



Let's Learn Hebrew

A first lesson for people who love the Book

You already speak Hebrew.

Amen. Hallelujah. Hosanna. Sabbath. Manna. Jubilee.

Six lessons: the words you already own, the letters as pictures,
the three-letter root, twenty words that open the Bible,
the place names that are sentences, and what to say out loud.

“The LORD bless you, and keep you.”

NUMBERS 6:24

Amitai (Tai) Elon

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What You Are Already Carrying

and two sounds English does not have

I want to give you something on this page that took me years to understand, and that nobody told me when I was young.

You already speak Hebrew. Not a little. Quite a lot.

Every time you say amen, you are speaking Hebrew. Hallelujah, Hebrew. Hosanna, Sabbath, Messiah, jubilee, cherub, manna, Satan, Eden, leviathan, behemoth, myrrh, cinnamon, rabbi, Abba, alphabet, camel. All Hebrew, carried into English inside the Bible, most of them unchanged for three thousand years.

So this is not a lesson where you start from nothing. This is a lesson where you find out what you have been carrying.

And I am not going to try to make you fluent. That takes years and a teacher and a lot of embarrassment in supermarkets, and I have had all three. What I am going to do is give you six things, in an order that makes them stick: the words you already own, the letters as pictures, the trick of the three-letter root, twenty words that open the Bible, the place names on the map that are actually sentences, and six things you can say out loud on your first morning in this country.

One honest word about pronunciation before we start. Every sound-alike below is a **memory hook, not a recording**. Hebrew has two sounds English does not: the **ch** in Bach, made in the back of the throat and never like the ch in church, and a **resh** rolled further back than an English r. Where you see kh or ch below, clear your throat gently and you will be closer than most tourists.

Words You Already Own

carried into English inside the Bible

אָמֵן	Amen ah-MEN	So be it, it is firm. From the root aman, to be steady, to be trustworthy. The same root gives emunah, faith. Every amen you have ever said was the word faith, spoken as a signature. DEUTERONOMY 27:15 · REVELATION 22:20
הַלְלוּיָהּ	Hallelujah hah-leh-loo-YAH	Two words, not one. Hallelu, praise, spoken as a command to other people, plus Yah, the short form of God's name. You are not describing your feelings. You are telling the room what to do. PSALM 150:1
הוֹשִׁיעַ נָא	Hosanna ho-SHEE-ah NAH	Save, please. It is a cry for rescue, not a cheer. The crowd on Palm Sunday was quoting a psalm and begging. PSALM 118:25 · MATTHEW 21:9
שַׁבָּת	Sabbath shah-BAHT	From shavat, to cease. Not a reward for finishing your work, a command to stop before it is finished. GENESIS 2:2 · EXODUS 20:8
מָשִׁיחַ	Messiah mah-SHEE-akh	Anointed one, from mashach, to smear with oil. Christ is the same word in Greek. Kings and priests were made by having oil poured on their heads. 1 SAMUEL 16:13 · JOHN 1:41
יּוֹבֵל	Jubilee yo-VEL	A ram's horn, and then the year the horn announced, when debts were cancelled and land went home to its family. LEVITICUS 25:10
מֶן הוּא	Manna MAHN hoo	It is a question, not a name. The people looked at the bread on the ground and said man hu, what is it? So the food of forty years is called What Is It. EXODUS 16:15

Words You Already Own (continued)

carried into English inside the Bible

שָׂטָן	Satan sah-TAHN	The adversary, the one who stands in the road against you. It is a job description before it is a name. JOB 1:6 · ZECHARIAH 3:1
כְּרוּב	Cherub keh-ROOV	Not a chubby baby. A guardian creature with a sword of fire at the gate of Eden, and a face carved over the ark. GENESIS 3:24 · EXODUS 25:20
עֵדֶן	Eden EH-den	Delight, pleasure. The garden is named for what it felt like. GENESIS 2:8
רַבִּי	Rabbi rah-BEE	My great one, my teacher, from rav, great or many. When they called Him Rabbi they were saying my teacher. JOHN 1:38
אָבָא	Abba AH-bah	Papa, and here is the beautiful detail: this one is Aramaic, not Hebrew, the everyday street language Yeshua spoke at home. He prayed in the word a child uses. MARK 14:36 · ROMANS 8:15
אֱלֹהֵי־בַיִת	Alphabet AH-lef BAYT	Alef and bet, the first two letters, borrowed by the Greeks as alpha and beta and handed to us as alphabet. The word for the whole system is just its opening two notes. —
גָּמֶל	Camel gah-MAHL	Gamal. The animal kept its Hebrew name all the way into English, and the letter gimel is named after it. GENESIS 24:64

The Alef-Bet

read right to left · each letter began as a drawing

	Alef silent	<i>an ox head</i>	Turn it on its side and the two horns appear. Strength, first, leader. אלהים ELOHIM, GOD
	Bet b / v	<i>a house</i>	A floor plan with one opening. The Bible's very first letter, because the first thing God does is build a home. בראשית BERESHIT, IN THE BEGINNING
	Gimel g	<i>a camel</i>	The tall neck and the walking foot. Gamal, camel. גן GAN, GARDEN
	Dalet d	<i>a door</i>	A door on its hinge. Delet is still the word for door today. דָּוִד DAVID
	Hey h	<i>a window, and a breath</i>	Say it and you feel breath leave you. It appears twice in God's own name. The letter of breathing. הללויה HALLELUJAH
	Vav v / oo	<i>a tent peg</i>	A hook that joins two things. On its own it means and, so vav is the letter that holds the Bible's sentences together. וְ AND
	Zayin z	<i>a weapon</i>	A sword with its handle on top. זָכוֹר ZACHOR, REMEMBER
	Chet kh, in the throat	<i>a fence, a wall</i>	Two posts and a bar. It fences a space in. חַיִּים CHAIM, LIFE
	Tet t	<i>a basket, a coiled snake</i>	Something curled inward, holding. טוֹב TOV, GOOD
	Yod y	<i>a hand, an arm</i>	The smallest letter in the alphabet, and the one Yeshua meant by not one jot shall pass away. Jot is yod. יְרוּשָׁלַיִם JERUSALEM
	Kaf k / kh	<i>an open palm</i>	A cupped hand. Kaf is still the word for palm. כֹּהֵן KOHEN, PRIEST

The Alef-Bet, continued

read right to left · each letter began as a drawing

ל	Lamed l	<i>a shepherd's staff</i>	The tallest letter, reaching above the line. Lamad means to learn and to teach: the staff that guides. לב LEV, HEART
מ	Mem m	<i>water</i>	Waves. Mayim is water, and the letter is the picture of it. מלך MELECH, KING
נ	Nun n	<i>a fish, a seed</i>	Life that continues. נביא NAVI, PROPHET
ס	Samekh s	<i>a prop, a support</i>	A closed circle that holds something up. ספר SEFER, BOOK
ע	Ayin silent, from the throat	<i>an eye</i>	Ayin means both eye and spring of water, which is why so many places here are called Ein something. עין AYIN, EYE
פ	Pe p / f	<i>a mouth</i>	Pe is the word for mouth. The letter has an open mouth with a tooth inside. פסח PESACH, PASSOVER
צ	Tsadi ts	<i>a fishhook</i>	Bent, caught. Tzadik, a righteous person, comes from this letter's family. ציון TZION, ZION
ק	Qof k, deeper	<i>the back of a head, a needle's eye</i>	Something with a long tail behind it. קדוש KADOSH, HOLY
ר	Resh r, rolled back	<i>a head</i>	Rosh is head, and the letter is a head and neck in profile. Rosh Hashanah is the head of the year. רוח RUACH, SPIRIT
ש	Shin sh	<i>teeth</i>	Three teeth. It is the letter for Shaddai, and it is the shape a priest's hands make when he gives the blessing. שלום SHALOM, PEACE
ת	Tav t	<i>a mark, a sign</i>	The last letter, and in the oldest script it was drawn as a cross. In Ezekiel God tells an angel to put a tav on the foreheads of those who grieve. תורה TORAH, INSTRUCTION

The Root

learn one root and you walk into a family

SH-L-M ש-ל-ם

the family of wholeness

שָׁלוֹם	shalom	peace, and much more than peace
שָׁלֵם	shalem	whole, complete, all its pieces present
שִׁלֵּם	shillem	he paid in full, he settled the debt
שְׁלֹמֹה	Shlomo	Solomon, his peace
יְרוּשָׁלַיִם	Yerushalayim	Jerusalem, with shalem inside her name

Look at what this family means together. Peace in Hebrew is not the absence of trouble, it is **everything present and paid for**. So when a Hebrew speaker wishes you shalom, he is not wishing you quiet. He is wishing you a life with nothing missing and nothing owed. And when Yeshua said at Golgotha that it is finished, the Greek word on His lips was a market word for **paid in full**. He was speaking shalom in another language.

B-R-K בִּרְךְ

the family of blessing

בָּרוּךְ	baruch	blessed
בְּרָכָה	bracha	a blessing
בִּרְךְ	berech	a knee
בְּרִיכָה	breicha	a pool, a place of kneeling water

Knee and blessing are the same three letters. In this language you cannot separate blessing from **kneeling**. The word carries a posture. And the same Semitic root travelled into Arabic as mubarak and into names you know today, which is why a Hebrew speaker hears the word blessed in places an English speaker never would.

The Root, continued

learn one root and you walk into a family

K-T-V כִּתִּיב

the family of writing

כָּתַב	katav	he wrote
כָּתוּב	katuv	it is written
מִכְתָּב	michtav	a letter you send
כְּתוּבָה	ketubah	a marriage contract
כְּתָב	ktav	script, handwriting

Every time the New Testament says **as it is written**, the Hebrew behind it is katuv, this family. And notice the marriage contract sitting in the same family as scripture. In Hebrew, a written thing is a **committed** thing. Words on a page are a promise with a signature, not information.

Y-SH-A יִשְׁע

the family of salvation

יֵשׁוּעַ	Yeshua	Jesus, salvation
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ	Yehoshua	Joshua, the LORD saves
יֵשַׁעְיָהוּ	Yeshayahu	Isaiah, the LORD saves
הוֹשִׁיעַ נָא	hoshia na	save, please, hosanna
יִשְׁוּעָה	yeshuah	salvation, rescue

This is the family I most want you to remember, because one famous verse only works inside it. The angel says, you shall call his name **Yeshua**, for he will **yoshia** his people from their sins. In English that sentence is a nice statement. In Hebrew it is the same word twice, a name and its own reason. And the crowd shouting hosanna on Palm Sunday was shouting His name back at Him without knowing it.

The Loaded Words

where the English translation has to choose, and always loses something

אור

or
sounds like the English word ore

light

God's first recorded command is two words: yehi or, let there be light. You can say the whole sentence after one minute of Hebrew.

GENESIS 1:3

רוח

ruach
clear your throat: ROO-akh

spirit, wind, breath

One word for all three, which is why Genesis 1:2 can be the Spirit of God or a wind from God, and both are the same Hebrew. Say it out loud and you will notice the word itself is a breath.

GENESIS 1:2 · JOHN 3:8

מים

mayim
MY-eem, like my in a hurry

water

Always plural in Hebrew, as though water were a crowd. The letter mem is a picture of it.

GENESIS 1:6

לב

lev
like the first part of level

heart

In Hebrew the heart is not the feelings, it is the whole inner person, mind and will together. When Scripture says love God with all your lev, it means with your thinking too.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5

שם

shem
like the English shem in shemale? no: like shame without the a-sound

name, reputation

Jews often say HaShem, The Name, rather than pronounce God's name. Yad Vashem means a hand and a name, a memorial and a name.

ISAIAH 56:5

דבר

davar
dah-VAR

word, and also thing

One word for both, because in this language a word from God is not a sound, it is an event. Ten Commandments in Hebrew are the Ten Devarim, the Ten Words.

EXODUS 20:1

חסד

chesed
KHEH-sed

loyal love, covenant kindness

The Bible's biggest small word. Love that acts first and keeps its promise afterwards. Usually translated mercy or steadfast love, and never quite captured.

PSALM 136 (EVERY VERSE)

The Loaded Words, continued

where the English translation has to choose, and always loses something

אֱמֶת	emet eh-MET	truth, faithfulness Made of the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet, which the old teachers loved: truth runs from beginning to end. PSALM 117:2
קָדוֹשׁ	kadosh kah-DOSH	holy, set apart The angels in Isaiah say it three times. Not holy meaning nice. Holy meaning belonging to another category entirely. ISAIAH 6:3
אֶחָד	echad eh-KHAHD	one The last word of the Shema, and the word Yeshua quoted when asked for the greatest commandment. DEUTERONOMY 6:4
שְׁמָע	shema sh'MAH	hear, listen, obey One word for hearing and obeying, because in Hebrew you have not heard until you have done something about it. DEUTERONOMY 6:4
הִנְנִי	hineni hee-NEH-nee	here I am One word, and it is the answer Abraham, Moses, Samuel and Isaiah all gave. Not I am here in a room. Here I am, send me. ISAIAH 6:8
תְּשׁוּבָה	teshuva teh-shoo-VAH	return, repentance Not sorrow. Turning around and walking back. The word is a direction, not a feeling. HOSEA 14:1
צְדָקָה	tzedakah tz'dah-KAH	charity, and also righteousness The same word for both. In Hebrew, giving to someone in need is not generosity added to righteousness. It is righteousness. DEUTERONOMY 15:7-8

The Loaded Words, continued

where the English translation has to choose, and always loses something

בְּרִית	brit breet	covenant You do not sign a covenant in Hebrew, you cut it, because covenants cost blood. This cup is the new brit in my blood. GENESIS 15:18 · LUKE 22:20
תּוֹרָה	Torah toh-RAH	instruction, teaching Many teachers connect it to yarah, to shoot an arrow, so Torah is aiming. Not a rule book, a direction of travel. PSALM 19:7
עַם	am like the English am	a people Am echad means one people. Am Yisrael chai, the people of Israel lives, is what you will hear sung here. EXODUS 6:7
אֶרֶץ	eretz EH-retz	land, earth, country Ha'aretz, The Land. When Israelis say it with no other word attached, they mean this one. GENESIS 1:1
מִדְבָּר	midbar meed-BAHR	wilderness, desert Some hear the word davar, word, hiding inside it, and preach that the wilderness is where God speaks. That is a sermon, not etymology, but it is a good sermon and the desert agrees with it. EXODUS 3:1
אָדָם	adam ah-DAHM	a human being From adamah, ground, soil. Human out of humus, exactly as in Latin. The first man's name is a reminder of where he came from, said every time you say it. GENESIS 2:7

Reading the Map

the holy places are descriptions, not labels

בֵּית לֶחֶם	Beit Lechem	Bethlehem	house of bread <i>and the Bread of Life was laid there in a feeding trough</i>
בֵּית אֵל	Beit El	Bethel	house of God <i>named by Jacob before there was a house on it, only a stone and a dream</i>
כְּפַר נַחֲוֹם	Kfar Nachum	Capernaum	village of comfort <i>the town's own name was a promise before He healed anyone in it</i>
גַּת שֶׁמֶן	Gat Shemen	Gethsemane	the oil press <i>the garden named for crushing, where the Anointed was pressed</i>
גִּלְגֹּלֶת	Gulgolet	Golgotha	a skull <i>John translated the Hebrew for his readers, and the name stuck</i>
מִגְדָּל	Migdal	Magdala	a tower <i>Mary of Magdala is Mary the Tower</i>
בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע	Be'er Sheva	Beersheba	well of the oath, and of seven <i>seven lambs and a promise, at the southern edge of the land</i>
עֵין גֵּדִי	Ein Gedi	Ein Gedi	spring of the wild goat <i>where David held the knife and put it down</i>
הַר מְגִדּוֹ	Har Megiddo	Armageddon	the mountain of Megiddo <i>say it fast and you hear the word the whole world knows</i>
יַרְדֵּן	Yarden	Jordan	the descender <i>everyone who enters it goes down</i>
נֶצֶר	Netzer	Nazareth	a branch, a shoot <i>Isaiah's green shoot out of a cut-down stump, hiding in a village name</i>
כִּנּוֹר	Kinnor	Kinneret, Sea of Galilee	a harp <i>the lake is named for its shape</i>
מִצְדָּה	Metzuda	Masada	a fortress <i>a word straight out of David's psalms</i>
בֵּית עֲנִיָּה	Beit Anya	Bethany	house of the afflicted <i>and He made His home there</i>
בֵּית חֶסֶד	Beit Chesda	Bethesda	house of mercy <i>named for chesed centuries before mercy walked in on two feet</i>
שִׁלּוֹחַ	Shiloach	Siloam	sent <i>a sent man washed in a pool called Sent, healed by the One who was Sent</i>
יְרוּשָׁלַיִם	Yerushalayim	Jerusalem	city of wholeness, in the dual form <i>two of her; the one below and the one above, and the name ends in the form Hebrew keeps for pairs</i>

Eight Things for Your First Morning

use them badly and often

שלום	Shalom shah-LOME	Hello, goodbye, and peace. One word for arriving, leaving and being whole. Use it for everything.
תודה רבה	Toda raba toh-DAH rah-BAH	Thank you very much. Toda alone is fine. Say it to every driver, every waiter, every soldier.
בבקשה	Bevakasha beh-vah-kah-SHAH	Please, and also you're welcome, and also here you are. A very useful word.
בקר טוב	Boker tov BOH-ker TOV	Good morning. Evening is erev tov, night is layla tov.
מה נשמע	Ma nishma mah neesh-MAH	How's it going? Literally what is heard. The normal street greeting.
בסדר	Beseder beh-SEH-der	Okay, fine, all right. Literally in order. You will hear it forty times a day.
כן / לא	Ken / Lo ken / lo	Yes and no. Ken like the name Ken, lo like the English low.
עם ישראל חי	Am Yisrael chai ahm yis-rah-EL KHAI	The people of Israel lives. Say it here and watch what happens to the face of the person you say it to.

The Priestly Blessing

Numbers 6:24-26 · the oldest blessing in the world

Priests have spoken these three lines over this people for three and a half thousand years, and the oldest silver amulets ever found carrying Bible text carry these very words. One line a day is enough.

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶכָּ

Yevarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha

The LORD bless you and keep you

יְאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֹךְ

Ya'er Adonai panav eleicha vichuneka

The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּשֵּׁם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם

Yisa Adonai panav eleicha v'yasem lecha shalom

The LORD lift up His face toward you and give you peace

Notice how it ends. Not with success, not with comfort. With shalom, the word for a thing that has all its pieces.

About the Name

four letters, and a silence that is not superstition

One more thing, and I want to say it carefully, because it is the most sensitive word in the language.

God's own name is written with four letters: יהוה. Yod, hey, vav, hey. You will see it in every Hebrew Bible thousands of times. Nobody living knows for certain how it was pronounced, because for more than two thousand years Jews have honoured it by not saying it. When a reader reaches those four letters, he says **Adonai**, my Lord, instead. In conversation people often say simply **HaShem**, The Name.

You will hear Christians say it aloud in two or three different ways, and I am not going to police anybody's prayers. But if you are standing in this land, among this people, it is worth knowing that the silence is not superstition. It is the way a people who were given a name decided to handle it: carefully, and with their shoes off.

And notice what the letters are made of. Yod, hey, vav, hey are among the softest sounds in Hebrew, mostly breath. The most powerful name in the universe is built almost entirely out of breathing. Which means that every living thing, in every language, is saying something close to it with every breath it takes, from the first one to the last.

“Read the land, and the land will start reading you.”

*Walk the whole land one page a day, sixty five holy sites:
amitai-elon-golan.netlify.app/today*

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