Learning to Read Hebrew: Consonants (the *Aleph-Bet*) and Vowels

1. Note on the names of the Hebrew letters:
    a. The first letter of the Hebrew name for the character is <u>always</u> the character itself This is in distinct contrast to the English alphabet, in which the names for ten out of the twenty-six the letters: **F, H, L, M, N, R, S, U, W, X,** and **Y** all begin with other letters.
    b. The names of fourteen of the Hebrew characters are monosyllabic, so their accentuation is trivial.
    c. Eight of the Hebrew characters have TWO-syllable names. Since the purpose of the name is to identify the character, the two-syllable name of a letter is <u>always</u> accented **mil'eyl.**

2. Summary of the Aleph-Bet written three ways, with comments on the pronunciation of some of the characters, as well as on their names**:**

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Nu–meric Value	Comment
AH-leph	א	א	אc	1	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ב,כ	ב,ב	ב,ב	2	
GIM-mel	ג , ג	ג , ג	ג , ג	3	
DAH-let	ד , ד	ד , ד	ד , ד	4	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ה	ה	ה	5	
VAHV	ו	ו	ו	6	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	ז	ז	7	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	ח	ח	8	As in *Johann Sebastian Ba<u>ch</u>*
TET	ט	ט	ט	9	

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Nu–meric Value	Comment
YUD	י	ו	،	10	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF (KHAHF)	כ ך, כ ך	כ ך, כ ך	כק, כק	20	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in the Hebrew letter CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH-med	ל	ל	ƒ	30	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	מם	מם	אם	40	
NUN	נ ן	נ ן	ﬞ ﬞ	50	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH-mach	ס	ס	O	60	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
AH-yin	ע	ע	צ	70	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
PEY (FEY)	פ, פך	פ, פך	⊚ ƒ⊚	80	
TSAH-diy	צ ץ	צ ץ	ℬ	90	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
QOOF	ק	ק	ק	100	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ר	ר	ﬞ	200	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN, SIN	שׁ, שׂ	שׁ, שׂ	℮, ℮	300	

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Nu–meric Value	Comment
TAHF (TAHF)	ת, ת	ת, ת	ת ת	400	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

The "B̲EH-G̲eD̲ K̲EH-F̲ehT̲" (בְּגֶ֑דְ כְּפֶ֑תֿ) or "B'GAHD̲ K'F̲AHT̲" (בְּגַ֑דֿ כְּפַ֑תֿ) Letters

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Numeric Value	Comment
In modern times, the distinction in pronunciation between the two forms of this letter is retained:					
BET	בּ	בּ	ב	2	
"VET"	בֿ	ב	ב	2	
In modern times, the following letter is _always_ pronounced "GIM'mel", and is always called "GIM'mel", regardless of the presence or absence of a _Da-GESH_:					
GIM-mel	גּ	גּ	צ	3	
GIM-mel (JIM-mel)	ג	ג	צ	3	_Possible_ ancient name, and possble ancient pronunciation shown in parens
In modern times, the following letter is _always_ pronounced "DAH-let", and is always called "DAH-let", regardless of the presence or absence of a Dagesh:					
DAH'-let	דּ	דּ	צ	4	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
DAH'-let (THAH'-let)	ד	ד	צ	4	_Probable_ ancient name, and probable ancient pronunciation shown in parens ('TH' like "than", _not_ like "thin")
In modern times, the distinction in pronunciation between the two forms of this letter is retained:					
KAHF	כּך	כּך	כ ק	20	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Numeric Value	Comment
KHAHF	כך	כך	כ ך	20	Very similar to CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

In modern times, the distinction in pronunciation between the two forms of this letter is retained:

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Numeric Value	Comment
PEY	*פ	*פ	⊙ *	80	
FEY	פף	פף	⨀	80	

*Note that this letter _never_ takes a Dah-GESH in final (ender) form.

In modern times, the following letter is _always_ pronounced "TAHF" and is always called "TAHF" in S'FAR-dic pronunciation, regardless of the presence or absence of a _Da-GESH_:

Name	Printed	Block	Script	Numeric Value	Comment
TAHF	ת	ת	ת	400	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
THAHF	ת	ת	ת	400	_Possible_ ancient name and ancient pronunciation (soft "th", as in "thin", _not_ hard "th" as in "than"); 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Recommended Procedure for Developing Your Reading and Pronunciation skills:

Make up two sets of flash-cards, one set for the printed Aleph-Bet, and the other set for script. The front of each card should show **one** form of a single letter, and the rear of the card should have the English transliteration of the letter's name. Thus, each set should contain 27 flashcards, one for each of the ordinary 22 characters of the Aleph-Bet, plus five additional cards for the letters that have separate forms when they appear as the final character of a word(ך, ם, ן, ף, ץ). Note that for the printed Aleph-Bet, you need to be able to go **only** from the Hebrew character to the pronunciation of its name. However, for the script Aleph-Bet, you need to develop facility **not only** for reading **but also** for writing. Therefore, you should use the set of flash cards for the script Aleph-Bet in **both** directions, looking first at the Hebrew-character sides of the cards and practicing pronunciation of the character's name, and **also** looking first at the English transliteration of the name, and then writing the character down on a piece of paper. Only after attempting to write the character yourself should you look at the other side of the flash-card to ascertain whether you correctly wrote the character specified.

Each day, as you get ready to do your reading and your homework in Biblical Hebrew, go through the sequence of reading warm-up exercises as described below. These are similar to what an athlete does as he/she prepares to train for a sports competition. You should get in the habit of doing these at least until you become highly skilled at reading and pronunciation (unlike the athlete, who needs to continue to perform warm-up exercises indefinitely):

STEP 1: Read through the entire printed form of the Aleph-Bet at least one time, clearly and correctly stating the name of each letter, and also checking your pronunciation against the name of the character transliterated-into-English in order to be certain that you are pronouncing its name correctly.

STEP 2: Next, read multiple times through the printed Aleph-Bet, this time **without** looking at the transliterated names of the characters. Either cover the transliterated names with an opaque screen, or use a different copy of the Aleph-Bet, that does **not** display the names of the characters.

STEP 3: Repeat steps 1 and 2 for the script Aleph-Bet.

STEP 4: For the first few sessions, steps 1 through 3 are good enough. Once you develop some facility at reading, however, you should ratchet up your effort a bit and take a crack at reading the characters in random order. Shuffle the flashcards for the printed alphabet, and then read the characters carefully, checking each time to make sure **both** that you have identified the correct letter **and** that you have pronounced its name properly. Note that you can do yourself more harm than good if you intensively practice, either the wrong names for several of the characters, or saying the right names but not pronouncing them correctly.

STEP 5: Each time you step through all 27 characters including both the within-the-word and the final forms, shuffle your flashcards so that your next pass through the Aleph-Bet will occur in a different order.

OVERALL ADVICE: Do **not** attempt to sit down for one mammoth oral-reading session. Instead, take occasional oral-Hebrew-reading breaks, perhaps once per hour for 15 minutes or so at a time, as intermissions while you are studying for some other course. Begin each time with a quick set of warm-up exercises as described above.

The Printed Aleph-Bet:

Name	Printed	Comment
AH-leph	א	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ב,בּ	

Name	Printed	Comment
GIM-mel	ג	
DAH-let	ד	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ה	
VAHV	ו	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	As in *Johann Sebastian Ba<u>ch</u>*
TET	ט	
YUD	י	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF (KHAHF)	כ ך, כ ך	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH-med	ל	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	מ ם	
NUN	נ ן	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH'-mach	ס	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
AH'-yin	ע	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
PEY (FEY)	פּ, פ ף	
TSAH-diy	צ ץ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Printed	Comment
QOOF	ק	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ר	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN SIN	שׁ שׂ	
TAHF (TAHF)	ת, ת	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

The Printed Aleph-Bet:

Printed
א
בּ,ב
ג
ד
ה
ו
ז
ח
ט
י
כּ,ךּ, כ ך
ל
מ ם
נ ן
ס
ע
פּ, פ ף

Printed
צ ץ
ק
ר
שׁ, שׂ
תּ, ת

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח

ט

י כ ך ל מ ם נ ן ס

ע

פ ף צ ץ ק ר ש ת

Block Letters:

Name	Block	Comment
AH-leph	א	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	ב,ב	
GIM-mel	ג	
DAH-let	ד	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	ה	
VAHV	ו	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	As in *Johann Sebastian Ba<u>ch</u>*
TET	ט	
YUD	י	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF, (KHAHF)	כ ך , כ ך	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH'-med	ל	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	מ ם	
NUN	נ ן	'U' as "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH'-mach	ס	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
AH'-yin	ע	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Block	Comment
PEY, (FEY)	פ, ף פ	
TSAH-diy	צ ץ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
QOOF	ק	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	ר	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN SIN	שׁ שׂ	
TAHF	ת	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

Block Letters:

Block
א
ב, בּ
ג
ד
ה
ו
ז
ח
ט
י
כ ךּ, כ ך
ל
מ ם
נ ן
ס
ע

Block
פ ף, פ
צ ץ
ק
ר
שׁ שׂ
ת

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט

י כ ך ל מ ם נ ן ס ע

פ ף צ ץ ק ר שׁ ת

Script:

Name	Script	Comment
AH-leph	) אָ	Initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
BET (VET)	בָ בָ	
GIM-mel	גָ	
DAH-let	דֹ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
HEY	הֹ	
VAHV	ו	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
ZAH-yin	ז	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
CHET	ח	As in *Johann Sebastian Ba<u>ch</u>*
TET	ט	
YUD	׳	'YUD' rhymes with "good"
KAHF (KHAHF)	כ ךֹ, ךֹ כ	'KH' very similar to 'CH' in CHET; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
LAH-med	ל	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
MEM	ם א	
NUN	ן נ	'U' as in "oo" of "good", "wood"
SAH-mach	ס	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"

Name	Script	Comment
AH-yin	४	Hard initiator of vowel sound; 'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
PEY (FEY)	ꙩ· ℔ ꙩ	
TSAH'-diy	ዋ ʒ	'AH' as 'O' in "Optimist"
QOOF	℔	Rhymes with "hoof", "roof"
REYSH	�ós	The trilled or "European" R
SHIN SIN	ℓ ℓ	
TAHF	♫	"AH" as 'O' in "Optimist"

Script:

Script
וכ
בֿ בֿ
ﭢ
ﭏ
הֿ
ו
ל
﬎
ﬠ
י
פֿ כֿ פ כ
ﭏ
א ק
ן נ
ס

Script
४
ৡ ৩ ,৩
४३
૧
૮
૭ ૭
౫

บ ১ ১ ৪ ৬ ২ ৫ ১๦

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۲ ০ ४ ४३ ৡ ৫ ४ ০

౫ ౫ ৪

Difficult-to-Distinguish Letters in the Printed Aleph-Bet:

ב כ פ   ג נ   ט מ

ס ם   י ו ז   ף ק

ז ן   ד ד ר   ע צ

ץ

Difficult-to-Distinguish Letters in the Script Aleph-Bet:

ג ל   י ו ן ר   נ ח ת

כ ק ב   ל ל ל   ס ס ם

ג ג   מ ק ה ר   נ ת

Review:

Name	Printed	Block	Script
AH'-leph	א	א	ןc
BET (VET)	ב, ב	ב, ב	ב, ב
GIM-mel	ג	ג	צ
DAH-let	ד	ד	ך
HEY	ה	ה	ה
VAHV	ו	ו	ו
ZAH-yin	ז	ז	ל
CHET	ח	ח	מ
TET	ט	ט	ו
YUD	י	י	׳
KAHF (KHAHF)	כ ך, כ ך	כ ך, כ ך	כ ק, כ ק
LAH-med	ל	ל	ן
MEM	מ ם	מ ם	א ם
NUN	נ ן	נ ן	ן ן
SAH-mach	ס	ס	○
AH-yin	ע	ע	צ

Name	Printed	Block	Script
PEY (FEY)	פ, פ ף	פ, פ ף	
TSAH-diy	צ ץ	צ ץ	
QOOF	ק	ק	ק
REYSH	ר	ר	ר
SHIN SIN	שׁ שׂ	שׁ שׂ	
TAHF	ת	ת	ת

Names and Soundings of the Vowels:

Name שֵׁם	תְּנוּעָה Vowel	Sound
Qah-MAHTZ קָמֵץ	ָ	*Ah* (in most cases) *Oh* (clipped: rarely)
Pah-TACH פַּתַח	ַ	*Ah*
TZEY-reh Chah-SEHR צֵירֶה חָסֵר	ֵ	*Ey*
TZEY-reh Mah-LEY צֵרֶה מָלֵא	ֵי	*Ey*
Seh-GOHL סֶגוֹל	ֶ	*Eh*
Choh-LAHM Chah-SEHR חוֹלָם חָסֵר	ֹ	*Aw* (close to *Oh*)
Choh-LAHM Mah-LEY חוֹלָם מָלֵא	וֹ	*Oh*
Chiy-RIQ Chah-SEHR חִירִיק חָסֵר	ִ	*Ih*
Chiy-RIQ Mah-LEY חִירִיק מָלֵא	ִי	*Iy*
Qoo-BOOTZ קֻבוּץ	ֻ	*Uu* (as in "put")
Shoo-ROOQ שׁוּרק	וּ	*Oo* (as in "root")

Name שֵׁם	תְּנוּעָה Vowel	Sound
Sch'-VAH NACH שְׁוָא נָח	:	(no sound)
Sch'-VAH NAH שְׁוָא נָע	— : or :	Uh (extremely clipped)
Chah-TAHF Qah-MAHTZ חֲטַף קָמֵץ	ָ:	Aw (clipped)
Chah-TAHF Pah-TACH חֲטַף פַּתַח	־ֲ	Ah (clipped)
Chah-TAHF Seh-GOHL חֲטַף סֶגוֹל	ֱ:	Eh (clipped)

Diphthongs:

Diphthong דּוּ־תְּנוּעָה	*Sound of the Diphthong*	*Example of Use in* תַּנַךְ
יָ	**Ahy** (in most cases: rhymes with "Hi!") *Oy* (clipped O: rarely)	מִצְוֺתָי
יַ	**Ahy**	חֲטָאי
וֹי	*Oy*	אוֹי
וּי	*Ooy*	(רִיבּוּי)[1]
However, note: יָו	*Ah<u>v</u>* (**NOT** O<u>y</u>)	קָדְשָׁיו

Nota Bene:

  (i) the difference in the use of the ו (*Vahv*) between אוֹי (vocal) and מִצְוֺתָי (consonantal); and

  (ii) comparison between the <u>vocal</u> use of the י (Yood) (*mater lectionis* אֵם מִקְרָא) in the words

   אוֹי and גּוֹי, and its <u>consonantal</u> use in the words גּוֹיִם and צְבוֹיִם .

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[1] **In the case of this diphthong, I am unable to recall a specific instance of its use in the תַּנַ״ךְ. This example is taken from Rabbinic Hebrew, and for that reason it is shown in parentheses.**