

## Chapter 1

# You Already Know Some Hebrew

### *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

**B***aruch HaBa!* 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 two thousand — 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. No longer true. That same ancient and holy tongue is now the language of sunbathing on the beach, eating dinner, going to the doctor, and the myriad of everyday life.

All languages are portals — openings to culture and friendship, literature and ideas. Discover any one, 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 already know a little Hebrew. But even if you've never walked through a

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synagogue's door or studied anything Jewish, you still probably know some Hebrew words. For example, you have probably heard the word *amen*. 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 the section, "Recognizing Tips to Help You Read Hebrew," later in this chapter.

Of course, you may have heard of other Jewish words, such as **Shlepp** (*shlehp*; to drag or pull) and **Kvetch** (*kvehtsh*; to complain), that are actually Yiddish (the language of the Jews of Eastern Europe combining Old High German, Hebrew, and other languages), that are part of the Israeli vernacular today. You may never even have thought about other words that have Hebrew roots. For example, did you know that *cinnamon* is a derivative of the Hebrew word **Kinamon** (*kee-nah-mohn*) which appears in the Biblical book, *The Song of Songs*? The English word *dilute* may derive from the Hebrew word **Dal** (*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. And this process works in reverse too, as many English words and phrases have crept into the Hebrew language. Interestingly enough — while you as an English speaker may identify these words as "English," some of these words 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!

- ✓ Cafe
- ✓ Hamburger
- ✓ Macaroni
- ✓ Pizza
- ✓ Radio
- ✓ Telephone

Incidentally, *The Academy for Hebrew Language*, the institute responsible for creating Modern Hebrew words, did create an authentic Hebrew word for the telephone. The academy called the telephone a **Sach-Rachok** (*sahch-rah-chohk*), which put together the words for conversation and long distance. So telephone translated as "long-distance conversation." Pretty clever, huh? However this word didn't "stick" with the Israeli public. So *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. So the question, of course, is where did all these modern words come from? Who decides? The answer is 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* (**Ta'ah-siaht-Elit**; tah-ah see-yat ee-leet) and *start-up company* (**Chevrat Heznek**; chehv-raht hehz-nehk), *surfboard* (**Galshan**; gahl-shan), *jet-lag* (**Ya'efet**; yah-eh-feht), and

even — when you've had just a few too many — *hangover* (**Chamarmoret**; chah-mahr-moh-reht).

Of course, the Israeli public doesn't accept all the words the Academy invents, although the Academy's decisions are binding for government documents and the official Israel Broadcasting Authority.

And 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 a new word, *pela-phone*, meaning "wonder-phone." You can learn more about the Academy at: <http://hebrew-academy.huji.ac.il/english.html>.

## 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 help you start. The most important part of sounding like a native is persistence and practice — and then some more practice! Listen to the CD in this book as much as possible. Spend as much time listening to Hebrew spoken by native speakers whenever 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 you speak Hebrew fluently — or close to it 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. For example: "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. For example: When *speaking* a *foreign language* . . .

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## Gesturing like the best of them

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

- ✓ When you hold one hand up about shoulder level with the palm upright and all the fingers cupped together in the center of the palm, this means **Rega!** (*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 are pointing.

- ✓ In Israel, the American “thumbs-up” sign has been seen traditionally as an unfriendly gesture that means you’re **Brogez** (*broh-geh-z*; mad or pissed off at someone).

Interestingly, an extremely recent ad campaign in Israel encourages kids to make a “thumbs-up” sign to drivers when they’re crossing the street, with the drivers returning a thumbs-up, as an indication that the drivers acknowledge 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

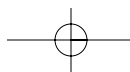
The second piece of advice I can give you has to do with certain Hebrew letters that are pronounced at the back of the throat. Use these tips for pronouncing them:

- ✓ **Ayin** (*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.
- ✓ **Chaf** (*khahf*): This letter makes a sound you don’t hear in English. It’s a hard *h* sound like you make when you clear your throat.
- ✓ **Chet** (*cheht*): This letter makes a strong throaty *h* sound. In this book, this syllable is written as *ch*.
- ✓ **Reish** (*raysh*): This letter makes the *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 the section, “Recognizing Tips to Help You Read Hebrew,” later in this chapter.

## Opening your mouth to say, “Ah!”

Thirdly, watch the pronunciation of your vowels. When pronouncing the *ah* sound, pronounce that vowel fully. Open your mouth wide and say, “Ah,” as if



you were at the doctor. 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 *ee* as in *Whoopee!* In Hebrew, *oh* sounds are long like in *over*.

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

## 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 only want to count, without counting objects, use the feminine form. See the section "Counting objects," later in this chapter to find out how to incorporate gender with numbers.

<b>Number</b>	<b>Masculine</b>	<b>Feminine</b>
1	Echad (eh- <i>chad</i> )	Achat (ah- <i>chat</i> )
2	Shnayim ( <i>shnah-eem</i> )	Shtayim ( <i>shta-yim</i> )
3	Shlosha (shloh- <i>sha</i> )	Shalosh (sha- <i>lohsh</i> )
4	Arba'ah (ahr-bah- <i>ah</i> )	Arba ( <i>ahr-bah</i> )
5	Chamisha (chah-mee- <i>shah</i> )	Chamesh (chah- <i>mesh</i> )
6	Shisha (shee- <i>shah</i> )	Shesh (shesh)
7	Shiv'a (sheev- <i>ah</i> )	Sheva ( <i>she-vah</i> )
8	Sh'monah (shmoh- <i>nah</i> )	Shmoneh ( <i>shmoh-neh</i> )
9	Tish'a (teesh- <i>ah</i> )	Tay-shah ( <i>tey-sha</i> )
10	Asarah (ah-sah- <i>rah</i> )	Eser ( <i>eh-sehr</i> )

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## 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 remain 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 different 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 **Eretz Yisrael** (*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 official language), and is a living, spoken language for millions of Israelis and other Hebrew speakers across the globe.

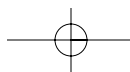
## Counting objects

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

- ✓ **Figure out the gender of the noun you're counting:** For example, if you want to talk about *one book*, you first have to figure out if 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 *one*, place the number *after* the noun. So rather than *one book*, you say *book one* (**Sefer Echad**; *seh-fehr eh-chad*). But after you get to the number two, place the number *before* the noun. [To make **Sefer** plural in Hebrew, it becomes **S'farim** (*sfah-reem*; books).] So, to say *two books*, you say **Shnai S'farim** (*shnay sfah-reem*), for *three books*, say **Shlosha S'farim** (*shloh-shah sfah-reem*), for *four books* say **Arba'ah S'farim** (*ahr-bah-ah sfah-reem*), and so on.



The number *two* in Hebrew is an exception. When you're specifying two of something, say two boys (**Yeladim**; *yuh-lah-deem*) or two girls (**Yeladot**; *yuh-lah-doh*t), and you drop the last syllable (*im*) of the number 2. So you get: **Shnei Yeladim** (two boys) and **Shtei Yeladot** (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 ten. For example, eleven in the masculine form is **Echad-asar**. In the feminine form, eleven is **Achat-esrei** (*ah-chaht es-reh*). Table 1-2 shows the numbers for 11-19.

Table 1-2		Counting from 11-19
Number	Masculine	Feminine
11	Echad-asar ( <i>eh-chaht ah-sahr</i> )	Achat-esrei ( <i>ah-chaht ehs-reh</i> )
12	Shnaym-assar ( <i>shnehym ah-sahr</i> )	Shtaym-esreh ( <i>shtehym ehs-reh</i> )
13	Shlosa-asar ( <i>shloh-sha ah-sahr</i> )	Shlosh-esreh ( <i>shlosh-ehsreh</i> )
14	Arba'ah-asar ( <i>ahr-bah-ah ah-sahr</i> )	Arba-esreh ( <i>ahr-bah es-reh</i> )
15	Chamisha-asar ( <i>chah-mee-shah ah-sahr</i> )	Chamesh-esreh ( <i>chah-mesh es-reh</i> )
16	Shisha-asar ( <i>shee-shah ah-sahr</i> )	Shesh-esreh ( <i>shehsh ehs-reh</i> )
17	Shiv'a-asar ( <i>sheev-ah ah-sahr</i> )	Shva-esreh ( <i>shvah es-reh</i> )
18	Sh'monah-asar ( <i>shmoh-nah ah-sahr</i> )	Shmoneh-esreh ( <i>shmoh-neh ehs-reh</i> )
19	Tish'a-asar ( <i>teesh-ah ah-sahr</i> )	tu-shah-esreh ( <i>tshah-esreh</i> )



Use the appropriate gender for the ten 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 1-3			Counting between Multiples of Ten
Number	Hebrew	Pronunciation	
20	Esim	<i>ehs-reem</i>	
30	Shloshim	<i>shloh-sheem</i>	
40	Arba'im	<i>ahr-bah-eem</i>	
50	Chamishim	<i>chah-mee-sheem</i>	
60	Sheeshim	<i>shee-sheem</i>	

(continued)

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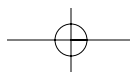
**Table 1-3 (continued)**

<i>Number</i>	<i>Hebrew</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>
70	Shiveem	sheev- <i>eem</i>
80	Sh'monim	shmoh- <i>neem</i>
90	Tish'im	teesh- <i>eem</i>

However, if you want to say something like *twenty-one* or *forty-seven*, you have to pay attention to gender again (see Table 1-4). The pattern for making these numbers is first to state the number in the tens, such as **Esrim** (ehs-*reem*; twenty), and then add the word for *and* (**V'**; veh), and then the single number, such as **Echad** (eh-*chad*; one). So *twenty-one* would be **Esrim v'echad** (ehs-*reem veh-eh-chad*; twenty-one).

**Table 1-4** Counting from 21-29

<i>Number</i>	<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>
21	Esrim v'echad (ehs- <i>reem veh-eh-chahd</i> )	Es-rim v'achat (ehs- <i>reem veh-ah-chat</i> )
22	Esrim u'shnayim (ehs- <i>reem oosh-nah-yim</i> )	Esrim u'shtayim (ehs- <i>reem ush-tah-yeem</i> )
23	Esrim u'shlosha (ehs- <i>reem oosh-loh-shah</i> )	Esrim v'shalosh (ehs- <i>reem veh-shah-lohsh</i> )
24	Esrim v'arba'ah (ehs- <i>reem veh-ahr-bah-ah</i> )	Esrim v'arba (ehs- <i>reem veh-ahr-bah</i> )
25	Esrim v'chamisha (ehs- <i>reem vah-chah-mee-shah</i> )	Esrim v'chamesh (ehs- <i>reem veh-chah-mesh</i> )
26	Esrim v'shisha (ehs- <i>reem veh-shee-shah</i> )	Esrim v'shesh (ehs- <i>reem veh-shehsh</i> )
27	Esrim v'shiv'a (ehs- <i>reem veh-sheev-ah</i> )	Esrim v'sheva (ehs- <i>reem veh-sheh-vah</i> )
28	Esrim u'shmonah (ehs- <i>reem ush-moh-nah</i> )	Esrim u'shmoneh (ehs- <i>reem ush-moh-neh</i> )
29	Esrim v'tish'a (ehs- <i>reem veh-teesh-ah</i> )	Esrim v'tay-shah (ehs- <i>reem veh-teh-sha</i> )



If you can count to 30, you can count to a million! For all the numbers, you follow the same pattern as Table 1-4. First, state the number that is the multiple of ten (twenty, thirty, forty, and so forth) and then you add **V'** (*veh*; and) plus the single digit. For example, **Shloshim v'ehad** (*shloh-sheem veh-eh-chahd*; thirty-one), **Arba'im v'echad** (*ahr-bah-eem veh-eh-chahd*; forty-one), and so forth.

To count by hundreds, first say the feminine number of the quantity of hundreds, such as *four* (**Arba**), and then add the word for *hundreds* (**Me'ot**). This pattern continues until a thousand. For example,

100	<b>Me'ah</b>	<i>meh-ah</i>
200	<b>Matayim</b>	<i>mah-tah-yeem</i>
300	<b>Shlosh-me'ot</b>	<i>shlohsh-meh-oht</i>

To count by thousands, first you say the feminine number of the quantity of thousands, and then follow it with the word for *thousands*, **Alafim** (*ah-lah-feem*). This pattern continues until one million. The Hebrew word for one thousand is **Elef** (*eh-lehf*) and the word for two thousand is **Alpayim** (*ahl-pah-yeem*).

1,000	<b>Elef</b>	<i>eh-lehf</i>
2,000	<b>Alpyim</b>	<i>ahl-pah-eem</i>
3,000	<b>Shloshet Alafim</b>	<i>shloh-sheht ah-lah-feem</i>
10,000	<b>Aseret Alafim</b>	<i>ah-seh-reht ah-lah-feem</i>
1,000,000	<b>Mil-yohn</b>	<i>meel-yohn</i>

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, and 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's origins date back more than 3,500 years ago 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

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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.



In Jewish circles, using the terms C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (before the Common Era) instead of the terms A.D. (*Ano Do minus*; year of our Lord) and B.C. (Before Christ) is customary. In Hebrew, you say **Lifnei Ha'Sfira** (leef-nahy hah-sfee-rah; before the counting) and **Acharei Ha'Sfiraha** (ah-chah-ray hah-sfee-rah; after the counting).

### *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 than 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, you write the Hebrew alphabet from right to left. Hebrew consists of 22 different letters — all consonants. Vowels aren't written within the consonant letters but rather are written in the form of dots and dashes below the consonant letter. For a more complete discussion of Hebrew vowels, see the section, "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 have different pronunciations and there are a few consonants that are different as well. I will be using 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	
<i>Name of the Letter</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Hebrew Character</i>	<i>The Sound It Makes</i>
<b>Aleph</b>	ah-lehf	א	makes no sound
<b>Bet</b>	beht	ב	makes a "B" sound as in "boat"
<b>Vet</b>	veht	ב	makes a "V" sound as in "veterinarian"

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<b>Name of the Letter</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Hebrew Character</b>	<b>The Sound It Makes</b>
<b>Gimmel</b>	<i>gee-mehl</i>	ג	makes a "G" sound as in "girl"
<b>Dalet</b>	<i>dah-leht</i>	ד	makes a "D" sound as in "door"
<b>Hey</b>	<i>hey</i>	ה	makes a "soft H" sound as in "hello"
<b>Vav</b>	<i>vahv</i>	ו	makes a "V" sound as in "video"
<b>Zayin</b>	<i>zah-een</i>	ז	makes a "Z" sound as in "zipper"
<b>Chet</b>	<i>cheht</i>	ח	makes a strong guttural "H" sound. In this book, this letter is represented as "Ch."
<b>Tet</b>	<i>teht</i>	ט	makes a "T" sound as in "teaspoon"
<b>Yod</b>	<i>yohd</i>	י	makes a "Y" sound at the beginning of a word as in "young." This letter also behaves like a vowel at times. I discuss it in the following section about vowels.
<b>Kaf</b>	<i>kahf</i>	כ	makes a "K" sound as in "kite"
<b>Khaf</b>	<i>khahf</i>	כּ	makes a strong guttural "H" sound. This letter is represented in this book as "kh."
<b>Lamed</b>	<i>lah-mehd</i>	ל	makes an "L" sound as in "lemon"
<b>Mem</b>	<i>mehm</i>	מ	makes an "M" sound as in "mouse"
<b>Nun</b>	<i>noon</i>	נ	makes an "N" sound as in "no" (And you thought only Catholics had nuns.)
<b>Samekh</b>	<i>sah-mehch</i>	ס	makes an "S" sound as in "soda"
<b>Ayin</b>	<i>ah-yeen</i>	ע	makes a barely audible guttural sound in the back of the throat (For practical purposes as most nonnative speakers can't make this sound, this letter is a "silent letter." You pronounce the vowels that are placed under it, but the letter itself doesn't make a sound.)

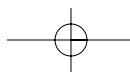
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<b>Table 1-5</b>		<b>The Hebrew Alphabet</b>	
<i>Name of the Letter</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Hebrew Character</i>	<i>The Sound It Makes</i>
<b>Pey</b>	<i>pay</i>	פ	makes a "P" sound as in "popsicle"
<b>Fey</b>	<i>fay</i>	ף	makes an "F" sound as in "fish"
<b>Tzadi</b>	<i>tzah-dee</i>	צ	makes a hard "Tz" sound as the double zz in "pizza." In this book, I represent it with "tz."
<b>Kof</b>	<i>kohf</i>	כ	makes this "K" sound as in "Kansas"
<b>Reish</b>	<i>raysh</i>	ר	makes the "R" sound as in "round." This letter is actually a "guttural" letter. Roll it like a Spanish "R," and also pronounce it from the back of the throat.
<b>Shin</b>	<i>sheen</i>	שׁ	(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 "show." In this book, I represent it with "sh."
<b>Sin</b>	<i>seen</i>	שׂ	when the dot is on the left side of the letter it makes an "S" sound as in "Sam"
<b>Tav</b>	<i>tahv</i>	ת	makes a "T" sound as in "toe"

***Those dots and dashes they call vowels***

Originally, Hebrew had no vowels. Vowels, in the form of dots and lines under the consonants, were added to the Hebrew writing in the seventh century of the Common Era (C.E.). Before then, people read without vowels. And even today, most books, magazines, and newspapers in Modern Hebrew — not to mention the Torah scroll — are written without vowels.



## Chapter 1: You Already Know Some Hebrew

# 21

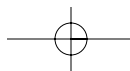
Modern Hebrew has both long and short vowels. As a general rule, a long vowel can make up one syllable, but a short vowel needs either another vowel or a **Shvah** (shvah; two vertical dots under a consonant) to form a syllable. For more on the **Shvah**, see “Introducing the shvah,” later in this chapter.

Vowels are divided into long and short vowels. This categorization doesn’t have to do with their pronunciation, but rather with the fact that long vowels are usually found in open syllables — syllables that end with a vowel — while short vowels are usually found in closed syllables — syllables that end with a consonant. However, the **Chirik Maleh** (the long vowel) holds its sound longer than its corresponding short vowel **Chirek Chaser**. Table 1-6 shows the long vowels.

Table 1-6		The Long Vowels	
Name of the Vowel	Pronunciation	Hebrew Character	The Sound It Makes
<b>Chirik Maleh</b>	chee-reek mah-leh	כִּי	makes the “ee” sound as in “see”
<b>Cholam</b>	choh-lahm	וֹ	makes the “o” sound as in “more”
<b>Kamatz</b>	kah-mahtz	ָ	makes the “ah” sound as in “saw”
<b>Shuruk</b>	shoo-rook	וּ	makes the “oo” sound as in “mood”
<b>Tzereh</b>	tzay-reh	ֵי	makes the “a” sound as in “cape”
<b>Vav Cholam</b>	vahv choh-lahm	וֹ	makes the “o” sound as in “snow”

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

Table 1-7 shows the short vowels.



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Table 1-7		The Short Vowels	
Name of the Vowel	Pronunciation	Hebrew Character	The Sound It Makes
<b>Chirik Chaser</b>	chee-reek chah-sehr	כְּ	makes the “ee” sound as in “see”
<b>Kamatz Katan</b>	kah-mahzt kah-tahn	כֶּ	makes the “o” sound as in “more”
<b>Kubutz</b>	koo-bootz	כֻּ	makes the “oo” sound as in “mood”
<b>Patach</b>	pah-tahch	כִּ	makes the “uh” sound as in “nut”
<b>Segol</b>	seh-gohl	כִּי	makes the “eh” sound as in “end”

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

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



The **Kamatz Katan** looks identical to the **Kamatz**. For example, if you see something that looks like a **Kamatz** at the beginning of a word, followed by a **Shva**, or between two **Shvas**, it's probably a **Kamatz Katan** and should be pronounced “o.”

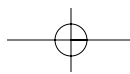


### Introducing the shvah

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

- ✓ **Shvah Na** (shvah nah), which opens a syllable
- ✓ **Shvah Nach** (shvah nahch), which closes a syllable
- ✓ **Shvah Merachef** (shvah mehr-rah-chehf), known as the *flying shvah*, which results from two **Shvah Nas** being next to each other in a word

The **Shvachs** don't make their own sound, but are essentially placeholders for the consonant above them. However, the **Shvah Nach** holds the sound for a little bit longer. You can tell a **Shvah Nach** because it usually comes in the middle or 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**. For 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** (dgeh-sheem; 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: **Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Fey, and Tav.**
- ✓ **Dagesh Chazak** (dah-gehsh chah-zahk): Appears after the word *the*, which in Hebrew is a prefix consisting of the letter **Hey** and the vowel **Patach** underneath it.

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



Sometimes in Hebrew, a letter acts like a “weak letter,” such as a **Hey** or a **Nun**, disappears in the course of verb conjugation. (By “weak letter,” I mean that sometimes it 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), where all the words belong to a certain category of words (such as professions, colors, and physical challenges), have a **Dagesh** in one of the letters. For example, words that describe physical challenges, such as blindness and deafness, always take a **Dagesh Chazak** in the middle letter of the word.

Are you totally confused yet? So what difference does adding a Dagesh make? In the Sephardic pronunciation that Israelis and most Hebrew speakers today use, adding a **Dagesh** makes no difference in pronunciation. However, in a few cases, when a **Dagesh** is placed within a letter (always a consonant), it changes the way you pronounce that consonant. For example, when you add a **Dagesh** to the letter **Vet**, the *v* sound becomes a *b* sound, and you pronounce the letter like *bet*. When you pair a **Dagesh** with the letter **Chaf**, the *ch* sound becomes a *k* sound, so the sound of that letter becomes *kaf*. Finally, the letter **Fey** with a **Dagesh** is pronounced *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!

## Hebrew as the holy tongue — don't bite it

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

Hebrew letters also all have numeric value. A particular form of Jewish numerology called **Gematria** (gee-*meht*-ree-yah) plays on the words' numeric values. For example, both the Hebrew word for *wine* (**Yayin**; yah-yeen) and

*secret* (**Sod**; sohd) have the same numerical value. The Talmud has a saying, "When the wine goes in, secrets come out!" Other Jewish sacred writings have claimed that the Hebrew letters are the manifestation of divine energy patterns, and even that the universe's DNA is composed of Hebrew letters.

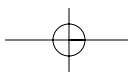
A 13th-century Jewish mystic Rabbi Abraham Abulafia created a form of Jewish meditation similar to yoga based on the Hebraic forms. And a 16th-century mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria developed another form of meditation based on visualizing the different Hebrew letters.

Maybe you've read the Bible, in particular the part about when Moses comes down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments in hand. And if you haven't read the Bible, then perhaps you've seen the Mel Brooks film version in *History of the World*. When Moses came down from the mountain, what was he holding? A copy of e-mail 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?

Moses chiseled the words in the stone with a mallet. And if he was a rightie, he would have used his dominant hand — his right hand — to pound the mallet onto the stylus he held with his left. 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 period of time the Greeks wrote in *both* directions, switching when they got to the end of the tablet/page. That practice makes sense if you think about it; instead of pressing the shift key to go to all the way back, just keep going where you are in the backward direction! Then the Greeks decided left to right would be the standard, but Hebrew kept on writing right to left. Tradition!



If you want some practice reading, check out: <http://ejemm.com/aleph/>, an online course in Hebrew reading and Jewish values. It features fun interactive activities and audio so you can hear the sounds of the letters. The site can help you read Hebrew in no time!



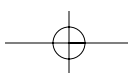
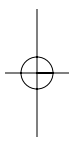
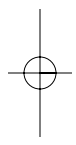
# Fun & Games

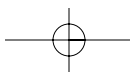


Write the sound that each of the following Hebrew characters makes:

- |   |       |   |       |   |       |   |       |
|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|
| ב | _____ | ג | _____ | ל | _____ | ש | _____ |
| ז | _____ | ו | _____ | ר | _____ | כ | _____ |

You can find the answers in Appendix C.





# 26

## Part I: Getting Started

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