

Rules for Dagesh in Biblical Hebrew

Tim Hegg • TorahResource

In the Masoretic pointing (נקודות, *niquddot*, the addition of diacritical marks in the Hebrew Bible), they used a “dot” in the middle of a letter to 1) indicate pronunciation and 2) to mark grammatical constructions. This dot is called דָּגֶשׁ, *dagesh*. The one exception to this short definition is the vowel שׁוּרוּק (*shuruq*), וּ, in which the diacritical mark (dot) simply identifies the *vav* as a vowel instead of a consonant. (When the *vav* is acting as a consonant, can take a *dagesh*, as in מְצִוָּה.)

Two Types of Dagesh

Though there is no distinction in the mark itself (being a single dot), the *dagesh* functions in two different ways: 1) דָּגֶשׁ קָל (*dagesh qal*, “light dagesh,” also called *dagesh lene*) and 2) דָּגֶשׁ חָזָק (*dagesh chazaq*, “strong dagesh,” also called *dagesh forte*).

1. דָּגֶשׁ קָל or *dagesh lene* is only found in the six letters ב, ג, ד, כ, פ, ת in order to differentiate between plosive (stopped) and spirantized pronunciation. Originally each of these six letters possessed two different pronunciations, one plosive (stopped or muted) and one spirantized (a fricative). By “plosive” “stopped” or “muted” is meant that the letter is vocalized without a continuing expulsion of breath. By spirantized is meant that the letter is vocalized with a continuing expulsion of breath.

In order to easily identify the six letters that take the *dagesh lene*, two words utilizing the letters have been used as an acronym: בְּגַד כְּפָת, *begad kephat*, also spelled בְּגַד כֶּפֶת, *beged kephet*. In modern Hebrew pronunciation, only three of the *begad kephat* letters have retained dual pronunciations:

Stopped	Spirantized
ב = “b” as in “boy”	ב = “v” as in “voice”
כ = “k” in “kitchen”	כ = “ch” in German “Bach”
פ = “p” in “pole”	פ = “ph” in “phone”

Of the remaining three letters (ת, ד, ג) one (the ת) has a dual pronunciation in the Ashkenazic tradition but the other two have lost any dual pronunciation (meaning that they are pronounced as stopped regardless of whether they have *dagesh* or not). In modern Israeli Hebrew (which follows the Sephardic pronunciation rather than the Ashkenazic), all three of the remaining letters are pronounced as plosives (stopped). In ancient times, all six of the *begad kefat* letters had dual pronunciation, though it is not entirely certain what the spirantized pronunciation was for ד, ג, and ת.

Ashkenazi	Sephardic	Ancient (?)
ג = “g” / ג = “g”	ג = “g” / ג = “g”	ג = “g” / ג = “g” as in “genre”
ד = “d” / ד = “d”	ד = “d” / ד = “d”	ד = “d” / ד = “th” as in “this”
ת = “t” / ת = “s”	ת = “t” / ת = “t”	ת = “t” / ת = “th” as in “think”

2. **דגש חזק** or *dagesh forte* indicates the doubling of the letter in which it is found. This would occur in forms where the same letter was written twice consecutively, and scribes used a “short cut” in order to write it only once. For instance, in a word such as **קטטל***¹, instead of writing the **ט** twice, the first **ט** with silent *sheva* would be represented by a *dagesh forte* in the second **ט**, yielding **קטל**. Thus, **קטטל*** = **קטל**, **ששלל*** = **שלל**, and **יללל*** = **ילל**.

Rules for *Dagesh Lene* and *Dagesh Forte* (**דגש קל** and **דגש חזק**)

Dagesh Lene (**דגש קל**)

- a. *Dagesh lene* is inserted in a *begat kefat* letter in most instances when it is the first letter in a word or when it begins a syllable. (If the *begat kefat* letter begins a syllable, it will most times follow a silent *sheva*.)
 1. At the beginning of a word: **פּה**, **בּן**
 2. At the beginning of a syllable: **מְדַבֵּר**, **יְקַבֵּר**, **שְׁמַרְתָּ**
- b. At the end of a word (not the beginning of a syllable), if a *begat kefat* letter follows a silent *sheva*, it can take the *dagesh lene* with a silent *sheva*: **שְׁמַרְתָּ** (*sha-mar-t*)
- c. *Begat Kefat* letters usually lose their *dagesh lene* when the vowel immediately preceding is a full vowel or a vocal *sheva*: **עָבַד**, **יְבַחַר**, **אֲדַנִּי**, **בְּבִית**
 1. This rule applies as well when a *begat kefat* letter begins a word when that word is preceded by a word which ends in a vocalized vowel:² **וְעַצֶּם לֹא תִשְׁבְּרוּ** בו, “and not a bone shall be broken of it,” where the final **בו** is joined by *maqef* (a raised dash) to **תִּשְׁבְּרוּ**. Since **תִּשְׁבְּרוּ** ends in a vocalized vowel (*shuruq*), the following **ב** will not admit a *dagesh lene*. Likewise, the **ת** in **תִּשְׁבְּרוּ** loses its *dagesh lene* because it follows the vocalized *cholem* in **לֹא**. One should remember that the **א** of **לֹא** is a *mater* (plural: *matris lectionis*), functioning as a “vowel marker” and thus not having the linguistic value of a consonant. The same, therefore, will occur when a *begat kefat* letter is immediately preceded by a word ending in any of the *matris lectionis*, namely, **י**, **ו**, **ה**, **א** and is joined by a conjunctive accent:
 2. An exception to rule #1 above is in some words, when the *begat kefat* letter is the first letter

¹ In linguistic studies, particularly Semitic linguistics, the presence of an asterisk (*) on a given form indicates that it is a linguistically proposed form and not a form that actually occurs.

² In the grammar of the Masoretes, the word beginning with a *begat kefat* letter which loses its *dagesh lene* is joined to the previous word with a conjunctive accent, but sometimes the conjunctive accent is presumed and not actually marked.

of an accented syllable, the *begat kefat* letter will receive the *dagesh lene*: שְׁתַּיִם (*she-ta-yim*), שְׁתֵּי (*she-tei*).

- Note: the *dagesh* that appears in letters following the definite article is a *dagesh forte*, not a *dagesh lene*. Thus, *begat kefat* letters which are preceded by the definite article will have a *dagesh forte*, and in this case, the *dagesh forte* acts in the same manner as a *dagesh lene* to make the *begat kefat* letter “stopped” (plosive) rather than spirantized: בְּבִית (*be-vye-it*) vs. בַּבֵּית (*ba-bye-it*). In the second example, the definite article is contained in the preposition, as noted by the vowel (*patach*) that remains from the definite article.

Rules for *Dagesh Forte* (דָּגֶשׁ חֲזָק)

- Guttural letters (א, ה, ה, ח, ע, ר) cannot accept *dagesh forte*. When linguistically they should receive *dagesh forte*, the preceding vowel is lengthened. This is called “compensatory lengthening” or “compensatory heightening”: הָעֵיר, הָאֵשָׁה (where the normal *patach* of the definite article is lengthened to *qametz* since the gutturals [א, ע, ר] cannot receive *dagesh forte*.)
- Since *dagesh forte* substitutes for writing a consonant twice, a *sheva* under a letter with *dagesh forte* is always vocal (since the original consonants would offer two *shevas*, the first silent and the second vocal): קִטְלוּ = *קִטְלוּ (qit-te-lu)
- Certain letters with vocal *sheva* may omit the *dagesh forte*. These letters are:
 - the sibilants (“s” type letters): ש, ש, צ, ז, ס
 - the liquid and nasal letters: ל, מ, נ
 - the letters ו, י, ק
 - These letters are known by the memory word סִקְנָם לְוֵי (*seqnem leivi*, where the ס stands for all sibilants).
 - Example: וַיְהִי (where we would expect וַיְהִי)
- Dagesh forte* must be preceded by a vowel. This is usually a short vowel, but may be a long vowel in an accented syllable: אֵלֶּה, הֵמָּה, קִבְּרֵי
- Dagesh forte* may not begin a word or end a word: עָם but עָמִי. In this case, the *dagesh forte* is said “to hover,” i.e., it is suspended. When something is added to the end of the word, the *dagesh forte* “lands,” i.e., appears.

3. *Mappiq* (מַפְיָק)

The 3rd feminine singular possessive suffix הַ, if left without a diacritic, could often be confused with the common *mater* הַ of the 3rd feminine singular noun. In order to make the distinction, a dot is added to the 3rd feminine singular possessive suffix to mark its distinction. This dot, while typographically the same as a *dagesh*, is actually a *mappiq* and is not functioning as either a *dagesh forte* or a *dagesh lene*. Thus, נַעֲרָהּ = “young girl” (3rd fem. sg.) and נַעֲרָהּ = “her young man” (3rd masc. sg. with 3rd fem. sg. possessive suffix).