

## SHEWA

The *shewa* is a combination of two horizontally aligned dots placed under a letter, ךְ, that indicates the lack of a vowel. Except for the last letter in a word, Biblical Hebrew does not permit an empty space under characters. Thus, ךְ is unacceptable, so we see the form ךְׁ instead. Biblical Hebrew has three classes of *shewa*: silent, vocal (also called mobile *shewa*) and composite; it is important to distinguish between them. Generally for identification, when a *shewa* appears at the beginning of a syllable it is vocal, and at the end of a syllable it is silent (as with ךְׁ). Biblical Hebrew does not allow two *shewas* to appear at the beginning of a word. To compensate for this, when an inseparable preposition (such as בְּ, בִּ, and לִ) is attached to a word beginning with a *shewa*, such as בְּ + תְּחִלָּה, the first *shewa* reduces to a short “i”, resulting in בְּתְחִלָּה.

### Silent *Shewa*

- i. The silent *shewa* is totally silent in pronunciation.
- ii. When two consecutive *shewas* appear, the first of these is always silent; therefore, the *shewa* under the *šin* in מְשִׁפָּחַת is silent.
- iii. After a short vowel, the *shewa* is silent, as in הֶתְפַּלֵּל.

### Vocal *Shewa*

- i. The vocal *shewa* is voiced as a short and hurried “e” sound, as one pronounces “extra”.
- ii. Gutturals do not appear with the vocal *shewa* (see below).
- iii. At the beginning of a word a *shewa* is usually vocal, as in תְּחִלָּה.<sup>1</sup>
- iv. The second of two consecutive *shewas* is vocal, thus in the word מְשִׁפָּחַת the second *shewa* is pronounced.
- v. Vowels appearing under a strong *dagesh* are vocal, even if they are preceded by a short vowel (contra. to point iii of the silent *shewa*). In the word בְּקֶשׁוֹ, because the strong *dagesh* doubles the *qof*, the *shewa* is pronounced even though a short “i” is immediately before it.
- vi. A *shewa* after a long vowel is vocal, as in the case of שְׁתַּחֲוֶה.<sup>2</sup>

### Composite *Shewa*

- i. Regarding its formation, the composite *shewa* is basically a combination of the three short vowels “a”, “e”, and “o” together with a *shewa*—אָ, אֶ, and אֹ, respectively.<sup>3</sup>
- ii. Composite *shewas* are always vocalized and in practice usually sound like their respective short vowels.
- iii. As a general rule, the composite *shewa* appears under gutturals as a replacement for a vocal *shewa*. In the case of אֶנְחֶנוּ, were the *alēph* a non-guttural, we would expect to see a vocal *shewa*. Notice also in this example that the *het* coexists with a *shewa* underneath because the *shewa* is silent.

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<sup>1</sup> A few exceptions to this rule exist; see Lambdin (1976:XXVII).

<sup>2</sup> Some disagreement exists over this issue; the vocal *shewa* may also appear under the first of two identical consonants. For a fuller discussion of both these subjects, see JM §8-b.

<sup>3</sup> These symbols are also called reduced vowels (the *aleph* here is merely a representative consonant).