

Ross Lessons 6 Gutterals: The Gutts Gang

Ever heard of the notorious street gangs of Los Angeles--the Bloods and the Crips? Well, there is a bit of “gang activity” in the Hebrew language. This gang runs around, wreaking havoc and causing trouble throughout Hebrew. They’re called the “Gutts Gang,” and they consist of the following *guttural letters*:

ע ח ה א / ר

In reality, only the first 4 letters are initiated, full-fledged members of the Gutts. The fifth letter, ר, is a Gutts-wanna-be. Sometimes he acts like a Gutt because he wants to be initiated, but he’s not an official member of the gang.

You can spot one of the Gutts from a mile away. No, it’s not because they wear the colors red or blue. It’s because of the kind of problems they cause for polite, linguistic society (that’s you--the student!). Here’s a short summary of the characteristics of the Gutts:

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The Gutts Gang: ע ח ה א / ר

1. All: No DF inside.
2. All except ר: No VS under; instead, takes CS. [SS is OK.]
3. All except ר: Prefer A-class vowels/CS. [But א often prefers segol.]

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Let’s talk a little about these characteristics.

1. If you can’t put a DF (dagesh forte) inside a Gutt, then you normally either lengthen the preceding vowel (compensatory lengthening), or you leave the preceding vowel short but treat the syllable as if a DF were present, closing the syllable (implied/virtual doubling). For ex., to make a noun definite, you normally attach ה to the beginning of the noun, with DF in the first letter of the noun: הַמֶּלֶךְ, the king. But, since עִיר begins with a Gutt, the ע rejects DF and the pataḥ of the article compensatorily lengthens: הָעִיר, the city.
2. Sometimes it’s necessary, due to changing stress and syllable structures, to reduce a vowel to a VS (vocal shewa). Since a Gutt can’t take a VS below it, the VS will be replaced with a CS (compound shewa). For example, the plural of שֶׁבֶד (servant) should be שֶׁבְּדִים, with VS under the ע. However, due to #2, we have CS instead: שֶׁבְּדִים.
3. Gutts have a tendency to change the vowels under them, and/or right before them, to a-class. For ex., the normal vowel pattern for singular segolate nouns is the double-segol:

מֶלֶךְ (a king), כֶּסֶף (silver, money). But if the middle letter is a Gutt, then the segolate noun's double-segol pattern changes to double-pataḥ: נַעַר (a youth).

You need to memorize these 3 characteristics. We will have opportunity, over the course of the class, to see how these Gutturals affect different grammatical situations. If you learn these now, then later, when we face an “irregularity” related to gutturals, you’ll actually realize that what you’re seeing is not really an exception to what you’re learning. Instead, you will simply be applying something you already know (guttural characteristics) to new linguistic information.