

GRAMMAR FOR GEMARA
AND TARGUM ONKELOS

An Introduction to Aramaic

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1

MISHNAIC HEBREW¹ (לשון חז"ל)

The language of the Mishna and the *baraitthoth* is almost exclusively Hebrew.² However, post-Biblical Hebrew is so different from Biblical Hebrew that it is regarded as a different dialect called *Mishnaic Hebrew* or לְשׁוֹן הַכְּמִים.³ This dialect, which developed from Biblical Hebrew, was spoken in Eretz Yisrael throughout the Mishnaic period (at least). Aramaic influence is so pervasive that some scholars have suggested that Mishnaic Hebrew be classified as a “mixed language.” In this chapter, we will point out some of the features of Mishnaic Hebrew that distinguish it from Biblical Hebrew.

1.1 THE MASCULINE PLURAL

In Mishnaic Hebrew, the *masculine-plural suffix* is often ין rather than the form ים that almost always occurs in the Bible.

Example: (משנה שבת פי"ג מ"א) חוטיין, *threads*

- 1 This chapter is based on the section on Mishnaic Hebrew by E. Y. Kutscher in the article, “Hebrew Language,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), Vol. XVI, pp. 1590-1607, and in his book, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, ed. Raphael Kutscher (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), pp. 115-147. See also A. Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (tr. J. Elwolde, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1993), “Rabbinic Hebrew”, especially pp. 172-173. The two-volume collection of Moshe Bar-Asher’s studies, *מחקרים בלשון חכמים*, is a very valuable resource.
- 2 For an example of an Aramaic mishna, see משנה אבות פ"א מי"ג; for a baraittha with Aramaic, see the famous Ḥanukka baraittha (ב. שבת כא, ב).
- 3 R. Yoḥanan, the greatest halakhic authority of his time, stressed the distinction between these two forms of Hebrew, and declared:
לשון תורה לעצמה; לשון חכמים לעצמן (עבודה זרה נח, ב; חולין קלו, ב)
The language of the Torah is unique; the language of the ḥakhamim is unique.

1.2 THE CONSTRUCT STATE

The Hebrew language uses a special form of the noun to express a close relationship, often possession, between a noun and the next word. This construction is called *קְמִיכוּת* in Hebrew, and such a noun is said to be *נִסְמָךְ*, *in the construct state*. For example, the noun *בַּיִת* (rather than the usual form *בֵּית*) appears in the construct state in the phrase *בַּיִת הָאִישׁ*, *the man's house*. For some nouns the form of the construct state is identical with that of the absolute state. Thus, *בֶּגֶד* is *a cloak*, and *בֶּגֶד הָאִישׁ* means *the cloak of the man* or *the man's cloak*.

◇ The construct state usually expresses this relationship in Biblical Hebrew, but sometimes the phrase *אֲשֶׁר לְ-* occurs instead, for example, *הַצֹּאֵן אֲשֶׁר לְאֲבִיהָ* (בראשית ב.ט, ט) *the flock which (belongs) to her father* (= *צֹאֵן אֲבִיהָ*, *her father's flock*). In Mishnaic Hebrew, the parallel form *שֶׁל-* (originally a prefix and later a separate word *שֶׁל*, *of*)⁴ is used in the following two constructions (which are still in use today in contemporary Israeli Hebrew):

- 1) *הַבַּיִת שֶׁל הָאִישׁ*, *the house of the man*
- 2) *בַּיְתוֹ שֶׁל הָאִישׁ*, *his house, (that) of the man*

In *בַּיְתוֹ שֶׁל הָאִישׁ*, the personal-pronoun suffix *וֹ*, *his*, refers to the noun *הָאִישׁ*, *the man*. Thus, the *וֹ* suffix is said to *anticipate* *הָאִישׁ*.⁵ This construction is also found in Biblical Hebrew, in the phrase *מִטָּתוֹ שֶׁל שְׁלֹמֹה* (שיר השירים ג:ז) — *his bed, that of Shelomo*.

◇ Certain pairs of nouns are regularly used together — with the first in the construct state — to express a single matter or concept.

Examples: *בַּיִת כְּנֶסֶת*, *synagogue*; *בַּיִת דִּין*, *court*.

In the plural, both nouns are pluralized in Mishnaic Hebrew.

Examples: *בֵּתֵי כְּנֶסֶת*, *synagogues*; *בֵּתֵי דִינִין*, *courts*.

In modern Hebrew, however, the forms *בֵּתֵי כְּנֶסֶת* and *בֵּתֵי דִין* are used — with only the first noun in the plural.

4 In many manuscripts, *שֶׁל-* appears as a prefix to the noun it precedes (*שֶׁלֹאִישׁ*, *of a man*, or *שֶׁלֹאִישׁ*, *of the man*, with a *kametz* indicating the definite article), rather than as a separate word (in *אִישׁ שֶׁל* or *שֶׁל הָאִישׁ*, as it is written today).

5 Similarly, *לוֹ*, *to him*, anticipates *לְרַ*, *to R. ...*, in the common Talmudic formula: *אָמַר לוֹ ר' ... לְרַ*, *R. ... said to him, [that is] to R. ...* See below Chapter 10:2, "The Anticipatory Pronoun Suffix," pp. 253-254.

1.3 PRONOUNS

The first-person *independent personal pronouns* in Mishnaic Hebrew differ from the Biblical Hebrew forms:

MISHNAIC HEBREW	BIBLICAL HEBREW	ENGLISH
אָנִי	אָנִי ; אָנֹכִי	<i>I</i>
אָנוּ	אָנֹהֶנוּ ; נֹהֵנוּ	<i>we</i>

◇ The *possessive-pronoun suffixes* of the second-person singular of both genders in Mishnaic Hebrew differ from those in Biblical Hebrew in their vocalization:

MISHNAIC HEBREW	BIBLICAL HEBREW	ENGLISH
ֶרְךָ (as in דְּבָרְךָ) ⁶	רְךָ (as in דְּבָרְךָ)	<i>your (m.)</i>
ֶרְיָךְ (as in דְּבָרְיָךְ)	רְיָךְ (as in דְּבָרְךָ)	<i>your (f.)</i>

◇ There are also differences between the two dialects in the feminine singular and in the plural of the *demonstrative pronoun*.

MISHNAIC HEBREW	BIBLICAL HEBREW	ENGLISH
זֶה	זֶה	<i>this (m.)</i>
זֹאת ⁷	זֹאת ; זֶה	<i>this (f.)</i>
אֵלֶּה ⁸	אֵלֶּה	<i>these</i>

6 Compare נְקִדִישְׁךָ וְנִעְרִיצְךָ in the Sephardic *Kedusha*.

7 For example, at a Jewish wedding the groom recites to the bride the formula: זוּ קְבִיעוֹת תִּקֵּן בְּלִשׁוֹן – חֲדָשִׁים גַּם יִשְׁנִים, with *this ring you are wedded to me*. For a discussion of the popular pronunciation זוּ, see Hayyim E. Cohen: "קביעות תקן בלשון – חדשים גם ישנים", בתוך: 250 שנות עברית חדשה (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 5766), pp. 39-46.

8 Sometimes אֵלֶּה has a different function: the plural of the *interrogative pronoun* אֵיזֶה, as in (א"מ פ"ב מ"א) אֵלֶּה מְצִיאוֹת שְׁלוֹי? (*Which found objects are his (= the finder's)?*)

◇ Mishnaic Hebrew sometimes uses אַת as a *demonstrative pronoun*.⁹

Example:

those who are in front of the bier אַת שְׁלִפְנֵי הַמָּוֶטָה (משנה ברכות פ"ג מ"א)

אַת is also used in Mishnaic Hebrew with third-person pronoun suffixes to form אֹתוֹ or אֹתָהּ, a *demonstrative adjective* that is placed before the noun it modifies.

Example:

that day (or: *the same day*) אֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם (משנה מכות פ"א מ"ד)

◇ The noun עֶצֶם (lit. "bone"), with personal-pronoun suffixes attached, serves as a *reflexive pronoun* in Mishnaic Hebrew, so that עֶצְמִי means *myself*; עֶצְמוֹ, *himself*; etc. (like the Aramaic גְּרַמְיָהּ).

Example:

he acquires himself קוֹנֵה אֶת עֶצְמוֹ (משנה קידושין פ"א מ"ב)

◇ Mishnaic Hebrew uses the prefix ׀ִשְׁ, *that, which or who*, as the *relative pronoun* instead of the Biblical אֲשֶׁר, which it retains only in Biblical quotations.¹⁰

Example:

Do not look attentively at the container but at that which is contained within it! אַל תִּסְתַּכֵּל בְּקַנְקַן אֶלָּא בְּמָה שִׁישׁ בוֹ! (משנה אבות פ"ד מ"ב)

It also uses ׀ִשְׁ, as a *conjunction*, meaning *because* or *for*, instead of Biblical כִּי.

Example:

and prepare yourself to study Torah for it is not [given as] an inheritance to you וְהִתְקַן עֶצְמְךָ לְלַמֵּד תּוֹרָה שְׂאִינָהּ יְרֵשָׁה לְךָ (שם פ"ב מ"ב)

9 For Biblical precedents, see ויקרא ה:טז; קהלת ד:ג.

10 The prefix ׀ִשְׁ occurs occasionally in Biblical Hebrew — mostly in שיר השירים, תהלים and קהלת.

1.4 VERBS: *BINYANIM*

In Hebrew, in Aramaic, and in other Semitic languages, a *root* — a grammatical abstraction usually consisting of three consonants — is regarded as the basis of each verb. The root expresses a general idea that may be given different shades of meanings through special vocalization, the addition of certain prefixes or both. The different patterns thus created are termed *binyanim* in Hebrew and, by some grammarians, “conjugations” in English.

It is often difficult for a native English speaker to understand the concept of *binyanim* — which is of great importance in Semitic languages. The difficulty may be due in part to the absence of the phenomenon in the English verbal system, where different shades of meaning are expressed by separate verbs. For example, the Hebrew verbs לָמַד and לְמַד are derived from the same root, but the corresponding English verbs, *learn* and *teach*, are completely independent. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of *binyanim* is not altogether foreign to English: The intransitive verbs *sit*, *fall*, *lie* and *rise* differ from the transitive verbs *seat*, *fell (a tree)*, *lay* and *raise*, respectively, only in terms of their vowels. In other words, different vocalization expresses different shades of meaning. A native English speaker who is aware of this phenomenon in his own tongue should be a bit more comfortable with the concept of *binyanim* in Hebrew and Aramaic.

◇ The *binyanim* that occur commonly in Biblical Hebrew are presented in the following table, with explanations, examples (in the third person, masculine singular of the past tense) and translations of the examples into English:

<i>BINYAN</i>	EXPLANATION	EXAMPLE	TRANSLATION
קל	the simple conjugation	כָּתַב	<i>he wrote</i>
נִפְעַל	passive/reflexive of the simple	נִכְתַּב	<i>it was written</i>
פְּעַל	the intensive ¹¹ conjugation	קִדְּשׁ	<i>he sanctified</i>
פֻּעַל	passive of the intensive	קִדְּשׁ	<i>it was sanctified</i>
הִתְפַּעַל	reflexive (of the intensive)	הִתְקִדְּשׁ	<i>he sanctified himself</i>
הִפְעִיל	the extensive ¹¹ conjugation	הִקְדִּישׁ	<i>he dedicated</i>
הִפְעִל	passive of the extensive	הִקְדִּישׁ	<i>it was dedicated</i>

◇ In Mishnaic Hebrew, the system of *binyanim* has undergone some changes. The most significant developments are the following:

- ◇ The פְּעַל *binyan* is used only in the participle, like מְקִדְּשׁ, *sanctified*.
- ◇ The past tense of the הִתְפַּעַל *binyan* is usually נִתְפַּעַל, and its participle is occasionally נִתְפַּעֵל instead of the Biblical מִתְפַּעֵל.¹²

Sometimes its meaning is reflexive (as in נִסְתַּפַּג, *he dried himself*), and sometimes it is passive (as in נִתְגַּלָּה, *it was revealed*). In the latter sense, it replaces the Biblical פְּעַל.

11 The grammatical terms *intensive* and *extensive* both refer to the form of the verb. In the פְּעַל, the middle root-letter of the verb is usually doubled (“intensified”) by means of a *dagesh* (as in קִדְּשׁ). In the הִפְעִיל, the root is “extended” by the addition of a prefix (as in הִקְדִּישׁ). As for meaning, the פְּעַל is used in a variety of senses, while the הִפְעִיל usually expresses causative action — as in הִלְבִּישׁ, *he dressed (someone else)*.

12 Bar-Asher (above, p. 1 note 1), vol. 2, pp. 4-5, 131-137.

◇ “New *binyanim*” occur in Mishnaic Hebrew:¹³

The *שִׁפְעַל* *binyan* has a causative meaning.

Example: שִׁחַרְרַר

he caused to be free, he liberated

The *נִשְׁתַּפְּעַל* *binyan* serves as its reflexive and passive.

Example: נִשְׁחַרְרַר

he freed himself or he was liberated

1.5 VERBS: TENSES

In Mishnaic Hebrew, several important changes have occurred in the verbal system. Some regular Biblical Hebrew forms are absent from Mishnaic Hebrew (except for Biblical quotations). One of the forms that is missing is the so-called “conversive *vav*” (הַוָּי הַמְהַפֵּכֶת) which supposedly “changes the tense” in Biblical Hebrew — either from future to past (as in וַיִּכְתֹּב, *and he wrote*) or from past to future (as in וְכָתַבְתִּי, *and I will write*).¹⁴ Furthermore, some of the Biblical forms that are retained in Mishnaic Hebrew — such as the participles presented in the table on the next page — function somewhat differently.

◇ Here is a summary of the tense system that has evolved in Mishnaic Hebrew:¹⁵

13 However, see Bar-Asher (*ibid.*, p. 24), who points out that such forms should not be regarded as constituting “new *binyanim*.” They should rather be understood as products of quadriliteral (=four-letter) roots. With regard to Aramaic verbs, cf. pp. 59, 221 and 223 below, and especially p. 289 note 10.

14 Grammarians have had difficulty in explaining the apparent switch of the tenses with the “conversive *vav*”, which is almost unique to Biblical Hebrew. In fact, some modern scholars avoid the old term and call it the “*vav* consecutive” instead, since it is used in sequences of verbs in Biblical narrative. See the analysis by S. R. Driver in his *The Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 70-73; 114-121.

15 For additional details, see Kutscher (above, p. 1 note 1), p. 131.

“TENSE”	TYPE OF ACTION	EXAMPLE	TRANSLATION
past	past	דַּע מֵאֵין בָּאתָ ¹⁶	<i>Know from where you came</i>
active participle	present or future	וּלְאֵן אֵתָה הוֹלֵךְ ¹⁴	<i>and where you are going</i>
עָתִיד followed by ל־ with a gerund ¹⁷	clear-cut future	וּלְפָנַי מִי אֵתָה עָתִיד לִיתֵן דִּין וְחָשְׁבוֹן! ¹⁴	<i>and before Whom you are destined to give an accounting!</i>
passive participle	present, future, or sometimes present perfect (indicating the present out- come of a past action)	מִקְבָּל אֲנִי ¹⁸	<i>I have received (a tradition)</i>
הָיָה with a participle	continual or repeated action	הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר ¹⁹	<i>he used to say</i>
future	future; desired or intended action	כָּל מִי שְׂיִוְדַע לוֹ זְכוּת, יָבֵא ²⁰	<i>[As for] anyone who knows some merit in his behalf, let him come [forward]!</i>
imperative	commands	דַּע מֵאֵין בָּאתָ ¹⁴	<i>know from where you came</i>

16 משנה אבות פ"ג מ"א

17 See discussion of "The Gerund and the Infinitive," Chapter 3, pp. 43-46.

18 משנה פאה פ"ב מ"ו

19 משנה אבות פ"א מ"ג ועוד

20 משנה סנהדרין פ"ו מ"א

◇ Mishnaic Hebrew often uses the past tense to portray the case about which a halakhic ruling is issued. When translating this use of the past tense into English, it is best to supply the conjunction *if* or *when*, as in the following example:

If the court alone sighted it (= the “new” moon), two [of the judges] should rise and testify before them (= the rest of the judges)...

רְאוּהוּ בֵּית דִּין בְּלֵבָד, יַעֲמְדוּ שְׁנַיִם וְיַעֲיִדוּ בְּפְנֵיהֶם... (ראש השנה פ”ג מ”א)

◇ Mishnaic Hebrew often uses the present tense in formulating a halakhic ruling that imposes an obligation or grants permission:

Example 1:

On Pesah [we] must read [in the Torah] the portion about holidays...

בְּפֶסַח קוֹרִין בְּפָרְשַׁת מוֹעֲדוֹת... (מגילה פ”ג מ”ה)

Example 2:

[If a blaze has broken out on the Sabbath, we] may save [enough] food for three meals...

מְצִילִין מְזוֹן שְׁלֹשׁ סְעוּדוֹת... (שבת פט”ז מ”ב)

◇ According to the Babylonian Talmud, the use of the *past* tense in Mishnaic Hebrew may also indicate an *after-the-fact* (דִּיעְבַּד) perspective towards an act that should *not* have been performed in the first place. The *present* tense, however, indicates a *before-the-fact* (לְכַתְּחִילָה) perspective towards a perfectly permissible act.²¹ This distinction has been presented in the following Talmudic passage:

*Does [the tanna] state חוֹלֵץ (in the present tense, “he may perform the ḥalitza”)?! [No], he states חָלַץ (in the past tense “[If] he has performed the ḥalitza) — after the fact (hence the mishna does not advocate ḥalitza in such a case.)!*²²

מִי קָתְנִי “חֹלֵץ”? “חָלַץ” קָתְנִי — בְּדִיעְבַּד! (יבמות נג, א)

21 See the entries דִּיעְבַּד and לְכַתְּחִילָה in *The Practical Talmud Dictionary* (above, p. ix note 6).

22 Nevertheless, when a present-tense form (i.e., a participle) is prefaced with the definite article (-ה), it is understood in the Talmud as indicating an *after-the-fact* perspective. Example: הַרוֹחֵץ — דִּיעְבַּד, אֵין; לְכַתְּחִילָה, לֵא: *the one who bathes* [on the Sabbath] — *after the fact, yes; in the first place, no* (= he should not be bathing)!

1.6 VERBS: SPECIFIC FORMS

Certain verbal forms in Biblical Hebrew have undergone significant changes in Mishnaic Hebrew. Here are some examples:

BIBLICAL	MISHNAIC	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
לֵאמֹר	*לוֹמַר ²³	<i>to say</i>
*לְשֵׁבֶת	לְיֹשֵׁב ²¹	<i>to sit</i>
*לְתַת	לְתִתֵּן ²¹	<i>to give</i>
*לְרִדֹת	לְיִרְדֹת ²¹	<i>to descend</i>
*לְקֹרֵא	לְקֹרוֹת	<i>to read</i>
*קֹרְאִים	קֹרִין	<i>reading</i>
*מְצָאנוּ	מְצִינוּ	<i>we found</i>
נִדּוֹן	*נִדּוֹן*	<i>it was judged</i>
הֵחִלוּ	*הֵתְחִילוּ*	<i>they began</i>
מִדֵּיתִי	*מִדְּרִיתִי*	<i>I measured</i>
*יֵצְאָה	יֵצְאָתָּה, יֵצְתָה	<i>she went out</i>
*בָּאָה	בָּאת	<i>she came</i>
תֹּאכְלֶנָּה	*יֹאכְלוּ*	<i>they (f.) will eat</i>

* The forms with the asterisk (*) are the ones currently used in Modern Hebrew.

1.7 VOCABULARY²⁴

The vocabulary of Mishnaic Hebrew differs considerably from that of Biblical Hebrew. It has been estimated that about half of the lexical material is different, with many foreign words borrowed from Aramaic, Akkadian, Persian, Greek and Latin.

23 In the first four examples of Mishnaic Hebrew, the infinitive/gerund has become similar to the future tense. For example, לְיֹשֵׁב resembles the future יֵשֵׁב.

24 For details, see Kutscher (above, p. 1 note 1) pp. 132-141.

2

THE ARAMAIC LANGUAGE¹

The Aramaic language is not primarily a Jewish language, but — as its name implies — it is the language of the ancient Arameans. Indeed, two words in the Torah that are definitely Aramaic were spoken by Lavan, the Aramean: (בראשית לא:מו) **שְׂהָדוּתָא**, *a mound of testimony*.

Later, this language became a medium of communication between other peoples in the Middle East, including the Jews. For many years, it served as an international language. For example, the Bible relates that during the period of the first *Beth HaMikdash* officials of the kingdoms of Judah and Assyria spoke to each other in Aramaic (מלכים ב יח:כו). Aramaic is also the only language other than Hebrew in which parts of the Bible are written.²

2.1 ARAMAIC AND HEBREW CONSONANTS

Aramaic is similar to Hebrew in many ways. Its consonantal and vocalic systems consist of precisely the same consonants and vowels that are used in Hebrew. Because of their different linguistic development, however, there are certain consonants in one language that sometimes correspond to different consonants in the other language. Here is a table of these consonantal shifts with illustrations. It must be emphasized that this table does *not* imply that *every* Aramaic **ד**, for example, corresponds to a Hebrew **ד**.

1 For a full discussion of the Aramaic language, see E. Y. Kutscher, "Aramaic," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), Vol. III, pp. 259-287.

2 See: ירמיה י:יא; דניאל ב:ד-ז:כח; עזרא ד:ה-ו:יח; ז:יב-כו.

ARAMAIC		HEBREW		ENGLISH
Consonant	Example	Consonant	Example	Translation
ד	דְּהַב	ז	זָהָב	<i>gold</i>
ת	תְּלַת	ש	שָׁלֹשׁ	<i>three</i>
ע	אַרְע	צ	אַרְצָא	<i>land</i>
ט	עֲטָא	צ	עֲצָה	<i>advice</i>

Furthermore, an Aramaic consonant sometimes corresponds to a different consonant in Hebrew that is pronounced in a similar manner, i.e., from the same point of articulation. Consider, for example, the Aramaic noun נְהֻמָּא, *bread* — the cognate of the Hebrew noun לֶחֶם. Phonetically, the Aramaic נ is parallel to the Hebrew ל, and the Aramaic ה is parallel to the Hebrew ח: The former pair of consonants are both pronounced with the tongue, while the latter pair are both pronounced deep in the throat. Similarly, the Aramaic פְּרִזְלָא, *iron*, is the equivalent of the Hebrew בְּרִזְלָא, with the פ parallel to the Hebrew ב, since both consonants are pronounced with the lips.

The same kinds of consonantal shifts sometimes occur within the Hebrew language: For example, Ramban contends that the noun דְּבַאָּה (in דברים לג:כה) is the equivalent of זְבַאָּה, with the Hebrew ד replacing the Hebrew ז.³ According to Rashi (on ויקרא יט:טז), the Hebrew root רכל is the equivalent of the Hebrew רגל, since the כ and the ג are phonetically similar.

3 See also Ramban's commentary on ויקרא יט:כ and שמות טו:י, בראשית מא:מו. For additional sources in Ramban's writings, see the index at the end of the second volume of H. D. Chavell's כתבי הרמב"ן (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1963), under the entry אותיות.

2.2 ARAMAIC AND HEBREW VOWELS

In the vocalic system, there is a tendency for Aramaic vowels to be shorter than their Hebrew counterparts. For instance, in the Aramaic noun ܩܠܘܫ — the cognate of the Hebrew קול — a *sh^eva* is placed under the ܫ instead of the Hebrew *kametz*, and a *kametz* is placed under the ܠ instead of the Hebrew *holam*.

2.3 ARAMAIC DIALECTS

The Aramaic language includes a variety of dialects that are written in a variety of scripts. Syriac, for example, the language of the Bible translation known as the *Peshitta*, is a non-Jewish dialect that is written in any one of three different scripts. The dialects used by Jews, however, are written in the same script as Hebrew. Here is a list of the major Jewish dialects:

- 1) *Biblical Aramaic* (the language of the Aramaic parts of Ezra and Daniel, and Yirmeyahu 10:11)
- 2) *Palestinian or Galilean Aramaic* (the language of the Talmud Yerushalmi, the aggadic Midrashim and the Palestinian Targumim)
- 3) *Onkelos-Yonathan Aramaic* (the language of Targum Onkelos on the Torah and Targum Yonathan on the Prophets)
- 4) *Babylonian Aramaic* (the language of the Babylonian Talmud and of some Gaonic texts)

This volume focuses on the latter two dialects, but much of the information provided does apply to Aramaic in general.

2.4 VOCALIZATION AND PRONUNCIATION

What is the correct way to *vocalize* (=to mark with vowels) the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud? Nobody knows for sure. In contrast to the Biblical text whose vocalization has been handed down to us with very few controversies, the standard editions of both the Mishna and the Talmud have no vowels. For Mishna, a scholarly vocalized edition has been published that is based upon

some vocalized manuscripts and oral reading traditions.⁴ The situation with respect to the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud, however, is more fuzzy: Little vocalized material is available in manuscript, and the reading traditions among the various Jewish communities are widely divergent. There is no easy solution.

The most scientific way to handle the problem would be to "play it safe" and not vocalize at all. Such an approach would save us from some scholarly criticism, but it would at the same time cause confusion for the *student* for whom this volume has been produced. In our view it is better to furnish the student with a reasonable vocalization — which may be dubious or even erroneous in some of its details — rather than to leave the student in the lurch, without any vocalization.

At first glance, one might assume that Biblical Aramaic should be a guide for the vocalization of the Aramaic of the Talmud, since the books of Ezra and Daniel both have an authoritative vocalized text. Babylonian Aramaic, however, is a different dialect. Just as it would be a mistake to equate Mishnaic Hebrew with Biblical Hebrew,⁵ it is a mistake to equate Talmudic Aramaic with Biblical Aramaic.

The Aramaic of Targum Onkelos,⁶ which was referred to in Babylonia as (א קידושין מט, א) תַּרְגּוּם דִּידָן, "*our Targum*," is certainly closer to Babylonian Aramaic and would seem to be a more reliable guide. Indeed, a careful vocalization of Targum Onkelos has been painstakingly preserved by Yemenite Jews in their manuscripts and books.⁷ Recent studies of the Yemenite reading tradition, however,

4 Ḥanokh Albeck (commentator) and Ḥanokh Yalon (vocalizer), *ששה סדרי משנה* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958). See also *מבוא לניקוד המשנה* by Yalon (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1964).

5 See Chapter 1.

6 Onkelos lived in Eretz Yisrael, but according to some scholars (e.g., J. N. Epstein, E. Y. Kutscher) at least the final editing and the vocalization of his Targum are of Babylonian origin. When quotations from Targum Onkelos are quoted in the Babylonian Talmud, they are almost always introduced by the word *ומתרגמינן*, and *we* (= *Babylonian Jews*) *translate*. Later, the Geonim of Babylonia regularly called it *תַּרְגּוּם דִּידָן*, *our Targum*.

7 See Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), vol. 1.

have shown that their pronunciation of the Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmud differs from their own pronunciation of Targum Onkelos.⁸ Furthermore, to vocalize in accordance with the Yemenite tradition would be impractical, since most of the students who will use this volume are non-Yemenites who study in non-Yemenite institutions of learning where the reading tradition of the Talmud differs markedly from the Yemenite pronunciation.

Grammar for Gemara, like *The Practical Talmud Dictionary*,⁹ adopts a somewhat eclectic approach towards this problem. On the one hand, an attempt is made to vocalize the Aramaic in a manner that makes sense grammatically and historically — sometimes in the face of the popular pronunciation.¹⁰ For example, the common form מִיפְּלָגִי is vocalized in that manner, since no way was found to justify the popular pronunciation מִיפְּלָגִי. In such cases, a different vocalization based upon the popular pronunciation is mentioned in a note, so that the student will recognize what he hears. On the other hand, *whenever justifiable*, the popular pronunciation is recorded. For example, the traditional pronunciation תְּנוּ is preserved alongside תְּנוּ and the Yemenite תְּנוּ.

8 Shelomo Morag, *ארמית במסורת תימן: לשון התלמוד הבבלי... ותצורת הפועל* (Jerusalem: Ben Tzvi Institute, 1988) pp. 41-45.

9 Jerusalem: Ariel, 1991; Maggid-Koren 2016. See the section on “Vocalization,” pp. XVI-XVII in the introduction.

10 Besides Morag’s work (see note 8), particularly useful have been: J. N. Epstein, *דקדוק ארמית בבליה*, ed. by E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem: Magnes; Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1950) and the critical review of the work by E. Y. Kutscher, reprinted in his *מחקרים בעברית ובארמית* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), pp. 226-255.

We fully realize that the fine points of pronunciation and vocalization are often insignificant for the understanding of the Talmudic text. In Judaism, there is a basic difference between the study of תּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּכַתָּב and the study of תּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּעַל פֶּה. While a Jew can fulfill the mitzvah of learning Torah by reading mechanically from the text of Scripture, reading תּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּעַל פֶּה mechanically — without at least trying to *understand* the content — does *not* fulfill any mitzvah.¹¹ Reading the words properly is important only as a means to enhance understanding but not as an end in itself. Indeed, my revered teacher, HaRav Dr. Michael Bernstein, of blessed memory, used to say: *Know* the correct pronunciation of the *gemara*, but *read* the *gemara* in the traditional way!

11 *Shulhan Arukh (HaRav), Hilkhoth Talmud Torah* (Brooklyn, New York: “Kehot” Publication Society, 1968), Chapter 2: par. 12-13, p. 1680. See also *Magen Avraham* on *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 50 and Rashi’s distinction between מקרא and משנה in his commentary on א, ברכות ה, א. This point was stressed by our master, HaRav Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, זצ”ל, on several occasions.