

Principle 1 A closed unaccented syllable ALWAYS has a short vowel.

A closed unaccented syllable cannot have a long vowel, nor can it have a reduced vowel (i.e., a Vocal Shewa or Hateph vowel). It must have a short vowel.

E.g.,

מִשְׁפָּטִים	מִשְׁ פָּ טִים
יִשְׂרָאֵל	יִשְׁ רָ אֵל
מִצְרַיִם	מִצְ רַיִם
פָּרָעָה	פָּרָ עָה
אֶרֶץ	אֶ רֶץ
עֶבֶד	עֶ בֶּד
עַמִּים	עַמִּ מִים
חֲצִים	חֲצִ מִים
חֲקִים	חֲקִ מִים
בֵּית	בֵּ יִת
הַמֶּלֶךְ	הַמֶּ לֶךְ
הַדָּרֶךְ	הַדָּ רֶךְ
הָאִשָּׁה	הָ אִשָּׁ הָ
וְהַמִּזְבְּחוֹת	וְ הַמִּזְ בְּחוֹת

The position of a closed unaccented syllable with respect to the accent is *irrelevant*. A closed unaccented syllable might be pretonic (one syllable before the accent) or propretonic (two syllables before the accent). Or, it might even come *after* the accent (as in Segholate nouns), or perhaps it might come three, five, or ten syllables before the accent. None of this matters. If a syllable is closed and unaccented, it doesn't matter where it is: it must take a short vowel, period.

Principle 2 Open distant syllables tend to reduce.

A distant syllable is one that is located two or more syllables before the accented syllable. The basic rationale behind Principle 2 is this: Because distant syllables are far away from the accent (where you are exerting the most force in pronunciation), it is easiest in such far-away syllables to pronounce a super short (i.e., reduced) vowel sound (as opposed to a long or short vowel).

The distant syllable closest to the accented syllable is the propretonic. Beyond this, we don't give distant syllables specific names. Propretonic reduction is the most common manifestation of the principle that open distant syllables tend to reduce.

דְּבָרִים	דֶּ בָּ רִים
מַלְכִּים	מֶ לָ כִּים
רְחוּבוֹת	רֶ חוֹ בּוֹת
חֲלוּמוֹת	חֶ לוֹ מוֹת
עֲנָבִים	עֶ נָ בִּים
אֱלֹהִים	אֶ לֹ הִים

Because Hebrew words are rarely longer than 3 or 4 syllables, reduction in distant syllables is usually observable in any given word only in the form of propretonic reduction. But knowing that all distant open syllables (not just the propretonic) tend to reduce will become helpful later, particularly when we study construct chains (BBH ch. 10). All of the words in a construct chain are treated as one accentual unit with one primary accent. Therefore, almost all open syllables in construct nouns are distant and many (though not all) of these open distant syllables will reduce. E.g.,

יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבֹתַי (Gen 47:9)

“the days of the years of the life of my fathers”

{ יָ | מֵי | שְׁ | חַ | יָ | יָ | חַ | יָ | אֲ | בֹ | תַ | יָ }

The above construct chain is one accentual unit with only one primary accent (located on the last syllable of אֲבֹתַי). Open distant syllables whose vowel has reduced are marked in red.

Principle 3 If the vowel in the pretonic syllable cannot reduce, the vowel in the pretonic syllable *may* (but will not always) reduce.

There are two reasons why the vowel in a pretonic syllable might not reduce:

- (1) The pretonic contains an unchangeable long vowel. (By definition, an unchangeable long vowel does not change.)

שׁוֹפְטִים טִים | פִּי | שׁוֹ
כֹהֲנִים נִים | הִי | כֹ

(The unchangeable long Holem Waw in the two preceding forms – and in forms like them – is often written defectively as Holem, thus:

שׁוֹפְטִים כֹהֲנִים)

- (2) The pretonic is closed and unaccented. (According to Principle 1, a closed unaccented syllable must take a short vowel; it cannot reduce.)

מִזְבְּחוֹת חוֹת | בִּי | מִזְ

Principle 4 Open pretonic syllables tend to prefer long vowels, often Qamets.

E.g.,

דְּבַר בַר | דֶּ
קָהֶל הֶל | קָ
דְּבָרִים רִים | בִּי | דֶּ
מְלָכִים כִים | לִי | מֶ
עֲנָבִים בִים | נִי | עֵ
מִשְׁפָּטִים טִים | פִּי | מִשְׁ
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵל | יִי | יִשְׁ

We sometimes find Tseré in open pretonic syllables as well.

לֶבֶב בֶב | לֵי

Principle 5 An accented syllable must take a full vowel.

Short vowels and long vowels are classified as full vowels. Reduced vowels are not full vowels. Thus, another way of putting this principle is that an accented syllable can take either a short or a long vowel, but cannot take a reduced vowel (i.e., Vocal Shewa or a Hateph vowel).

E.g.,

מִשְׁפָּטִים	מִשְׁ פָּ טִים
יִשְׂרָאֵל	יִשְׁ רָ אֵל
אֶרֶץ	אֶ רֵץ
עֶבֶד	עֶ בֶּד
עַמִּים	עַמְ מִים
חֲצִים	חֲצִ מִים
חֲקִים	חֲקִ מִים
הַמֶּלֶךְ	הַמְ לֶ כֶּ
הַדֶּרֶךְ	הַדְ רֶ כֶּ
הָאִשָּׁה	הָ אִשׁ שָׁה
וְהַמִּזְבֵּחַ	וְ הַמְ זֶ בֶּ חַת

The following are two ways of thinking of things:

CHART ONE

CLOSED SYLLABLE (= CvC)

if UNACCENTED (it **doesn't** matter where the syllable is with respect to the accent)

Always takes a short vowel

if ACCENTED = can take either a short or a long vowel

OPEN SYLLABLE (= Cv)

if UNACCENTED (it **does** matter where the syllable is with respect to the accent)

if PRETONIC = prefers a long vowel, usually Qamets

if DISTANT (i.e., PROPRETONIC OR BEYOND) = vowel tends to reduce

if ACCENTED = can take either a short or a long vowel

Below is another way of writing the preceding schema:

CHART TWO

ACCENTED SYLLABLE (the syllable can be either open or closed)

Can take either a short or a long vowel

UNACCENTED SYLLABLE

CLOSED (= CvC) (it **doesn't** matter where the syllable is with respect to the accent)

Always takes a short vowel

OPEN (= Cv) (it **does** matter where the syllable is with respect to the accent)

if PRETONIC = prefers a long vowel, usually Qamets

if DISTANT (i.e., PROPRETONIC OR BEYOND) = vowel tends to reduce
