

## The Vowels

Ancient Hebrew had no written vowels. The written vowels were added around AD 500 by the Masoretes who added them in order to preserve the language. It is not that the language did not use vowels; it is just that there was no written form until later. The speaker would add the vowel as necessary. For example, all verbs (with exception) use the “a” sound while its noun equivalent will use the “e” sound in the first vowel position. The system they developed is called the pointing system whose intention is not to alter the established written form. The pointing added small *dots* and *symbols* below and above the character.

Drs. Pratico and Van Pelt give the following example, “Let us use the English translation of Deut. 6:5 as an example: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart.’ Without the vowels, we are left with a series of consonants, much like the ancient written form of Hebrew: Lv th Lrd yr Gd wth ll yr hrt. In order to read this sentence out loud, you would need to rely on your knowledge of English and supply the necessary vowels. In the same way, when Joshua read the entire law of Moses to the Israelites (Josh 8), he had before him a consonantal text with no vowels. This required Joshua to supply from memory the necessary vowels when reading.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Hebrew, there are the “a,” “e,” “i,” “o,” and “u” vowel sounds as shown below.

**Table of Full-Vowels**

Group	Name	Sign	Position	Sound	Example
<b>a</b>	Qamets <sup>2</sup>	·	אָ	a, as in car	אָב father
	Pathach	·	אֲ	a, as in bat	בַּת daughter
<b>e</b>	Tsere	·	אֵ	e, as in they	אֵל God
	Tsere-Yod	·	אֵי	e, as in they	בֵּית house
	S <sup>c</sup> ghol	·	אֶ	e, as in met	שֶׁקֶל shekel
<b>i</b>	Hireq-Yod	·	אִי	i, as in marine	הִיא she
	Hireq	·	אִ	i, as in sit	עִם with
<b>o</b>	Holem	·	אֹ	o, as in row	לֹא not
	Holem-Vav	·	אֹו	o, as in row	אוֹר light
	Qamets-Hatuf	·	אָ	o, as in cost	כָּל all
<b>u</b>	Shureq	·	אוּ	u, as in rule	הואּ he
	Qibbutz	·	אֻ	u, as in rule	שֻׁלחַן table

*Long Vowels.* The following table lists the Hebrew long vowels.

Sign	Name		Transliteration	Example		
ָ	qames	קָמֵץ	ā	אָב	'av	father
ֵ	sere	סֵרֵי	ē	אֵל	'el	God
ֹ	holem	חֹלֵם	ō	לֹא	lo'	not

<sup>1</sup> Gary Pratico & Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 2001), p. 8)

<sup>2</sup> The older authors use qāmēs, pātāh, etc. The spelling is often different depending on the author. One thing the beginning student of Hebrew needs to know is that nothing is consistent between different authors in Hebrew.

*Naturally long vowels.* The following table lists the Hebrew naturally long vowels. Naturally long vowels are formed using either a *vav* (ו) or a *yod* (י).

Sign	Name		Transliteration	Example		
ֵ	sere yod	צֵרִי יוֹד	ê	בֵּית	beyth	house of
ִ	hireq yod	חִירֵק יוֹד	î	הִיא	hiy'	she
וֹ	holem vav	חֹלֶם וָו	ô	אוֹר	'or	light
וֹ	šureq	שׁוּרֵק	û	הוא	hu'	he

*Short Vowels.* The following table lists the Hebrew short vowels.

Sign	Name		Transliteration	Sound	Example	
ַ	patah	פַּתַח	ă	a, as in bat	בַּת	daughter
ֶ	s <sup>°</sup> gol	סֵגוֹל	ě	e, as in met	שֶׁקֶל	shekel
ִ	hireq	חִירֵק	ĭ	i, as in sit	עִם	with
ֹ	qames hâtuḥ	קָמֵץ חֲטוּף	ǒ	o, as in cost	כָּל	all
ֻ	qibbuṣ	קִבּוּץ	ǔ	u, as in rule	שֻׁלְחָן	table

## The Half-Vowels

In addition to vowels, Hebrew makes use of semi-vowels or half-vowels. These half vowels make use of the *sheva* or *shewa* (שְׁוָא). There are two classes of *sheva*, the first is the vocal *sheva* which stands alone and is pronounced like an “e” as in בְּרִית (b<sup>°</sup>rit) pronounced “breet.” It is transliterated as a superscript e as in b<sup>°</sup>rit. The other class is a silent *sheva* which is a *sheva* placed beneath a consonant that ends a syllable and sometimes placed in the final kaf (ך).

The other *sheva* is used as a compound with other vowels and makes a hurried vowel sound. The compound *shevas* are as follows:

First	Second	Compound	Name	Sounds like	Example	
ַ	ֶ	ֵ	hatef - pathah	hurried Pathach	אֲנִי	' <sup>a</sup> niy “I”
ֶ	ֶ	ֵ	hatef- s <sup>°</sup> ghol	hurried S <sup>°</sup> ghol	אֲנוֹשׁ	' <sup>e</sup> noš “man”
ֶ	ֶ	ֵ	hatef- qamets	hurried Qamets	חֲלִי	holi “sickness”

## Daghes Forte

The *Daghes forte* is a dot in the letter which indicated one is to double the consonant in which it occurs. It is the same mark as the *daghes lene* placed in the six consonants. For example in, הַבֵּן (habben) the *bet* is doubled.

The rules for a *dagesh forte* are as follows:

1. A dot in any letter other than a BaGad KeFaT letter is a *dagesh forte*.
2. A *dagesh forte* is always found immediately after a vowel, whereas a *dagesh lene* is never found after a vowel.

## Syllables

The word syllable comes to the English from the Greek *syllabē* meaning, “that which holds together,” and applies to how a word is pronounced. A word or part of a word pronounced with a single, uninterrupted sound of the voice is a syllable. A Hebrew word has as many syllables as it has separate consonants. In general, words are broken up into syllables using the following rules:

- All syllables in a word must begin with a consonant.
- A syllable must include one full vowel or a half vowel.
- There are as many syllables as there are full vowels.

Hebrew syllables are either open or closed. An open syllable is one that ends in a vowel and is normally a long vowel. A closed syllable is one that ends in a consonant and the vowel will normally be short.

Examples are:

- דָּבָר da/bar
- מֵלָכִים me/la/kim

Hebrew syllable identification has the following formal naming convention:

- Antepenultima - 1<sup>st</sup> syllable
- Penultima - 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable
- Ultima - last syllable

<b>EXAMPLE: מֵלָכִים ME/LA/KIM</b>		
כִּים	לָ	מֵ
Ultima	Penultima	Antepenultima
last syllable	2 <sup>nd</sup> syllable	1 <sup>st</sup> syllable

## Accent Marks

There are twenty-seven prose and twenty-one poetic accents in the Hebrew<sup>3</sup>. The accent marks are about evenly divided between those that are placed above and those placed below the word. There are two main purposes for accent marks in the Hebrew. The first is to mark the tonal syllable, and secondly to serve as punctuation marks.

1. *Tonal syllable mark*. The accented syllable is normally the last syllable of the word, but it may also be the next to last. In the case where words are accented on any syllable other

<sup>3</sup> That is, for the BHS. This text does not use accent marks. They are only referenced here in order to let you know that they exist and that you may refer to William R. Scott, *A Simplified Guide to BHS* (BIBAL Press, 1987).

than the last the addition of a *munah* (,) is added to the bottom of the word. For example,

פִּלְגֵּי

2. *Punctuation marks*. There are two type of punctuation marks in the Hebrew (this grammar does not use these mark<sup>4</sup>):
  - *Disjunctive* (separating). There are many disjunctive marks, the top three are listed here; (i) to mark the end of the first half of the verse known as the *'atnah* ( ^ ) and placed below the accented syllable of the last word of the first half of the verse; (ii) to mark the end of the verse known as the *silluq* ( , ) and placed below the accented syllable of the last word in the last half of the verse; and (iii) the end of the verse is denoted by the *sof passuq* ( : ) that identifies the end of the sentence.
  - *Conjunctive* (joining). There are many conjunctive marks but one example is *nal<sup>e</sup>nal* ( , ) placed below the letter.

## A final word

The system of pronunciation recommended throughout this book stresses the use of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) system. Recognized symbols of the IPA system provide exact pronunciation applied to any language or culture.

## Practice

- A. Memorize the consonants (It is helpful to memorize the alphabet in groups of 5).
- B. Memorize the vowels.
- C. Memorize the half-vowels.
- D. Transliterate the following proper names (remember – right to left):
  1. בֵּית לֶחֶם (Mic. 5:1)
  2. בְּנִימִין (Gen. 42:4)
  3. דָּוִד (1 Sam. 16:23)
- E. Write the following in Hebrew (remember – right to left):
  1. ysɹ'l
  2. hl̩k
  3. ywnt̩n

---

<sup>4</sup> See Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar for a thorough discussion of special accent marks.