

chapter one

The Signs and Sounds of Hebrew: Orthography and Pronunciation

1.1 Focus.

In this chapter you are to learn:

23 consonants, 5 of which have two forms,

15 vowels, and

3 dots: *dagesh lene*, *dagesh forte*, and *mappiq*.

Besides the consonants, vowels, and three dots, this chapter also contains transliteration symbols (English-looking characters for the Hebrew alphabet). They are an initial aid to learning the sounds of the Hebrew characters. The chapter also exposes you to the 5 “weak” consonant principles. They do not need to be mastered now, but you need to be aware of these groups of consonants and categories of behavior. Future chapters will apply them as their topics require.

The CD has flashcards for learning the consonants and vowels as well as phonics lists for pronouncing syllables. You may find it helpful to use these while going through the chapter. The vocabulary for this chapter uses all the consonant forms and nearly all the vowels, so it acts as practice in reading Hebrew.

1.2 The Aleph-Bet.

The letters of the Hebrew alphabet appear in the following chart.

There are no capitals, but some letters have different forms when written at the end of a word. These 5 final forms are listed to the right.

A few letters were pronounced two ways, as signaled by the presence or absence of a dot, called a *dagesh lene* (dah-géysh léy-ney, explained below). Note that a few letters with *dagesh lene* are no longer pronounced differently. (Modern Hebrew pronunciations are favored. Your instructor may prefer another system.)

See the CD for practice writing the letters. Handwritten block letters are more simplified in form than the print that appears in books. Most letters are written beginning at their upper left point and finishing with a down stroke or a stroke moving left (since Hebrew is written from right to left).

1.2.1 Hebrew Alphabet.

ʾaleph	א	ʾ	unpronounced (or guttural stop, like h in heir)
bet	ב	b	b as in bent
		ē	v as in vent
gimel	ג	g	g as in gas
		ḡ	g as in gas (formerly g as in dog)
dalet	ד	d	d as in dime
		ḏ	d as in dime (formerly th as in then)
he (hey)	ה	h	h as in hat (typically silent if ending a word)
vav	ו	v	v as in vent (formerly w as in way)
zayin	ז	z	z as in zebra
ḥet	ח	ḥ	as ch in Loch Ness
ṭet	ט	ṭ	t as in toy
yod (yōd)	י	y	y as in yes
kaf	כ	k	k as in kick
		ḵ	as ch in Loch Ness
lamed	ל	l	l as in love
mem	מ	m	m as in mom
nun	נ	n	n as in no
samech	ס	s	s as in say
ʿayin	ע	ʿ	unpronounced (or guttural stop made farther back in the throat than aleph)
pe (pey)	פ	p	p as in pit
		p̄	ph as in phone or as f in fit
tsade	צ	ṣ	ts as in skits
qof	ק	q	k as in kick / q as in plaque
resh (reysh)	ר	r	r as in run
sin	ש	ē	s as in say
shin	שׁ	š	sh as in ship
tav	ת	t	t as in toy
		ṭ	t as in toy (formerly th as in thin)

1.3 The 3 Dots. They look the same but do different things.

(a) *Dagesh lene* (dah-géysh léy-ney).

Dagesh lene can only occur in six letters, ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, and פ, known by the acronym *BeGaDKePhaT* letters. This is only a pronunciation issue. Without *dagesh lene* breath is moving, as in *graphite*, e.g. ב. *Dagesh lene* tells you that breath stopped, as in *crackpot*, e.g. ב. *Dagesh lene* is like a stop sign.

(b) *Dagesh forte* (dah-géysh fór-tey).

Dagesh forte indicates that a letter is doubled, i.e. pronounced twice. If we used it in English, we would write *lader* for *ladder*. A few letters called gutturals, א, ח, ע, ו, and ק, will not double and so can not take *dagesh forte* (see further at 1.8.2).

(c) *Mappiq* (mahp-pík).

The *mappiq* can occur only in a *he* at the end of a word. Normally a *he*, ה, ending a word is not pronounced; the *mappiq* in a *he*, ה, tells you to pronounce it (in which case it is usually a pronominal suffix; cf. ch. 6).

1.4 Consonant groupings for study.

Be careful to discern the differences between letters in these sets.

(a) With upper right corner.

ת	ח	ה	ד	ר	ך	ף
Tav	Ḥet	He	Dalet	Resh	Kaph (final)	Pe (final)

(b) With main vertical stroke.

י	ו	ז	ן	ך	נ	ג
Yod	Vav	Zayin	Nun (final)	Kaph (final)	Nun	Gimel

(c) With upper right corner and a bottom line.

ב	כ	פ	נ	ג
Bet	Kaph	Pe	Nun	Gimel

(d) Boxish.

ס	מ	ט	ש	שׁ
Samech	Mem (final)	Ṭet	Sin	Shin

(e) Two point tops.

צ	ע	ץ	א
Tsade	Ayin	Tsade (final)	Aleph

(f) BeGaDKePhaT letters, with and without dagesh lene.

	Bet	Gimel	Dalet	Kaph	Pe	Tav
stop	ב b	ג g	ד d	כ k	פ p	ת t
spirant	ב ē (v)	ג ġ	ד ḏ	כ ḳ (kh)	פ ē (ph)	ת ṭ

Stop means breath has stopped; *spirant* means breath is moving. Even if they are pronounced the same in modern Hebrew, they will still be transliterated differently. For example, ת is transliterated ṭ, even though now pronounced like ת, t.

(g) Letters with final forms.

	Kaph	Mem	Nun	Pe	Tsade
beg. or middle	כ	מ	נ	פ	צ
final	ך	ם	ן	ף	ץ

(h) Letters with similar sounds.

א Aleph and	ע Ayin
ו Vav and	ב Bet (no dagesh)
ה Het and	כ Kaph (no dagesh)
ק Qof and	כ Kaph (with dagesh)
ש Sin and	ס Samech
ט Tet and	ת Tav

Speakers with an Arabic background may distinguish between ט and ת, ש and ס, and א and ע.

(i) Letters with similar transliteration symbols.

Dentals. ט, ת, ת (as well as ת and ת) are dentals, made by pressing part of the tongue against the back of the upper teeth.

ṭ	t	ṭ
ט Tet	ת Tav	ת Tav

Gutturals. Gutturals are made near the back of the throat. English lacks letters corresponding to א, ה and ע.

h	ḥ	ʾ	ʿ
ה He	ה Het	א Aleph	ע Ayin

Sibilants. Sibilants contain an “s” sound.

s	ē	š	ṣ
ס Samech	ש Sin	ש Shin	צ Tsade

1.5 Vowels.

Hebrew vowels come in three classes and three lengths. The three main classes are *a*-class (*ah*-class), *i*-class (*ee*-class) and *u*-class (*oo*-class). The *i*-class includes both “i” and “e”; the *u*-class includes both “u” and “o.” The three vowel lengths are long, short, and slurred. Slurs include half-vowels, also called composite *shewas*.

But we should first be aware that English is odd in how it writes vowels. In English, the letter “a” makes the sounds in fat and fate; “e” those in bet or beet; “i” those in high or hit. But most languages use “i” for the sound in beet; “e” for the sound in hay; and “a” for “ah,” as in father, but *not* that in fate. Hebrew vowels are treated in this more common way. In this chart, a ׀ or ׀ is part of writing the vowel; they are not consonants in these cases (cf. 1.8.5). A box stands for any consonant.

Hebrew Vowel chart 1.

class	length	name	vowel	trlit.	pronunciation
<i>a</i> -class	long	qametz (gadol)	◻ ׀	ā	ah as in father (longer than <i>pataḥ</i>)
	short	pataḥ	◻ ◻	a	ah as in father (shorter than <i>qametz</i>)
	half	ḥataph pataḥ	◻ ◻ ◻	ă	like <i>pataḥ</i> , but extra short
<i>i</i> -class	long	ḥireq yod	׀◻ ׀	ī	ee as 2 nd i in intrigue (normally with <i>yod</i>)
	short	ḥireq	◻ ׀	i	i as 1 st i in intrigue
	long	tserē yod or tserē	׀◻ ◻ ׀	ē	e as in hey (with or without <i>yod</i>)
	short	segol	◻ ׀	e	e as in get (rarely with <i>yod</i>)
	half	ḥataph segol	◻ ׀ ׀	ĕ	like <i>segol</i> , but extra short
<i>u</i> -class	long	shureq	׀◻ ׀	ū	oo as in shoot
	long or short	qibbutz	◻ ׀	ū u	oo as in shoot (may be long or short)
	long	ḥolem vav or ḥolem	׀◻ ◻ ׀	ō	o as in vote
	short	qametz ḥataph	◻ ׀	o	o as in bottle (or as in vote, but short)
	half	ḥataph qametz	◻ ׀ ׀	ō	like <i>qameṣ ḥataph</i> , extra short
class: all	slur	vocal shewa	◻ ׀	ə / ^e	very short vocalic slur
class: none	not a vowel	silent shewa = absence of vowel	◻ ׀	none	silent; marks end of a syllable within a word and rarely at the end of a word

There are variations in how people speak. In modern Hebrew *pataḥ* and *qametz* may sound alike; *tserē* may be pronounced like *segol*. Follow your instructor.

1.5.1 Notes on vowels.

- (a) **Qametz**, long \bar{a} , and *qametz ḥaṭuph*, short o , look alike, \square . (English also uses the same vowel sign for more than one sound, e.g. the letter “o” in *lob*, *lobe*, *love*.) Most *qametzim* are long \bar{a} . Distinguishing the two will be explained in ch. 2.
- (b) **Qibbutz**, \square , can be long \bar{u} or short u .
- (c) **Holem**. The *holem*’s dot, $\dot{\square}$, may blend into that of a following וְ .
- (d) **Shewa**.

Vocal and silent shewa look alike, \square . Distinguishing them is best done in the context of learning syllables (ch. 2), but see also 1.7 below.

A composite shewa is a shewa written beside a vowel to show that its length is in between a short vowel and a slur. Composite *shewas* appear with the gutturals: \aleph , η , π , and ע . (These letters can sometimes accept a silent *shewa*; but they always take a composite shewa instead of a vocal *shewa*.)

Vocal shewa is a slur. Vowels may reduce to a vocalic slur, as some English dialects slur (or virtually skip) the first “o” in *potato* or “e” in *Melissa*. Not much vowel remains, less than the short vowels in *pot* and *melt*. Regardless of the original vowel class, once they are reduced the vocal *shewas* sound alike. Unlike English, which writes the same letter regardless of how much it is actually pronounced, Hebrew signals this reduction by writing a vocal *shewa*.

- (e) **Full vowels**. Long and short vowels are considered full vowels. Slurs, both vocal *shewas* and composite *shewas* are not full vowels; they are too much reduced.

1.5.2 Changing vowel lengths.

As we learn more about the structure of Hebrew, we will find that different circumstances affect vowel length. Changes in vowel length typically occur within the same vowel class. For example, short a may lengthen to a long \bar{a} or reduce to vocal *shewa*. The next chart helps to see the vowels by class and length at the same time. After the names and sounds are learned, this will be the more useful chart.

Hebrew Vowel chart 2.

		long	short	slur (vocal <i>shewa</i>)	slur with $\aleph, \eta, \pi, \text{ע}$ (composite <i>shewa</i>)
<i>a-class</i>	a	\square ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ
<i>i-class</i>	e	\square $\text{י}\square$ ֿ ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ
	i	$\text{י}\square$ ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ	
<i>u-class</i>	o	$\text{ו}\square$ \square ֿ ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ	\square ֿ
	u	$\text{ו}\square$ \square ֿ ֿ	\square ֿ		

1.6 Distinguishing one *dagesh* from another.

Remember what each *dagesh* does. *Dagesh forte* indicates a letter is doubled. *Dagesh lene* indicates a begadkephat letter is spoken as a stop, i.e. the sound cannot be held out as in “ph,” but must have stopped as in “p,” (*graphite* vs. *crackpot*). Distinguishing them is practiced in ch. 2.

Rule 1. *Dagesh forte* follows a full vowel within the word, e.g. אֵלֶּה *’bl/le(h)* and הַגָּדֹל *hag/gā/dōl*. In begadkephat letters, both will be pronounced as stops.

Corollary A: *Dagesh* beginning a word is *dagesh lene*,¹ e.g. בֵּן *ben*.

Rule 2. *Dagesh lene* follows a stop. A stop is either a consonant ending a syllable or a pause between words (if there is a pause), e.g. מִקְדָּשׁ *miq/da*□.

Corollary B: *Dagesh lene* cannot follow a vowel or vocal *shewa*; the moving breath of the vowel does not permit it. If a word ends in a vowel and the next word begins with a begadkephat letter, the begadkephat letter will not have *dagesh lene* unless there is a pause, or stoppage of breath, between the words, such as between sentences. We will learn about pauses later.

Corollary C: If *dagesh* follows *shewa*, the *shewa* must be silent and the *dagesh* must be *dagesh lene*.

Illustrations from English. In the word *ladder*, the doubled “d” is pronounced after a vowel (Rule 1). The first “d” ends a syllable and the next “d” begins a syllable. Hebrew writes one “d” and puts a dot, *dagesh forte*, in it to show it is doubled, e.g. לָדֶרֶךְ for *lad/der*, i.e. לָדֶרֶךְ (with both *dalets* pronounced as stops with *dagesh lene*).

In the word *crackpot*, the “p” follows a consonant which ended a syllable *crack/pot* (Rule 2). Since it is not preceded by a vowel, doubling it would make no sense, e.g. *crack/ppot*. Likewise it would make no sense to begin a word with a *dagesh forte*, e.g. *ppot* (Corollary A). The moving air of a preceding vowel blows *dagesh lene* out of *begadkephat* letters, turning them into spirants. Hebrew does not say *tap*, but would say *taph* instead (Corollary B).

1.7 Distinguishing *Shewas*, initial rules of thumb:

Remember what they do. Vocal *shewa* is a reduced vowel; silent *shewa* ends a syllable (more in ch. 2). Distinguishing *shewas* need not be fully mastered in ch. 1.

- (a) Silent *shewa* is usually preceded by a short vowel.²
- (b) Vocal *shewa* is usually preceded by a long vowel or silent *shewa*.
- (c) Beginning a word, *shewa* is vocal, always.
- (d) If there are two *shewas* in a row, the first is silent, the second vocal (almost always).

¹ The rare occasions in which *dagesh forte* can begin a word are discussed in ch. 23.

² Silent *shewa* may also be preceded by an accented long vowel. Accents are discussed in ch. 2.

1.8 Weak Consonants: consonants with special behaviors.

Some consonants have special rules. We will deal with them more as chapter topics raise them. This list exposes you to what is coming. At this point you only need to know what the special groups are and have a basic recognition of their behaviors.

1.8.1 Begadkephat Letters: ב, ג, כ, פ, צ, ק.

Begadkephat letters can take *dagesh lene* and are then pronounced as stops.

1.8.2 Gutturals: א, ה, ו, ע and sometimes ח.

Shewa problem: Gutturals reject vocal *shewa* (and sometimes silent *shewa*), taking a composite *shewa* instead.

Dagesh problem: Gutturals and ח reject *dagesh forte*. This often results in lengthening the preceding vowel, called *compensatory lengthening*. If not, we treat it as doubled anyway and call it *semi-doubling* or *virtual doubling*.

Gutturals also prefer *a*-class vowels. Gutturals may take a preceding or following *a*-class vowel when a word pattern normally does not. Also a **furtive pataḥ** may appear before a ה, ו or ע at the end of a word, even though preceded by another vowel. For example, חַיִּי is *rū^ah*; מִצְוֹת is *miz/bē^ah*.

1.8.3 Quiet Letters: א and ע.

א 'Aleph. Today *aleph* is not pronounced. When scholars, called the Masorettes, added the vowels, א was pronounced at the start of a syllable but had usually become silent (quiesced) at the end of a syllable. This quiescence means that *aleph* will not have a silent *shewa*, and a following *begadkephat* letter will not have a *dagesh lene*.

ע 'Ayin. ע was a full consonant in all positions for the Masorettes, so it is followed by *dagesh lene*. But since it is a silent letter today, it will “sound” like *aleph*. Pay attention to the spellings, especially as you study vocabulary.

1.8.4 Matres lectionis: ו, י and ה.

When ו and י are used as part of writing vowels, they are called *matres lectionis*, Latin for “mothers of reading.” Scribes used ו and י, as well as ה, to indicate vowels as an aid to reading. ו and י are vowels when they have no vowel or *shewa* underneath. At the end of a word, ה is usually a *mater*, not a consonant.

ו is consistently used for *u*-class vowels, e.g. וּ and וֹ.

י is consistently used for *i*-class vowels, e.g. יִ, יֵ and rarely יֶ.

ה usually indicates a preceding long *qametz*, הֶ. But it can support *a*-class, *i*-class, and *u*-class vowels, e.g. הֶ, הֵ, הֹ, and הֶ. Some transliteration systems write *mater* ה with parentheses, e.g. ā(h).

With a *mater*, vowels are said to be written “fully.” If a *mater* is not used where it is usually expected, it is called “defective.” (As you will learn in the paradigms, some *holems* are usually written with *vav*, others without.)

1.8.5 Diphthongs or contractions.

A consonantal ׀ or ם may become part of a vowel, typically when ending an unaccented syllable. The contraction of the vowel plus the ׀ or ם is called a diphthong. It is transliterated differently than other long vowels, with a circumflex (\hat{e}) rather than a macron (\bar{b}). Some systems use a circumflex for all *matres*, e.g. \hat{a} for $\bar{a}(h)$.

Unaccented ׀ becomes ׀ (aw ← \hat{o}).³ The *vav* is now a *mater*.

Unaccented ם becomes ם (ay ← \hat{e}). The *yod* is now a *mater*.

When you do see ם, it represents a glide between the vowel and the consonant, similar to “aye” as in “aye, aye, sir.”

1.8.6 The assimilation of Nun.

When ׀ ends a syllable inside of a word (*nun* over a silent *shewa*, ׀) it transforms into a copy of the next consonant. Then it is written as a *dagesh forte* in that letter. To a limited degree we have this pronunciation issue in English:

in + resistible = irresistible, in + measurable = immeasurable,

tin + eāʾ = tiē-eāʾ: נְשֵׁתִי = נְשֵׁתִי נְשֵׁתִי ← נְשֵׁתִי + תִּי

As you might guess, there will be issues when the letter after *nun* is a guttural.

1.9 Summary.

Alphabet and vowels. See the charts. Learn the names, sounds, and transliteration values of each consonant and vowel.

Other symbols: *dagesh lene*, *dagesh forte*, *mappiq*.

Dagesh lene signals that *begadkephat* letters (בגדכפת) are stops; it follows a consonant or a pause; it cannot follow a vowel.

Dagesh forte indicates a consonant is doubled; it follows a full vowel in a word.

Mappiq indicates that a final *he* is consonantal and to be pronounced.

For future reference: Peculiarities of certain consonants.

1. Only *begadkephat* letters can have *dagesh lene*.
2. Gutturals reject *dagesh forte*.
Solution: Compensatory lengthening or virtual doubling.
3. Gutturals reject vocal (and sometimes silent) *shewa*.
Solution: composite *shewa*.
4. *Aleph* quiesces at the end of a syllable.
5. *He*, *Yod*, and *Vav* may be *matres lectionis*.
6. *Yod* and *Vav* may be part of diphthongs or represent contractions.
7. *Nun* closing a syllable within a word may assimilate into the following consonant as a *dagesh forte*.

³ Historically *vav* was pronounced “w.”

At this point you need to focus on learning the consonant and vowel signs well. Review the rest of the material so that you can consult it quickly. It will become more meaningful when we start to look at the structure of syllables and words.

1.10 Vocabulary.

All the letter forms of the Hebrew alphabet and nearly all the vowels (except *ḥaṭaph segol* and *ḥaṭaph qametz*) are used in this chapter's vocabulary. Practice saying the names of the letters and vowels as you learn these words. When you have learned them, you will have learned the basic information of ch. 1.

1	מִי	mî	<i>prn.</i> who? (424)
2	הוּא	hû'	<i>prn.</i> he (1398)
3	הִיא	hî'	<i>prn.</i> she (491)
4	אֲנִי / אֲנֹכִי	'ānî	<i>prn.</i> I (1233*)
5	אֲנַחְנוּ	'ānah-nû	<i>prn.</i> we (121)
6	גָּדוֹל	gā-dōl	<i>adj.</i> great, large (527)
7	זָקֵן	zā-qbn	<i>adj.</i> old, elder (180)
8	עַם	'ām	<i>n.m.</i> a people (1869)
9	שָׂדֶה	ēa-de(h)	<i>n.m.</i> field (329)
10	דָּבָר	dā-bār	<i>n.m.</i> word, matter, thing (1454)
11	מִדְבָּר	mid-bār	<i>n.m.</i> wilderness, pasture, steppe (269)
12	מִשְׁפָּט	miš-pāṭ	<i>n.m.</i> law, custom, legal claim/decision (425)
13	שַׁבָּת	šab-bāt	<i>n.f/m.</i> rest, Sabbath (111)
14	מִצְוָה	miš-vā(h)	<i>n.f.</i> commandment (184)
15	חֻקָּה	ḥuq-qā(h)	<i>n.f.</i> statute, enactment (104)
16	חֻכְמָה	ḥok-mā(h)	<i>n.f.</i> wisdom (153)
17	תְּפִלָּה	t'ēil-lā(h)	<i>n.f.</i> prayer (77)
18	מַלְכָּה	mal-kā(h)	<i>n.f.</i> queen (35)
19	מֶלֶךְ	me-lek	<i>n.m.</i> king (2530)
20	אֶרֶץ	'e-reš	<i>n.f.</i> land, earth, ground, territory, region (2505)
21	כֶּסֶף	ke-sep	<i>n.m.</i> silver, money (403)
22	נֶגֶד	ne-ged	<i>prp.</i> in front of, opposite of (151)
23	תּוֹרָה	tō-rā(h)	<i>n.f.</i> instruction, law (223)

adj. = adjective

n.m. = noun masculine

n.f. = noun feminine

n.f/m. = noun (may be masculine or feminine)

prn. = pronoun

prp. = preposition