

Learning Hebrew: Sentence Syntax

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

In English, the normal verbal sentence structure would be subject-verb-object (Jacob honored Isaac). In Hebrew, the normal verbal sentence structure is verb-subject-object.

וַיִּחְלֵם יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם

(And Joseph dreamed a dream – Genesis 37:5)

SYNTAX OF THE VERB

In the normal verbal sentence structure, the verb is at the beginning. However, there are certain circumstances that change this pattern.

1. The verb may be preceded by an adverb.

וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי מֶלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ

(And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king – I Samuel 24:20)

2. The verb may be preceded by an expression that provides context, circumstantial information, or a connection with the preceding verse or clause.

עַל-כֵּן, יַעֲזֹב-אִישׁ, אֶת-אָבִיו, וְאֶת-אִמּוֹ

(Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother – Genesis 2:24)

3. The verb may be preceded by הִנֵּה.

וְהִנֵּה נָפְלוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, בַּחֶרֶב

(And behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword – II Chronicles 29:9)

4. The verb may be preceded by a temporal clause beginning with וַיְהִי or וְהָיָה.

וַיְהִי בַּהֵיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה, וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הָבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ

(When they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and he killed him – Genesis 4:8)

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נֶאֱמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת, אֶכְרִית אֶת-שְׂמוֹת הָעֵצָבִים מִן-הָאָרֶץ,
וְלֹא יִזְכְּרוּ, עוֹד

(And it came to pass in that day, said the L-rd of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered – Zechariah 13:2)

5. The verb may be preceded by a negative particle.

לֹא-אִירָא רָע
(I will not fear evil – Psalm 23:4)

6. The verb may be preceded by an independent personal pronoun (for emphasis).

אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם, אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם
(You have seen what I did to Egypt – Exodus 19:4)

7. The verb may be preceded by many other modifiers or grammatical constructions.

כִּי זֹאת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֶכְרֹת אֶת-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
(This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel – Jeremiah 31:32)

SYNTAX OF THE SUBJECT

Perfect, Imperfect, and Imperative verbs have an implied subject which means that you will not always need an explicit subject to complete a sentence in Hebrew.

1. The subject (if one is specified) will usually immediately follow the verb.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַנָּחָשׁ, אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה
(And the serpent said to the woman – Genesis 3:4)

2. The subject may precede the verb to emphasize the subject.

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים
(And Moses went up to G-d – Exodus 19:3)

SYNTAX OF THE OBJECT

There are a number of differing types of objects in Hebrew but the most important ones for this topic are the indirect (dative) and the direct (accusative) objects.

1. The dative (indirect) object is the person or thing that is indirectly affected by the action of the verb.

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה, אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל
(And Moses called to all Israel – Deuteronomy 5:1)

2. The accusative (direct) object generally comes immediately after the verb or its subject.

בְּרָאֵשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
(G-d created the heavens and the earth – Genesis 1:1)

3. The object may precede the verb to emphasize the object.

אֶת-הַצְּדִיק וְאֶת-הַרְשָׁע, יִשְׁפֹּט הָאֱלֹהִים
(The righteous and the wicked G-d will judge – Ecclesiastes 3:17)

CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

A conditional sentence consists of two clauses. The protasis (“if”) clause states the condition and the apodosis (“then”) clause states the consequence of the condition.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָּרַק, אִם-תֵּלְכִי עִמִּי וְהִלַּכְתִּי
(Barak said to her, If you will go with me, then I will go – Judges 4:8)

ADVERBS

Adverbs are words that are used to describe, modify, limit, or qualify a verb, adjective, or another adverb. Generally, adverbs are divided into four categories.

1. Adverbs of time

כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי-יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה
(For now I know that you fear G-d – Genesis 22:12)

2. Adverbs of place

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁבוּ-פֹה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ
(And he said, “Sit here,” and they sat – Ruth 4:2)

3. Adverbs of degree

וַתֵּהָר עוֹד, וַתֵּלֵד בֵּן
(And she conceived again and bore a son – Genesis 29:33)

4. Adverbs of manner

וַיָּבֹא אֵלֵיהֶם יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, פְּתָאִם
(And Joshua came upon them suddenly – Joshua 10:9)

DISJUNCTIVE VAV

The Disjunctive Vav is prefixed to a non-verbal form and is non-sequential. There are four main uses for the Disjunctive Vav.

1. The Parenthetical use means that the disjunctive clause interrupts the narrative to offer some explanatory information.

וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ, כִּי שָׁמַעַ יוֹסֵף כִּי הִמְלִיץ, בֵּינֵהֶם

(Now they did not know that Joseph was understanding them because there was an interpreter between them – Genesis 42:23)

2. The circumstantial use means that the disjunctive clause introduces or identifies circumstantial information related to the narrative.

וַיְהִי כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה, וַיָּבֵא הַבֵּיתָה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֶאכֶתוֹ; וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת,
שָׁם--בַּבַּיִת

(And one day, he went into the house to do his work and none of the household servants were there in the house – Genesis 39:11)

3. The contrastive use means that the Disjunctive Vav introduces a contrasting idea.

וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה, אֶל-הָקָל וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ וְאֶל-קַיִן וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ, לֹא שָׁפָה

(The L-rd looked favorably on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not look favorably – Genesis 4:4-5)

4. The introductory use means that the Disjunctive Vav may begin a new narrative or introduce a new idea or theme to the narrative.

וַהֲנַחֵשׁ, הָיָה עָרוֹם, מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים

(Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the creatures that the L-rd G-d had made – Genesis 3:1)

Sources: *The First Hebrew Primer, Third Edition* by Simon, Resnikoff, and Motzkin *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* by Pratico and Van Pelt