

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” (דָּבָר) consists of two syllables. דָּבָר

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

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 [בּ] – b versus vet [בְ] – v).

There is also a dagesh forte that doubles the consonant (example: אַתָּה would be transliterated as 'attah [the tav is doubled]).

All consonants can take the dagesh forte except the guttural 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: אַתָּה would be transliterated as 'attah. The syllables would be shown as 'at-tah (אֶתְ|תָּא).

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), gimmel (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.

מִלְכָּה

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.

פְּרֵעָה

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

מִשְׁפָּטִי

A sheva at the end of a word is silent.

כְּתֻבָּה

The initial sheva is always vocal.

בְּרָכָה

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

מִשְׁפָּטִי

A sheva under a consonant with a dagesh forte is vocal.

הַמְּלָכִים

A sheva after a long vowel is vocal.

כְּתוּבִים

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.

חַטָּאֵת = חֵטְאֵת

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 אֵי (ayi). Syllables with this diphthong are considered closed syllables.

נְשִׂמִים = נְשִׂמִים

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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