

Lesson Three

q r w s

Vowel Sounds and Points

Have you been asking, 'Where are the vowels?' So far we have looked at only consonants---because Hebrew in more ancient times as well in printed books today appeared only as consonants. Marks indicating vowel sounds did not come into usage until being introduced by scribes after the beginning of the Common Era. Today some beginning reader type publications and religious works feature *niqqudim*, or vowel-points and other marks.

If you were to compare this in an English example, we would see English in the following manner:

Cn y rd ths sntnc? Hw bt "Th wrds wr rd.?"

Were the words *red* or *read*? And so you see the importance of vowel-points. The vowel-points were devised, at a time when most Jews felt more at home speaking Aramaic, in order to preserve the correct pronunciation of the scriptures as they were read in the synagogues each Shabbat. It should be noted that the niqqudim record the pronunciation of centuries of scriptures spoken and later read, and not arbitrarily invented.

א	qā mā ṣ	ā	f ather	א	ḥ ă ṭ āf	ō	collo quial
ב	ḥ ă ṭ āf pāttā ḥ	ă	a lone	ג	šûrûq wā w	û	bl ues
ד	š ^e wā	e	math e matics	ה	pāttā ḥ	a	pa t
ו	ṣê rê	ē	f avor	ז	qā mā ṣ ḥ ă ṭ ûf	o	so ft
ז	ṣê rê yô ḏ	ê	th e y	ח	š ^e ḡô l	e	me t
ט	ḥ ă ṭ āf s ^e ḡô l	ě	en e my	ט	qubbuṣ	u	mo on
י	ḥ ô lā m	ō	o bey	י	ḥ îrîq	i	hi t
כ	ḥ ô lā m mā lē ^ו	ô	o pen	יא	pāttā ḥ ḡ ^e nûbā h	a	we' r e
Here א stands in as any letter that the vowel point might be found combined with.				יב	ḥ îrîq ḡā ḏô l	î	ma ch ine

So now you have become familiar with the consonants and are learning the vowel-points. You should be ready to try to read and transliterate some sounds and words. Hebrew reads from right to left. The time will come when it will seem only natural to read from right to left!

Look at the following syllables and see if you can pronounce and transliterate them. There will be several completed to encourage you.

אָב	āb	בִּ	
אֹב		בִּ	
אֵשׁ		וִ	wā
בִּ		רִ	
בִּ		רִ	
בִּ		רִ	
בֹּ	bō	רִ	
בִּ		שָׁב	

Try these words.

אֲבִיוֹן		בֵּין	
אֲדוֹן		בָּרָא	
אָדָם		בָּהֶן	
אֲהָבָה		בָּהֶמָּה	
אֱלֹהִים		גָּדוֹל	
אֵם		גֵּן	
אֲרֶץ		הָיָה	
אֲתָה		שָׁבַת	

You will be pronouncing Hebrew from the Bible soon!

Š^ewā

The Š^ewā can be a little confusing. Mainly, for our purpose at present, it has two uses. As Š^ewā nā (or, *mobile/ vocal*) it has a slight, slight sound comparable to the *e* in *mathematics*. As Š^ewā nāḥ (or, *silent/ quiescens*) it marks a syllable division. It can appear silently at the end of a word. At the end of some words it does this doubly. Notice the following examples:

תִּכְתְּבוּ	כְּתַבְתֶּם	מֶלֶךְ	קִטְלָתְךָ	שְׂתַיִם	שְׁמוֹנִים
tikt ^e bû	k ^e tabtem	meleḵ	qaṭālt	štaym	š ^e mōnîm

In examples from right to left, the first is a typical $\check{S}^e wā nā$. The second is an exception and one that must be memorized. The third shows a consonant cluster. In four the marks the word end, but this is only for certain words and not typical.

The fifth example illustrates the rule that the $\check{S}^e wā nāḥ$ followed immediately by a BeGaDKePaT (בגדכפת) letter with a dāgeš will make the $\check{S}^e wā nāḥ$ an indicator of a syllable break. This marks syllable breaks very often.

The last example shows that of two successive $\check{S}^e wās$, the first will be silent followed by a vocal $\check{S}^e wā nā$.

In modern Hebrew in the first example this distinction is not made often and the word comes out "*shmoniyim*."

Understanding the distinctions for $\check{S}^e wā$ takes time and active reading, but it will come to you. Will you be perfect at it? Probably not. There are disagreements between the correct reading of words among men who read the Torah in synagogues every week.

Keep in mind that this lesson is not comprehensive in the coverage of vowels. But it's just a start, and enough to get us started in reading and analyzing scripture to begin a more inductive approach to biblical Hebrew.