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Introduction

Learning the grammar of any language can be challenging. We have written this book to help students of Modern Hebrew meet this challenge. Our primary audience is English-speaking students of Modern Hebrew who are looking for explanations of Hebrew grammar in **non-technical** English. We have tried to "ease" them into Hebrew grammar in ways that are described below. Our explanations are accompanied by examples in Hebrew (with English translations). In order to understand these examples, readers must be able to read Hebrew and must know some basic vocabulary and grammar.

What material is covered?

This book deals with a wide range of topics covered in **beginning and intermediate** Hebrew language courses.¹ We have not attempted to describe Modern Hebrew as a whole, but rather have clearly limited the topics discussed (e.g., the verb groups, the prepositions, the time words, the reason words, etc.) and the vocabulary used to the topics and vocabulary generally learned at the beginning and intermediate levels.

In our presentation of Hebrew grammar we focus on different kinds of **words** (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives), their functions, and the ways in which they are formed, written and pronounced. We also look at common ways in which these words join together with other words to form **phrases** and **sentences**, which ultimately create a written or oral "text."²







Aims and format

Easing into Modern Hebrew Grammar is designed to serve as a **user-friendly reference and exercise book**. Our intention is to engage the student and, to this end, we often use a **question-answer** (Q-A) format: We first present a Hebrew sentence or passage (with English translation) and then ask the reader a question about it. The answer to this question appears immediately below it. At frequent intervals we provide brief **summaries** of the material covered (called *Let's review*). A *Chapter summary* appears at the end of many chapters. The interim and chapter summaries are often followed by **exercises** (labeled *Want to see if you've understood?*), which enable the reader to check if the topic has been understood. Answers are provided at the end of each exercise.

-
- 1 Our division into levels is based on the division used at the Hebrew University and, obviously, may vary from institution to institution.
 - 2 We also deal with various aspects of how sentences relate to one another in a larger text, but we do not discuss the structure of this text as such.

Readers searching for a specific grammar topic can refer not only to the **table of contents**, but also to the English **subject index** and the **Hebrew word index** at the end of the book. Both the **Preview** at the beginning of each chapter and the various summaries provide additional guidance.

The following **icons** and **headings** appear throughout the book:

	Preview – presents a list of the main topics discussed in the chapter.
	Be careful! – emphasizes a point that is a frequent source of mistakes.
	Did you know? – adds material that is related but either is not of paramount importance or is a clear digression from the topic under discussion.
	Let's review – provides an interim summary of the material taught.
	Chapter summary – summarizes the material examined in the chapter.
	Want to see if you've understood? – offers a short exercise of the material taught.

Near the end of the book, we have included five **appendices**. These include material that students often find helpful. (See the table of contents for details.)

Use of grammatical terms, comparisons to English and "simplification" of material

In this book we have tried to use only basic grammatical terms and have avoided using more technical terms often found in books on Hebrew grammar. We have included these technical terms (in English or Hebrew) either in parentheses or in the footnotes at the bottom of the page. In several cases we have used Hebrew terms (e.g., *beenyan*, *smeechoot*) instead of translating them into English. These terms are written in Latin letters, but not as transcriptions (which would be: *been-YAN* and *sme-CHOOT*). The usual translations of these terms are noted in parentheses or in the footnotes.

In order to make our explanations clearer, we have often compared and contrasted Hebrew and English. Since the differences between the languages are commonly a source of error, many of the contrasts are included in explanations labeled ***Be careful!***.

Teachers and advanced students may notice that we have sometimes "simplified" grammatical material in order to make it easier for students to learn. We have noted blatant cases of such simplification in our footnotes. Here are three examples:

1. Syllable division

In this book we have based the division of words into syllables on the (fairly slow and clear) pronunciation of Hebrew by most native speakers today. Thus, a word like דְּבָרִים is regarded as having two syllables: *dva-REEM* (as opposed to the traditional division *de/va-REEM*). The word דְּיָבֵר is regarded as having the following two syllables: *dee-BER* (as opposed to the traditional *deeb-BER*).

2. Sounds and writing

In our description of Hebrew, we have tried to differentiate between the **sounds** of the language (*consonants* and *vowels*) and the recording of these sounds in **writing** (*letters, vowel signs, etc.*). However, at times we felt it necessary to blur this distinction; for example, we use the term *root letters* when we sometimes mean *root consonants*. We also say that *letters* are "pronounced" when, properly stated, *consonants* and *vowels* are "pronounced," and *letters* and *vowel signs* are "realized."

3. Describing sentences

When describing sentence structure, we often use the term *base clause* to refer to an independent or subordinating clause. We use the term *added clause* to refer to a dependent or subordinate clause. In addition, when speaking of sentences **without** a verb (e.g., יש לי ספר – I have a book, דויד ספורטאי – David is an athlete), we often say that these sentences are in the *present tense*, even though – technically speaking – only a **verb** has tense. We do this because these sentences are perceived as being in the present tense. Indeed, the English equivalents of these sentences contain a present tense verb.

Spelling and vowel signs

Hebrew has two systems of spelling. According to one system, the word for "he spoke" is spelled דָּבַר. In this system we add to the letters both vowel signs and other signs – such as the *dagesh* (a dot that is placed in a letter) or the dot on the letters ש and שׁ.³ In grammar books this system is often called *defective spelling* (פְּתִיב הַסֵּר). We have chosen to call this system *standard spelling*. The second system, called *full spelling* (פְּתִיב מְלֵא), dictates that this same word be spelled דִּבֵּר. The letter ם has been added and no vowel signs are used.

In this book we spell words according to the *full spelling* system. This is the spelling used in most publications in Modern Hebrew today.⁴ In addition, we often add some or all vowel signs to words in order to make their pronunciation clearer. We use the *dagesh* sparingly, adding it primarily to the letters פ', כ', ב' (when they are pronounced *b*, *k* and *p*). However, in chapters

3 In Hebrew these signs are called סִימְנֵי נִיקוד. When we use the term *vowel signs* we refer also to the diacritical marks like the *dagesh*.

4 Today we find *vowel signs* used mainly in children's books and in poetry.

dealing with *patterns* of words (*adjectives, nouns and verbs*), we do sometimes add a *dagesh* to letters other than פ', כ', ב' in cases where the *dagesh* is a significant part of the form and where its absence (in ר', ע', ח', ה', א') may cause a change in pronunciation. Compare, for example, the *regular* verb להִיגָמֵר *le-hee-ga-MER* and the verb להִיעָלֵם *le-he-'a-LEM*, whose first *root letter* is ע'.⁵

In almost all cases we follow the spelling rules set forth by the Hebrew Language Academy.⁶ In some cases, however, we diverge from these rules in order to make pronunciation clearer. For example, in words such as the following, we add a ו' or י': תוכנית (program) instead of תכנית, איתי (with me) instead of אתי and פירות (fruit) instead of פרות.

In the exercises we usually do not add vowel signs, and we do not expect students to add vowel signs to their answers. In the answers that we supply, however, we often add vowel signs in order to make the pronunciation of words clearer.

Describing language as formal and informal, correct and incorrect

Foreign language students are usually taught the fairly standard Hebrew spoken and written by educated speakers, and this is the language we have presented in this book. When we deal with more than one word or expression denoting the same thing, we try to point out differences in the level of formality or in ways or circumstances in which the words are used.

We use the following terms to note levels of informality and formality:

colloquial – typical of popular spoken Hebrew, often does not adhere to the traditional rules of grammar.

informal – typical of spoken Hebrew and of informal written language (letters to friends and family). Language in this register usually adheres to the rules of grammar.

formal – a word or expression for which a less formal alternative exists in everyday usage. This Hebrew is spoken in more formal contexts (for example, a conversation with a professor, a lecture to a class) and is written in formal letters or academic writing. Formal pronunciation is used today in news broadcasts and at formal public ceremonies.

literary – used only in very formal language or in literature.

5 See the chapter "Guttural Consonants: *Beenyaneem Pee'el, Poo'al and Neef'al*," pp. 480-482 for an explanation.

6 See the chapter "Hebrew Spelling: Selected Issues," pp. 654-669.

The Hebrew that is taught to learners – and is the subject of this book – usually adheres to the rules of grammar. However, Hebrew is alive and changing. Sometimes what is "correct" according to the rules of grammar (i.e., "normative") sounds either out of place or even incorrect. When – in everyday usage by educated speakers – a certain non-normative usage or pronunciation is very widespread, we note this fact either in the body of the text or in the footnotes. For example, we teach the normative form אֶתְכֶם and note that the form אוֹתְכֶם is commonly used in everyday speech. In some special cases, we have chosen to teach the non-normative form (e.g., כְּתַבְתֶּם *ka-TAV-tem*), while noting the traditional form and pronunciation (כְּתַבְתֶּם *ktav-TEM* or *ke-tav-TEM*) in small letters. The guiding principle in deciding what to teach our students is our desire that they not sound like *ulpan* students when they speak and write. However, we do want them to be **aware** of what is normative and non-normative and to sound like educated speakers of Hebrew.

In cases where we were unsure regarding normativity, we consulted the Hebrew Language Academy and other experts in the field. We have made it a point to keep abreast of the decisions made by the Hebrew Language Academy, and these are reflected in our presentation of material in this book. In questions of usage – regarding what sounds "right" or "acceptable" to a native speaker in a certain situation – we have not only relied on our own judgment, but also have consulted reliable native-speaker "informants." In addition, we have used the Internet as a source of information – though with the requisite caution.

Transcription of words in Latin letters

In addition to English translations, we often provide *transcriptions* that indicate in Latin letters how a Hebrew word is pronounced. Our transcriptions are based on the pronunciation of Hebrew by a large segment of the Israeli population. In this pronunciation there is no differentiation between 'א and 'ע; in addition, 'כ (without a *dagesh*) and 'ח are pronounced the same. The vowel signs ם and ם are both pronounced *eh*, but when ם is followed by 'י, as in בֵּית סֵפֶר, it is pronounced by some speakers *ei*: *beit SE-fer*. In such a case, we have included the transcriptions of two common pronunciations of the same word (*beit* and *bet*).

As mentioned above, we have divided words into syllables according to how they are pronounced in Israeli Hebrew. In words with more than one syllable, the stressed syllable is indicated by capital letters (e.g., יֵלֵד = *YE-led*).

Despite our desire to make our transcriptions as exact as possible, we are keenly aware of their limitations. There are certain common phenomena that we have not attempted to transcribe; for example, we transcribe the pronunciation of a word like הֶסְבֵּיר as *hees-BEER* – according to its written form – rather than *heez-BEER*, which reflects the more commonly heard pronunciation of this word.

Introduction

Here are some special features of our transcriptions:

1. Consonants

We have chosen the following signs or letter combinations to transcribe the following sounds:

- ' is used to indicate 'א and 'ע at the beginning of a word or syllable. It indicates the slight "catch in the throat" you can feel and hear before the first vowel in the English word *eye*, for example: אָנִי = 'a-NEE and עָסוּק = 'a-SOOK. (This "catch in the throat" is not always realized by Hebrew speakers; nevertheless, we have always transcribed 'א and 'ע as ' at the beginning of a syllable.) When 'א and 'ע are at the end of a word like אָרָא = ka-RA, their presence is not indicated in the transcription.
- ch is used to indicate a sound like that in the name of the German composer *Bach*. This is the transcription we use for the sounds represented by the letters 'ח, 'כ (without a *dagesh*) and 'ך, thus: חָדָר = CHE-der, לֵעָתוֹב = leech-TOV.
- ts is used to indicate the pronunciation ("realization") of 'צ (and 'ץ), as at the end of the English word *cats*, for example: צָרִיךְ = ts-a-REECH.
- sh is used to indicate the sound we hear at the beginning of the English word *shirt*, as in שֵׁיר = SHEER.

2. Vowels

The vowels in Hebrew are not identical in sound to English vowels (and, of course, the pronunciation of vowels in English varies from accent to accent).⁷ Our transcription is as follows:

- a represents the sound indicated by אָ, אַ and אֲ.⁸ For example: אָא is transcribed as *ba*. When we refer to this vowel sound alone (not as part of a word), we use the transcription *ah*. The *h* in this transcription is intended to help English speakers know how to pronounce the Hebrew *a* vowel correctly; it does not represent the sound *h* when it is used in the transcription of the vowel *ah*. It also does not represent the sound *h* in the transcriptions *eh* and *oh* discussed below.

Note: Even though the transcription of a word like בַּח would be clearer to English speakers if it were transcribed as *bah*t, we have decided – for reasons of simplicity – that when the *ah*

7 For guidance on how to pronounce Hebrew vowels and consonants, see: "Sabra Sound: Learning to Pronounce Hebrew" on the Internet: <http://hebrew-multimedia.huji.ac.il/sabrasound/index1.htm>. This multimedia courseware was developed by Esther Delshad and Carmia Shoval of the Division of Hebrew Language Instruction (Rothberg International School, Hebrew Univ.) and Asher Laufer of the Phonetic Laboratory at the Hebrew University.

8 This is the *kamats gadol*. The *kamats katan*, which looks the same, is pronounced *oh*, as in תְּכַנִּית (toch-NEET), but it is quite rare.

sound appears in a word, our transcription will be *bat*. (Note: This *a* should not be pronounced as it is in **English** words like *bat* and *cat*. This sound does not exist in Hebrew.)

- e* is used to transcribe the sound indicated by ם, ם and ם. For example: סֵפֶר is transcribed as *SE-fer*. This *e* is transcribed as *eh* when it stands alone, i.e., not in the context of a word.
- ee* represents the sound indicated by ם in words like שִׁירָה: *shee-RA*.
- o* is used to transcribe the sound indicated by ם, ם, ם (*kamats katan*) and ם in words such as דוּד (*DOD*), רוֹשׁ (*ROSH*), תְּכֵנִית (*toch-NEET*) and אֲנִיָּה (*'o-nee-YA*). When we refer to this sound alone, we transcribe it as *oh*.
- oo* is used for the vowel sound indicated by ם or ם in words like סִפּוּר (*see-POOR*) and בְּשׁוּל (in full spelling: בּוּשׁוּל) (*boo-SHAL*).

When the vowels *ah* and *eh* are followed by a *y* sound, we use the following transcriptions:

- ai* – as in the English pronunciation of *Thailand*, for example: עַלִּי ('*a-LAI*).
- ei* – as in the English word *eight*, for example: עֲלִינוּ ('*a-LEI-noo*).

3. Strong Dagesh (דָּגֵשׁ חָזֶק)

Since in today's pronunciation a *strong dagesh* does not cause a doubling or lengthening of a consonant, we do not transcribe a letter with a *strong dagesh* as a double letter. Thus, סִפּוּר is transcribed as *see-POOR*.

4. Mapeek (מַפִּיק)

When words written with vowel signs require a *mapeek* (a dot in a final ה', as in אוֹתָהּ), we indicate it, but we do not transcribe it as *h* since speakers of Modern Hebrew do not pronounce it as such.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations and special signs are used in this book:

m. – *masculine*

f. – *feminine*

s. – *singular*

pl. – *plural*

lit. – *literally*

* at the beginning of a word – indicates that the form is theoretical and does not exist in Hebrew.

Q – *question*

A – *answer*