

Ivrit (עברית) Hebrew

Ivrit! (Hebrew)

Ivrit (עברית) is the word for the language of Moses and the prophets, the language of prayer and the Torah, the language familiar to Yeshua as He expounded upon the Holy Scriptures. *Ivrit* (Hebrew) is a holy language, a heavenly language, a Bible-based language in which there are no curse words. (They must be imported from other languages.) *Ivrit*, (eev-REET), is referred to by God as a "pure" language: *"For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord"* (Zephaniah 3:9).

We also read about the Hebrew language in the book of Ezekiel chapter 3 verses 1-5 where God instructs the prophet to eat a scroll and then go speak to the house of Israel. The scroll was sweet like honey in Ezekiel's mouth. The Lord said to him: *"For you are not sent to a people of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, but to the house of Israel."* God was saying that *Ivrit* (Hebrew), the language of the house of Israel, is not a hard language. We try to remind ourselves of this as we labor over our Hebrew book!

The root word from which *Ivrit* is derived is *avar* (עבר) which means "to cross over, to pass through, by or over." Movement is implied in the word *Ivrit*, and truly it is a language of action with verbs being of utmost importance.

History of the Hebrew language

Hebrew is a member of the family of languages known as the Semitic languages. The word Semitic comes from *Shem*, the name of one of Noah's sons (see Genesis 6:10). There are five main branches of Semitic languages: Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Akkadian and Ethiopic. Of the ancient Semitic languages, only Hebrew and Arabic are spoken today. Semitic languages have five things in common: 1) guttural letters, with special sounds, 2) three root letters for almost all verbs and nouns, 3) meaning dependent on form or pattern of words, 4) pronominal suffixes to nouns, verbs and prepositions, 5) some common basic consonantal vocabulary, i.e. *yd*-hand, *byt*-house

It is believed by most scholars that the Hebrew *alef-bet* came from the Canaanites, also known as "Phoenicians." The Greeks and Romans, and all European peoples after them, took their alphabet from the same Canaanite source. That is why there is a close identity between the names and phonics of various letters in the alphabets of these languages, i.e. Hebrew *alef* (a) is alpha in Greek; *bet* (b) is beta; *gimmel* (g) is gamma; *dalet* (d) is delta; *zayin* (z) is zeta, etc.

Hebrew was a living language, used for speech and writing by the Israelites until the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. It was gradually replaced by Aramaic, the political and cultural language of the Near East. We read in Nehemiah 13:24 that when Nehemiah, the Jewish cupbearer to King Ahasuerus of Persia, returned to Judah, leading a group of exiles from Babylonia, he found that Aramaic had been rapidly supplanting Hebrew as the spoken language of his people: *"And their children...would not speak in the Jews' language."* Nevertheless, Hebrew continued to be used for prayer and Torah study, important theological and philosophical writings, as well as for scientific works, poetry, astronomy and medicine.

Spoken Hebrew: A Modern Miracle

The word *Ivrit* ("Hebrew" language) is first found in the Talmud, but even there, the term more frequently used to denote "Hebrew" is *lashon ha-kodesh*, "the sacred tongue or language."

The History of Hebrew as a language may be divided into four main phases:

Biblical (classic)
Mishnaic (rabbinical)
Medieval (after 70 A.D.)
Modern

Hebrew has died and been revived a number of times. This is a cultural phenomenon without parallel in the history of mankind. Hebrew as a language has refused to be extinguished! It has survived because of its connection with the preservation of the Torah and with the physical survival of Israel. Several thousand years of attempts to suppress Hebrew by the enemies of Israel beginning with Antiochus Epiphanes (Hanukkah story) were to no avail. Hebrew continued to be the language used for Torah study and prayer. It's use as a living language in a Jewish state today is a miracle of God.

Basics of the Hebrew language

The Hebrew alphabet (*alef-bet*) has 22 consonants. *Alef* is the first letter and *bet* is the second. *Tav* is the final letter. Since Hebrew is written from right to left, *Alef* is the letter on the far right.

Letters of the Alef-bet

ת	שׁ/שׂ	ר	ק	צ	פׁ/פׂ	ע	ס	מ	נ	ל	כׁ/כׂ	י	ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	בׁ/בׂ	א
tav	sin/shin	reysh	koof	tzadik	fay/pay	ayin	samech	nun	lamed	yood	kaf/chaf	chet	vav	dalet	vet/bet	gimmel	aleph				

Like most early Semitic alphabetic writing systems, the Hebrew *alef-bet* has no vowels. You might ask: "How would you know how to pronounce a word if there are no vowels?" A good question, and yet native Israelis do it every day since most things written in Hebrew in Israel today are written without vowels.

After 70 A.D. and the Roman expulsion of the Jews, it was found necessary to have aids for pronunciation, so a system of dots and dashes called points (*nikkudot*) was developed to indicate vowel sounds. There are five long and five short vowel sounds. These points are written above, below or inside a letter and enable the reader to distinguish between one word and another. The *nikkudot* are used for children and adults first learning the Hebrew language. We are very thankful for the *nikkudot*!

Sometimes Hebrew words are written using the English alphabet. This is known as transliteration. This is not an exact science, and there is no "correct" way to transliterate any given Hebrew word. That is why you might see the Jewish Festival of Lights (in Hebrew: **חנוכה** *Chet-Nun-Kaf-Hey*) written as "Chanukah," "Chanukkah," "Hanuka," and "Hanukkah," among others. There is no right or wrong.

Each letter of the Hebrew *alef-bet* also has a numerical value. *Alef* is 1, *Bet* is 2, *Gimmel* is 3 etc. The numerical value of a word is determined by adding up the values of each letter. For example,

the word **ח** (*Chai*) life, has a numerical value of 8 + 10 or 18. This is why Jewish people give gifts of \$18, or multiples of \$18 (\$36, \$54 etc.) for special occasions and to charities.

The earliest form of Hebrew used at the time of Moses and King David included word pictures. Each letter represented both a sound and a picture. For example, the final letter of the *alef-bet*, *Tav*, means "a sign." The ancient Hebrew letter for *Tav* is a "cross" (+). Thus we have the symbol for "a sign" being "a cross." Frank Seekins points out in his book **Hebrew Word Pictures** that the ancient symbol of the cross is not a 'Gentile' symbol. The cross was a Jewish symbol that meant 'the sign'!

Eliezer Ben Yehuda: Father of Modern Hebrew

One man is responsible for the restoration of Hebrew as the predominant language in Israel today. His name is Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, but he was born Eliezer Yitzhak Perelman in Lithuania in 1858. When Ben-Yehuda was born there was no Jewish state. What we know of Israel today was simply a part of the Ottoman Empire. Ben Yehuda grew up in a Hasidic Jewish household. He spoke Yiddish, a Jewish language derived from medieval German which uses the Hebrew alphabet. Hebrew had been dead for 1800 years. It was then only a written language, the language of prayer and Torah study.

In 1877, when Eliezer was 19 years old, God gave him a vision which changed his entire life; "In those days, Eliezer said, it was as if the heavens had suddenly opened, and a clear incandescent light flashed before my eyes, and a mighty inner voice sounded in my ears: the renaissance of Israel on its ancestral soil." As the vision of a national and spiritual homeland for Jewish people grew within Eliezer, the more he saw the need for a common language for the Jewish people which would bring unity. He dedicated himself to this goal "*Yisrael be'art zo*" "Israel in its own land" (speaking its own language).

Eliezer changed his name to Ben Yehuda, Son of Judah, when he wrote his first essay, "A Burning Question," which explained his call to emigrate to the Land of the Fathers. He moved to Jerusalem in 1881 in spite of being very ill with tuberculosis. He traveled by way of Vienna, where he was joined by his childhood sweetheart Deborah Jonas. Although Deborah knew that the doctors did not hold out much hope for a long, full life for Eliezer she said to him, "Wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge..." They married in Cairo on their way to the future land of Israel.

In October 1881 they arrived in Jaffa where Eliezer informed his wife that from that moment on they would converse only in Hebrew. The Ben-Yehuda household became the first Hebrew-speaking home in Israel. Their first son, Ben-Zion was the first modern Hebrew-speaking child. Deborah died of tuberculosis in 1891. On her deathbed she wrote a letter to her younger sister. "If you want to be a queen," her letter said, "then hurry to Jerusalem and marry my prince, my darling Eliezer." She did, and Hemda (Hebrew for "darling") mastered Hebrew quickly, published and wrote alongside her husband, cleaving to him as he was persecuted because of his journalistic work. Before his death, he finished the manuscript of his 17 volume Hebrew dictionary, a major contribution to the Jewish world. After Eliezer's death in 1922 his wife and son published his work. The completed dictionary lists all the words used in Hebrew literature from the time of Abraham to the present. Eliezer Ben Yehuda also built up the Hebrew vocabulary from the 7,704 of the Old Testament to almost 100,000 words!

Hebrew and the U.S.A

Many of the early pilgrims who settled the "New England" of America were Puritans fleeing from religious persecution in Europe. These Puritans, steeped in the Old Covenant Scriptures, saw their

exodus from England as paralleling the Israelites' liberation from Egypt. The King of England was the Pharaoh, the Atlantic Ocean was the Red Sea, and the New World was the Promised Land. They even saw the Indians as the ancient Canaanites. Once in America, the Puritans used Biblical law as the basis of their legal codes. The earliest legislation of the New England colonies was all based on Scripture: "...the Word of God shall be the only rule to be attended unto in organizing the affairs of government in this plantation" (New Haven, 1639 John Davenport).

The Hebrew Bible played a central role in the founding of many institutions of higher learning, including Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, Princeton, Rutgers, and Brown. Many of these colleges adopted some Hebrew word or phrase as part of their official emblem or seal. For example, the Yale seal has an open book with the Hebrew *Urim V'Timur* on it. This was part of the breastplate of the high priest in Temple times. Dartmouth has *El Shaddai* (God Almighty) in a triangle on its seal. Hebrew as a language was so popular in the 16th and 17th centuries that several students at Yale delivered their commencement address in Hebrew. In most colleges in colonial America, Bible and Hebrew were required courses.

Perhaps most surprising is the proposal that Hebrew be the native language of America, first by the Puritans and then by various members of Congress. Abraham Katsh in **The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy** notes: "At the time of the American Revolution, the interest in the knowledge of Hebrew was so widespread as to allow the circulation of the story that 'certain members of Congress proposed that the use of English be formally prohibited in the United States, and Hebrew substituted for it'." What a shame! If such a proposal had passed, we would all be speaking Hebrew today!

New Jewish Jewels TV Series on Hebrew

By the time you read this newsletter our Mercy Mission will be completed and we will be in Jerusalem taping segments for 22 new **Jewish Jewels** television programs. The Lord has directed us to produce one program on each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. We will be joined on each program by Dr. Danny Ben Gigi, author, teacher, lecturer and Hebrew scholar who will introduce each letter and help us to better understand the Holy Scriptures as we explore the original language of the Book! Each program will have an "Israel segment" in which we (Neil and Jamie) explore one Hebrew word in an Israeli context. For example, on the *dalet* (d) program we are planning a mini-teaching on the word *dam* (blood). Neil and Jamie will be seen giving blood in Jerusalem on the program's Israel segment.

We are very excited about these new programs because our personal knowledge of Hebrew is limited and we long to learn more. If the Lord puts it on your heart to sponsor a letter, please let us know at the Jewish Jewels office: 1-800-2-YESHUA.

Yeshua, the Alef and the Tav!

Yeshua said: "*I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending...which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty*" (Revelation 1:8). Alpha and Omega, of course, are Greek. Yeshua might actually have said that He was the *Alef* and the *Tav*. The meaning is clear. He was at the beginning (*Beresheet*) and will be at the end. It is meaningful that the Messiah should use the *alef-bet* in referring to Himself since He is the Word. We will see in our new TV series, that Yeshua can be found in every letter of the Hebrew *alef-bet*. Please pray for us as we tackle this big assignment (and adventure) in God. Our confession: "*I can do all things through Messiah (Christ) who strengthens me*" (Philippians 4:13). Let this be **your** confession as well!

Ahavah b'shem Yeshua (Love in the name of Yeshua),

Neil and Jamie

P.S. For a lovely mix of songs in Hebrew and English, order "Shema Yisrael"!