

What's the Truth about...*Tzadi*?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: The eighteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet (the one between *pei* and *kuf*) is called *tzaddik*.

Fact: The correct name is *tzadi*, with no “k” sound at the end. However, the use of *tzaddik* as a viable alternative has gained some acceptance.

Background: The letter is referred to as *tzadi* in the Talmud. In the Yerushalmi (*Megillah* 1:9), *tzadi* (spelled *tzadi daled yud*) is listed along with other letters that have a final form. Similarly, the Bavli (*Shabbat* 104a) provides a *midrash* on the names of the letters of the alphabet in which it spells out the name *tzadi*. On the previous page, the Talmud, when listing letters that can be erroneously interchanged when written, uses the word *tzadin* when referring to the plural of *tzadi*, providing further evidence that the name does not end with a *kuf*. The Talmud (*Yoma* 73b; cf. Yerushalmi *Yoma* 7:3) once again mentions the *tzadi* when questioning where the letter was located on the high priest's breastplate (*urim vetumim*).

One of the earliest and most important Jewish philologists, Yona ibn Janach,¹ mentions the word *tzadi* many times in his *Sefer HaShorashim*.

More recent evidence can also be found. The *Sdei Chemed* is arranged alphabetically and includes a section called “*tzadi*.” In the sections detailing the *halachot* of writing a *Sefer Torah* in

Rabbi Dr. Zivotofsky is on the faculty of the Brain Science Program at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

the *Beit Yosef* (OC 36), *Mishnah Berurah* (OC 36, p. 64) and *Aruch Hashulchan* (OC 32:49, 36:22 and *Yoreh Deah* 274:10), *tzadi* is written out several times.² Rav Hershel Schachter in *MiPninei HaRav* (2001, 267) also refers to the *tzadi*. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (14:622) uses the term “*sade*.” Moreover, parallel letters in Arabic (*sad*), Syriac (*sade*) and Ethiopic (*sadai*), all closely related languages, have no “k” sound at the end.³

Despite this, one still hears the letter referred to as *tzaddik*. The most likely reason for this is that since the *kuf* directly follows the *tzadi* in the Hebrew alphabet, many people inadvertently link the two. Another reason is that in Hebrew acrostics, the word *tzaddik* (as in righteous person) is frequently used for the letter *tzadi*, and in various *midrashim*, the word *tzaddik* appears in connection with the *tzadi*. Examples of the former include Psalms 145:17—which is included in Ashrei and, as such, known by heart by many—as well as Psalms 119:137 and 112:9. An example of the latter includes the *midrash* cited in the Talmudic statement above (*Shabbat* 104a).

Despite the error, the “letter” *tzaddik* is found in traditional sources. However, unlike the misconception regarding Cheshvan and Mar Cheshvan,⁴ this doesn't seem to have any halachic ramifications. Consequently, it persists with little, if any, protest.

The earliest source that refers to the letter in question as *tzaddik* appears to be Sifrei⁵ to Deuteronomy 6:9 where a

scribe is cautioned not to mix up the letters *tzaddik* and *gimmel*. One might deduce from this that alternate pronunciation already existed in the fifth century (which is when the Sifrei was first written). However this is not the case. The first printed edition of the Sifrei (Venice, 1545) used the term *tzaddik*, however, earlier manuscripts all refer to the *tzadi* (according to the critical edition of the Sifrei by L. Finkelstein). Thus, it appears that the error may have been introduced by the printer. (Many false traditions have become well established because of uneducated printers.)


In the introduction to the *Zohar*, (2b) God is quoted as saying to the *tzadi*: “O *tzadi*, you are *tzadi* and you are *tzaddik*....” This is understood to mean that God was telling the *tzadi* that he is righteous (*tzaddik*). But it can be (mis)understood to mean that God was saying that the name of the letter is both *tzadi* and *tzaddik*. Rashi to *Menachot* 29b (s.v. *Shatnez gaetz*) calls the letter *tzaddik*⁶ as well. In modern times the use of the term *tzaddik* has become even more popular. In *Rachamim LeChaim*, a commentary on the Rashba,⁷ the author, Rabbi Chaim Palache,⁸ references another work of his, *Kuntres Derech Yam*, and refers the reader to section “*tzaddik*.” Rav Yitzchak Elchanan Spector⁹ misquotes the Talmud and calls the letter *tzaddik*. In some modern sources both options are offered, such as in the classic Hebrew/English dictionary by Reuben Alcalay (1990,

p. 2143). The *Modern English-Yiddish/Yiddish-English Dictionary* by Uriel Weinreich lists the letter as *tzaddik* as well. Additional research is required to find the earliest use of the term *tzaddik*¹⁰ in lieu of *tzadi*.

A Bar-Ilan CD-Rom search reveals hundreds of uses of *tzadi* in sources including the Bavli, Yerushalmi, Midrash Rabbah, Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, *Zohar*, *Zohar Chadash*, Geonim, Rishonim and Acharonim on Tanach and Shas, codes and numerous responsa. Surprisingly, there are also tens of instances of the use of *tzaddik* to mean *tzadi*. For example, the Ramban refers to *tzaddik* (Exodus 25:29); however he also refers to *tzadi* (Exodus 16:1). Again, it is not clear whether a printer is at fault here. There are very few early uses of the term *tzaddik*, fewer than two score. However, several dozen can be found in nineteenth and twentieth century responsa and codes and thus cannot be ascribed to printers' errors. For example Rav Eliezer Waldenberg uses both terms several times. Most contemporary authorities, however, are careful; Rav Ovadia Yosef mentions *tzadi* several dozen times and *tzaddik* only once when making a play on the name. Thus, although *tzaddik* has become an acceptable alternative and can be found in sources such as the *Nodah B'Yehudah*, *Chatam Sofer*, *Mishnah Berurah* and *Kol Mevasser*, it is clear that the correct name was and remains *tzadi*.

It is worth noting that the Yemenites have a slightly different custom regarding the names of the Hebrew letters. Rav Shlomo ben Rav Yehyei Amram Korach, one of the leading contemporary Yemenite authorities, brings down this custom in his work, *Arichat Shulchan*, (vol. 3, p. 166-168). Instead of referring to the end letters as *sofit*, the Yemenites refer to those letters with two forms as either *peshutah* (straight) or *kefufah* (bent), which is how the Talmud refers to them.¹¹ Rav Shlomo refers to the letter under discussion as a *tzad peshuta* and *tzad kefufah* and emphasizes that it is neither *tzadi* nor *tzaddik*, but “*tzad*.”¹²

The *tzadi/tzaddik* distinction has been put to good use. As an example of how

a *gadol* can relate to children, the story is told that Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt”l*, would show a little boy the letter under discussion and have an earnest conversation with him about whether it is a *tzaddik* or a *tzadi*.¹³ 

Notes

1. Lived in the first half of the eleventh century. See *Encyclopedia Judaica* 8:1181-1186.

2. It should be noted that there are three places where the *Mishnah Berurah* uses the term *tzaddik* but twenty-seven where it uses the term *tzadi*.

3. See the chart in Peter T. Daniels, “Scripts of Semitic Languages” in Robert Hetzron's *The Semitic Languages* (London, 1997), 35. I thank Dr. Adina Moshavi for this source.

4. See “Legal-ease: What's the Truth about...Mar Cheshvan?” *Jewish Action*, fall 2000, 28-29.

5. *Piska* 36 in Va'etchanan, Finkelstein edition 5753, 65.

6. It is certainly possible that in Rashi, as in the Sifrei, the original was *tzadi* and a printer who thought it should be *tzaddik* changed it. Old manuscripts would have to be consulted to verify this.

7. *She'eilot U'Teshuvot HaRashba*, *chelek* 7, *siman* 343. Rashba was Rav Shlomo ben Aderet, 1235-1310.

What's the Truth about...*Bobe-Mayses*?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: The term *bobe-mayse* refers to *bobes*, Jewish grandmothers.

Fact: A *bobe-mayse* is an old wives' tale or incredible story. While in Yiddish, *bobe* is an affectionate name for grandmother, and *mayse* means tale or story; the term *bobe-mayse* probably derives from a sixteenth-century

8. Sephardic halachic authority (b. Izmir, 1788-1869). On Palache see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13:17-18. *Rachamin LeChaim* can be found in the back of his book, *Nishmat Kol Chai*, vol. 2, as well as in some editions of the *She'eilot U'Teshuvot HaRashba*.

9. 1817-1896; *She'eilot U'Teshuvot Ein Yitzchak*, *chelek aleph*, *Yoreh Deah*, *siman* 28, par., 5, 6.

10. For a philosophical discussion of *tzadi* vs. *tzaddik*, see Eliyahu (Elias) Lipiner, *Ideologye Fun Yiddish Alef-Beys* (Buenos Aires, 1967) 165, 497-502.

11. This is preferred to the term *sofit* since there is no *kof rishonit*, for example.

12. The other letters that he gives slightly different names to are: *be* (*bet*), *dal* (*dalet*), *va* (*vav*), *zan* (*zayin*), *yod* (pronounced as such and not *yud*), *ahn* (*ayin*—the *ayin* is only mentioned in a footnote; the author seems to have left the letter out in the text, which I assume he did accidentally), *peh* (*pay*) and *kof* (*kuf*). See also Rav Yosef Kafich, *Halichot Taiman*, (5723), 50 for the names of the letters.

13. Yonason Rosenblum, *Reb Yaakov: The Life and Times of Hagaon Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky* (New York, 1993), 244. This book is based on the research of Rabbi Noson Kamenetsky. I thank Rabbi Aharon Marcus for pointing this story out to me.

Yiddish classic *Bove-Bukh*.¹

Background: One of the first (chronologically and in pride of place) published works of Yiddish literature was the frequently reprinted chivalric romance *Bove-Bukh*,² which was written in 1507 by Elijah Levita (ben Asher haLevi Ashkenazi “haBocher”; 1468?-1549).³ *Bove-Bukh* is

a Yiddish adaptation of a romantic fifteenth-century novel, *The Story of Buvo* or *Buovo*, which was an Italian reincarnation (entitled *Buovo d'Antona*) of the Anglo-French Sir Bevis of Hampton cycle of romances of the early fourteenth century.⁴ The stories were originally in English, translated into Italian and then adapted into Yiddish. In Yiddish, *Bove-Bukh* became popular among Jewish women and the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe. The Italian version has no less than thirty known editions and the Yiddish edition was reprinted in Venice (1540), Prague (1660), Frankfort-on-the-Main (1691), Amsterdam (1721) and other cities. It was written in the now almost forgotten Western Yiddish—a dialect that may not be familiar to the modern Yiddish speaker—and contains many Italianisms.⁵ Originally, *bobe-mayse* meant a story that could actually be found in *Bove-Bukh* or the type of tall tale that was likely to be found in the famous novel. There was no reference to a grandmother (except that *Bove-Bukh* was the sort of literature that many *bobes* liked to read and talk about). Over time, the book lost its popularity, and the original meaning of the popular phrase was lost. The use of similar terms for old wives' tales in other languages, particularly Slavic, probably aided in the popularization of the Yiddish phrase. Today *bobe-mayse* connotes an unbelievable story or grandmother's tale and has no

connection to the original romance novel. It is thus a *bobe-mayse* that *bobe-mayses* are related to *bobes*. **JA**

Notes

1. For more on this see Jean B. Jofen, *Yiddish for Beginners*, 1st revised ed., (New York, 1998), 3; Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago, 1980), 273, 616; Yudel Mark, "Yiddish Literature" in *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*, vol. II, 3rd ed., ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York, 1960), 1191-1231; *Jewish Encyclopedia* 2:391-2 (Baba Buch); *Encyclopedia Judaica* 4:1155 (*Bobe-Mayse*). I thank Gilad J. Gevanyahu, Jim Marchand and Dr. Paul Glasser, associate dean at the Max Weinreich Center in New York, for information on this topic.

2. There is a critical edition (1949) and an edition with translation by Judah A. Joffe (1873-1966; see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10:141-142). In 1969 Jerry Smith wrote an unpublished Cornell dissertation on it. See also *Encyclopedia Judaica* 4:1276 (*Bove-Bukh*). The first extant version is from 1541, but it is believed to have first been published in 1507. It was written in ottava rima, a stanza of eight iambic lines containing three rhymes, a style it introduced into Yiddish literature. The work consists of 650 eight-line stanzas.

3. For details about this talented author and grammarian, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 11:132-135. He was born in Germany but spent most of his life in Italy. Despite all his travels and worldliness, including living in a cardinal's house for twelve years, he remained an observant Jew, although two of his grandchildren converted to Christianity.

4. Whether it is the story of Bevis of Southampton or Buovo d'Anc(tona), depends on whether one accepts the continental or insular origin of the story.

5. Yiddish has two major dialects: Western and Eastern. In gross simplification, Eastern is composed of the following major dialects: Polish (or Central Yiddish), Lithuanian (or Northeastern Yiddish) and Ukrainian (or Southeastern Yiddish). The most widely spoken dialect today is that of the *Chassidim* who use Hungarian Yiddish, which is generally classified as a sub-dialect of Polish Yiddish. However, knowledge of Yiddish is also fairly common among Jews from the former Soviet Union, most of whom speak Ukrainian Yiddish. Much of sixteenth-century Yiddish literature, including *Bove Bukh*, is in Western Yiddish where the word for grandmother is not *bobe*. For more on this, see Jack Howard's University of Illinois dissertation, ca. 1972. Also, see Max Weinreich (see note 1) on Yiddish dialects in general.