

Why Is the Torah So Hard To Read

By Rabbi Zachary Truboff

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One of the more unusual features of a Torah scroll is that it lacks vowels and punctuation. Yet when one considers the importance of precision when reading from a Torah scroll in synagogue, the lack of vowels and punctuation is quite striking. Though it might put *baalei keriah* out of work, wouldn't it be so much easier if Torah scrolls had vowels and punctuation like the *chumashim* we use to follow along with the Torah reading? Is their absence simply an attempt to preserve continuity between the Torah scrolls of our ancestors and those of today or is there more at stake here?

According to the Shulchan Arukh (Yoreh Deah 274:7), not only is the practice that a Torah scroll should be written without vowels and punctuation, but including them makes the Torah scroll invalid (*pasul*), such that it can no longer be used for a public reading of the Torah. Though this requirement does not appear in the Gemara and is only hinted to in Massechet Sofrim (3:7), general practice follows the Shulchan Arukh and it is the norm for all Torah scrolls in use today. In a *teshuvah* of the Rashba (238), he is asked why this is the case and explains that vowels and punctuation are not written into a Torah scroll is because “we only have that which was given to us at Mount Sinai.” The Torah that the Jewish people received at Mount Sinai was without vowels and punctuation, and the one we read from today must be the same.

In an interesting *teshuvah*, the Radbaz (Rabbi David ben Solomon ibn Zimra, 1479–1573) further explores this question and offers a series of theological reflections on why a Torah scroll cannot have any vowels or punctuation. He cites *midrashim* and other sources to argue that unlike other texts, which are defined by a singular reading, the Torah can be read on many different levels. For example, it is read one way by the angels and in other ways by human beings. Each word of the Torah contains a surplus of meaning that invites additional analysis no matter how many times one has read it. The vowels, punctuation, and trope that we use for the proper reading of the Torah are of course important, but they are to be considered as part of the Oral Torah, the ongoing interpretation of the Written Torah. They never fully determine the meaning of the Torah, and to write them into a Torah scroll would impose fixed meaning on the divine letters and words, and in a sense, would profane them. Because a Torah scroll lacks vowels and punctuation, our encounter with it serves as a reminder that there are “seventy faces of Torah.”

שו"ת רדב"ז חלק ג סימן תרמג (אלף סח)

(אלף סח) שאלת ממני אודיעך דעתי למה אין כותבין הנקודה בספר תורה כיון שהכל נתן למרע"ה בסיני וגם הטעמים היו ראויים שיכתבו אותם כדי שיקרא הקורא קריאה ישרה בלי שבוש שהרי גם הטעמים מבארים טעם הכתובים לפעמים:

תשובה שאלתך זו תלויה במה ששאלו המלאכים להקב"ה כשעלה מרע"ה לקבל את התורה. אמרו מלאכי השרת מה לילוד אשה בינינו אמר להם הקב"ה לקבל תורה בא אמרו לו תנה לנו והיינו דכתיב אשר תנה הודך על השמים [כו']. אמר להם משה תורה מה כתיב בה לא תרצח לא תנאף וכו' רציחה יש ביניכם וניאוף יש ביניכם תורה למה לכם והודו ואמרו ה' אדונינו מה אדיר שמך בכל הארץ.

יש להקשות וכי המלאכים לא היו יודעים התשובה זו אלא מאי אית לך למימר שהם היו קורין בתורה קריאה אחרת רוחנית בלא פיסוק תיבות על דרך שמותיו של הקב"ה וכן ארז"ל כל התורה כולה שמותיו של הקב"ה והודיעם הקב"ה שיש לתורה קריאה אחרת גשמות על דרך פיסוק תיבות בענייני בני אדם בטומאה וטהרה ואיסור והיתר ופטור וחייב וכן כל שאר דיניה. ואחר שידעת זה תבין שאלתך כי צוה האל יתעלה שיכתבו את התורה בלא נקודות וטעמים כאשר היתה באמנה אתו יתברך כדי שיהיו בה שתי קריאות רוחנית וגשמית כדי שמי שיכול להשיג ישיג. וכן אמרו יודע היה בצלאל לצרף אותיות שנבראו בהם שמים וארץ. ומסר הנקודות והטעמים כשאר תורה שבעל פה שהיא פירוש לתורה שבכתב כן הנקודות והטעמים הם פירוש לתורה שבכתב. והדבר ידוע כי האותיות בלא נקודות וטעמים יש בהם משמעויות הרבה וצירופים שונים וקריאות הפכיות ולכן לא ניתנו הנקודות והטעמים ליכתב בס"ת ויכתבו בחומשים משום עת לעשות לה' כדי שלא תשתכח תורת הקריאה כשאר תורה שבעל פה...

ואם ננקד הס"ת היה לו גבול ושיעור ... ולא היה אפשר לו להיות נדרש כי אם לפי הניקוד המסויים באותה תיבה אבל מפני שס"ת בלול ומובלל בכל מיני שלימות ובכל מלה ומלה נתלים בה תלי תלים לא נעשה מנוקדים כדי שיהיה נדרש בכל מיני שלימות ולפיכך אמרו אל תקרי כך אלא כך ואלו... וכל התורה נוהגת על דרך זה ולפיכך אחז"ל שבעים פנים לתורה והבן.

Responsa, Radbaz 3:643

I will share my opinion regarding your question why is it that vowels are not written on a Torah scroll even though everything was given to Moshe at Mount Sinai. In truth, it would have been appropriate for the trope to be written in the Torah scroll, so that the reader could read them properly without confusion, for even the trope explains the meaning of the written words sometimes.

Answer:

Your question is connected to what the angels asked the Holy One blessed be He when Moshe went up to receive the Torah. The ministering angels said, "Why has one born of woman come among us?" The Holy One blessed be He answered them, "He has come to receive the Torah." In response, the angels told God, "Give it to us, as it is written, "You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor" (Psalms 8:2). In turn, Moshe said to the angels, "What is written in the Torah? 'Do not murder! Do not commit adultery! etc.' Do you have murder amongst you? Is there adultery amongst you? Why would the Torah be for you?" The angels agreed with Moshe and said, "Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth" (Psalms 8:10).

One could raise the following difficulty: Is it really possible the angels did not know the answer [that the Torah contained laws that appeared irrelevant to them]? Rather, one could say that they would read the Torah in a different heavenly way without the spaces between the words,

in a manner similar to the [way the] names of God [are read]. As the rabbis said, the entirety of the Torah are the names of the Holy One blessed be He. God informed them [the angels] that there with another earthly reading of Torah that was dependent on the spaces between the words and related to human matters of impurity and purity, that which is prohibited and permitted, exemptions and obligations, and the rest of the laws.

After knowing this you will understand the answer to your question, because God commanded that the Torah be written without vowels and trope like the Torah was when it was with Him [before it was given to Moshe]. This [the lack of vowels and punctuation in the Torah] would allow for two readings, one heavenly and one earthly, so that one who can grasp them will grasp them. So too the rabbis said that Bezalel joined together the letters [of Torah] which had been used to create the heaven and the earth.

The vowels and trope were passed on [to Moshe] like the remainder of the Oral Torah, which is a commentary on the Written Torah. So too, the vowels and trope are a commentary on the Written Torah. It is known that the letters [of Torah] without vowels and trope have many meanings, different possible combinations, and even contradict readings. Therefore, the vowels and trope were not given to be written in the Torah scroll. They are written in *chumashim* so that the way Torah is to be read will not be forgotten. This was done because of “a time to act for God” (Psalms 119:121) like the remainder of the Oral Torah...

If one adds vowels and punctuation to a Torah scroll, one has given it boundary and measure.... It would only be possible for it to be read and interpreted according to the specific vowels in each word. However, because a Torah scroll contains all kinds of perfection and in every word hangs heaps and heaps, we do not add vowels so that it can be interpreted in all different kinds of perfection. Therefore, the rabbis said [in many *midrashim*], “Don’t read it as this. Rather, read it as that!” If the Torah had specific punctuation, we could not say this...

The entirety of the Torah functions this way, and therefore the rabbis said, “There are seventy faces to Torah.”

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