

On Parsing Verbs with So-called Weak Roots

I hate to write anything. Practice is best. But maybe a few words could help. First, one needs to master the forms and binyanim (stems) of the strong verb. Page Kelley is right when he says: “Nothing short of this is adequate” (202). Second, one should be able to take a working knowledge of the strong verb, awareness of basic morphological phenomena like gutturals, assimilation, and compensatory lengthening, and with practice and patience, and more of each of these, make viable guesses of most verbs.

The weak roots are so named because certain letters are contained in them. They are not really weak, they act normal for those letters. Keeping these other kinds of normal functioning in mind is a good step. Nine of the ten ordinary kinds of weak roots dealt with in introductory grammars fall into two categories: gutturals and Jonah letters. The tenth kind is the geminate.

Gutturals account for the first five kinds of weak roots: פ-Guttural, פ"א, ע-Guttural, ל-Guttural, and ל"א. Gutturals all repel doubling but each acts differently with vowels.

- Gutturals and ך repel dageshim, that is, they do not double or assimilate with other consonants. Gutturals in the I and II positions will reject dageshim and cause compensatory lengthening.
- ע and ן attract patachs in the I, II, and III positions.
- א may quiesce and lengthen vowels.

Jonah letters, the letters that make up the ancient prophet's name, יונה, account for the next four kinds of weak roots: ה"ל, פ"ץ, Hollow (ו/י"ע), and פ/י"ו. The יונה letters are prone to get “swallowed up.” They assimilate, quiesce, or drop off.

- ה's drop off in the III position because they are really only vowel markers. Since ה"ל are actually ל"ה the ה will reappear if a verb suffix begins with a consonant.
- ך's assimilate when they close a syllable before a consonant.
- י's and ו's may lose their consonantal character and drop out or assimilate with previous vowel in the I or II position.

So how does the student deal with the weak roots? If the root has a guttural think through the effects of dageshim-refusal and the way that different gutturals function with vowels. If there seems to be some missing letters think through the Jonah letters and how they may have been swallowed up. In this case, familiarity with vocabulary goes a long way to solving troubles.

What about **Geminate** roots? Smile and look them up in a lexicon.