

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Identifying English-sounding words in Hebrew
- » Recalling Hebrew sayings and words
- » Figuring out English words that come from Hebrew
- » Counting in Hebrew
- » Eyeing the Hebrew alphabet

## Chapter **1**

# You Already Know Some Hebrew

**!** ברוך הבא (Bah-rooh Hah-Bah!; *Welcome to Hebrew!*) In studying Hebrew, you're joining millions of other Hebrew speakers around the world. Its two centers are ● Israel (of course) and North America, which is home to many Hebrew newspapers, Hebrew-speaking camps and schools, and institutions. You're also speaking the Bible's original language and one of the most ancient languages still spoken today. Furthermore, you're speaking the only language in the history of the world known to have undergone a revival, returning fully to being a spoken language after hundreds — perhaps even 2,000 — years of being relegated to correspondence, literature, and the sacred world of prayer and the Bible.

Hebrew was once almost exclusively a holy language — a language of prayers and ritual, of the Bible and other sacred texts, and a language above the humdrum of the everyday. That's no longer true. The same ancient and holy tongue is now the language of sunbathing on the beach, eating dinner, going to the doctor, and carrying out the myriad events of everyday life.

All languages are portals — openings to culture and friendship, literature, and ideas. Discover any one of these portals, and a whole new world opens up to you. Discover Hebrew, and a whole Jewish and Israeli world is yours.

# Taking Stock of What's Familiar

If you've ever been to a synagogue or had a bit of Jewish education, you probably know a little Hebrew already. But even if you've never walked through a synagogue's door or studied anything Jewish, you probably still know some Hebrew words. You've probably heard the word *amen*, for example. That word is Hebrew! *Amen* comes from a word meaning "faith" or "belief," and people usually say it at the end of a prayer. And the word *Hallelujah*? Hebrew again! The word literally means "Praise God." Even the word *alphabet* derives from the Hebrew words for the first two letters of its alphabet, *aleph* and *bet*. (To see what the Hebrew alphabet looks like, check out "Recognizing Tips to Help You Read Hebrew" later in this chapter.)

You may have heard other Jewish words, of course, such as *שלעפ* (*shlehp*; to drag or pull) and *קְוֶהְטִישׁ* (*kvehtsh*; to complain), which are actually Yiddish (the language of the Jews of Eastern Europe combining Old High German, Hebrew, and other languages) and are part of the Israeli vernacular today. You may never have thought about other words that have Hebrew roots. Did you know that *cinnamon* is a derivative of the Hebrew word *קַנְמוֹן* (*kee-nah-mohn*), which appears in the biblical book *The Song of Songs*? The English word *dilute* may derive from the Hebrew word *דָּל* (*dahl*), which means "weak" or "thin" and first appears in the biblical book of *Genesis*.

Some people claim that Hebrew is the mother of all languages. No matter what its history or origin, Hebrew, a language that has its origins in the Fertile Crescent, has crept into North American spoken English. This process works in reverse, too, as many English words and phrases have crept into the Hebrew language. Interestingly enough, although you as an English speaker may identify some words as English, some of them derive from Italian and French, which shows the universality of certain words. But if you say the following words with an Israeli accent, you're speaking Hebrew!

- » Hamburger
- » Macaroni
- » Pizza
- » Cafe
- » Radio
- » Internet
- » Telephone

Incidentally, The Academy for Hebrew Language, the institute responsible for creating Modern Hebrew words, created an authentic Hebrew word for the telephone. The academy called the telephone a שַׁח-רַחוּק (sahch-rah-chohk), which put together the words for *conversation* and *long distance*. So, *telephone* translated as “long-distance conversation.” Pretty clever, huh? This word didn’t stick with the Israeli public, however, so טֵלֶפּוֹן (*telephone*) it is.

## INTRODUCING THE ACADEMY FOR HEBREW LANGUAGE

Hebrew, the language of the Bible, is spoken today in Israel and around the world as a modern language. The question, of course, is where all these modern words come from? Who decides? The answer is הַאֲקָדֵמְיָה לְלִשׁוֹן הָעִבְרִית (ha-ah-kah-dee-mee-yah la-lh-shon hah-eev-reett; The Academy for Hebrew Language), an institute founded in Israel in 1953 to oversee the language’s development and to create new words as the need arose in a manner consistent with Hebrew’s historical development. So, although Hebrew is an ancient biblical language, new words needed to be developed, such as *high tech* (תַּעֲשֵׂי־הַעֲלִית) tah-ah see-yat ee-leet) and *start-up company* (חֵבְרַת הַזְּנֵק; hehv-raht hehz-nehk), *surfboard* (גַּלְשָׁן; gahl-shan), *jet lag* (יַעֲפָת; yah-eh-feht), and even — when you’ve had a few too many — *hangover* (חִמְרָמְרַת; hah-mahr-moh-reht).

Other timely words include נְגִישׁוּת (neh-shee-goot; *affordability*), חֵרִיגְנוּת (**h**ahr-ree-gahn-oot; *exceptionalism*), נְתוּנֵי עֵתָק (nee-too-nee ah-tahk; *big data*), תַּג הַקְּבֻצָּה (tahg-hahk-bahk-tzah; *hashtag*), הַעֲלֵמַת זְהוּת (heet-ahm-aht zah-hoot; *anonymization*), עֵילוּת (ee-loot; *gentrification*), אַהֲוָה (ah-vah; *solidarity*), and תַּעֲלוּם מַסְךְ (tahtz-loom mahh screen shot).

The Israeli public doesn’t accept all the words the academy invents, of course, although the academy’s decisions are binding for government documents and the official Israel Broadcasting Authority.

Israelis aren’t above taking matters into their own hands and creating words of their own. In the 1990s, Motorola Israel Corporation introduced wireless phones, coining the new word פֶּלֶא-פּוֹן *pela-phone* (meaning “wonder phone.”) You can find out more about the academy at: <https://hebrew-academy.org.il/>. Here’s a great video on the Academy (it’s in Hebrew, but there are English subtitles); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY62gLh10CM> You can even check out their Facebook page and “like” it at [www.facebook.com/AcademyOfTheHebrewLanguage](http://www.facebook.com/AcademyOfTheHebrewLanguage).

# Speaking Hebrew Like a Native

When speaking a foreign language, you want to sound as authentic as possible. Use the tips in the following sections to start. The most important parts of sounding like a native are persistence and practice — and then some more practice! Listen to the dialogues from this book (available online) as much as possible. Spend as much time listening to Hebrew spoken by native speakers as you can.

Memorizing vocabulary and certain stock phrases and repeating them to yourself until you can say them at quite a clip is also helpful. In no time at all, you may fool people into thinking that you speak Hebrew fluently — or close to fluently, anyway.

## Stressing out (not)

The first tip I give you has to do with the way syllables are stressed. In American English, we often stress or place emphasis on the first syllable in each word, as in “When *speaking* a *foreign language* . . .” But Hebrew often places the emphasis on the last syllable. So, if you were speaking that previous phrase with an Israeli accent, you’d place your emphasis on the last syllable: “When *speaking* a *foreign language* . . .”

## GESTURING LIKE THE BEST OF THEM

Gestures provide the flourishing touch to help you seem like a native speaker. Use the following gestures when you’re speaking in Israel:

- Holding one hand at about shoulder level with the palm upright and all the fingers cupped together in the center means ! רגע (reh-gah; *wait a minute*).
- When you want to catch a cab, point your index finger down at the ground, indicating that you want the cab to stop where you’re pointing.
- In Israel, the American thumbs-up sign has traditionally been seen as an unfriendly gesture that means you’re ברוך (broh-gehz; *mad or pissed off at someone*).

Interestingly, an ad campaign in Israel once encouraged kids to make a thumbs-up sign to drivers when they’re crossing the street, with the drivers returning the thumbs-up as an indication that they see the children and will let them cross without running them over. So, thumbs-up is taking on a positive connotation!

## Getting out the gutturals

The second piece of advice I'll give you has to do with certain Hebrew letters that are pronounced at the back of the throat. Use these tips to pronounce them:

- » ץ (*eye-yeen*): This letter makes a barely audible guttural sound in the back of the throat. For practical purposes, this letter is nearly a silent syllable.
- » כ (*hahf*): This letter makes a sound you don't hear in English. It's a hard H sound, like the one you make when you clear your throat. In this book it is written as an **h**.
- » ח (*heht*): This letter makes a strong throaty H sound. In this book, this syllable is written as **h**.
- » ר (*raysh*): Traditionally this letter makes an R sound as in *round*. To sound like a native, roll this syllable like a Spanish R, and try to produce the sound from the back of your throat.

Find out about the rest of the Hebrew alphabet in “Recognizing Tips to Help You Read Hebrew” later in this chapter.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

## A PEOPLE DISPERSED, A LANGUAGE INTACT

Hebrew served as the vernacular during the ancient Jewish commonwealth until it was conquered by the Romans in 70 CE (Common Era). Then Jews fanned out across the globe to Asia, Africa, and Europe. Even though they were dispersed, the Jewish people continued to practice their religion (Judaism) and remained literate in their language (Hebrew).

Hebrew continued to be the language of prayer, study, and correspondence for Jewish people. Gradually, Jews adopted the languages of their host countries as their spoken language. They mixed Hebrew with their host countries' languages, giving rise to new Jewish languages such as Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and Yiddish.

In the 1800s, a movement began to revive Hebrew as a spoken language. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda championed the cause and moved to אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל (*eh-rehtz yees-rah-ehl*; *the Land of Israel*) to revive Hebrew, writing the first Modern Hebrew dictionary. Today, Hebrew is one of the two official languages in Israel (Arabic being the other) and is a living, spoken language for millions of Israelis and other Hebrew speakers across the globe.

## Opening your mouth to say “Ah!”

Third, watch the pronunciation of your vowels. When pronouncing the *ah* sound, pronounce that vowel fully. Open your mouth wide and say “Ah” as though you were at the doctor’s office. Hebrew doesn’t have a short *i* sound (like the vowel sound in *sit*), so any time you see an *i*, remember to make it a long sound, like the *ee* in *Whoopee!* In Hebrew, *oh* sounds are long, as in *over*.



REMEMBER

Hebrew is a Mediterranean language, and as such, it has a certain nasal quality. More so than in English — but actually a lot like in French — you use your nasal cavity when making sounds. Here’s a less-technical tip: When speaking Hebrew, try to fake a French accent. At the very least, your Hebrew will sound better than it does with an American accent!

## Counting in Hebrew

Learning how to count is fundamental to the study of any language. Hebrew divides words into masculine and feminine genders (see Chapter 2), and numbers are no different; they have masculine and feminine forms. You may feel a little confused, but don’t worry! Table 1-1 gives you the *cardinal numbers* (the numbers you use for counting) from 1 to 10. When you want to count without counting objects, use the feminine form. See “Counting objects” later in this chapter to find out how to incorporate gender into numbers.

TABLE 1-1

### Counting from 1 to 10

Number	Masculine	Feminine
1	אֶחָד (eh- <b>had</b> )	אֶחָת (ah- <b>hat</b> )
2	שְׁנַיִם (shnah-eem)	שְׁתַּיִם (sh <sup>h</sup> ta-yim)
3	שְׁלוֹשָׁה (shloh-sha)	שְׁלוֹשׁ (sha-lohsh)
4	אַרְבָּעָה (ahr-bah-ah)	אַרְבַּע (ahr-bah)
5	חֲמִשָּׁה (hah-mee-shah)	חֲמִשׁ (hah-mesh)
6	שֵׁשׁ (shee-shah)	שֵׁשׁ (shesh)
7	שִׁבְעָה (sheev-ah)	שִׁבְעַת (she-vah)
8	שְׁמוֹנָה (shmoh-nah)	שְׁמוֹנֵת (shmoh-neh)
9	תֵּשַׁע (teesh-ah)	תֵּשַׁע (tey-sha)
10	עֶשְׂרֵה (ah-sah-rah)	עֶשְׂרֵי (eh-sehr)

## Counting objects

The gender of the number you use when you want to count something depends on the gender of the noun you're counting. (Sound confusing? Don't worry. You can do it.) Counting objects in Hebrew is easy. Just remember to do the following things:

- » **Figure out the gender of the noun you're counting.** If you want to talk about one book, first you must figure out whether the noun *book* is masculine or feminine. (It's masculine.) So, when you count books, you need to use the masculine form of the number.
- » **Place the number appropriately before or after the noun.** For the number 1, you place the number after the noun. So rather than saying "one book," you say, "book one" (סֵפֶר אֶחָד; *seh-fehr eh-chad*). But after you get to the number two, place the number before the noun. In Hebrew, the plural of סֵפֶר is סֵפָרִים (*sfah-reem; books*). So, to say "two books," you say שְׁנַי סֵפָרִים (*shnay sfah-reem*); for "three books," say שְׁלוֹשָׁה סֵפָרִים (*shloh-shah sfah-reem*); for "four books," say אַרְבָּעָה סֵפָרִים (*ahr-bah-ah sfah-reem*); and so on.



TIP

The number 2 in Hebrew is an exception. When you're specifying two of something, say "two boys" (יְלָדִים; *yuh-lah-deem*) or "two girls" (יְלָדוֹת; *yuh-lah-doht*), and drop the last syllable (*im*) of the number 2. So, you get יְלָדִים (*two boys*) and שְׁנֵי יְלָדוֹת (*two girls*). Drop the *im* regardless of the noun you're counting.

## Counting higher

To form the numbers 11–19, place the second number in front of the 10. In the masculine form, for example, 11 is אֶחָד עָשָׂר. In the feminine form, 11 is אַחַת עָשָׂרָה (*ah-chaht es-reh*). Table 1-2 shows the numbers 11–19.



REMEMBER

Use the appropriate gender for the 10 and the additional number that makes up the compound number.

The multiples of ten (10, 20, 30, and so on) are easy because these numbers are gender-neutral. Table 1-3 shows the multiples of 10.

**TABLE 1-2** Counting from 11 to 19

Number	Masculine	Feminine
11	אֶחָד עָשָׂר (eh- <b>h</b> ad ah-sahr)	אַחַת עָשָׂרָה (ah- <b>h</b> aht ehs-reh)
12	שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר (shnehyim ah-sahr)	שְׁתַּיִם עָשָׂרָה (shtehyim ehs-reh)
13	שְׁלוֹשׁ עָשָׂר (shloh-sha ah-sahr)	שְׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂרָה (shlosh-ehsreh)
14	אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר (ahr-bah-ah ah-sahr)	אַרְבַּע עָשָׂרָה (ahr-bah es-reh)
15	חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר (hah-mee-shah ah-sahr)	חֲמֵשׁ עָשָׂרָה (hah-mesh es-reh)
16	שֵׁשׁ עָשָׂר (shee-shah ah-sahr)	שֵׁשׁ עָשָׂרָה (shehsh ehs-reh)
17	שִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר (sheev-ah ah-sahr)	שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂרָה (shvah es-reh)
18	שְׁמוֹנָה עָשָׂר (shmoh-nah ah-sahr)	שְׁמוֹנֶה עָשָׂרָה (shmoh-neh ehs-reh)
19	תְּשַׁעַת עָשָׂר (teesh-ah ah-sahr)	תְּשַׁע עָשָׂרָה (tshah-esreh)

**TABLE 1-3** Counting Multiples of 10

Number	Hebrew	Pronunciation
20	עָשְׂרִים	ehs-reem
30	שְׁלוֹשִׁים	shloh-sheem
40	אַרְבָּעִים	ahr-bah-eem
50	חֲמִשִּׁים	hah-mee-sheem
60	שֵׁשִׁים	shee-sheem
70	שִׁבְעִים	sheev-eem
80	שְׁמוֹנִים	shmoh-neem
90	תְּשַׁעִּים	teesh-eem

If you want to say something like “21” or “47,” however, you have to pay attention to gender again. (See Table 1-4.) The pattern for making these numbers is to state the number in the tens, such as עָשְׂרִים (ehs-reem; 20) and then add the word for *and* (וְ; *veh*), followed by the single number, such as אֶחָד (eh-chad; one). So, 21 would be עָשְׂרִים וְאֶחָד (ehs-reem veh-eh-chad).

**TABLE 1-4** Counting from 21 to 29

Number	Masculine	Feminine
21	עֶשְׂרִים וְאַחַד (ehs-reem veh-eh- <b>h</b> ahd)	עֶשְׂרִים וְאַחַת (ehs-reem veh-ah- <b>h</b> at)
22	עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁנַיִם (ehs-reem oosh-nah-yim)	עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁתַּיִם (ehs-reem ush-tah-yeem)
23	עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁלוּשָׁה (ehs-reem oosh-loh-sah)	עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁלוֹשׁ (ehs-reem veh-shah-lohsh)
24	עֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבָּעָה (ehs-reem veh-ahr-bah-ah)	עֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבַּע (ehs-reem veh-ahr-bah)
25	עֶשְׂרִים וַחֲמֵשֶׁה (ehs-reem vah- <b>h</b> ah-mee-shah)	עֶשְׂרִים וַחֲמֵשׁ (ehs-reem veh- <b>h</b> ah-mesh)
26	עֶשְׂרִים וְשֵׁבַע (ehs-reem veh-sheev-ah)	עֶשְׂרִים וְשֵׁשׁ (ehs-reem veh-shehsh)
27	עֶשְׂרִים וְשֵׁבַעַת (ehs-reem veh-sheev-ah)	עֶשְׂרִים וְשֵׁבַעַת (ehs-reem veh-sheh-vah)
28	עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁמוֹנָה (ehs-reem ush-moh-nah)	עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁמוֹנֶה (ehs-reem ush-moh-neh)
29	עֶשְׂרִים וְתֵשַׁע (ehs-reem veh-teesh-ah)	עֶשְׂרִים וְתֵשַׁעַת (ehs-reem veh-the-sha)

If you can count to 30, you can count to a million! For all the numbers, you follow the same pattern as in Table 1-4. First, state the number that's the multiple of 10 (20, 30, 40, and so on); then add *veh* (and) plus the single digit: שְׁלוּשִׁים וְאַחַד (shloh-sheem veh-eh-**h**ahd; 31), אַרְבָּעִים וְאַחַד (ahr-bah-eem veh-eh-**ch**ahd; 41), and so on.

To count by hundreds, first say the feminine number of the quantity of hundreds, such as *four* (אַרְבַּע), and then add the word for *hundreds* (מֵאוֹת). This pattern continues until a thousand:

100	מֵאָה	may-ah
200	מֵאוֹתַיִם	mah-tah-yeem
300	שְׁלוֹשׁ מֵאוֹת	shlohsh-meh-oht

To count by thousands, first you say the feminine number of the quantity of thousands and then follow it with the word for *thousands*, אֶלְפֵי (ah-lah-*feem*). This pattern continues to 1 million. The Hebrew word for *1,000* is אֶלֶף (eh-*leh*f), and the word for *2,000* is אַחַד אֶלְפִים (ahl-*pah-yeem*):

1,000	אֶלֶף	eh-lehf
2,000	אַחַד אֶלְפִים	ahl-pah-eem
3,000	שְׁלֹשָׁת אֶלְפִים	shloh-sheht ah-lah- <i>feem</i>
10,000	עֶשְׂרֵת אֶלְפִים	ah-seh-reht ah-lah- <i>feem</i>
1,000,000	מִלְיוֹן	meel-yohn

Several chapters in this book give you an opportunity to practice using numbers. Check out Chapter 9 to find out how to ask for and give phone numbers. Also see Chapter 14, which is all about money. Don't you love counting money?

## Recognizing Tips to Help You Read Hebrew

Hebrew is no ordinary language. Quite the contrary. Hebrew dates back more than 3,500 years to antiquity, and the Hebrew alphabet is quite possibly the first alphabet known to humankind. Hebrew was the language of King David and King Solomon, and the Bible's original language. Furthermore, ancient people called the Phoenicians based their alphabet on the Hebrew alphabet. The Greeks based their alphabet on the Phoenicians' letters. And the Latin letters you're reading right now are derived from the Greeks' letters! So, although the Hebrew language may look a little different, only four degrees separate it from what you're used to.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

In Jewish circles, using the terms CE (Common Era) and BCE (Before the Common Era) instead of the terms AD (*Anno Domini*, or year of our Lord) and B. (Before Christ) is customary. In Hebrew, you say לְפָנֵי הַסְפִירָה (leef-nahy hah-sfee-rah; *before the counting*) and אַחֲרֵי הַסְפִירָה (ah-chah-ray hah-sfee-rah; *after the counting*). 2021/22 is 5782, dated from the time of Creation, placed at 3761 BCE.

### Figuring out the Hebrew alphabet's shapes, sounds, and stories

The Hebrew alphabet is one of the oldest alphabets still in use today. Even though the letters look different from the Latin characters that comprise the English alphabet, don't be intimidated! Just spend some time memorizing the shapes and sounds of these Hebrew letters and reading Hebrew will be easier!

Like many ancient alphabets, the Hebrew alphabet is written from right to left. Hebrew consists of 22 letters, all of which are consonants. Vowels aren't written within the consonant letters; rather, they're written in the form of dots and dashes below the consonant letters. For a more complete discussion of Hebrew vowels, see "Those dots and dashes they call vowels" later in this chapter.

The pronunciation I provide in this book is the Sephardic (Mediterranean) pronunciation, which is spoken in Israel today. Ashkenazi (European) pronunciation differs slightly; the vowels, for example, have different pronunciations, and a few consonants are different as well. I use Sephardic pronunciation in this book.

## Deciphering the consonant letters

Table 1-5 shows the Hebrew letters and their sounds.

**TABLE 1-5** The Hebrew Alphabet

Name of the Letter	Pronunciation	Hebrew Character	The Sound It Makes
Aleph	<i>ah-lehf</i>	א	Makes no sound.
Bet	<i>beht</i>	ב	Makes a B sound as in <i>boat</i> .
Vet	<i>veht</i>	ב	Makes a V sound as in <i>veterinarian</i> .
Gimmel	<i>gee-mehl</i>	ג	Makes a G sound as in <i>girl</i> .
Dalet	<i>dah-leht</i>	ד	Makes a D sound as in <i>door</i> .
Hey	<i>hey</i>	ה	Makes a soft H sound as in <i>hello</i> .
Vav	<i>vahv</i>	ו	Also makes a V sound as in <i>veterinarian</i> . (Don't ask me why.)
Zayin	<i>zah-een</i>	ז	Makes a Z sound as in <i>zipper</i> .
Chet	<b><i>heht</i></b>	ח	Makes a strong guttural H"sound. In this book, this letter is represented as <b>h</b> .
Tet	<i>teht</i>	ט	Makes a T sound as in <i>teaspoon</i> .
Yod	<i>yohd</i>	י	Makes a Y sound at the beginning of a word, as in <i>young</i> . This letter also behaves like a vowel at times. I discuss it in "Those dots and dashes they call vowels" later in this chapter.
Kaf	<i>kahf</i>	כ	Makes a K sound as in <i>kite</i> .
Khaf	<i>khahf</i>	כ	Makes a strong guttural H sound. This letter is represented in this book as <b>kh</b> .
Lamed	<i>lah-mehd</i>	ל	Makes an L sound as in <i>lemon</i> .
Mem	<i>mehm</i>	מ	Makes an M sound as in <i>mouse</i> .
Nun	<i>noon</i>	נ	Makes an N sound as in <i>no</i> . (And you thought only Catholics had nuns.)
Samekh	<i>sah-meh<b>h</b></i>	ס	Makes an S sound as in <i>soda</i> .
Ayin	<i>ah-yeen</i>	ע	Makes a barely audible guttural sound in the back of the throat. (For practical purposes, as most non-native speakers can't make this sound, this letter is a silent letter. You pronounce the vowels that are placed below it, but the letter itself doesn't make a sound.)

(continued)

**TABLE 1-5 (continued)**

Name of the Letter	Pronunciation	Hebrew Character	The Sound It Makes
Pey	<i>pay</i>	פ	Makes a P sound as in <i>popsicle</i> .
Fey	<i>fay</i>	פ	Makes an F sound as in <i>fish</i> .
Tzadi	<i>tzah-dee</i>	צ	Makes a hard Tz sound as in <i>pizza</i> . In this book, I represent it as tz.
Kof	<i>kohf</i>	ק	Makes a K sound as in <i>Kansas</i> .
Reish	<i>raysh</i>	ר	Makes an R sound as in <i>round</i> . This letter is actually a guttural letter. Roll it like a Spanish R and pronounce it from the back of the throat.
Shin	<i>sheen</i>	ש	(Not Charlie's brother or Martin's long-lost son.) When the dot is on the right side of the letter, it makes a Sh sound, as in <i>show</i> . In this book, I represent it as sh.
Sin	<i>seen</i>	ש	When the dot is on the left side of the letter, it makes an S sound as in <i>Sam</i> .
Tav	<i>tahv</i>	ת	Makes a T sound as in <i>toe</i> .

## Those dots and dashes they call vowels

Originally, Hebrew had no vowels. Vowels, in the form of dots and lines below the consonants, were added to Hebrew writing in the seventh century CE. Before then, people read without vowels. Even today, most books, magazines, and newspapers in Modern Hebrew — not to mention the Torah scroll — are written without vowels.

Modern Hebrew has both long and short vowels. As a general rule, a long vowel can make up one syllable, but a short vowel needs either another vowel or a שְׁוָא (shuh-vah; *two vertical dots below a consonant*) to form a syllable. For more on the שְׁוָא, see “Introducing the Shvah” later in this chapter.

As I mentioned earlier, vowels are divided into long and short vowels. This categorization doesn't have to do with their pronunciation but with the fact that long vowels are usually in open syllables — syllables that end with a vowel — and short vowels are usually in closed syllables — syllables that end with a consonant. The long vowel הִירִיק מְלֵא (Chirik Maleh), however, holds its sound longer than the corresponding short vowel הִירִיק חֲסֵר (hirek haser). Table 1-6 shows the long vowels.

**TABLE 1-6** The Long Vowels

Name of the Vowel	Pronunciation	In Hebrew	The Sound It Makes
Hirik Maleh	ḥee-reek mah-leh	יִ	Makes an Ee sound as in <i>see</i>
Holam	ḥoh-lahm	וֹ	Makes an O sound as in <i>more</i>
Kamatz Gadol	kah-mahtz	ָ	Makes an Ah sound as in <i>saw</i>
Shuruk	shoo-rook	וּ	Makes an Oo sound as in <i>mood</i>
Tzere	tzay-reh	ֵ	Makes an A sound as in <i>cape</i>
Vav Cholam	vahv ḥoh-lahm	וֹ	Makes an O sound as in <i>snow</i>

**Note:** In this table, I used the letter א (aleph) so you could see how the vowels look when they're attached to a consonant. (The vowels are the little squiggles and dots around the א.) Unlike in English, Hebrew vowels can never be written alone; they're always attached to a consonant.

Table 1-7 shows the short vowels.

**TABLE 1-7** The Short Vowels

Name of the Vowel	Pronunciation	In Hebrew	The Sound It Makes
Herik Haser	ḥee-reek ḥah-sehr	ִ	Makes an Ee sound as in <i>see</i>
Kamatz Katan	kah-mahtz kah-tahn	ִ	Makes an O sound as in <i>more</i>
Kubutz	koo-bootz	וּ	Makes an Oo sound as in <i>mood</i>
Patach	pah-tahḥ	ָ	Makes an Ah sound as in <i>saw</i>
Segol	seh-gohl	ֵ	Makes an Eh sound as in <i>end</i>

**Note:** In this table, I used the letter א (aleph) so you could see how the vowels look when they're attached to a consonant. (The vowels are the little squiggles and dots around the א.)

Sometimes, the Kamatz Patah, Kamatz Katan, or the Segol is paired with a Shvah. This pairing doesn't change the pronunciation.



TIP

The Kamatz Katan looks identical to the Kamatz. If you see something that looks like a Kamatz at the beginning of a word followed by a Shvah or between two Shvah, it's probably a Kamatz Katan and should be pronounced O.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

## Introducing the Shvah

The *Shvah* looks like a colon (:), and you find it below letters. Hebrew actually has three types of Shvahs (but they all look the same):

- » Shvah Na (*shvah nah*), which opens a syllable
- » Shvah Nach (*shvah nahh*), which closes a syllable
- » Shvah Merahef (*shvah mehr-rah-**h**ehf*), known as the *flying shvah*, which results from two Shvah Nas being next to each other in a word

The Shvahs don't make their own sound but are essentially placeholders for the consonant above them. The Shvah Nah, however, holds the sound a little bit longer. You can tell a Shvah Nah because it usually comes in the middle or at the end of a word. A Shvah Na is at the beginning of a word or syllable

## Doing it with a Dagesh

The little dot that you see in the middle of letters is called a *Dagesh*. Most of the time, this dot doesn't change the pronunciation of the consonant except for three letters. I discuss this point later in this section.

Hebrew has two types of D'geshim (*duh-gehsh-eem*; the plural form of *Dagesh*):

- » Dagesh Kal (*dah-gehsh kahl*): Appears at the beginning of all words and at the beginning of all syllables in the following letters: ב (Bet), ג (Gimmel), ד (Dalet), כ (Kaf), פ (Pey), and ת (Tav).
- » Dagesh **h**azak (*dah-gehsh **h**ah-zahk*): Appears after the word *the*, which in Hebrew is a prefix consisting of the letter Hey and the vowel Patach below it.

Don't get too hung up on this distinction, because all D'geshim look the same!



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Sometimes in Hebrew, a letter acts like a weak letter, such as a ה (Hey) or a נ (Nun), and disappears in the course of verb conjugation. (By “weak letter,” I mean that it sometimes drops out during conjugation.) When a weak letter disappears, a Dagesh Chazak appears in the letter that comes after the dropped letter. Also, certain word patterns called Mishkalim (*meesh-kah-leem*), in which all the words belong to a certain category (such as professions, colors, and physical challenges), have a Dagesh in one of the letters. Words that describe physical challenges, such as *blindness* and *deafness*, for example, always take a Dagesh **h**azak in the middle letter of the word.

## HEBREW AS THE HOLY TONGUE — DON'T BITE IT

Judaism has always regarded Hebrew as a sacred language. Hebrew is often referred to as לְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ (le-*shohn* hah-*koh*-desh; *the Holy Tongue*), and even the Hebrew word for *letter*, אות (oht), means “sign” or “wonder.” In fact, during the period of Hebrew’s revival as a spoken language, some people objected, saying that Hebrew was simply too sacred for saying things like “Take out the garbage.”

Also, all Hebrew letters have numeric value. A particular form of Jewish numerology called גִּמְטְרִיָּה (gee-*meht*-ree-yah) plays on the words’ numeric values. Both the Hebrew word for *wine* (יַיִן; yah-yeen) and *secret* (סוֹד; sohd) have the same numerical value. The Talmud has a saying, “When the wine goes in, secrets come out!” Other Jewish sacred writings claim that the Hebrew letters are the manifestation of divine energy patterns and even that the universe’s DNA is composed of Hebrew letters.

A 13th-century mystic, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, created a form of Jewish meditation, similar to yoga, based on the Hebraic forms. And a 16th-century mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria, developed another form of meditation based on visualizing the Hebrew letters.

Are you totally confused yet? What difference does adding a Dagesh make? In the Sephardic pronunciation that Israelis and most Hebrew speakers today use, adding a Dagesh almost never makes a difference in pronunciation. But in a few cases, when a Dagesh is placed within a letter (always a consonant), it changes the way you pronounce that consonant. When you add a Dagesh to the letter ו (Vet), for example, the V sound becomes a B sound, and you pronounce the letter like *bet*. When you pair a Dagesh with the letter הּaf, the *h* sound becomes a K sound, so the sound of that letter becomes *kaf*. Finally, the letter פּ (Fey) with a Dagesh becomes a פּ (Peh).

## Reading and writing from right to left

Hebrew, like other ancient Semitic languages (such as Acadian, Samaritan, Ugaritic, and Arabic), is written from right to left. Why? Is there a preponderance of lefties in the region? No!

Maybe you’ve read the Bible, in particular the part where Moses comes down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments in hand. And if you haven’t read the Bible, perhaps you’ve seen the Mel Brooks film version in *History of the World: Part 1*. When Moses came down from the mountain, what was he holding? A copy of an email from the Almighty? A scroll of papyrus? No. He was holding two stone

tablets! You may ask, “Well, how did the Ten Commandments get on the stone tablets? Did Moses have a special pen or something?”

When ancient Hebrew emerged, it was written by chiseling it in stone. If the writer was a rightie, they would have used their dominant hand — their right hand — to pound the mallet onto the stylus they held with their left hand. And because ancient Hebrew society (like all societies) favored righties, its language was written from right to left. The Phoenicians and then the Greeks followed suit. Then, for a while, the Greeks wrote in both directions, switching when they got to the end of the tablet or page. That practice makes sense, if you think about it; why press the Return key on your electric typewriter to go all the way back to start a new line when you can just keep going where you are in the backward direction! Then the Greeks decided that left to right would be their standard, but Hebrew scribes kept on writing right to left. Tradition! (OK, folks today are just as likely to have an electric typewriter as the ancient Greeks, but that’s neither here nor there.)



TIP

If you want some practice reading, check out <https://www.easylearnhebrew.com>, an online course in Hebrew. The site can help you read Hebrew in no time!

# FUN & GAMES

---

Write the sound that each of the following Hebrew characters makes:

ב (B) \_\_\_\_\_

ג (G) \_\_\_\_\_

ל (L) \_\_\_\_\_

ו (V) \_\_\_\_\_

ד (D) \_\_\_\_\_

ה (H) \_\_\_\_\_

ר (R) \_\_\_\_\_

א (° silent) \_\_\_\_\_

You can find the answers in Appendix C.

---

