

## It's OK to Teach the Sounds of the Alef-Bais

Recently a question has surfaced as to how the Alef-Bais should be taught in Chabad schools. Some educators believe that the letters of the Alef-Bais do not make independent sounds. Therefore, in order to pronounce a letter of the Alef-Bais, the letter must be read together with a *nekuda*. Subsequently, a teacher or parent should not say, "The letter *Bais* makes the same sound as *Bayis*".

There is absolutely no directive from the Rebbeim, however, against teaching the Alef-Bais with phonics. The prohibition these educators advocate is derived from a small segment of an unedited *sicha* said on Chai Elul 5742. The Rebbe says there that the letters are like a *guf* and the *nekudas* are like a *neshama*. Hence, a letter can not be pronounced without a *nekuda*, just as a *guf* can not live without a *neshama*. However, neither in that *sicha*, nor anywhere else, is there a directive not to teach the sounds of the letters. This view is held by individuals who are essentially taking an abstract concept and turning it into a *hora'ah* for others to follow.

It is important to note that this *sicha* of Chai Elul 5742 is unedited. If one looks closely at the above-mentioned segment of the *sicha*, one will easily notice that the main topic that the Rebbe was speaking about was regarding the order of the *nekudas* printed in the Siddur (*Tehillat Hashem*). The Rebbe made a practical request at the *farbrengen*, that the order of the *nekudas* should be changed in the siddur. In reality, the order was never changed! For various reasons, after the *farbrengen*, it was decided by the Rebbe not to change the order! Therefore, it is problematic to use this *sicha* as the basis for prohibiting something that was not prohibited by the Rebbe himself, while something the Rebbe said really should be changed was in reality not changed.

The Alef-Bais is holy and certainly should be learned as an end in itself. This does not preclude the ability to teach the unique sound of each letter. The Rebbeim were opposed to the method of teaching only the sounds that the *nekudas* and letters make without mentioning their names. (Such as a teacher pointing to a *chirik* and saying "this is an 'eee' ".) There is no such problem by saying "Bais sounds like Bayis".

As stated in the above-mentioned *sicha*, letters do not have a moving sound without a vowel. However, they do have a static sound. In *Tanya Igeres Hakodesh Siman 5*, the Alter Rebbe discusses pronouncing letters that come from the "five *motzaos hapeh*", and only after that does the Alter Rebbe discuss pronouncing the sounds of the *nekudas*. The letter sound is a simple, self-evident fact, and children have always used sound to symbol recognition. Introducing young children to the Alef-Bais by emphasizing the sounds each letter makes starts them out on the right foot for future progress in reading Hebrew.

Zechariah Davidson  
 Yehudis Davidson  
 Alef is for Apple  
 Los Angeles, CA  
[www.alefisforapple.com](http://www.alefisforapple.com)  
[info@alefisforapple.com](mailto:info@alefisforapple.com)