

THE JERUSALEM POST LIFESTYLE

August 31, 1983

SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

VOWEL PLAY!

The setting: the 1980 Canadian Scrabble Championships, the 10th and final round of play. The nation's best players dig deep into reservoirs of stamina for one more cut-throat, killer game.

The raucous, risky atmosphere of the opening rounds has yielded to quiet tension. Tiles click, clocks tick away the 23 minutes playing time allotted each player, and muttered “damns!” and “hells!” — or worse — comprise the majority of talk.

Defending Canadian champion Mike Wise is clinging to fourth place, and if he retains his position by winning his game, he — along with the top three — will win an all-expenses-paid trip to Los Angeles to play in the North American Championships.

I myself was present. In fact, I was Mike's opponent in this crucial game. The best I could hope for was 10th place, if I won.

In that game, I was very lucky, but Mike was very good. His superior vocabulary includes most of the language's vowel-laden words, and having studied them ensured he would not have to depend on the luck of the draw.

He negated my bingos (seven-letter words) by blocking the board, rendered my high-valued tiles impotent, and forced the pattern of the board to accommodate shorter words (his forte). Most impressive was the bingo Mike himself placed on a board apparently blocked, with seemingly terrible letters. With his rack **AAEIOUD** and using a **B** on the board, he laid down **ABOIDEAU** — a beauty!

Mike neutralized the luck factor by converting poor racks into profitable plays, such as **ZOEAE**, **URAE** and **AALII**. He scored points and blocked openings. He drew challenges by testing my knowledge of odd words (would you challenge **ATE** pluralized? I did. **ATE** is also a noun — “a blind impulse or reckless ambition that drives one to ruin”). Mike won the game and gained the right to represent Canada in Los Angeles. My reward was an unexpurgated hug by his wife, and a good lesson in hard, tough Scrabble.

Luck is adjudged to be 16 percent of a factor between two good players. The previous column discussed the strategy to aid the law of averages (playing as many tiles as possible early in the game for a better chance at the blanks and Ss, while the board is still open and susceptible to the big play). The law of averages, of course, is governed by lawless anarchy, and can make you feel pretty silly if

you've sacrificed a turn to change letters and thrown in six vowels only to pick up six more. Nevertheless, it is a law to be respected.

For a serious Scrabble player, it is worthwhile to devote study and practice to the vowel-heavy words. The most useful of those are the four- and five-letter words that contain only one consonant (such as the three examples cited earlier). It can be tedious to study 'meaningless' words, and the casual player might rebel as it "takes all the fun out of playing."

Many of the better players in Israel's Scrabble clubs do not spend time memorizing these words, although they have in their possession a very helpful list of the vowel-heavy words. Rather they learn new words in the course of playing.

Mnemonics help, too. **NAOI** is Naomi without the M; **UVEA** is **UnVictorious Egyptian Army**; **AGEE**, **AJEE**, **AKEE** and **AWEE** are easily remembered if grouped together; **OIDIA** is **O, IDI Amin**; **AMIA** is derived from **mamma MIA**. It's really very easy if you're a little bit imaginative — and a little *meshugga*.

Some words I can never recall, no matter how hard I try: **AERIE**, **AURAE**, **AUREI**, **URAEI**, **UREA** — I can only ever remember that each contains an R, which is totally useless if it's vowels you're studying.

There are 80 four- and five-letter words with only one consonant found in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary. (I am considering Y as a consonant here.) Four consonants go very well with vowels: R, L, N and D.

When I have a rack full of variant vowels, I immediately seek out any of these four fairly common consonants on the board (or in my rack), knowing that they are most helpful in ridding the irritating abundance. Familiarity with these R-L-N-D words will help lessen your dependence on luck. And if not, well...

A Scrabble-player threw in the towel
After picking up vowel after vowel.
"Eau, awee, beau, aalii,
Yipe, yowie and ogee,
I've a Q with no U," he cried, "Foul!"