# What You Need to Know To Help Learners
# Decode Hebrew Effectively[i]

Lifsa Schachter

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Many of us have witnessed children's initial excitement learning Hebrew turn into frustration and even indifference as they moved from learning letters to more complex words and phrases. There are many well known explanations for this situation. Overarching issues include the students' limited contact with Hebrew and the lack of support for it in their lives. Technical issues include the minimal distinctinctiveness of Hebrew letters, the many look alikes, and the absence of anything other than visual clues to assist in the decoding process.

I assert that even given the accuracy of these explanations, Hebrew decoding can be taught more effectively. In this monograph I focus on only one aspect of the problem: because of how they are taught students are deprived of tools that can help them figure out complex unknown words.

The purpose of this monograph is to provide these tools by giving teachers the information they need to guide students to effective Hebrew decoding. It is not a complete grammar, nor is it a reading program per se. The information can help teachers adapt reading programs in ways that will facilitate learning. It is based on sound grammatical principles as explained in leading sources (Chesin, 1992; Even-Shoshan, 2004) and my years of experience working with struggling Hebrew decoders and consulting with schools. Using these principles I have, over many years, been able to turn failure into success for many students and to see dramatic new school wide Hebrew achievements.

I    Elements of  written Hebrew

Hebrew books, magazines and newspapers are written only with consonantal letters. People who understand Hebrew read without vowel signs or the *sh'va* (two vertical dots placed under a consonant) except when they read the Bible, prayer book and poetry. However one can do this only if one understands what one is reading. Vowel signs and the *sh'va* are included for those who do not understand Hebrew or where precise reading is critical, as in the Bible.

Hebrew vowel signs are not the same as English vowel letters. We can think of the vowel signs and the *sh'va* as a kind of learners guide for the reader who doesn't understand Hebrew. A Hebrew text printed with vowel signs and the *sh'va* is called vocalized or pointed.

Textbooks for the supplementary school are intended for students who are being taught to sound out Hebrew words before or without understanding them. They always include the vowel signs and the *sh'va*. Understanding the relationship between them and the Hebrew alphabet is critical to efficient decoding.

A.   The Hebrew alphabet

The most important fact about the Hebrew alphabet is that it is a consonantal alphabet. All the letters are consonants and every letter has a sound. There are no letters dedicated solely to vowel sounds. Because of this many linguists do not consider Hebrew (and other languages which lack vowel letters) to be true alphabets.

The 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet make more than 22 sounds. Similarly the English alphabet of 26 letters makes many more than 26 sounds. Hebrew alphabet charts should not add final letters or letters marked with a *dagesh* (dot) to the basic alphabet chart, any more than English alphabet charts include all the letter combinations for all the sounds that letters can make.

Additional posters can be created for teaching final letters and the letters whose sound is changed by a *dagesh kal,* the weak *dagesh*[1].

Why is this important?

o   The Hebrew language is based on root words; words made up of the same letters have related meanings when prefixes and suffixes are added. That is why the letters *Bet*, *Kaf* and *Peh* must be taught as letters that can be pronounced in two ways depending on where they appear in a word or syllable. In a vocalized text this is indicated by the presence or absence of a dot in the letter called the *dagesh kal,* the weak *dagesh*.

Teaching these as the same letter makes it easier for students to recognize words when prefixes or suffixes are added. Thus for example they can more easily recognize that בְּכׂל (*b'khol* ) is the same as כׂל (*kol)* with the addition of the prefix בְּ'.

o   Each letter has a numeric value, used for numbering chapters and verses in the Bible, for dates on the calendar, and for *gematria* , a system of word play based on substituting number values for letters. Thus *Aleph* is 1, *Bet* is 2, *Gimel* is 3. A well known example is the use of 18 to symbolize life, deriving from the numeric value of the Hebrew word for life, חַי. ח(8) + י (10) equal 18. If we add add the

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[1] In modern Sephardic pronunciation the *dagesh kal* affects the pronunciation of only three letters, the *Bet* ,the *Kaf* and the *Peh;*  in earlier times (and among some groups of Jews until this day) the pronunciation of  *Gimel, Dalet* and *Tav* were affected by the *dagesh*.  These are known as the $b^eg^ed\ k^ef^et$ (בְּגֶד כְּפֶת) letters.   Some Ashkenazi Jews also retain the distinction between a *Tav* with and without a *dagesh*.

letters with a *dagesh* to the alphabet, *gematria* can no longer work and the letters and the numbers they stand for don't match up.

Unlike the relationship between the names of the English letters and the sound made by the letter, the sound made by a Hebrew letter is the same as the sound made by the first letter in the letter's name. Thus, the ב (*Bet)* makes the 'B' sound; the ח (*Het)* makes the 'H' sound.

The ש (*Shin*) is also a letter with two possible pronunciations. In vocalized texts this is indicated by a *nekudah* (dot) to the right of the letter to indicate the 'Sh' sound and to the left of the letter to indicate the 'S' sound.

The ו (*Vav*) can serve one of three functions.  It can be a consonant with the 'V' sound, an *Em Kriyah* (described later) or used as part of a vowel sign.  Later we will discuss how to know which function the ו is serving in a given word.

B.   Other Hebrew symbols

The vowel signs and the *sh'va* are relatively late additions to Hebrew writing.  In the beginning of our Jewish history there was a limited amount of reading matter and only a few, highly trained people were expected to read.  They made do with the purely consonantal alphabet. But as the number of readers and the amount of text material to be read grew, and as Hebrew ceased to be the spoken language of Jews, the absence of vowels made reading Hebrew increasingly challenging.

1.   Helping letters; the Imot Kriyah

The first attempt to ease this situation involved choosing four letters, the *Aleph*, *Hey*, *Vav,* and *Yud*, to indicate some of the vowel sounds.   These letters are called *Imot Kriyah*, literally the mothers of reading; the singular is *Em Kriyah*.  Like mothers, they are both independent and attached.

Examples of words with *Imot Kriyah* are לי, מה and לו.  If one knows Hebrew it is easy to read these words without the vowel signs. Eventually this system proved insufficient and the system of vowel signs we currently use was adopted.  Because words written with the *Imot Kriyah* are found in the Torah, the *Imot Kriyah* were retained even though they were no longer necessary.  The vowel signs allow the *Imot Kriyah* to be ignored for determining pronunciation.

Hebrew readers often have problems distinguishing when these four letters are consonants and when they are helping letters.  They can be helped by a simple rule. When the letters are accompanied by a vowel sign or a *sh'va* they are independent consonants.  Without them they are vowel-like helping letters, attached to the consonant preceding them. This is especially true for the *Vav*.  The ו can be either a consonant with a <u>holam</u> <u>haser</u>, or simply a vowel following a letter.   The identical symbol is used for both.

2. The vowel signs

> The vowel signs were developed as a response to the increase in reading matter
> and in the number and range of readers for whom Hebrew was not their mother
> tongue.  The signs are called *t'nu-ot* (movements) because they move the
> consonants.  A *Bet* by itself could be *ba bi beh bo* or *bu*.  The vowel signs tell us
> which one it is. The vowel signs do not have sounds by themselves.
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> While the vowel signs are old, the standardization of vowel sounds is relatively
> recent and a good deal of variation still remains from region to region and among
> different communities. We still hear these differences among older Jews
> especially those from other parts of the world.  This work is based on the standard
> current Israeli Sephardic pronunciation.
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> Students have more difficulty remembering the vowel signs than the letters.  To
> make this easier, the names of the vowel signs should be taught.  Naming them
> gives these symbols significance.  They provide an additional clue to the sound
> shaped by the sign.  The first syllable of the name of the sign tells us the sound
> that will be indicated by the vowel sign under any letter.  Using the names of the
> vowel signs allows the teacher to talk about the symbols and manipulate them
> while teaching.  This is preferable to talking about the two dots, the three dots,
> and the like.
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> Below is a chart of the five basic vowel signs and their names. The vowel signs
> have been traditionally categorized as long and short and correspond
> approximately to the sounds made by the five vowel letters in English. Vowel
> sounds change from long to short or the reverse depending on where these sounds
> appear in a word.  In this chart the vowel signs are shown under the letter א. Note
> how the names of most of the vowel signs incorporate both long and short sounds.

| Long Vowel Signs | Short Vowel Signs | *Hatafim* [1] |
|---|---|---|
| קָמַץ [2]  *kamatz* <br> אָ | פַּתָּח *patah* <br> אַ | חֲטַף פַּתָּח *hataf patah* <br> אֲ |
| צֵירֵה [3] t*zeyreh* <br> אֵ אֵי | סֶגוֹל *segol* <br> אֶ | חֲטַף סֶגוֹל *hataf segol* <br> אֱ |
| חִירִיק מָלֵא *hirik maleh* <br> אִי | חִירִיק חָסֵר *hirik haser* <br> אִ | |
| חוֹלָם *holam* <br> אוֹ <br><br> חוֹלָם חָסֵר [4] *holam haser* <br> אֹ | קָמַץ קָטָן *kamatz katan* <br> אָ   (rhymes with aw) | חֲטַף קָמַץ *hataf kamatz* <br> אֳ |
| שׁוּרֵק *shuruk* <br> אוּ | קֻבּוּץ *kubutz* <br> אֻ | |

1. There are only three of these vowel signs.  They generally appear only under the guttural letters א, ה, ח, and ע  and function grammatically as a *sh'va na* (see below).

2. The symbol for both a short and long *kamatz* is the same, even though they are pronounced differently in standard Ashkenazic pronunciation.  In Sephardic pronunciation they are pronounced the same.  Some siddurim have taken to using a slightly different symbol for the *kamatz katan*.

3. The *tzereh*  appears both  alone and followed by a *Yud*.  Especially without the *Yud*, the sound indicated by the *tzereh*  has virtually disappeared in modern Israeli Hebrew, replaced by the sound of a *segol*.  It is generally preserved in chanting the Torah.  Different synagogue schools have different policies regarding how to teach this vowel sign.

4. The *holam haser* consists only of a dot above the letter.  It lacks the *Vav.*

There is a special rule when a guttural letter, a *Heh, Het*, or *Ayin* is the last letter of a word and is vocalized with a *patah*.  We pronounce it as though the letter is preceded by an *Aleph* with a *patah*.  This is called a *patah g'nuvah*.  We are familiar with this rule for words like *luah* and *ruah*, but it is equally true for words like *elo-ah*.

When the vowel sign preceding the *Shin* is a *holam haser, (a holam* consisting of only a dot), the dot of the *Shin* serves double duty; it tells us how to pronounce the  שׁ  and also the sound of the *holam.* Example, מֹשֶׁה

The one exception to the rule that a vowel sign does not stand alone is  what appears to be a *shuruk* (וּ) at the beginning of a word.  This is in fact not a *shuruk*.  It is a form of the prefix 'and' and is pronounced 'OO,'  as though preceded by an *Aleph*.

3. The *Sh'va*

Understanding the role of the *sh'va* is critical to learning how to chunk words into syllables, an indispensable skill for fluent decoding.

There is disagreement in scholarly circles about this sign and many programs do refer to the *sh'va* as a vowel sign.  However foremost scholars of  Hebrew affirm that the *sh'va* indicates the absence of a vowel sign (Even-Shoshan).  We follow this understanding; only by so doing can one break unknown words into syllable*s*.

A letter with a *sh'va* is never sounded alone. In the last letter of a word, the *sh'va* is generally omitted. There are a few exceptions to this rule such as the *sh'va* under a ךְ (*Khaf sofit*) or at the end of the word  אַתְּ (*at*).

o   There are two types of *sh'va*: the *sh'va na*,  and the *sh'va nah*[2].

o   The *sh'va na*,  the moving *sh'va,* always begins a syllable.  The Hebrew word *na* means moves.  The *sh'va* is called *na* because it moves the letter above it towards the next consonant and forms a blend with it. A consonant with a*sh'va na* is heard like a very hurried sound.

Example:  שְׁמֹר

o   The *sh'va nah* is the resting *sh'va*.   The Hebrew word *nah* means rest. The *sh'va nah* tells us to rest, that we have come to the end of a syllable or a word.   It connects the letter with the *sh'va* to the preceding letter and closes syllables in the middle of a word.  Generally it is not placed under a closed syllable at the end of a word. This *sh'va* is totally silent.

Examples:  תַּלְ מִיד

לֵךְ

Some *siddurim* assist the reader by distinguishing between these two types of *sh'va* in some way.  Check for this in the *siddur* used in your setting.

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[2] There is a third type of sh'va called the *sh'va merahef,* the floating *sh'va.*  What needs to be understood for decoding purposes is that it refers to a bᵉgᵉd kᵉfᵉt letter that is without a dagesh and yet is treated as a sh'va na.  It can be recognized by a horizontal line over the letter called a  *Raphe*.

o The challenge to decoders is to determine whether a *sh'va* is a *sh'va na*, thus opening a syllable, or a *shva nah*, closing the syllable. Following the rules of the *sh'va* make this possible.

4. Other symbols found in the *Siddur*

o The dot in a letter is called a *dagesh*. Once again we have one symbol for two different functions. In the *b$^e$g$^e$d k$^e$f$^e$t* letters - בֶּגֶד כֶּפֶת , it is called a *dagesh kal*, the weak *dagesh*. Originally this *dagesh* signaled a change in the pronunciation of all six letters. A second type of *dagesh* is called a *dagesh hazak* (the strong *dagesh*). This dagesh might indicate that a letter has been dropped from the word. It can appear in any letter except for the ones that are guttural (א ה ח ר ע ). In classical Hebrew the letter with the dagesh *hazak* is stressed.

When the *dagesh hazak* appears in the letter ו it is often confused with the vowel sign, for a *shuruk*. The key to distinguishing the *Vav* from the *shuruk* is the presence or absence of a vowel sign in the preceding letter. Thus in the word נִצְטַוּוּ the first *Vav* must be a consonant with a *dagesh* since the letter preceding it has a vowel sign. It is followed by the *shuruk*, the vowel sign for the consonant *Vav*.

o The *mapik*. A third kind of dot, a *nekuda* in a *Heh* at the end of a word is called a *mapik*. It indicates that the *Heh* is not an *Em Kriyah* and should be sounded. Example מִפְרְיָה

o The *meteg*. Generally Hebrew words are accented on the final syllable. When the accent should be placed on the syllable before the last, a vertical line, called a *meteg*, is placed to the left of the vowel sign. Example יַשְׁעֵינוּ

o A *makaf* is a short horizontal line joining two short words at the top indicating that they should be treated grammatically as one word. Example בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ

o The newest sign in a Hebrew text is a horizontal line placed over some consonant marked with a *sh'va* in the middle of a word. It indicates that this is a *sh'va na* in a case that is ambiguous. It is so new that it does not yet have a name. Example הַמְשֻׁבָּח

II. The Key to Effective Decoding: Breaking Words into Syllables

The syllable is the most important unit for decoding. The working definition of a syllable for Hebrew decoding is one or more consonants with only one vowel sign. This is a different definition from the one children are taught for English syllables. There syllables are determined by sound. The one vowel per syllable is unique to Hebrew and must be taught as a distinctive rule.

Instead of focusing on a series of letters with their accompanying marks, students can be trained, from the start, to chunk words into syllables. Words of 6-10 letters can be

broken down into 2-4 syllables, making it possible for students to decode long and unknown words with greater ease.[3]

In this section we will describe the process of breaking words into syllables from the simplest to the most complicated.

Syllables can be open or closed. Open syllables end with a vowel sound indicated by either a vowel sign or an *Em Kriyah*.  Closed syllables end with the sound of a consonant. For words without a *sh'va* the division of words into syllables is straightforward.

| Simple syllables | Syllables always begin with a consonant followed by a vowel sign |
|---|---|

➢        בַּ

A syllable with  one letter and one vowel sign.  It is an open syllable because it ends with a vowel sound.

➢        שַׁ בָּת סִ דוּר

Two syllable words; the first open, the second closed.

➢        בָּאֱלִים  טֹטָפֹות

These words have three vowel signs and therefore three syllables.  The first two are open because they end with a vowel sound and the last is closed because it ends with the sound of a consonant.

בָּ אֱ לִים   טֹ טָ פֹות

➢        צִוִּיתִיךָ

By applying the same rule we come to a four syllable word. All of the syllables are open.

צִ וִּי תִי ךָ

➢        וִירוּשָׁלָיְם

Five vowel signs lead to a five syllable word.

וִי רוּ שָׁ לָ יְם

Theoretically we could add additional syllables in this way ad infinitum.

## Complex Syllables

Complex syllables, in addition to having one vowel sign, have at least one *sh'va*.  We will describe these syllables from the simplest to the most elaborate and complicated.

A *sh'va* at the beginning of a word is always a *sh'va na*

➢ לְךָ –        an open one syllable word ending in a vowel sound.

➢ אֲנִי –        another open one syllable word.

Remember the <u>ḥ</u>ataf is treated like a *sh'va na.*

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[3] The *Phonetic Siddur, Ot L'ot* by Alex Kaminetsky is the only work of which I am aware that uses this approach. It differs in its treatment of vowel signs. Still it is a helpful resource.

➢ כָּבוֹד –        a closed one syllable word ending in a consonant

➢ לְדוֹדִי – a two syllable word – both syllables are open

> The first syllable is לְדו

> The second syllable is דִי

➢ אַהֲבָה – another two syllable word with two open syllables.

> The first syllable is אַ (Note the *hataḥ pataḥ*)

> The second syllable is הֲבָה

➢ הֲמוֹנָם – another  two syllable word with the first syllable open and the second closed

> The first syllable is open הֲמוֹ (Note the *hataḥ pataḥ*)

> The second is closed נָם

A *sh'va* in the middle of a word may be either *na* or *naḥ*

➢ Following the short vowel sign it is generally *naḥ*.  In the following words the *sh'va* *naḥ* follows the short vowel sign, the *ḥirik*.

    בְּדִבָרוֹֿ    נִשְׁמָתִי

    בִּד בָ רו    נִשְׁ מָ תִי

➢ Following a long vowel sign it is generally *na*

In the following words the *sh'va* follows the long vowel, the *ḥolam*.

    אוֹרְךָ    סוֹמְכִים

    אוֹ רְךָ  סוֹ מְכִים

Special cases

➢ If a letter appears twice consecutively in a word, and the first is marked with a *sh'va*, the  *sh'va* is always *na*

    הַ לְלוּ       הַלְלוּ

    רוֹֿ  מְמוּ      רוֹמְמוּ

➢ If there are two *sh'va-im* in the middle of a word, the syllable breaks between them. The first is *naḥ* and the second is *na*.

                    נִשְׂמְחָה        נִשְׂ מְחָה

                        נַפְ  שְׁךָ        נַפְשְׁךָ

Summary of key rules

1.    At the beginning of a word or syllable the *sh'va* is always *na*.

2.    At the end of a word or syllable the *sh'va* is always *naḥ*.

9

3.  A *sh'va* after a short vowel ( *patah, segol, hirik katan, kamatz katan, kubutz)*  is generally *nah.*

4.  A *sh'va* after a long vowel sign (*kamatz. tzeyreh, hirik gadol, holam, shuruk*) is generally *na.*

5.  If there are two *sh'vaim* in the middle of a word the first is always *nah* and the second n*a.*

6.  If a letter appears twice consecutively in the middle of a word and the first has a s*h'va*, it is *na.*

Applying these rules to complex words

1.  Count the vowel signs to determine how many syllables are in the word.

2.  Check if there are any special cases that determine syllable breaks.

3.  Identify the simple syllables which consist only one letter and a vowel sign (possibly with an *Em Kriyah*).

4.  Locate each sh'va and determine if it is na or na*h*.

5.  Chunk the  word into syllables.

Examples

➢ Our first example is בְּמִשְׂמְרוֹתֵיהֶם.

The word contains 10 letters but only four vowel signs.  Therefore it has four syllables.

Looking for special cases we note that the word has two consecutive *sh'va-im*.  This requires that we break a syllable between them.

בְּמִשְׂ  מְרוֹתֵיהֶם

The first syllable is בְּמִשְׂ.  It opens with a *sh'va na* and closes with a *sh'va nah*.

מְרוֹ – an open syllable, beginning with a *sh'va na*.

The remainder of the word follows the one vowel to a syllable rule in a more straightforward way.

תֵי – an open syllable

הֶם –  closed syllable

Together

בְּמִשְׂ מְרוֹ תֵי הֶם

➢ Our next example is לְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ . Again we have four vowel signs.  Therefore the word has four syllables.

There are a number of special situations in this word.  The first requires determining whether the ו is a *holam* or a consonant. Following the rules we determine that it is a consonant because the consonant before it already has a symbol or vowel sign.

We next have to determine whether the second *sh'va* is *na* or *nah*.  It is *nah* because the vowel sign under the second letter is a *hirik*, a short vowel sign.

Thus our first syllable becomes לְמִצְ

The second syllable is one consonant with one vowel sign, the letter ו with a *holam haser* וֹ

The third syllable consists of one consonant with one vowel sign and an *Em Kriyah* תֵי

The final syllable is a simple open syllable – ךָ

Together לְמִצְ וֹ תֵי ךָ

Putting this into practice

There is much more to be said about how to apply these rules  and how to develop activities and games for visual discrimination and chunking words, and especially about how to integrate these approaches into a comprehensive Hebrew program for the supplementary school.

But the information presented here can, without further elaboration, be a valuable resource for an experienced teacher.  These tools for breaking words apart give children the power to be word sleuths. Those with whom I have worked enjoyed having these skills well as the success that follows.

Resources

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