Learning Hebrew: Syllables

SYLLABLES
A Hebrew syllable always begins with a consonant. A syllable can be either a consonant plus a vowel or a consonant plus a vowel plus a consonant.

Every syllable must begin with one consonant and have only one vowel. There are only two types of syllables: open and closed. Open syllables end with a vowel and closed syllables end with a consonant.

The Hebrew word for “word” (דָבָר) consists of two syllables. דָ׀בָר

The Hebrew word for “word” also demonstrates both types of syllables – open (ד) and closed (בָר).

Hebrew words are usually accented (stressed) on the last syllable. However, there are some Hebrew words where the accent is not on the last syllable. In these cases, an accent mark (<) over the stressed syllable will be written.

There are three classifications of syllables:
1. Tonic – The accented syllable is called the tonic (or tone) syllable.
2. Pretonic – The syllable before a tonic syllable.
3. Propretonic – The syllable before the pretonic syllable.

The dagesh lene hardens the sound of certain letters (example: bet [ב] – b versus vet [כ] – v). There is also a dagesh forte that doubles the consonant (example: מֶנֶשֶׁךָ would be transliterated as ’attah [the tav is doubled]).

All consonants can take the dagesh forte except the gutterals letters – aleph (א), hey (ה), chet (ח), ayin (ע), and resh (ר).

Since the dagesh forte doubles the consonant, the letter can act as both the ending of one syllable and the beginning of another syllable. Example: מֶנֶשֶׁךָ would be transliterated as ’attah. The syllables would be shown as ’at-tah (מֶנֶשֶׁךָ).

Here are three simple rules to remember if the dagesh is a dagesh lene (hardening of the consonant) or a dagesh forte (doubling of the consonant) for the beged kefet [bet/vet (ב), gim mel (ג), dalet (ד), kaf (כ), pey/fey (פ), and tav (ת)].
The dagesh in a beged kefet is a *dagesh forte* if it is preceded by a vowel.

אַתָּה

The dagesh in a beged kefet is a *dagesh lene* if it is preceded by a consonant.

מַלְכָּה

The dagesh in a beged kefet is a *dagesh lene* unless the word preceding it ends in a vowel.

דָּבָר סֵפֶר

SHEVA
There are two types of shevas – silent and vocal. The silent sheva has no sound but the vocal sheva sounds like a hurried “a” as in amuse and is transliterated as ə.

There are three simple rules to help you distinguish between a silent and a vocal sheva.

1. A silent sheva will always occur at the end of a closed syllable.
2. A vocal sheva will always occur in an open syllable.
3. A guttural consonant cannot have a vocal sheva – the sheva is always silent.

A sheva is silent when it is immediately preceded by a short vowel.

פַּרְעֹה

The first of two side-by-side shevas in a word is silent.

מִשְפְּטֵי

A sheva at the end of a word is silent.

כָּתַבְתְּ

The initial sheva is always vocal.

בְּרָכָה

The second of two side-by-side shevas within a word is vocal.

מִשְפְּטֵי

A sheva under a consonant with a dagesh forte is vocal.
A sheva after a long vowel is vocal.

כֹתְבִים

QUIESCENT ALEPH
When an aleph (א) occurs without a vowel, it is quiescent. This means that the aleph is not considered a consonant as far as the rules for syllables.

חַטָאת = חַטָאת

HEBREW DIPHTHONG
A diphthong is a term that identifies sounds normally distinct but are now working as a single unit. The most common diphthong in Hebrew is (ָּי; ayi). Syllables with this diphthong are considered closed syllables.

שָמַיִם = שָמַיִם

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

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