

Hebrew Language: Vowels

The Hebrew alefbet contains no vowels.

Consider how you would pronounce the following “words” without using vowels:

ptr פטר

ppr פפר

pkd פכד

pk פכ

pkld פכלד

pprs פפרס

Or, try vocalizing just a consonant without the explosion of a vowel; try saying

p פ

Or try reading this very well known sentence: ptr ppr pkd pk pkld pprs.

You can't do it. So we must use vowels, English or Ivrit (Hebrew). Then we can read “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.” Only by adding vowels.

Hebrew was written and read for centuries similar to “ptr ppr pkd pk pkld pprs.” Adding vowel sounds to a string of letters was not too difficult as long as you were familiar with the words from an oral standpoint, which people were. Oral recitation was heavily used to pass on Scripture and history because written Sefer Torahs (Torah scrolls or books) were few and far between.

People who are fluent in the language do not need vowels to read Hebrew, and most things written in Hebrew in Israel are written without vowels.

Because they became concerned that the Diaspora would weaken, harm or destroy the language, sometime beginning in the 5th century A.D., a group of scribes in Tiberias called the Masorettes (mesora means “tradition”) began developing a system of vowel marks (called nequdot) to indicate how the text was orally read. Since these scribes did not want to alter the consonantal text, they placed these markings under, to the left, and above the Hebrew letters. (Beside these vowel marks, the scribes also added cantillation marks (in Hebrew, ta'amim) to indicate how the text was to be chanted or sung.)

The following simplified vowel table will take you a long way. Learn it first, concentrating on the first form of the vowel, e.g. **Ɀ** and not **Ɀ** at first. Note that vowel markings can appear under, over or beside a letter. I've used the **Ɀ** for illustration purposes, but the vowel sounds apply to any other letter, following it as the consonant + vowel, e.g. **תו**, tow or **תא**, tea or **תתא**, tea tea.

Hebrew Vowel	Sound	Name of Vowel	Type
א or אֲ	a as in father	patach, chateph patach	a
אָ or אֱ	a as in father	qamets, qamets hey	a
אֵ or אֶ	ey as in they	tsere, tsere yod	e
אִ or אֵי	e as in met	segol, chateph segol	e
אִי or אֵי	i as in machine	chireq, chireq yod	i
אֹ or אֱ	o as in alone	cholem vav, cholem	o
אוֹ or אֱ	oo as in moon	shureq, qibbutz	u
אִי	At beginning of syllable: hint of letter In middle of syllable: like a in alone At end of syllable: silent	sh'va	
אֱ	oh as in show	chateph qamets	o

Remember that the vowels א and אֵ are silent unless they are voweled, or “pointed.”

Note that the consonant א can also be used as a vowel, when so “pointed.”

Two “dialects” of Hebrew are spoken today, Ashkenazic and Sephardic. Israelis generally speak Sephardic. I learned and teach Sephardic, just so you’ll know. The difference? Ashkenazic Jews are the Jews of France, Germany, and Eastern Europe. Sephardic Jews are the Jews of Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East. Most American Jews today are Ashkenazic, descended from Jews who emigrated from Germany and Eastern Europe from the mid 1800s to the early 1900s. Ashkenazic Jews have a different pronunciation of a few Hebrew vowels and one Hebrew consonant (אֵי is pronounced as os, e.g. Shabbos instead of Shabbat), though most Ashkenazim are adopting Sephardic pronunciation now because it is the pronunciation used in Israel.

Hebrew diphthongs are clusters or combinations of vowels that act as a unit and producing a unique sound, generally different from any English sound. From the point of view of word division, a diphthong represents a distinct syllable in Hebrew. The most common diphthongs are:

Hebrew vowels	Sound		

אֵי	‘ai		
אֵי	‘ai		
אֵי	‘aiy		
אוי	‘oy		
אוי	‘uy		
אֵו	‘av		

Syllables. In order to properly pronounce a Hebrew word, you must know how the word is divided into syllables (i.e., units of distinct sound). A syllable always begins with a consonant and may end with either a consonant or a vowel. Since there is one vowel per syllable, the number of syllables in a word is the same as the number of vowels.

To syllabize a word, begin with the rightmost letter, of course, and proceed until you reach a vowel letter (which may or may not be followed by an unvoiced ל, ה, ת, ם, etc.). You now have a syllable, and it is pronounceable! Then again proceed until you reach a vowel letter, again possibly followed by an unvoiced letter. You now have the second syllable. Etc. You may reach the end of a word with an unvoiced, and therefore silent, letter, often ה, א, ם, ת.

Let's try a few.

כִּי ki, for or when

בָּרָא ba-ra, create

אֵת untranslatable, but pronounceable as et

וְאֵת v'et, and אֵת

תְּהוּ to-hu

וְבוֹהוּ va-vo-hu

תְּהוֹם t'hom

וְרוּחַ v'ru-chah

Sooner, rather than later, you will realize the need for the rule on closed vs. open syllables. Syllables can be "Open" or "Closed." Open syllables end with a vowel sound and closed syllables end with a letter without a vowel:

הַמַּיִם ha-ma-yim (open, open, closed syllables)

בְּרֵאשִׁית b're-shit (open, closed, closed)

Note that the distinction between open and closed syllables does not relate to whether the

syllable ends the word.

Normally, to sound out a syllable you first pronounce the letter sound and then add the vowel sound. For example ד is pronounced “da” and not “ad.” There is an exception to this rule, which you will need. When a word ends in ר, ש or ח (note the dot) and has a patach vowel mark (פ, ש or ח), you first pronounce the vowel sound and then add the letter sound. So רח is ru-ach, not rucha, and חשח is hamasheach, not hamashecha.

For practical practice, I recommend you try read any of the several blessings at <http://hebrew4christians.com/Blessings/blessings.html> aloud. By clicking the speaker symbol, you can hear many of the blessings recited in Hebrew, some slower and clearer than others.

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