

# Reading Classical Hebrew

## Pronunciation, Vocabulary, and Grammar

The current offering of this course has been underway since 26 Apr 23. If at least two students continue to the end and progress at the rate they have since then, they will reach the last page of the textbook on 05 Sep 25.

### Description

This course is about reading and understanding the Hebrew of the Tanakh and the siddur. It consists of participating in a Zoom class for 90 minutes each week and studying outside of class for at least another 30 minutes each week. Many people who begin the course eventually find that they cannot continue making this significant commitment of time and effort, and leave after their curiosity has been satisfied or they have gotten what they want out of attending; that is OK and I expect that it will happen. Sometimes new people join; that is also expected, and it is OK too if they can catch up.

We will study the following topics in order, devoting 1–4 weeks to each topic depending on its complexity, and we will continue until we have learned all of them or for as long as at least two students remain in the course.

- the Hebrew consonants and vowels
- the spelling and pronunciation of words
- nouns and verbs
- the perfect tense
- the direct object
- word pairs
- the imperfect tense
- using a Hebrew dictionary
- noun sentences
- the adjective
- possessive endings
- prepositions with pronoun endings
- the reversing vav
- the participle
- commands and numbers
- the infinitive
- hollow verbs
- navigating the siddur
- the pi'ayl verb pattern
- the hifeel verb pattern
- using the Chumash
- verbs with object suffixes
- the nif'al verb pattern
- the hitpa'ayl verb pattern

## Audience

This course is for Jews who want to follow the synagogue service and learn Torah more easily, for prospective converts to Judaism, and for others who want to read the Hebrew Bible in Hebrew; see the *Should you take this course?* tab on my website. It is designed for complete beginners, but it will also be of value to people who previously learned how to pronounce Hebrew words without knowing what they mean.

Because the course is participatory and delivered on Zoom, class size is limited. Preference will be given to applicants who are members or friends of the sponsoring synagogue, but usually there is room for some who are not.

## Textbooks

To learn the first two topics we will study this book, which can be downloaded for free from my website.

*Voicing Hebrew* by Michael Kupferschmid

To learn the remaining topics we will study this book, which every student or study-pair is expected to have by the time we begin reading it (starting with Chapter 4, at class 5 or class 6).

*The First Hebrew Primer*, Third Edition

by Ethelyn Simon, Irene Resnikoff, and Linda Motzkin

EKS Publishing Company, [www.ekspublishing.com](http://www.ekspublishing.com), 510 558 9200

Of the textbooks on the market that cover the topics of our curriculum, the *Primer* is by far the best for beginning students. The course includes a few topics that the *Primer* does not mention and slightly revises its exposition of others, as itemized on the next page; you can download the comprehensive Course Index from my website to learn more.

If you enroll and buy the book I will email you a file named `pages.pdf` containing images of these new and modified pages, along with many others that have cosmetic improvements (such as the addition of personal pronouns to verb conjugation charts and translations to the Bible quotes). These images are for your personal use and are not to be shared with anyone who isn't enrolled in the course. If you are in the course I suggest that you print `pages.pdf` on paper so that you can use the images along with your bound copy of the *Primer*.

page	purpose of modification or insertion
28–28a	explain how prepending the definite article affects the word
35	explain the pointing of the “and” vav
44	elaborate on word-form and inseparable prepositions
51a	clarify grammatical persons and their subject pronouns
62a	compare verbs having roots ending in hay
75a	elaborate on word-pair forms
85–85b	discuss the use of flashcards
90a	list the books of the Hebrew Bible
97a	simplify conjugation of regular imperfect tense verbs
98	elaborate on the Tetragrammaton
114a–114e	explain how to use a Hebrew dictionary
116	clarify why Biblical Hebrew has noun sentences
127	add vocabulary words
131	explain words for “those”
139–140	clarify the use of possessive endings
151a	clarify the object pronouns
153	add a note about the doubling dagesh
166	elaborate on the reversing vav
180a	give a brief overview of participles
182a	show the full conjugation of “to be”
186	clarify the conjugation of “to give”
186a	summarize signal letters and endings
197a	explain the gender of numbers
227–228	improve the hollow verb tables
253a–253h	explain how to use a siddur
268	show actual verbs rather than only roots
281	indicate musical notes and a spelling variation
283a–283g	explain how to use a Chumash
285	show actual verbs rather than only roots
302	show actual verbs rather than only roots
304	clarify the clipped forms table
306	clarify the verb tables
316	show actual verbs rather than only roots
331	distinguish forms of “he fought”
346	show actual verbs rather than only roots
415	letter values, half-vowels, and diacritical marks

If you are *not* in the course I cannot email you `pages.pdf`, but you can download the modifications and insertions from the *supplementary material* tab on my website, print those that you find helpful, and insert or cut-and-paste them into your own bound copy of the textbook.

Tabs on my website make it possible for you to purchase professionally-made flashcards for the entire *Primer*, or to print my homemade ones for each textbook chapter before we begin studying it.

## Classes

We will meet on Zoom at a time that accommodates the largest number of prospective students. I will lead each class and answer questions; students will take turns reading from the text and working its numerous exercises. Before each class I will email you a reminder with the Zoom link and a description of what we will be discussing.

## Instructor

I retired from teaching college math in 2015. In August of 2005 I began teaching Hebrew, and in December of 2020 I began using Zoom to do it. I do not consider myself an expert, but I am happy to share what I know. I am also happy to learn from students who know more than I do, if that can happen in a way that does not discourage or confuse the students who know even less. There has never been a charge for taking this course; all I hope to receive in exchange for teaching it is your sincere attempt to learn.

I will communicate with the students in the course only in class and via email, so I need to know your email address and you will need to check it for messages from me. You can find my email address for course-related matters at the *contact* tab of the website from which you downloaded this document.

## Computing

Because the classes will be held on Zoom, you can join them only if you know how to use that application on your computer. If you need help using your computer, installing Zoom on it, or using Zoom, please have someone tell me via email and I will try to help.

Various cellphone apps and other on-line resources purport to make it easy for you to learn Hebrew, and if any of those work for you, congratulations! But some students have tried these in the past and found them less helpful than time spent with a human teacher in the company of other learners.

If your computer runs the Linux operating system and you know how to use the L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X scientific typesetting language, you might want to download from my website the free software that I have developed for my own use in studying and teaching Hebrew.

## Hebrew

Hebrew has regularities that give rise to rules of grammar. The rules are very useful so *Voicing Hebrew* and the *Primer* emphasize them, and this leads some students wrongly to assume that they explain everything. The rules you will learn are only *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*, and each has exceptions. Children learn language painlessly by imitating what they hear and read, and you will learn a lot that way too. Soon it will be possible for you to start reading Hebrew, from the Tall Tales in the text or, with the occasional help of its translation, from the Chumash. When you need a break from learning grammar, learn by reading instead.

## Encouragement

If you get stage fright at the mere thought of participating even over Zoom, let me reassure you that after one or two meetings the handfull of students who are in the course will all have become friends who look forward to seeing each other. If you are embarrassed to reveal to others or admit to yourself that you do not already know Hebrew, let me remind you that the other students do not already know Hebrew either! Every synagogue has members who do not know Hebrew. That is why I am teaching this course.

In the beginning you might be tempted to say “What was I thinking? This is just too hard.” All beginnings *are* hard, but it is always a mistake to give up too soon. Hebrew is the key not just to the Bible but to the whole Jewish religion and culture. Being able to decode it is as magical and empowering an experience as you had when you first learned how to read English, so it is worth the effort. You can do this, and I will help.

## What Happens Next

1. Please download *Voicing Hebrew* and try reading its Chapter 2 to convince yourself that you can (we will all be reading it together in the first class). You might want to get the *Primer* before we need it, so that you can see what that will be like to use when we start reading it beginning with its Chapter 4.

2. If we don't know each other yet please email me a brief introduction of yourself, including your current occupation, educational background, and prior exposure to Hebrew. What motivates you to take this course, and what do you hope to get out of it? Do you have any questions about the course?
3. I will send you a form on which you can indicate all of the time intervals during a typical week when you *could not* attend class. Based on all of the responses I will choose a time that allows the largest number of prospective students to participate.
4. When the class roster is definite and you tell me that you have the *Primer* I will send you the file `pages.pdf` described above.
5. Then our weekly class meetings will begin. See you on Zoom!