

THE ALPHA OF THE ALEF-BET: FIRST STEPS IN HEBREW by Meira Rom and Dalia Roth-Gavison. Jerusalem: Academon. 2017. 152 pp. 74 NIS.

The Alpha of the Alef-Bet: First Steps in Hebrew (אלופים באלף-בית : צעדים), by Meira Rom and Dalia Roth-Gavison, is an introductory Modern Hebrew textbook that focuses on teaching the alphabet as well as basic vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. This concise textbook consists of ten lessons, each presenting several Hebrew consonants, various points of morphology (nominal and verbal), and sentence structure. In each chapter, brief closed exercises are provided to practice writing the relevant consonants and to practice reading texts containing words with those consonants. In chapters that include grammar material, short exercises are provided that drill knowledge of morphology and syntax. Most chapters also include YouTube links to songs containing relevant vocabulary or grammar material. The end of the book offers several helpful appendices, including charts of the alphabet and vowels, a glossary, lists of personal names and place names, and a brief list of foreign words.

In regard to vocabulary, the book presents basic function words such as pronouns (personal and demonstrative), interrogatives, prepositions, and conjunctions; additionally, the book provides terms for colors, types of food, names of cities and countries, and common Hebrew personal names. In relation to nominal morphology and syntax, the textbook provides clear charts and concise explanations concerning gender and number markers, the definite article, and nominal sentences. As regards presentation, the use of purple font (as opposed to the book's standard black font) to accentuate spelling or morphological aspects under discussion is particularly helpful, in that the distinct color isolates the issue to be learned by the student.

The book does a fine job presenting several verbal groups. Beginning in chapter 6, the grammar first presents the conjugation of present tense *Ayin Vav*, *Yod* verbs (עיי,י) in the *Pa'al* stem; and the infinitive forms of these verbs are introduced in chapter 8. Additionally, chapters 8–10 introduce the present tense and infinitive forms of regular verbs (*Shlemim*) such as *Lamed Ayin*, *Khet* verbs (לייח,ע) and *Lamed Alef* (לייא) as well as the present tense and infinitive forms of *Lamed Heh* verbs (לייה). Finally, the last chapter of the book presents the common modal verb 'to need' (צריך) as well as the present tense forms of the verb 'to speak' (לדבר) of the *Pi'el* stem.

Perhaps the best aspect of this textbook is its ability to present successfully linguistic topics in a very simple manner that almost certainly will not overwhelm the student. Complicated explanations of spelling or grammar rules are absent from this book, being substituted by charts followed by concise exercises geared at practicing the newly presented material. Considering the brief nature of this workbook, the authors can be commended for introducing not only the alphabet and vowels of Hebrew, but also the main points of nominal and verbal morphology as well as the essential features of sentence structure.

While this workbook is exemplary in presenting basic linguistic content in a clear and succinct manner, at times, the presentation of such material is a bit too succinct and could be improved by an addition of a brief footnote. For example, in presenting definite noun phrases containing an adjective (e.g., הכדור החדש; page 58), the chapter provides a table with examples of such phrases, but no explanation is offered to clarify this not necessarily intuitive concept – that a definite article must appear on both the noun and the adjective. A footnote may also be fitting on pages 53–54 to explain that adjectives must agree in number and gender with the nouns that they modify. Throughout the book, however, the authors do a nice job including such pertinent notes. For example, the authors provide an explanatory note on page 51 when introducing the general function of the definite article, and on page 62 when explaining the correct use of the two forms of the preposition 'from' (-מ vs. -מי). The brevity and precision of these (and other) notes in the book are commendable.

Some pedagogues may need to become accustomed to specific features of the book. For instance, the Hebrew consonants are not presented in the order of the alphabet; the reasoning behind the particular order of the presentation of the consonants is not clear. It is noteworthy, though, that the well-known textbook *Hebrew from Scratch* also presents the alphabet in non-sequential order, so this aspect should not be too much of an obstacle to learning the alphabet. Furthermore, while the Hebrew consonants are presented in a gradual manner (that is, they are spread out over the ten lessons of the book), the vowels, in contrast, are all given together as a group in chapter 1 with very little explanation. Nevertheless, this terse presentation of the vowels is compensated by the fact that the vowels are reintroduced at the beginning of

each subsequent chapter in a chart with various consonants so that the student can practice reading the consonants and the vowels together. This approach will no doubt help the student to internalize the vowels.

When introducing the alphabet, the book purposefully avoids using too many foreign words and personal names that stem from the Western culture. The authors explain in the forward to the book that the prevalence of such vocabulary in other textbooks has become more of a hindrance than an aid in the learning process of students in Israel since many of them come from a non-Western background and are not necessarily familiar with this terminology. Such a pedagogical approach of limiting foreign words at the beginner's level makes sense for an Israeli classroom.

There are a couple minor typos that may be fixed in future editions of the book. On page 136, there is a stray *tsere* vowel in the box that presents the *u* vowel. On page 111, the song title is missing for the YouTube link. Besides adjusting these two trivial flaws, in a future edition it may also be beneficial to introduce the word 'yes' earlier in the book (rather than in chapter 5), in order to make use of the word in reading excerpts, which will help the flow of these passages (e.g., pages 18, 26). We may also note that some may find the book's illustrations more appropriate for a younger audience than for adults; the same can be stated about the content of certain YouTube links in the book (although the actual vocabulary of many links is well beyond a beginner's level). Adjusting these details may be worthwhile in future editions.

In sum, this workbook is well-suited for a classroom setting (or for self-study) focused on learning the alphabet, basic vocabulary, and basic verbal forms. While the book's succinctness is advantageous in certain respects, this brief nature of the textbook will almost certainly compel instructors in a university setting to search for additional materials with which to augment each lesson. Nevertheless, the textbook achieves the aim that it sets out to attain: to introduce the alphabet in a clear and accessible fashion and to present the basic morphology and syntax of the language.

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