commentaries on Song of Songs (1563) and Daniel (1563) that were printed in the Ottoman Empire. The list of printed editions of Alsheikh’s commentaries compiled by Naphtali Ben-Menaḥem is in Shalem (1965–1966, 237–74). See Benayahu (2001); Dweck (2010).

earlier exegete, Joseph ibn Caspi, developing his predecessor's interpretation that the *ṭa'am* indicates a physical manifestation of wavering resolve by suggesting that it reveals "a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision." As the cantillation marks once again "raise their voices" to relay interpretations old and new, it is hoped that an understanding of the development of this expository technique and its relationship to earlier exegetical methods will enable a deeper appreciation of a chapter of the reception history of the Hebrew Bible, in which the Masora is treated as a means to "gain an understanding of what is not written in the Torah" (Ben Asher, 1966, I:321).

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