

AN ILLUSTRATED BEGINNER'S COMPANION

# How to Pray in Hebrew

Read the words.

Understand the tradition.

Begin with attention.



J. ALDUNATE

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## HOW TO PRAY IN HEBREW

# A note on this edition

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This educational book distinguishes Jewish prayer practice from Christian reception and modern adaptations. It is not a complete siddur, a legal ruling, or a substitute for a community's ritual guidance. Pronunciation aids follow the convention explained in the reading chapters. They do not represent every living Jewish pronunciation.

The English prayer and verse renderings in the teaching chapters were prepared for this edition; no modern commercial Bible or siddur translation is reproduced. Sources and further reading appear in the bibliography. Original vector art is conceptual and is labeled accordingly.

The full five-book Hebrew appendix is a study transcription, with source vowels and cantillation and explicit written/reading variants. It is not a manuscript facsimile or a Torah scroll suitable for ritual use. Its verification limits are explained before the appendix.

Prepared with AI-assisted research, writing, typesetting, and automated source checks. No independent rabbinic, cantorial, or academic review is claimed. Source files and a validation report accompany this edition so that corrections can be audited.

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**BEGIN HERE**

# A language you can enter

Hebrew prayer begins with attention: to a sound, to a word, to the people who have carried it, and to the One being addressed.

You do not need to become fluent before you begin learning. You do need to know what kind of text you are holding. A biblical verse, a rabbinic blessing, a medieval poem, and a modern devotional adaptation may all appear on the same page of a prayer book. Their ages, purposes, and authority are different. This book teaches you to notice those differences while developing a small, usable reading vocabulary.

The main course is an introduction to Jewish Hebrew prayer for English-speaking beginners. A separate chapter considers Christian engagement with Hebrew. It does not present Christianity as the hidden meaning of Jewish worship, nor modern Hebrew versions of Christian prayers as ancient originals. Readers of either faith, and readers studying religion without practicing it, can use the language lessons.

## What this book provides

You will learn the consonants and common vowel signs, work through a blessing word by word, study the opening paragraph of the Shema, and meet the architecture of the Amidah. Short prayers become laboratories for reading, translation, and reflection. Historical case studies distinguish what an ancient source says from what a later community does with it. Exercises and a full answer key make the course usable without a classroom.

This is a teaching book, not a complete siddur or a ruling on religious obligations. Its prayer selections are deliberately identified as complete short texts or excerpts. For the full service, seasonal additions, and local practice, use your community's prayer book and guidance. A study session assembled from these lessons does not automatically fulfill the requirements of a Jewish prayer service.

## A workable rhythm

Spend fifteen minutes on a short passage. Read its English meaning first. Trace the Hebrew from the right edge, pronounce a few words slowly, and then return to the meaning. Separate decoding practice from devotional recitation when that distinction matters to your tradition.

Repetition is useful when you can hear what changed; repeating a whole page without understanding it is a poor substitute for learning one phrase well.

**Your first practice:** locate שלום, *shalóm*, “peace.” Find the rightmost letter, shin. Move left through lamed, vav, and final mem. The dot above the vav supplies the vowel *o*. Say the word, then name one concrete act that might make peace less abstract today.

Reading anchors: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mishnah Berakhot 2:1; 5:1. Bibliography keys [T], [M].

## 01 · ORIENTATION

# Prayer has a home

A prayer is more than a sentence translated into Hebrew. It belongs to a calendar, a community, and a history of interpretation.

## Four words that organize the journey

| Hebrew    | Reading | Working meaning                                |
|-----------|---------|------------------------------------------------|
| תְּפִלָּה | tefilá  | Prayer; also, in rabbinic contexts, the Amidah |
| בְּרָכָה  | berakhá | Blessing                                       |
| סִדּוּר   | siddúr  | The ordered collection used for regular prayer |
| כַּוָּנָה | kavaná  | Directed intention or attention                |

The siddur is not the Torah. The Torah, in its narrower sense, is the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Tanakh is the wider Jewish scriptural collection: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Psalms belongs to the Writings. A siddur incorporates biblical passages alongside later prayers. A maḥzor is a festival prayer book, often especially associated with the High Holy Days.

**Exercise 2.** In Hannah's story, identify one feature of the biblical narrative and one rule inferred by a later rabbinic text. Why would it be inaccurate to call the Mishnah's discussion a complete transcript of first-century worship?

Sources: 1 Samuel 1:9-18; Daniel 6:11 in Jewish verse numbering (6:10 in many English Bibles); Mishnah Berakhot 1:1; Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 26b and 31a; [T], [M1], [B26], [B31], [H].

### 03 · READING WORKSHOP

## Begin at the right edge

Hebrew is read from right to left. Vowels and other marks cluster around consonants; they are not a second line to read separately.

### The consonants

The table gives conventional letter names and the practical sounds used in this book. It follows a broadly Israeli/Sephardi-style teaching pronunciation, not a reconstruction of biblical speech. Living traditions differ. The five final forms occur at the end of a word; they are not extra letters. Hebrew has twenty-two letters, with shin and sin distinguished by the dot.

| Letter | Name      | Sound / note            | Letter | Name   | Sound / note           |
|--------|-----------|-------------------------|--------|--------|------------------------|
| א      | alef      | Often a vowel carrier   | ל      | lamed  | l                      |
| ב בּ   | bet / vet | b / v                   | מ מּ   | mem    | m; ׀ is final          |
| ג      | gimel     | g as in “go”            | נ נּ   | nun    | n; ׀ is final          |
| ד      | dalet     | d                       | ס      | samekh | s                      |
| ה      | he        | h; often silent finally | ע      | ayin   | See pronunciation note |

| Letter   | Name       | Sound / note           | Letter  | Name       | Sound / note            |
|----------|------------|------------------------|---------|------------|-------------------------|
| ו        | vav        | v; also vowel carrier  | פ פּ פֿ | pe / fe    | p / f; ף is final       |
| ז        | zayin      | z                      | צ צֵ צִ | tsadi      | ts; ץ is final          |
| ח        | het        | h, often like kh today | ק       | qof        | k in this guide         |
| ט        | tet        | t                      | ר       | resh       | r; pronunciation varies |
| י        | yod        | y; also vowel carrier  | ש שׁ שׂ | shin / sin | sh / s                  |
| כ כּ כִּ | kaf / khaf | k / kh; ך is final     | ת       | tav        | t in this guide         |

*Kh* is the friction sound in Scottish “loch,” not English *ch* in “church.” We write *h* for het to preserve the distinction in spelling, though many contemporary speakers pronounce it like *kh*. Some communities preserve a deeper pharyngeal het and a pronounced ayin. Our simplified reading generally does not mark silent alef or ayin; an apostrophe may clarify a vowel boundary. This is a reading aid, not a reversible scholarly transliteration.

## The small dot that changes the task

A dagesh inside bet, kaf, or pe distinguishes b/k/p from v/kh/f in this pronunciation. A dot in another letter can reflect a different grammatical function, often historical consonant doubling. Do not infer that every dotted letter becomes “hard.” The dot at the upper right of shin gives *sh*; the dot at the upper left gives *s*. Those are shin/sin dots, not dagesh.

Learn visually similar letters in pairs: dalet and resh; he and het; bet and kaf; vav and zayin. Find the corner, gap, or stroke that distinguishes them. Guessing from a familiar English prayer name may get you through one line while teaching you nothing about the next.

**Exercise 3.** Read the consonants aloud, without inventing vowels: / ב · כ / פ · ש / ט · ק / צ · ח. Match ט · ק · ח with their ordinary forms. Then locate the final letter in מְלִיץ, שָׁלוֹם, and אֶמֶן.

Reference: [G], especially its treatment of the consonants, vowel signs, shewa, and dagesh. The sound column intentionally simplifies historical distinctions.

## 04 · READING WORKSHOP

# Give the letters a voice

The dots and strokes called *niqqud* guide pronunciation. Learn them with a consonant so that your eyes practice the unit you will actually read.

| Example  | Sign                    | Reading in this guide             |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| בֿ       | Pataḥ                   | ba, a as in “father”              |
| בֿֿ      | Qamats                  | Usually ba; qamats qatan is o     |
| בֿֿֿ     | Segol / tsere           | be; both use e here               |
| בֿֿֿֿ    | Ḥiriq, with/without yod | bi, i as in “machine”             |
| בֿֿֿֿֿ   | Ḥolam                   | bo, a pure o                      |
| בֿֿֿֿֿֿ  | Qibbuts / shuruq        | bu, u as in “rule”                |
| בֿֿֿֿֿֿֿ | Shewa                   | A short e or no vowel, by context |

| Example                                                                           | Sign           | Reading in this guide |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
|  | Reduced vowels | Short a / e / o       |

## What a beginner must not oversimplify

The same qamats shape can represent different historical vowels. In this guide, קָל is *kol*, “all,” not *kal*. Some editions use a distinct qamats-qatan glyph; many do not. Learn the reading of each common word and use a reliable dictionary or teacher when uncertain.

Shewa is not always “uh.” In שְׁמַע, our teaching reading is *shemá*; in מֶלֶךְ, the final shewa adds no vowel: *mélekh*. The rules have grammatical and traditional dimensions. A blanket instruction to pronounce every shewa, or to silence every shewa, will produce errors.

In רוּחַ, *rúah*, “wind/spirit,” the pataḥ under the final het is pronounced before the consonant. This is the furtive pataḥ. It is one reason reading letter by letter without learning the sound pattern can mislead. In שָׁמַיִם, *shamáyim*, “heavens,” hear the *ay* sequence; do not turn every yod into an independent extra syllable.

## Stress and the printed page

Acute accents in our transliteration mark the stressed vowel: *barúkh*, *atá*, *mélekh*. They are teaching marks in Latin letters, not Hebrew cantillation signs. Unaccented one-syllable words need no stress mark. Many Hebrew words stress the last syllable, but enough common words do not that “always stress the end” is bad advice.

The Torah appendix preserves cantillation. Those signs organize the received chanting and phrasing of the biblical text; they are not simply a pronunciation alphabet. Musical realizations differ among communities. This book does not teach trope melodies. For decoding, concentrate on consonants and vowels; for chanting, learn the particular tradition from a qualified reader.



Figure 2. One word, several jobs: consonants carry the sequence; niqqud guides the vowels; final mem closes the word.

**Exercise 4.** Read slowly: בְּ בְּ בְּ בְּ. Then read כָּל · רוּחַ · מְלֶךְ · אֱמֵן · שְׁלוֹם. Which word has a furtive pataḥ? Which has qamats read as o? Explain why the niqqud cannot be read as a separate left-to-right string.

Reference: [G]. Pronunciation follows the declared teaching convention; it does not erase Ashkenazi, Yemenite, or other established readings.

## 05 · CORE LANGUAGE

# Understand a blessing

A recurring opening makes the siddur less intimidating. Learn it as a sentence with relationships, not as a password.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם

*Barúkh atá Adonái, Elohéinu mélekh ha-olám...*

Blessed are You, LORD our God, sovereign of the world...

A common opening formula, incomplete until its appropriate ending.

The Hebrew display uses יְיָ, a conventional liturgical substitute, rather than spelling out the four-letter divine name. In Jewish prayer that name is read *Adonái*; in ordinary discussion many speakers say *HaShém*, “the Name.” In the Torah appendix, the source’s actual

consonants and pointing are retained. Their written form is not an invitation to attempt a reconstructed pronunciation.

| Word                  | What to notice                                                            |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| בָּרוּךְ · barúkh     | “Blessed.” A description of the One addressed, not an imperative “bless!” |
| אַתָּה · atá          | “You,” grammatically masculine singular.                                  |
| אֱלֹהֵינוּ · Elohéinu | “Our God.” The ending carries the relationship “our.”                     |
| מֶלֶךְ · mélekh       | Literally “king”; “sovereign” is the translation choice used here.        |
| הָעוֹלָם · ha-olám    | “The world” in this formula; the word has a wider range across periods.   |

## Where is “are”?

Hebrew can make a present-tense nominal sentence without an expressed equivalent of English “are.” “Blessed You” is not broken grammar. English supplies the linking verb. Translation routinely makes such adjustments. A word-for-word crib helps you find the pieces; a good English sentence helps you understand their relationship.

English “bless” can suggest giving something to someone who lacks it. Addressing God as blessed does not require imagining God as deficient. In liturgical use, the formula acknowledges and praises God as the source of the gift or commandment being named. Different Jewish thinkers explain the theology differently; the grammatical observation should not be inflated into one exclusive philosophy of blessing.

## Three endings, three acts of attention

Compare the full food blessings in the next chapter. Their shared opening leads to a specific description: bringing forth bread, creating fruit of the vine, creating fruit of the tree. The object changes. Memorizing only the melody of the opening can hide that change from a learner.

A commandment blessing often adds אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ, *ashér kiddeshánu bemitsvotáv vetsivánu*, “who has sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us.” That “us” is covenantal language. A Christian or other non-Jewish student should not assume it is merely a neutral way to say “people are spiritual.” Learn what the community means by the first-person plural before adopting it devotionally.

**Exercise 7.** Find the Hebrew words for “I,” “my soul,” and “Your faithfulness.” Which biblical book supplies the echo at the end? Is the entire prayer therefore a verse from that book?

Sources: Lamentations 3:22-24; Moses ben Machir, Seder ha-Yom, opening morning order; [T], [MA]. Translation is original and interpretive at the phrase “for You have restored.”

## 08 · THE CENTRAL READING

# Hear, Israel

The Shema is a proclamation and a scriptural reading at the center of Jewish life. Its first word asks for more than sound reaching the ear.

## The opening verse · Deuteronomy 6:4

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד:

*Shemá Yisraél, Adonái Elohéinu, Adonái eḥád.*

Hear, Israel: the LORD is our God; the LORD is one.

The English is a defensible traditional reading, not the only grammatically discussed translation. “The LORD alone” expresses another important interpretation of the last clause. Biblical Hebrew’s compact nominal syntax does not mechanically dictate every English linking word. The translation choice has theological consequences and deserves to be visible. [S]

*Shemá* is a command addressed to a masculine singular “you,” here Israel as a collective. Listening in biblical discourse often includes heeding. “Obey” may explain an implication, but silently substituting it everywhere for “hear” removes the auditory image. *Eḥád* means “one”; claims that the word by itself proves a specifically Christian doctrine or a special mathematical kind of unity go beyond its lexical meaning.

## The paragraph that follows · Deuteronomy 6:5-9

The following completes the first biblical paragraph of the liturgical Shema, beginning with verse 4 above. Hebrew spelling and vowels are shown in a study form without cantillation; the divine name uses a liturgical substitute here. The complete accented source appears in the Torah appendix.

וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ:

*Veahavtá et Adonái Elohékha, bekhól levavekhá uvekhól nafshekhá uvekhól meodékha.*

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your life, and with all your might.

*Néfesh* can refer to life or the living self; “soul” may mislead if it makes the verse sound as though only an immaterial part of a person is involved. *Meód* ordinarily means “very” or “much”; here its unusual nominal use is conventionally rendered “might.” Later interpretation also connects it with resources or possessions. The English “all” appears three times because the Hebrew insists on comprehensiveness, not because the translator needed filler.

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ:

*Vehayú ha-devarím ha-éle ashér anokhí metsavekhá ha-yóm al levavékha.*

These words that I command you today shall be upon your heart.