

Learning to Read Hebrew: Consonants (the *Aleph-Bet*) and Vowels

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1. Note on the names of the Hebrew letters:
 - a. The first letter of the Hebrew name for the character is always the character itself. This is in distinct contrast to the English alphabet, in which the names for ten out of the twenty-six the letters: **F, H, L, M, N, R, S, U, W, X, and Y** all begin with other letters.
 - b. The names of fourteen of the Hebrew characters are monosyllabic, so their accentuation is trivial.
 - c. Eight of the Hebrew characters have TWO-syllable names. Since the purpose of the name is to identify the character, the two-syllable name of a letter is always accented *mil'eyl*.
2. Summary of the Aleph-Bet written three ways, with comments on the pronunciation of some of the characters, as well as on their names:

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Nu- meric Value	Comment
AH-leph	א	א	א	1	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ב, בּ	ב, בּ	ב, בּ	2	
GIM-mel	ג, גּ	ג, גּ	ג, גּ	3	
DAH-let	ד, דּ	ד, דּ	ד, דּ	4	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ה	ה	ה	5	
VAHV	ו	ו	ו	6	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	ז	ז	7	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	ח	ח	8	As in <i>Johann Sebastian Bach</i>
TET	ט	ט	ט	9	

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Nu- meric Value	Comment
YUD	י	י	י	10	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF (KHAHF)	כך כך	כה, כר	כח, כמ	20	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in the Hebrew letter CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH-med	ל	ל	ל	30	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	מם	מם	מם	40	
NUN	נן	נו	נו	50	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH- mach	ס	ס	ס	60	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
AH-yin	ע	ע	ע	70	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
PEY (FEY)	פ, פה	פ, פה	פ, פה	80	
TSAH-diy	צץ	צץ	צץ	90	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
QOOF	ק	ק	ק	100	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ר	ר	ר	200	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN, SIN	ש, ש	ש, ש	ש, ש	300	

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Nu- meric Value	Comment
TAHF (TAHF)	ת, ת	ת, ת ת	ת ת	400	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

The “BEH-GeD KEH-FehT” (בֵּה גֵד כֵּה פֵת) or “B’GAHD K’FAHT” (בִּגְהַד כִּפְהַת) Letters

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Numeric Value	Comment
In modern times, the distinction in pronunciation between the two forms of this letter is retained:					
BET	ב	ב	בֿ	2	
“VET”	ב	ב	בֿ	2	
In modern times, the following letter is <u>always</u> pronounced “GIM’mel”, and is always called “GIM’mel”, regardless of the presence or absence of a <i>Da-GESH</i> :					
GIM-mel	ג	ג	גֿ	3	
GIM-mel (JIM-mel)	ג	ג	גֿ	3	<u>Possible</u> ancient name, and possible ancient pronunciation shown in parens
In modern times, the following letter is <u>always</u> pronounced “DAH-let”, and is always called “DAH-let”, regardless of the presence or absence of a Dagesh:					
DAH'-let	ד	ד	דֿ	4	'AH' as 'O' in “Optimist”
DAH'-let (THAH'-let)	ד	ד	דֿ	4	<u>Probable</u> ancient name, and probable ancient pronunciation shown in parens ('TH' like “than”, <u>not</u> like “thin”)
In modern times, the distinction in pronunciation between the two forms of this letter is retained:					
KAHF	כּ	כֿ	כֿ כּ	20	'AH' as 'O' in “Optimist”

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Numeric Value	Comment
KHAHF	כך	כר	כ ך	20	Very similar to CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
In modern times, the distinction in pronunciation between the two forms of this letter is retained:					
PEY	*פּ	*פּ	פּ *	80	
FEY	פּך	פּך	פּך	80	
*Note that this letter <u>never</u> takes a Dah-GESH in final (ender) form.					
In modern times, the following letter is <u>always</u> pronounced "TAHF" and is always called "TAHF" in S'FAR-dic pronunciation, regardless of the presence or absence of a <i>Da-GESH</i> :					
TAHF	תּ	תּ	תּ	400	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
THAHF	ת	ת	ת	400	<u>Possible</u> ancient name and ancient pronunciation (soft "th", as in "thin", <u>not</u> hard "th" as in "than"); 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Recommended Procedure for Developing Your Reading and Pronunciation skills:

Make up two sets of flash-cards, one set for the printed Aleph-Bet, and the other set for script. The front of each card should show **one** form of a single letter, and the rear of the card should have the English transliteration of the letter's name. Thus, each set should contain 27 flashcards, one for each of the ordinary 22 characters of the Aleph-Bet, plus five additional cards for the letters that have separate forms when they appear as the final character of a word (ך, ם, ן, ף, ץ). Note that for the printed Aleph-Bet, you need to be able to go **only** from the Hebrew character to the pronunciation of its name. However, for the script Aleph-Bet, you need to develop facility **not only** for reading **but also** for writing. Therefore, you should use the set of flash cards for the script Aleph-Bet in **both** directions, looking first at the Hebrew-character sides of the cards and practicing pronunciation of the character's name, and **also** looking first at the English transliteration of the name, and then writing the character down on a piece of paper. Only after attempting to write the character yourself should you look at the other side of the flash-card to ascertain whether you correctly wrote the character specified.

Each day, as you get ready to do your reading and your homework in Biblical Hebrew, go through the sequence of reading warm-up exercises as described below. These are similar to what an athlete does as he/she prepares to train for a sports competition. You should get in the habit of doing these at least until you become highly skilled at reading and pronunciation (unlike the athlete, who needs to continue to perform warm-up exercises indefinitely):

STEP 1: Read through the entire printed form of the Aleph-Bet at least one time, clearly and correctly stating the name of each letter, and also checking your pronunciation against the name of the character transliterated-into-English in order to be certain that you are pronouncing its name correctly.

STEP 2: Next, read multiple times through the printed Aleph-Bet, this time **without** looking at the transliterated names of the characters. Either cover the transliterated names with an opaque screen, or use a different copy of the Aleph-Bet, that does **not** display the names of the characters.

STEP 3: Repeat steps 1 and 2 for the script Aleph-Bet.

STEP 4: For the first few sessions, steps 1 through 3 are good enough. Once you develop some facility at reading, however, you should ratchet up your effort a bit and take a crack at reading the characters in random order. Shuffle the flashcards for the printed alphabet, and then read the characters carefully, checking each time to make sure **both** that you have identified the correct letter **and** that you have pronounced its name properly. Note that you can do yourself more harm than good if you intensively practice, either the wrong names for several of the characters, or saying the right names but not pronouncing them correctly.

STEP 5: Each time you step through all 27 characters including both the within-the-word and the final forms, shuffle your flashcards so that your next pass through the Aleph-Bet will occur in a different order.

OVERALL ADVICE: Do **not** attempt to sit down for one mammoth oral-reading session. Instead, take occasional oral-Hebrew-reading breaks, perhaps once per hour for 15 minutes or so at a time, as intermissions while you are studying for some other course. Begin each time with a quick set of warm-up exercises as described above.

The Printed Aleph-Bet:

Name	Printed	Comment
AH-leph	א	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ב, בּ	

Name	Printed	Comment
GIM-mel	ג	
DAH-let	ד	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ה	
VAHV	ו	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	As in <i>Johann Sebastian Bach</i>
TET	ט	
YUD	י	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF (KHAHF)	כ, כּ כך	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH-med	ל	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	מם	
NUN	נן	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH'-mach	ס	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
AH'-yin	ע	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
PEY (FEY)	פּ, פ פּף	
TSAH-diy	צץ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Printed	Comment
QOOF	ק	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ך	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN SIN	שׁ שׂ	
TAHF (TAHF)	ת, תּ	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

The Printed Aleph-Bet:

Printed
א
ב, בּ
ג
ד
ה
ו
ז
ח
ט
י
כּ, כ, כף
ל
מם
נן
ס
ע
פּ, פ, פף

Printed
צץ
ק
ר
ש, שׁ
ת, תׁ

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח

ט

י כך ל מם נן ס

ע

פף צץ קר ש ת

Block Letters:

Name	Block	Comment
AH-leph	א	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ב, בּ	
GIM-mel	ג	
DAH-let	ד	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ה	
VAHV	ו	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	As in <i>Johann Sebastian Bach</i>
TET	ט	
YUD	י	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF, (KHAHF)	כּ, כַּ כּ, כַּ	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH'-med	ל	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	מ, מּ	
NUN	נ, נּ	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH'-mach	ס	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
AH'-yin	ע	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Block	Comment
PEY, (FEY)	פּ פֿ	
TSAH-diy	צ ץ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
QOOF	ף	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ר	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN SIN	שׁ שׂ	
TAHF	תּ	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

Block Letters:

Block
א
ב, ב
ג
ד
ה
ו
ז
ח
ט
י
כ, כ כך
ל
מ ם
נ ן
ס
ע

Block
פּ, פּ
פּ
צץ
ק
ר
שש
ת

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט
י כך ל מם נן ס ע
פּ פּ צץ ק ר ש ת

Script:

Name	Script	Comment
AH-leph	lc	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ᵇ ᵇ	
GIM-mel	ᶜ	
DAH-let	ᶜ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ᶜ	
VAHV	ᶜ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ᶜ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ᶜ	As in <i>Johann Sebastian Bach</i>
TET	ᶜ	
YUD	,	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF (KHAHF)	ᶜ ᶜ ᶜ ᶜ	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH-med	ᶜ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	ᶜ ᶜ	
NUN	ᶜ ᶜ	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH-mach	ᶜ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Script	Comment
AH-yin	ʔ	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
PEY (FEY)	ð β ð	
TSAH'-diy	ʃ ʒ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
QOOF	ɹ	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ʀ	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN SIN	ʃ ʃ'	
TAHF	ɳ	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

Script:

Script
lc
ᲁ ᲂ
ᲃ
ᲄ
ᲅ
ᲆ
ᲇ
ᲈ
Ᲊ
ᲊ
᲋
᲌
᲍
᲎ ᲏ Ა Ბ
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Დ Ე
Ვ Ზ
Თ

Script
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Ƨ

Ƨ Ƶ 1 ƶ 3 Ɔ ƶ Ɔ

ƶ Ɔ Ƨ ƶ ƶ ƶ ƶ ƶ

ˆ Ɔ ƶ 3 ƶ ƶ ƶ ƶ

Ƨ Ɛ

Difficult-to-Distinguish Letters in the Printed Aleph-Bet:

ט מ	ג נ	ב כ פ
ף ק	י ו ז	ס ם
ע צ	ד ד ר	ז ז
	ץ	

Difficult-to-Distinguish Letters in the Script Aleph-Bet:

ח ת נ	ו ן	ז ט
ס ן ף	ף ף ף	כ ק ך
ת נ	ח ק ף ך	ז ז

Review:

Name	Printed	Block	Script
AH' -leph	א	א	א
BET (VET)	ב, ב	ב, ב	ב, ב
GIM-mel	ג	ג	ג
DAH-let	ד	ד	ד
HEY	ה	ה	ה
VAHV	ו	ו	ו
ZAH-yin	ז	ז	ז
CHET	ח	ח	ח
TET	ט	ט	ט
YUD	י	י	י
KAHF (KHAHF)	כ, כ, כ	כ, כ, כ	כ, כ, כ
LAH-med	ל	ל	ל
MEM	מ, מ	מ, מ	מ, מ
NUN	נ, נ	נ, נ	נ, נ
SAH-mach	ס	ס	ס
AH-yin	ע	ע	ע

Name	Printed	Block	Script
PEY (FEY)	פ, פה	פ, פה	פ, פה, פה
TSAH-diy	צץ	צץ	צץ
QOOF	ק	ק	ק
REYSH	ר	ר	ר
SHIN SIN	שש	שש	שש
TAHF	ת	ת	ת

Names and Soundings of the Vowels:

שם Name	תנועה Vowel	Sound
קֹמֵץ <i>Qah-MAHTZ</i>	◻ ◌ָ	Ah (in most cases) Oh (clipped: rarely)
פֶּתַח <i>Pah-TACH</i>	◻ ◌ַ	Ah
צִירֶה חֶסֶר <i>TZEY-reh Chah-SEHR</i>	◻ ◌ִ	Ey
צִירֶה מְלֵא <i>TZEY-reh Mah-LEY</i>	י◻ ◌ִי	Ey
סְגוּל <i>Seh-GOHL</i>	◻ ◌ֹ	Eh
חֹלֶם חֶסֶר <i>Choh-LAHM Chah-SEHR</i>	◻ ◌ֻ	Aw (close to Oh)
חֹלֶם מְלֵא <i>Choh-LAHM Mah-LEY</i>	י◻ ◌ֻי	Oh
חִירִיק חֶסֶר <i>Chiy-RIQ Chah-SEHR</i>	◻ ◌ִ	Ih
חִירִיק מְלֵא <i>Chiy-RIQ Mah-LEY</i>	י◻ ◌ִי	Iy
קְבוּץ <i>Qoo-BOOTZ</i>	◻ ◌ֻ	Uu (as in “put”)
שׁוּרֶק <i>Shoo-ROOQ</i>	י◻ ◌ֻי	Oo (as in “root”)

Name שם	תנועה Vowel	Sound
<i>Sch'-VAH NACH</i> שוא נח	◻ :	(no sound)
<i>Sch'-VAH NAH</i> שוא נע	◻ or ◻ : or :	<i>Uh</i> (extremely clipped)
<i>Chah-TAHF Qah-MAHTZ</i> חטף קמץ	◻ ט:	<i>Aw</i> (clipped)
<i>Chah-TAHF Pah-TACH</i> חטף פתח	◻ פ:	<i>Ah</i> (clipped)
<i>Chah-TAHF Seh-GOHL</i> חטף סגול	◻ ס:	<i>Eh</i> (clipped)

Diphthongs:

Diphthong דו־תנועה	Sound of the Diphthong	Example of Use in תנך
יֹ	<i>Ahy</i> (in most cases: rhymes with “Hi!”) <i>Oy</i> (clipped O: rarely)	מִצֹּתִי
יֹ	<i>Ahy</i>	חֲטָאִי
יֹי	<i>Oy</i>	אֹי
יֹי	<i>Ooy</i>	¹ (רִיבֹי)
<u>However</u> , note: יֹי	<i>Ahy</i> (NOT <i>Oy</i>)	קִדְשֵׁי

Nota Bene:

- (i) the difference in the use of the ו (Vahv) between אֹי (vocal) and מִצֹּתִי (consonantal); and
- (ii) comparison between the vocal use of the י (Yood) (*mater lectionis* אֵם מְקִרָא) in the words אֹי and גֹי, and its consonantal use in the words צְבוֹיִם and גְּבוֹיִם.

¹ In the case of this diphthong, I am unable to recall a specific instance of its use in the תנ"ך. This example is taken from Rabbinic Hebrew, and for that reason it is shown in parentheses.