Hebrew Alphabet

Level: Basic

The Hebrew and [Yiddish](#) languages use a different alphabet than English. The picture below illustrates the Hebrew alphabet, in Hebrew alphabetical order. Note that Hebrew is written from right to left, rather than left to right as in English, so Alef is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and Tav is the last. The Hebrew alphabet is often called the "alefbet," because of its first two letters.

Letters of the Alefbet

מ ט	ח	ז	ו	ה ה	ד	ג	ב	א
Tet	Chet	Zayin	Vav	He	Dalet	Gimel	Bet	Alef
(T)	(Ch)	(Z)	(V/O/U)	(H)	(D)	(G)	(B/V)	(Silent)

ס	ן	נ	ם	מ	ל	כ	כ	י
Samech	Nun	Nun	Mem	Mem	Lamed	Khaf	Kaf	Yod
(S)	(N)	(N)	(M)	(M)	(L)	(Kh)	(K/Kh)	(Y)

ת	ש	ר	ק	ץ	צ	ף	פ	ע
Tav	Shin	Resh	Qof	Tzade	Tzade	Fe	Pe	Ayin
(T/S)	(Sh/S)	(R)	(Q)	(Tz)	(Tz)	(F)	(P/F)	(Silent)

If you are familiar with Greek, you will no doubt notice substantial similarities in letter names and in the order of the alphabet.

The "Kh" and the "Ch" are pronounced as in German or Scottish, a throat clearing noise, not as the "ch" in "chair."

Note that there are two versions of some letters. Kaf, Mem, Nun, Pe and Tzade all are written differently when they appear at the end of a word than when they appear in the beginning or middle of the word. The version used at the end of a word is referred to as Final Kaf, Final Mem, etc. The version of the letter on the left is the final version. In all cases except Final Mem, the final version has a long tail.

Vowels and Points

Like most early Semitic alphabetic writing systems, the alefbet has no vowels. People who are fluent in the language do not need vowels to read Hebrew, and most things written in Hebrew in Israel are written without vowels.

However, as Hebrew literacy declined, particularly after the Romans expelled the Jews from Israel, the rabbis recognized the need for aids to pronunciation, so they developed a system of dots and dashes called nikkud (points). These dots and dashes are written above, below or inside the letter, in ways that do not alter the spacing of the line. Text containing these markings is referred to as "pointed" text.

| Vowel	Pronunciation
אַ	a as in father
אָ	Sephardic: a as in father Ashkenazic: aw as in saw
אֵ or אֵי	ey as in they
אֶ	e as in met
אִ or אִי	i as in machine
וֹ or אֹ	o as in alone
וּ or אֻ	oo as in moon
אְ	At end of syllable: silent In middle of syllable: a schwa sound, like the a in alone
אֲ	A schwa sound, with just a hint of the a as in father
אֳ	A schwa sound, with just a hint of the aw as in saw
אֱ	A schwa sound, with just a hint of the e as in met

Most nikkud are used to indicate vowels. The table at right illustrates the vowel points, along with their pronunciations. Pronunciations are approximate; I have heard quite a bit of variation in vowel pronunciation.

Vowel points are shown in blue. The letter Alef, shown in red, is used to illustrate the position of the points relative to the consonents. The letters shown in purple are technically consonents and would appear in unpointed texts, but they function as vowels in this context.

There are a few other nikkud, illustrated and explained below.

שׁ	שׂ	וּ	וֹ	ו	תּ	ת	פּ	פ	כּ	כ	בּ	ב
Sh	S	U	O	V	T	T (S)	P	F	K	Kh	B	V

The dot that appears in the center of some letters is called a dagesh. It can appear in just about any letter in Hebrew. With most letters, the dagesh does not significantly affect pronunciation of the letter; it simply marks a split between syllables, where the letter is pronounced both at the end of the first syllable and the beginning of the second. With the letters Bet, Kaf and Pe, however, the dagesh indicates that the letter should be pronounced with its hard sound rather than its soft sound. See the table above. In Ashkenazic pronunciation (the pronunciation used by many Orthodox Jews and by many older Jews), Tav also has a soft sound, and is pronounced as an "s" when it does not have a dagesh.

Vav, usually a consonant pronounced as a "v," is sometimes a vowel pronounced "oo" (u) or "oh" (o). When it is pronounced "oo" as in "food", pointed texts have a dagesh. When it is pronounced "oh" as in "Oh!," pointed texts have a dot on top.

Shin is pronounced "sh" when it has a dot over the right branch and "s" when it has a dot over the left branch.

<div dir="rtl">וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ</div>

At right is an example of pointed text. Nikkud are shown in blue. This line would be pronounced (in [Sephardic](#) pronunciation, which is what most people use today): V'ahavtah l'reyahkhah kamokhah. (And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Leviticus 19:18).

Styles of Writing

The style of writing illustrated above is the one most commonly seen in Hebrew books. It is referred to as block print or sometimes Assyrian text.

For sacred documents, such as [torah scrolls](#) or the scrolls inside [tefillin](#) and [mezuzot](#), there is a special writing style with "crowns" (crows-foot-like marks coming up from the upper points) on many of the letters. This style of writing is known as STA"M, an acronym for "Sifrei Torah, Tefillin and Mezuzot," which is where you will see that style of writing. For more information about the STA"M alphabet, including illustrations and relevant rules, see [Hebrew Alphabet used in writing STA"M](#).

There is another style used for handwriting, in much the same way that cursive is used for the Roman (English) alphabet. This modern script style is illustrated at right.

Another style is used in certain texts to distinguish the body of the text from commentary upon the text. This style is known as Rashi Script, in honor of [Rashi](#), the greatest commentator on the [Torah](#) and the [Talmud](#). Rashi himself did not use this script; it is only named in his honor. The alefbet at left is an example of Rashi Script.

Transliteration

The process of writing Hebrew words in the Roman (English) alphabet is known as transliteration. Transliteration is more an art than a science, and opinions on the correct way to transliterate words vary widely. This is why the Jewish festival of lights (in Hebrew, Chet-Nun-Kaf-He) is spelled Chanukah, Chanukkah, Hanuka, and many other interesting ways. Each spelling has a legitimate phonetic and orthographic basis; none is right or wrong.

Numerical Values

Each letter in the alefbet has a numerical value. These values can be used to write numbers, as the Romans used some of their letters (I, V, X, L, C, M) to represent numbers. The table at right shows each letter with its corresponding numerical value. Note that final letters have the same value as their non-final counterparts.

100	ק	10	י	1	א
200	ר	20	כ,ך	2	ב
300	ש	30	ל	3	ג
400	ת	40	מ,ם	4	ד
		50	נ,ן	5	ה
		60	ס	6	ו
		70	ע	7	ז
		80	פ,ף	8	ח
		90	צ,ץ	9	ט

The numerical value of a word is determined by adding up the values of each letter. The order of the letters is irrelevant to their value: the number 11 could be written as Yod-Alef, Alef-Yod, Heh-Vav, Dalet-Dalet-Gimmel or many other ways. Ordinarily, however, numbers are written with the smallest possible number of letters and with the largest number first (that is, to the right). The number 11 would be written Yod-Alef, the number 12 would be Yod-Bet, the number 21 would be Kaf-Alef, the number 611 would be Tav-Resh-Yod-Alef, etc. The only significant exception to this pattern is the numbers 15 and 16, which if rendered as 10+5 or 10+6 would be a name of G-d, so they are normally written Tet-Vav (9+6) and Tet-Zayin (9+7).

Because of this system of assigning numerical values to letters, every word has a numerical value. For example, the word Torah (Tav-Vav-Resh-He) has the numerical value 611 (400+6+200+5). There is an entire discipline of Jewish mysticism known as Gematria that is devoted to finding hidden meanings in the numerical values of words. For example, the number 18 is very significant, because it is the numerical value of the word Chai, meaning life. Donations to Jewish charities are routinely made in denominations of 18 for that reason.

I have received several e-mails pointing out that the numerical value of Vav (often transliterated as W) is 6, and therefore WWW has the numerical value of 666! It's an amusing notion, but Hebrew numbers just don't work that way. In Hebrew numerals, the position of the letter/digit is irrelevant; the letters are simply added up to determine the value. To say that Vav-Vav-Vav is six hundred and sixty-six would be like saying that the Roman numeral III is one hundred and eleven. The numerical value of Vav-Vav-Vav in Hebrew would be 6+6+6=18, so WWW is equivalent to life! (It is also worth noting that the significance of the number 666 is a part of Christian numerology, and has no basis that I know of in Jewish thought).

Hebrew Fonts and Word Processors

Several Hebrew fonts for PC (Windows) are available for free from http://www.snunit.k12.il/hebrew.html. Please be patient! This site is in Israel and is often slow to load. The example of pointed text above uses Snuit's Web Hebrew AD font. These Hebrew fonts map to ASCII 224-250, high ASCII characters which are not normally available on the keyboard, but this is the mapping that most Hebrew websites use. I'm not sure how you use those characters on a Mac. In Windows, you can go to *Start | Programs | Accessories | System Tools | Character Map* and select them there. If you know the mappings in Windows, you can also type the letters by holding down the ALT key and pressing the number as 4 digits on the numeric keypad. For example, Alef maps to ASCII 224, so if you hold down ALT and press 0224 in the numeric keypad, it will type an Alef. In addition, MS Word for Windows will let you assign shortcut keys to these Hebrew letters at *Insert | Symbol*.

If you use MS Internet Explorer version 5 or AOL version 5, you can download Hebrew support for your browser from the Windows Update center on Microsoft's website, http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com/. Very few sites are using this Hebrew support at this time, but they may in the future. Microsoft's Hebrew support includes Hebrew versions of various standard fonts, such as Times New Roman and Arial, as well as a few new Hebrew fonts, such as Rod and Miriam. These fonts map in very strange ways and are not keyboard-accessible; however, you can set up shortcut keys in MS Word for Windows at *Insert | Symbol*.

If you have AOL, there are also Hebrew fonts that can be downloaded from AOL. Some of these have intuitive keyboard mappings, so you can for example type the letter H and get the letter Heh in these fonts. To find fonts on AOL, go to Keyword: File Search, select Shareware, and search for the term "hebrew font." You may also want to check out the Download area in AOL's Jewish Community (Keyword: Jewish Community). The big alefbet at the top of the page uses a font I downloaded from AOL years ago (it's just called Hebrew; I don't know if it's still there). Many of these Hebrew fonts have the same high-ASCII mappings as the Snuit fonts (which is good, because that's what most websites with Hebrew use), but some of them have intuitive keyboard mappings (a = Alef; b = Bet, g = Gimmel, etc.).

Of course, all of the above fonts would require you to type Hebrew backwards, because word processors go from left to right and Hebrew goes from right to left! If you are serious about writing a significant amount of text in Hebrew, you will need a Hebrew word processor. An excellent Hebrew word processor is DavkaWriter, available from Davka Software. DavkaWriter comes with many attractive Hebrew fonts including both consonents and vowels that will map to your keyboard in an intuitive phonetic way or in the standard Israeli keyboard format. It is very easy to switch between Hebrew and English within a document. DavkaWriter even comes with little stickers to put on the keys of your keyboard so you can learn their keyboard mappings, and an onscreen display shows you their keyboard mappings. Davka also has a lot of fonts available, as well as a lot of other Hebrew and Judaic software.
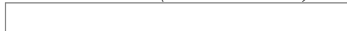
The following explanation are sufficient to show the method of transliterating Hebrew words into English adopted in this Dictionary (© *Copyright* 1890 by James Strong, Madison NJ)

1. The Hebrew is read from right to left. The Alphabet consists of 22 letters (and their variations) which are all regarded as *consonants*, being enunciated by the aid of certain "points" or marks, mostly beneath the letters, and which serve as *vowels*. There is no distinction of *capitals, italics etc.*

2. The letters are as follows:

No	*Form*	*Name*	*Font Key*	*Sound*	
1	א	'Aleph (aw'-lef)	a	silent	
2	ב	Beyth (bayth)	b	b/v as in boy/vine	
3	ג	Giymel (ghee'-mel)	g	g/gh as in God/aghast	
4	ד	Daleth (daw'-leth)	d	d/dh as in day/the	
5	ה	He' (hay)	h	h as in hay	
6	ו	Vav (vawv)	w	w as in way	
7	ז	Zayin (zah'-yin)	z	z as in Zion	
8	ח	Cheyth (khayth)	x	ch as in Bach	
9	ט	Teyth (tayth)	j	t as in toy	
10	י	Yowd (yode)	y	y as in yes	
11	ך 2 כ	Kaph (caf)	K 2%	k/ch as in king/Bach	
12	ל	Lamed (law'-med)	l	l as in lion	
13	ם 2 מ	Mem (mame)	M 2~	m as in mother	
14	ן 2 נ	Nuwn (noon)	N 2!	n as in now	
15	ס	Camek (saw'-mek)	s	s as in sin	
16	ע	'Ayin (ah'-yin)	[	gutteral/silent	
17	ף 2 פ	Pe' (pay) (fay)	P 2@	p/ph - pastor/alphabet	
18	ץ 2 צ	Tsadey (tsaw-day')	C 2#	ts as in boots	
19	ק	Qowph (cofe)	q	k as in king	
20	ר	Reysh (raysh)	r	r as in run	
21	שׂ שׁ	Siyn (seen) (sheen)	F F	s/sh as in sin/shin	
22	ת ת	Thav (thawu) (tawu)	t T	t/th as in toy/thin	

BST Hebrew Font to keyboard mapping

ם ן ף ץ ך ד ד ד ד ָ ֳ ֲ � (~ - +)   וֹ ס ד שׁ ג ה ה ט כ ל ָ " (Keys A - ")

: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 ־ ֪ ֚ (ֿ - =)   א ס ד שׂ ג ה ה ט כ ל ֶ ֱ (Keys a - ')

ק ו ר ת י ֽ פ ֻ ֹ (Q - |)   ז שׁ צ ב נ מ ֖ ֗ (Keys Z - ?)

ק ו ר ת י ָ פ ע ֻ (q - \)   ז ח צ שׁ ב נ מ ֘ ֙ (Keys z - /)

3. The vowel-points are the following:

Form	Key	Name	Pronounce	Representation	
בָ	'	Qamets	(caw-mates)	a, as in all	
בַ	;	Pattach	(pat'-takh)	a, as in man / far	
בֲ	]	Sheva-Pattach	(she-vauh pat'-takh)	a, as in hat	
בֵ	e	Tserey	(tsay-ray')	e, as in they	
בֶ	,	Cegowl	(seg-ole')	e, as in their/men	
בֱ	/	Sheva-Cegowl	(she-vaw' seg-ole')	e, as in met	
בְ	.	Sheva	(she-vaw')	e, as in made	
בִ	i	Chiyriq	(khee'-rik)	i, as in machine/ suppliant/ hit	
בֹ	o	Chowlem	(kho'-lem)	o, as in no	
בָ	'	Short Qamets		o, as in nor	
בֳ	\	Sheva-Qamets	(she-vaw' caw-mates')	o, as in not	
בּ	{	Shuwreq	(shoo-rake')	u, as in cruel	
בֻ	u	Qibbuts	(kib'-boots)	u as in full/ rude	

4. A point in the bosom of a letter is called *Dagesh* and is of two kinds, which must be carefully distinguished.

a. Dagesh *Lene* occurs only in the letters ב , ג , ד , כ , פ , ת , (technically vocalized *Begad Kaphath)* when they *begin* a clause of sentence, or are preceded by a consonant *sound*; and simply has the effect of removing their aspiration. (In our system of transliteration Dagesh lene is represented only in the letters פ and ת , because elsewhere it does not aggect the pronounciation with most Hebraists.)

b. Dagesh *forte* may occur in any letter except א , ה , ח , ע , or ר ; it is equivalent to doubling the letter, and at the same time it removes the aspiration of a Begad Kephath letter. (A point in the bosom of ה is called *Mappiyq* (mappeek.) It occurs only in the final vowelless letter of a few words, and we have represented it by hh. A Dagesh forte in the bosom of ר may easily be distinguished from the vowel *Shuwreq* by noticing that in the former case the letter has a propere vowel-point accompanying it. It should be noted that both kinds of Dagesh are often omitted in writing (being then said to be implied), but (in the case of at least of Dagesh forte) the word is (by most Hebraists) pronounced the same as if it were present.)

5. The *Maqqeph'* ( ), like a *hyphen*, unites words only for purposes of pronunciation (by removing the primary accent from all except the last of them), but does not affect their meaning or their grammatical construction.

Notes: The letter ayin, owing to the difficulty experienced by Occidentals in pronouncing it accurately (it is a deep guttural sound, like that made in gargling), is generally neglected (i.e. Passed over silently) in reading. We have represented it to the eye (but not exactly to the ear) by the Greek rough breathing (for distinctness and typographical convenience. A reversed apostrophe) in order to distinguish it from 'Aleph, which is likewise treated as silent, being similarly represented by the Greek smooth breathing.)

Silent Shevd is not represented by any mark inour method of tranliteration, as it is understood whenever there is no other vowel-point.

Chiyriq is thus long only when it is followed by a qulescent yowd (either expressed or implied)

Chowlem is written fully only over Vau, which is then quiescent (w): but when used "defectively" (without the Vau) it may be written either over the left-hand corner or the letter to which it belongs, or over the right-hand corner of the following ones.

Short Qamets is found only in unaccented syllables ending with a consonant sound.

Shuwreq is written only in the bosom of Vau. Some times it is said to be defectively written (without the Vau), and then takes the form of Qibbuts, which in such cases is called vicarious.

BST Hebrew Font to keyboard mapping

ם ן ף ץ דֱ דֳ דֲ דֹ דִ , , , ^ ^ (~ - +)

: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 ־ ֽ (` - =)

ק ו וּ רֹ תּ י ֶ ֵ פּ ֿ ֹ ֱ (Q - |)

ק ו וּ רֹ תּ י ֶ ֵ פ ע ֻ ֳ (q - \)

וֹ ס ד שׂ גּ הֵ ט כ ל ־ “ (Keys A - “)

א ס ד שׁ ג ה ט כ ל ָ , (Keys a - ')

זֵ שׁ שׂ צּ שׁ ב נ מ ֱ ֵ ֶ (Keys Z - ?)

ז ח צ שׁ ב נ מ ֳ ֲ ֻ (Keys z - /)

Hebrew Language: Root Words

Level: Intermediate

The vast majority of words in the Hebrew language can be boiled down to a three-consonant root word that contains the essence of the word's meaning. For example, the first word of the Torah is "bereishit," meaning "in the beginning." The root is Resh-Alef-Shin, which means "head" or "first." (See Hebrew Alphabet to learn the letters). It is the same root as the "Rosh" in "Rosh Hashanah" (first of the year, i.e., Jewish New Year).

<div align="center">

ראֹשׁ

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There are surprisingly few root words in biblical Hebrew, but we get a lot of mileage out of the ones we have. For example, from the root word Qof-Dalet-Shin, meaning "holy," "sacred" or "sanctified," we get kedushah (holiness), kiddush (a prayer over wine sanctifying Shabbat or a holiday), Kaddish (an important prayer commonly thought of as a mourning prayer), aron kodesh (holy cabinet - the place in synagogue where the Torah scrolls are kept), and kiddushin (betrothal). Less obviously, from the root Samech-Dalet-Resh, meaning "order," we get siddur (the daily prayer book, which sets for the order of prayers), seder (the Passover family ritual, which must be performed in a specified order) and sidrah (the weekly Torah reading, also called a parshah).

<div align="center">

סדר   קדֹשׁ

</div>

A substantial amount of rabbinical interpretation of the Bible is derived from the relation between root words. For example, the rabbis concluded that G-d created women with greater intuition and understanding than men, because man was "formed" (yeetzer, Gen. 2:7) while woman was "built" (yeeben, Gen. 2:22). The root of "built," Bet-Nun-Heh, is very similar to the word "binah" (Bet-Yod-Nun-Heh), meaning understanding, insight or intuition.

<div align="center">

בנה

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