עברית The Hebrew Language — *by Zachary M. Baker*

Printed	*Cursive*	*Rashi*	*English*
א	א	א	*'/silent*
ב	ב	ב	*b/v*
ג	ג	ג	*g*
ד	ד	ד	*d*
ה	ה	ה	*h*
ו	ו	ו	*v/u/o*
ז	ז	ז	*z*
ח	ח	ח	*ḥ*
ט	ט	ט	*ṭ*
י	י	י	*y/i*
כ	כ	כ	*k/kh*
ך	ך	ך	*final k*
ל	ל	ל	*l*
מ	מ	מ	*m*
ם	ם	ם	*final m*
נ	נ	נ	*n*
ן	ן	ן	*final n*
ס	ס	ס	*s*
ע	ע	ע	*'/silent*
פ	פ	פ	*p/f*
ף	ף	ף	*final p*
צ	צ	צ	*ts*
ץ	ץ	ץ	*final ts*
ק	ק	ק	*k*
ר	ר	ר	*r*
ש	ש	ש	*sh/s*
ת	ת	ת	*t/s*

Hebrew is a Semitic language, closely related to ancient Phoenician and Aramaic, and to classical and modern Arabic. The basic Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 consonants, five of which (כ, מ, נ, פ, צ) possess additional forms used only at the end of words; each is shown in the chart at left as a separate character, in the column immediately below the standard form. There is no distinction between upper- and lower-case forms in Hebrew.

Vowel signs and other diacritical marks ("points" or "dots") are sometimes used above, below, within, and between Hebrew letters. The chart on the next page illustrates their use, using the consonant ה *[h]* to demonstrate their positioning. Generally the vowels appear below the consonant they follow in pronunciation, as with הַ *[ha]*, but notice the exception הֹ, *[ho]*, with the point above the consonant. "Pointed" texts are largely limited to poems, children's literature, liturgy, and Hebrew Bible editions; otherwise, Hebrew is customarily written or printed without vowel signs. Thus, the pronunciations and meanings of Hebrew words can often be inferred only by context. An authoritative Hebrew-English dictionary, such as those cited below, is an essential tool for reading Hebrew.

Like other languages employing the Hebrew alphabet (such as Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic), Hebrew is written from right to left. Most written documents in Hebrew employ cursive script; printed texts most frequently use "square" letters, though a rounded typeface commonly referred to as "Rashi script" is also found in some religious publications and early Hebrew imprints.

Hebrew words are most often formed on the basis of three-letter consonantal roots. For example, the common stem זמן *[zeman]* = "time," "date," generates such words as להזמין *[le-hazmin]* = "to invite," הזמנה *[hazmanah]* = "invitation," and הזדמנות *[hizdamnut]* = "chance," "occasion." Hebrew possesses two genders: masculine and feminine. In nouns, the feminine form is frequently signaled by the presence of ה and ת at the end of words.

Over the millennia, Hebrew has evolved from the now-archaic language of the Bible, to Aramaic-tinged rabbinic Hebrew, and most recently, to the revived spoken and written vernacular of the modern State of Israel. Standard Israeli Hebrew follows Sephardic norms of pronunciation; in Eastern Europe, by contrast, the Ashkenazic pronunciation was used. The accompanying alphabet table relies on the Library of Congress standard for the transliteration of Israeli Hebrew, but also includes Ashkenazic pronunciations where these differ from Sephardic. The most striking differences between the two are:

(1) In Sephardic Hebrew most words are stressed on the last syllable, while in Ashkenazic Hebrew they are

stressed on the preceding syllable, e.g.: שבת *[shabat]* (Sephardic) vs. *[shabos]* (Ashkenazic) = "Sabbath."

(2) Ashkenazic Hebrew distinguishes between ת *[t]* and ת *[s]*; in Sephardic Hebrew both forms of the letter are pronounced *[t]*, as the previous example indicates.

(3) Ashkenazic Hebrew distinguishes between the vowels ֹ *[o]* and ָ *[a]*, while in Sephardic Hebrew both vowels usually are pronounced *[a]*, e. g.: אָמֵן *[omein]* (Ashkenazic) vs. *[amen]* (Sephardic) = "Amen."

Four Hebrew letters — shown here in their "pointed" (or "dotted") forms — can represent different consonants in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Hebrew: בּ *[b]* vs. ב *[v]*, כּ *[k]* vs. כ *[kh]*, פּ *[p]* vs. פ *[f]*, and שׁ *[sh]* vs. שׂ *[s]*. The letters ח *[ḥ]* and כ *[kh]* are pronounced alike (as in Scottish "loch"), though the Library of Congress transliteration system represents them differently. Similarly, ט and ת are both pronounced *[t]*, and ס and שׂ are both pronounced *[s]*.

Two letters can function as either consonants or vowels: ו *[v/o/u]* and י *[y/i/ei]*. There are two variant spelling systems in Hebrew, one of which makes special use of ו and י: "defective" (without vowels) and "plene" (where selected vowels are indicated by the insertion of the letters ו and י), e. g.: ספור ("defective" spelling) vs. סיפור ("plene" spelling), *[sipur]* = "story."

The letter ה is pronounced *[h]*, except at the end of words, when it is silent. The letter א can either be silent or act in lieu of vowels. The letter ע functions similarly to א, though some Hebrew speakers pronounce it with a guttural inflection, and it is usually transliterated by an inverted apostrophe *[']*. The letter ר *[r]* is pronounced with the soft palate.

Traditional Hebrew texts use letters to represent numbers, including dates. Abbreviations are also frequently encountered in written and printed Hebrew. This example illustrates both concepts: תרס"ד לפ"ק = [5]664 "according to the shortened reckoning" (of the year), or 1903/04 C.E. (תרס"ד adds up to 664, omitting the letter ה׳ [= 5,000], indicating the millennium — see the accompanying chart. לפ"ק is short for לפרט קטן *[li-ferat katan]* = "according to the shortened reckoning").

Honorifics are also represented in abbreviated forms, of which perhaps the most common is ר׳, short for "rabbi" or "master." Abbreviations and honorifics are included in authoritative dictionaries; separate lists have also been published.

In pre-World War II Hebrew-language documents and publications, especially those from Europe, personal names of non-Hebrew derivation are often spelled according to their phonetic Yiddish renderings, for example בלומע ראָזען *[Blume Rozen]*, rather than בלומה רוזן — the accepted Israeli Hebrew spelling.

Vowel points, using the consonant ה *[h] to illustrate their positioning*		
הַ *ha*	הִ *hi*	
הָ *ha/ho*	הֻ *hu*	
הֶ *he*	הְ *hə/h*	
הֵ *he/hei*	הֹ *ho*	

Sources:

Alcalay, Reuben. *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*. Tel-Aviv: Massadah, 1963 [and subsequently].

Baltsan, Hayim. *Webster's New World Hebrew Dictionary*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1992.

Hebraica Cataloging: A Guide to ALA/LC Romanization and Descriptive Cataloging. Prepared by Paul Maher. Washington, D.C.: Cataloging Distribution Service, Library of Congress, 1987.

The Numerical Values of Hebrew Letters

Letter	*Value*	*Letter*	*Value*
א	1	ף / פ	80
ב	2	ץ / צ	90
ג	3	ק	100
ד	4	ר	200
ה	5	ש	300
ו	6	ת	400
ז	7	תק	500
ח	8	תר	600
ט	9	תש	700
י	10	תת	800
ך / כ	20	תתק	900
ל	30	א׳	1,000
ם / מ	40	ב׳	2,000
ן / נ	50	ג׳	3,000
ס	60	ד׳	4,000
ע	70	ה׳	5,000

A shortcut formula for figuring out the civil calendar (C.E.) equivalent of a Hebrew year, according to the "shortened reckoning": add 1240 to the Hebrew year, e. g., תרס"ד *= 664 + 1240 = 1904 C.E. Note: the Hebrew year begins in the autumn of the previous civil calendar year, so 5664 actually began in the autumn of 1903.*

Source: The text and alphabets for the Yiddish and Hebrew pages were prepared by Zachary M. Baker, head librarian of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; the font was adapted with the assistance of Jeffrey Salant, director of Yiddish Language Programs at YIVO Institute of Jewish Research; and the page layout was done by William F. Hoffman, linguist and desktop publishing specialist.