Kri’at Sh’ma in a Whisper

**Question:** As a speech therapist, I was wondering whether Kri’at Sh’ma can be done in a whisper. In a whisper, the "z" sound is produced as an "s" and the "v" sound is produced as a "f" (and all voiced sounds become devoiced). Scientifically, this is because the vocal chords do not vibrate when whispering. Doesn’t one need vocalize to truly produce a "zayin", "vav", or any voiced sound, when saying Sh’ma?

**Answer:** We will have to understand the laws of enunciation of Kri’at Sh’ma to deal with your scientific revelation (to people like me, who were not aware). There is a machloket among Tana’im about whether Kri’at Sh’ma must include sound that is audible to one’s own ear (B’rachot 15a). We rule like Rabbanan’s middle approach in between the stringent Rabbi Yossi and lenient Rabbi Meir: L’chatchila one should recite Kri’at Sh’ma audibly, but b’di’eved he fulfills the mitzva even if he did not, as long as he just moved his mouth, lips, and tongue (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 62:3; the same is likely true for davening - see Mishna Berura 101:5).

It turns out scientifically that not all letters can be differentiated in a whisper, and certainly when no sound comes out. Your good question about whispering, which is not a major discussion in halachic sources, applies equally to totally non-audible speech, which is discussed. Since the clear halacha is that one does fulfill the mitzva, the question is only: why? (If there were a halachic difference between whispering and quiet talking, some poskim would have mentioned it.)

It seems implausible that the letters in question are close enough in sound that it does not make a difference if one says s instead of z or v instead of f, since they can create different words with different meanings. The answer is based on the following observation. (Almost) every Jewish subgroup pronounces certain things wrong. For example, Ashkenazim pronounce AYIN like ALEF and CHET like CHAF. Sephardim do not distinguish between KAMATZ GADOL and PATACH. Some of these regrettable (see Megilla 24b) inaccuracies can change the meaning. Yet, one with a speech impediment fulfills mitzvot of speech with a theoretically confusing lack of differentiation, and when it is standard for one’s society, it is not considered a problem (see Mishna Berura 53:37).

Why? Hashem knows what we mean. While thought is not enough (see above), one only has to enunciate to the extent that he can be expected to based on circumstances (ability, minhag (?)). Hashem can handle homonyms. The same is apparently
true of whispering. While one technically cannot tell if someone whispered "zonim" or "sonim," but Hashem knows what one meant, and since whispering is a legitimate form of speech, the best he can do is enough.

One can ask on this approach: why does Halacha make instruct us to stress the zayin of TIZK’RU so as not to sound like TISK’RU (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 61:17) if anyway it is indistinguishable when done inaudibly or with whispering? One can answer by saying that stressing the zayin is only l’chatchila (Mishna Berura 62:1), and vocalizing so the speaker can hear himself, is anyway required l’chatchila. So indeed, if you follow the l’chatchila of vocalizing, stressing the zayin becomes relevant. But this works out only if the l’chatchila of making audible to the ear can be done only through regular speech and not whispering, an opinion I have not found.

Perhaps the answer, then, is that a whisperer does not need to actively make the ZAYIN sound, but rather if and when one is vocalizing, so that a proper ZAYIN is possible, pronouncing it wrong is a real problem. For example, if an Ashkenazi says an AYIN wrong it is not a problem, but a Sephardi who usually uses a proper guttural AYIN but in one place says it like an ALEF, that is a halachic problem, at least if it changes the meaning. Perhaps also, because one is sometimes audible for Kri’at Sh’mah and sometimes not, he should consciously do these words audibly and correctly, to avoid accidentally doing it audibly and incorrectly.

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